

2005

## Common sense philosophy and politics in America: John Witherspoon, James McCosh, and William James

Scott Philip Segrest

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_dissertations](https://repository.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations)



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Segrest, Scott Philip, "Common sense philosophy and politics in America: John Witherspoon, James McCosh, and William James" (2005). *LSU Doctoral Dissertations*. 1737.

[https://repository.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_dissertations/1737](https://repository.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/1737)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact [gradetd@lsu.edu](mailto:gradetd@lsu.edu).

**COMMON SENSE PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS IN AMERICA:  
JOHN WITHERSPOON, JAMES MCCOSH, AND WILLIAM JAMES**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Political Science

by  
Scott Philip Segrest  
B.A., Baylor University, 1992  
M.A., University of Dallas, 1996  
December 2005

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The specific nature of this study keeps me mindful of what I owe to the scholarly and spiritual communities that have prepared, encouraged, and supported me. I am especially grateful to Professor Ellis Sandoz for his mentorship and for the inspiration of his work on Anglo-American political theory and on, surely, one of the most penetrating and underappreciated thinkers of the twentieth century, Eric Voegelin; to Professor Cecil Eubanks for heartening perspective and sound advice; to Professors Sandoz, Eubanks, James Stoner, Wayne Parent, and William Clark at Louisiana State University, and to Professors Leo de Alvarez, Richard Dougherty, Thomas West, and John Paynter at the University of Dallas, for making my graduate experience a deeply enriching and satisfying one; to David D. Corey for countless stimulating conversations about the meaning of human existence and what a science of politics should entail; to Elizabeth Corey for endless hospitality and many timely reminders; to David Gauthier for faithful friendship and regular commiseration; to Tara Montelaro for saving my academic hide times without number; to Jeremy and Simone Mhire, for supporting me in the final hour and making victory a little sweeter; to my sister JaNelle, who helped me through an especially rough stretch; to my parents, Philip and Gayle Segrest, for giving without stint, and the rest of my family—Sherilyn, Doug, and Steve—for being always available to me; and finally, to the Earhart Foundation for two precious years of funding.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
WITHERSPOON'S 'PLAIN COMMON SENSE'.....	40
MCCOSH'S SCIENTIFIC INTUITIONISM.....	96
THE COMMON-SENSE BASIS OF JAMES' PRAGMATIC RADICAL EMPIRICISM.....	142
THE COMMON-SENSE BASIS OF JAMES' ETHICAL AND SOCIAL THEORY.....	202
CONCLUSION.....	257
REFERENCES.....	264
APPENDIX: ABBREVIATIONS OF JAMES' WORKS.....	271
VITA.....	272

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the political significance of the two leading strains of common sense thought in the history of American philosophy—Scottish Common Sense and Pragmatism—as suggested in the writings of John Witherspoon and James McCosh in the Scottish Common Sense line, and of the more famous co-founder of Pragmatism, William James. These two strains of American common sense are placed in context of the larger Western common sense tradition. Each is shown to aim at finding a solid middle ground epistemologically between skeptical doubt and idealistic certitude that could serve as a stable basis for moral and political life. Witherspoon, the first great advocate and popularizer of Scottish Common Sense in America, gave the United States its first coherent, systematic common sense political theory, and that theory is here traced out as a common sense theory of politics for the first time. The first systematic text-based treatment of the moral and social thought of McCosh, the last great proponent of Scottish Common Sense in the American setting, is also provided. In James’ case, the first systematic treatment of the place of common sense in his philosophic worldview is rendered, and it is argued in the process that he is rightly understood as a kind of common sense philosopher. Together, Witherspoon, McCosh, and James offer a vision of man and society that avoids the rigidity of dogmatic foundationalism, on the one hand, and the slackness of foundationless ethics and politics, on the other.

## INTRODUCTION

This study considers the political significance of something called “common sense philosophy.” I can imagine two likely reactions to the proposed topic: Those generally skeptical about the value of philosophy for political life—who tend to see philosophy as either vicious or useless<sup>1</sup>—will say, “It’s about time! Finally, a *common sense* philosophy of politics!” Those of a more philosophical bent, conversely, may well say, “What! Crude common sense is precisely what philosophy wants to transcend!” In my view, there is some validity in both responses. The basic conviction motivating this work, in fact, is that common sense without philosophy is inadequate to address assaults on the foundations of society or to reinforce foundations already cracked, while philosophy, if not anchored in common sense, tends to radicalize and ultimately to corrode social order still further.

The best way to manage this subject, as with most subjects, is to be as concrete as possible. This is peculiarly essential in the matter of common sense philosophy, however, for the essence of common sense is to stay in close contact with life as it is lived, and the whole point of common sense philosophy is to keep our thinking concrete—that is, in touch with the particulars of real-world experience. In the interest of concreteness, then, I herein consider common sense philosophy as exemplified by three thinkers in the American common sense tradition, two of them—John Witherspoon and James McCosh—immigrants from Scotland hailing from the Scottish Common Sense school, and one—William James—a home-grown American product whose pragmatic “radical empiricism” breathed new life into common sense philosophizing. William James is not ordinarily identified with common sense philosophy, and so, first, a few words about him. James is most famous as a founder of Pragmatism (although he is more justly remembered for his classic magnum opus, *The*

---

<sup>1</sup> Plato’s Republic VI, 487d.

*Principles of Psychology*). But one of the series of lectures published as *Pragmatism*, entitled “Pragmatism and Common Sense,” hints that the “pragmatic method” of philosophizing he recommends aims at a reworking of common sense, and presupposes that the common sense outlook is basically sound, though inadequate by itself—absent critical and scientific (and, it turns out, religious) support—for understanding the world and maximizing human fulfillment. In *The Meaning of Truth*, the compilation of essays published as “A Sequel to Pragmatism,” James explains to his critics that, “The whole originality of pragmatism, the whole point of it, is its use of the concrete way of seeing. It begins with concreteness, and returns and ends with it.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, James’ own version of pragmatic philosophy, radical empiricism, is deeply rooted in common sense impressions. He repeatedly points out in his posthumously published *Essays on Radical Empiricism* close affinities between the radically empiricist way of seeing the world and the way of common sense. (I would argue, further, that Pragmatism generally, in its classic form—in the writings of James, Charles S. Peirce, and John Dewey—exhibits the basic hallmarks of the common sense perspective. But proving this in the cases of Peirce and Dewey is beyond the scope of this book.) James has been one of the most written-about philosophers and public intellectuals in American history,<sup>3</sup> yet no one, to my knowledge, has until now ever systematically examined the role of common sense in James’ thought.

---

<sup>2</sup> James, *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to Pragmatism*, eds. Fredson Bowers and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 115-16.

<sup>3</sup> The volume of secondary literature on James is prodigious. The best secondary work on James in the last fifteen years, in my view, is Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *William James’s Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990). *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) provides a fine collection of fairly recent essays. Gerald E. Myers’ *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) is the most comprehensive critical interpretation of James’ thought, and serves as a less sympathetic answer to Ralph Barton Perry’s classic, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1936). The most complete treatment of James’ social thought is George Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). Richard M. Gale provides an interesting and engaging, if in my view flawed, recent interpretation of the relation between James’ moral and religious philosophy in *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). The most compelling

It is not hard to see why John Witherspoon and James McCosh should be thought of as common sense philosophers, adherents as they are of the Scottish Common Sense movement, but the reader may well wonder, Why these two in particular? The answer is that Witherspoon and McCosh were the most influential members of the school *in America*, Witherspoon during the founding period and McCosh in the post-Civil War era. The symmetry of their respective roles in the near century-long reign of Scottish Common Sense over the American academy is almost poetic. Witherspoon was the first, and McCosh the last, of its major proponents in the history of American philosophy. Witherspoon's *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* at Princeton (published posthumously in 1810) and McCosh's late *Realistic Philosophy* (republished, 1897) are effectively bookends of the movement. Both men emigrated from Scotland to serve as presidents of Princeton (originally, the College of New Jersey, later to become Princeton University during McCosh's tenure); both played pivotal parts in making Princeton into one of America's leading institutions of higher learning; both taught courses in philosophy there; both actively participated in the major philosophical, social, and academic debates of their times; both were ordained Presbyterian ministers and continued preaching more or less regularly during their years at Princeton. Witherspoon was primarily responsible for making Scottish Common Sense the leading philosophical movement in America, and it attained the status virtually of academic orthodoxy in American colleges shortly after his passing; and McCosh's writings and public speeches represent its last hurrah before newer trends like German idealism and then Pragmatism

---

interpretation of James' view of the spiritual self, I think, is provided by Eugene Fontinell, *Self, God, and Immortality: A Jamesian Investigation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), and perhaps the best work on James' metaphysical views is David C. Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Hunter Brown's *William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000) is, as I see it, the soundest analysis of James' religious philosophy available. Finally, Henry S. Levinson offers a highly stimulating account the religious motive behind James' philosophic project in *Science, Metaphysics, and the Chance of Salvation: An Interpretation of the Thought of William James* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1978). A host of other secondary works on James deserve mention, but the ones I have named here are the ones I have found most telling and fruitful.



swept it from center stage, and almost from memory. No systematic analysis of the common sense basis of Witherspoon's moral and social philosophy has been made, nor of McCosh's, either. Jeffrey H. Morrison recently delivered a fine study of Witherspoon's underappreciated role in America's founding; Thomas Miller gave a good general treatment of Witherspoon's thought in his introduction to an edition of the Scotsman's more important writings; Mark A. Noll wrote an excellent chapter on Witherspoon's legacy at Princeton in a 1989 study of that institution's Christian intellectual origins; Jack Scott produced an *Annotated Edition* of Witherspoon's Lectures on Moral Philosophy in 1982; and a number of scholarly articles on Witherspoon have been published in recent decades<sup>4</sup>—but none has made a systematic textual analysis of Witherspoon's common sense political philosophy. Only one scholarly work of note has been written on McCosh in recent times, an intellectual biography by J. David Hoeveler, Jr.<sup>5</sup>

Our direct concern here is with the *political significance* of American common sense thought, and Witherspoon, McCosh, and James speak to this in rather different ways. Witherspoon is the only one of the three who directly presented a theory of politics. Neither McCosh nor James ever did much political theorizing, but each of them said a good deal about ethics and the moral life, and each was much concerned with the social consequences of personal morality and the moral quality of social life itself. Between the two of them,

---

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey H. Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic* (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); *The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon*, ed. Thomas Miller (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990); Mark A. Noll, *Princeton and the Republic, 1768-1822: The Search for a Christian Enlightenment in the Era of Samuel Stanhope Smith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), chs. 3-4; *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy by John Witherspoon*, ed. Jack Scott (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982). Articles: Ned C. Landsman, "Witherspoon and the Problem of Provincial Identity in Scottish Evangelical Culture," in *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment*, eds. Richard B. Sher and Jeffrey R. Smitten (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Richard B. Sher, "Witherspoon's *Dominion of Providence* and the Scottish Jeremiad Tradition," in *ibid.*; Robert Kent Donovan, "The Popular Party of the Church of Scotland and the American Revolution," in *ibid.*; Thomas P. Miller, "Witherspoon, Blair and the Rhetoric of Civic Humanism," in *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *James McCosh and the Scottish Intellectual Tradition, from Glasgow to Princeton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

however, McCosh was much more interested than James in elucidating fundamental ethical principles; James thought that abstract principles weren't much help in hard cases and therefore preferred to concentrate his energies on working out and clarifying a comprehensive moral *vision*. What all three have in common, beyond a generally consistent common sense view of things, is a distinctive project: to find a *via media* between skepticism, on the one hand, and idealism, on the other. Each of them was especially worried about the moral and spiritual consequences of modern skepticism. The emergence of Scottish Common Sense as a self-conscious philosophical movement had been motivated by the skepticism in particular of David Hume. In McCosh's and James' day (the two were contemporaries, although McCosh was many years James' senior), the specter of materialism loomed large, as increasing numbers of Western intellectuals took the establishment of evolutionary science to imply the death of God, or at least his irrelevance to human affairs, and by the same token to suggest the transience and arbitrariness of moral convictions. On the other side, idealism did not seem to our three thinkers to be any kind of solution. Berkeley's idealism, after all, had only paved the way for Hume's skeptical conclusions, and the philosophy of the "Absolute" of Hegel and his successors was too far removed from common sense to win honest belief from more than a relative handful of hyper-intellectuals. No, the only hope for modern man lay in some common middle ground between idealistic certitude and radical doubt. This ground Witherspoon, McCosh, and James were determined to explore, illuminate, and map out for their contemporaries. In what follows, I try to trace their steps and describe the territory as they saw it.

Before going there, however, it will help to give some further context. In the remaining introduction, I try to clarify the general meaning of "common sense" as it has

been understood philosophically in ancient and modern times, and in doing so to show how deep—how *very* deep—the roots of American common sense go.

## **BACKGROUND**

The philosophical import of common sense is strikingly suggested in a passage of Eric Voegelin's *Autobiographical Reflections*. The passage has the additional merit of highlighting the surprising philosophic richness of American culture and outlook. As a young German scholar studying in America ca. 1922 at Columbia University in New York, Voegelin found himself "overwhelmed by a new [cultural and intellectual] world of which hitherto I had hardly expected the existence." He took courses with John Dewey among others and, repairing often to the university library, "started working through the history of English philosophy and its expansion into American thought." His account of what he learned in the process is illuminating.

I discovered English and American common sense philosophy. More immediately, the impact came through Dewey's recent book, *Human Nature and Conduct*, which was based on the English common sense tradition. From there, I worked back to Thomas Reid and Sir William Hamilton. This English and Scottish conception of common sense as a human attitude that incorporates a philosopher's attitude toward life without the philosopher's technical apparatus, and inversely the understanding of Classic and Stoic philosophy as the technical, analytical elaboration of the common sense attitude, has remained a lasting influence in my understanding both of common sense and Classic philosophy. It was during this time that I got the first inkling of what the continued tradition of Classic philosophy on the common sense level, without necessarily the technical apparatus of an Aristotle, could mean for the intellectual climate and the cohesion of a society.

Precisely this tradition of common sense I now recognized to be the factor that was signally absent from the German social scene, and not so well developed in France as it was in England and America. In retrospect, I would say that the absence of political institutions rooted in an intact common sense tradition is a fundamental defect of the German political structure that still has not been overcome... During my year in New York, I began to sense that American society had a philosophical background far superior in range and existential substance, though not always in articulation, to anything that I found represented in the methodological environment in which I had grown up.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 28-29. Voegelin's last words here are particularly remarkable in light of the fact that "the

The passage indicates the meaning of “common sense,” its importance in the history of philosophy, and the political ramifications of its presence or absence as a cultural force. Let me consider each of these points in turn.

The philosophic attitude prior to or shorn of a highly technical vocabulary: this is a good general expression of what the common sense philosophers meant by “common sense.” It is a certain mental disposition, an openness of consciousness to all that experience may show. What it means more particularly and substantively will be made plain, I trust, in the body of the book, but a few early indications will help the reader find his bearings. Fritz van Holthoon and David R. Olson have suggested—rightly, I think—that all the various employments of the term “common sense” are rooted in two related notions: common sense as “judgment, the capacity to recognize self-evident truths,” and common sense as the body of knowledge constituted by such truths.<sup>7</sup> Self-evident truths are truths about existing facts, which can only be known experientially. If someone points at this lamp and demands to know how we know the lamp is really there, the answer can only be, “Why, we know the lamp by experiencing it, and there is no other way it *can* be known.” Similarly, if it be true that “all men are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, [including] life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” we know it to be true only by “seeing” it through lived experience, by observing, for example, the necessity of life and the free pursuit of happiness for meaningful human existence, and the absurdity of denying

---

methodological environment” in which he grew up was forged, as he notes in this same passage, by “men like Max Sheler, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Alfred Weber, Karl Mannheim.” I think by this Voegelin means to suggest that, brilliant as such men were, their sense of the full range of human experience could not that of the ancients.

<sup>7</sup> Frits van Holthoon and David R. Olson, “Common Sense: An Introduction,” in *Common Sense: The Foundations for Social Science*, eds. Holthoon and Olson (New York: University Press of America, 1987), 2-3. I am greatly indebted to Holthoon and Olson’s book for helping me understand the full amplitude of meanings and implications of common sense. The collection of essays therein serves as an excellent introduction to the theoretic significance of the idea.

these to anyone arbitrarily. Self-evident truths are not necessarily evident to everyone: they are evident only to those who have seen the evidence, who have viewed the relevant facts with sufficient attention. They are truths that every clear-eyed, unbiased observer would recognize if only he looked in the right place. Generally, then, common sense is an appeal to “what can be commonly sensed”<sup>8</sup>—what *can* be sensed, not necessarily what *is* sensed.

“Common sense philosophy” was a philosophical movement of the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries that had its roots in England, grew up in Scotland, and found its warmest reception in America. Pragmatism, that home-grown American philosophy, has *its* roots in this earlier movement, and must be accounted, as I will try to show, an extension of the “tradition of common sense” Voegelin speaks of. But the classical and Stoic philosophers had recognized the importance of the existential posture Voegelin calls the “common sense attitude” long before Anglo-American common sense philosophy was ever born, and conceptually the latter tradition owes much to those ancient philosophic pioneers. The classic and Stoic philosophers as well as the British and American thinkers of later times took the common sense attitude as the starting point for philosophy, and the former as well as the latter thought it imperative in all their theorizing to keep in working touch with it. Indeed, as Voegelin suggests, the fundamentals of truth and right were to all of them simply a working out and elaboration of that mental orientation and all that it revealed.

Herman Parret traces “two rough lines of interest in common sense in the history of philosophical doctrines”: 1) “the Aristotelian line [—extending “from Aristotle to the Scottish and English empiricism,” continuing “even as far as George Edward Moore”—] introduces common sense as a category in the theory of perception: common sense is used

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 5.

to explain the consciousness of perception;” and 2) one “rooted in the notion of *koinei ennoiai* developed by the Stoics and used for the axioms of theories (and geometry and pure mathematics, too),” and leading to “Kant’s *Gemeinsinn*.”<sup>9</sup> Actually, these are the two lines of *epistemological* interest in common sense—there is a third line of interest critical to the present inquiry, and that is in common sense as a community’s sense of what is good and right. This third line finds its classic expression in Vico. While certainly distinct from the purely epistemological question, the phenomenon of the sense of a community is nonetheless inseparably connected to it: common sense as communal sense is usually thought to be grounded in perceptual or intuitive experience.

Aristotle was the first to use “common sense” as a technical term, and something of his meaning has persisted through the whole history of the concept. In *De Anima* (*On the Soul*), Aristotle describes *koine aesthesis*, common sensation, as the awareness of external objects through a pooling of our special sensations (sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell)—i.e., perception of “things” and their varying states and modes.<sup>10</sup> It is what enables us to perceive “movement, rest, number, shape and size, such being not special to any one sense but common to all.”<sup>11</sup> He does not in *De Anima* unequivocally indicate a faculty or power of soul that performs this operation, but most interpreters of Aristotle have taken him there to imply such a faculty,<sup>12</sup> something he in fact explicitly affirms in *Parva Naturalia*.<sup>13</sup> As Peter van Kessel puts it, this faculty is “the sense which converts the impressions given by the five senses into one unity of sensations connected to the one object and origin of these

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> *De Anima* 425a27ff.

<sup>11</sup> *De Anima*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 172.

<sup>12</sup> See Lawson-Tancred’s discussion of why he believes this to be a mistake in the introduction to his translation of *De Anima*, 81-2.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle considers this faculty and its activity fairly extensively in *Parva Naturalia*, finding it to be the *differentia specifica* of animal life (what sets it apart from mere biological life). See especially “On Sense and Sensible Objects,” the first part of *Parva Naturalia*, in *Aristotle: On the Soul; Parva Naturalia; On Breath*, Loeb No. 288 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

impressions.”<sup>14</sup> Aristotle’s faculty of common sense, then, is that inner sense by which we perceive objects immediately before us *as* objects, rather than as heaps of disconnected sensations. Aquinas later translated Aristotle’s term *sensus communis*—the Latin basis, of course, of our English “common sense.” But in Aquinas’ handling, as Frits van Holthoon says, “*sensus communis* became almost a synonym for reason.”<sup>15</sup> In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas describes the faculty this way:

The proper sense judges of the proper sensible by discerning it from other things which come under the same sense; for instance, by discerning white from black or green. But neither sight nor taste can discern white from sweet: because what discerns between two things, must know both. Wherefore the discerning judgment must be assigned to the common sense; to which, as to a common term, all apprehensions of the senses must be referred: and by which, again, all the intentions of the senses are perceived; as when someone sees what he sees.<sup>16</sup>

Thomas thus seems to go beyond Aristotle to make *sensus communis* “the locus of the discerning judgment.”<sup>17</sup>

*Sensus communis* was a term widely used during Roman times, in both formal and informal contexts. Aquinas thus chose for his translation of *koine aesthesis* a term of great currency. Cicero had made several references to *sensus communis* in his writings and public speeches, but had never made use of it as a technical philosophical concept. He had used it in the popular sense of “the notions or norms men in society hold in common.” He seemed to be close, however, to fusing its meaning with that of another term that bulked large in his political philosophy: *humanitas*, a word rich in connotations, signifying variously 1) “human nature, humanity, the qualities, feelings and inclinations of mankind,” 2) “humane or gentle conduct toward others, humanity, philanthropy, kindness, politeness,” and 3) “mental

---

<sup>14</sup> Holthoon and Olson, 116.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>16</sup> *Summa* I, 3 (London: Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1912), 87; quoted in Holthoon and Olson, 101.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Holthoon credits C. Werner with this formulation, citing Werner’s *Der Heilige Thomas van Aquino, die Lehre*, vol. 2 (Regensburg; reprint New York, 1889).

cultivation befitting a man, a liberal education, good breeding, refinement, elegant manners.” S. E. W. Bugter says that, “Humanitas in classical Latin is the counterpart of our modern *common sense*, *gezond verstand* (in Dutch), *gesunder Menschenverstand* (German), or *le bon sens* (in French).”<sup>18</sup> The meanings of *humanitas*, Bugter points out, correspond closely to the four connotations of *sensus communis* that C.S. Lewis delineates in his essay on “Sense” in *Studies in Words*: 1) “the elementary mental outfit of normal man,” 2) “*sensus communis* as a social virtue,” 3) *sensus communis* as common wit,” and 4) “*sensus communis* [as] a collection of all our experiences, emotions, thoughts, opinions, etc.,” i.e., “the collection of all the *sensus* that we have in common, because they are ‘normal.’”<sup>19</sup>

The Stoic *koine ennoiai* (“common conceptions”) are “the axioms of theorizing and the norms of practical life,” “principles of reason in theory and practice, and are thus transcendental pre-conditions of reasoning (theoretically and practically).”<sup>20</sup> The *koine ennoiai*, then, are something like Aristotle’s first principles—indemonstrable, self-evident principles that are primary in the sense that they are and must be presupposed, taken for granted, in all our reasonings.<sup>21</sup> Kant’s *Gemeinsinn* (common sense) has a similar meaning. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant presents *Gemeinsinn* as the “possibility ground of the conditions” (Parret’s language) of both theoretical and practical reason—i.e., common sense provides the pre-conditions of both. It is thus the very root of rationality. Parret explains that, “Common sense [for Kant] appears just at the parting of theory and practice, or at the crossroads where conditions of valid knowledge and conditions of good life meet.”<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Holthoorn and Olson, 91-2. Bugter takes these definitions of *humanitas* from C.T. Lewis and C. Short’s *Latin Dictionary* (1980).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-4. C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge, 1967).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>21</sup> See Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics* I.1-4 and II.8-10, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Holthoorn and Olson., 28-9.



In the early eighteenth century, Vico employed the Latin *sensus communis* in his theory of common sense, giving it, however, a rather more involved significance than Aquinas contemplated. Vico's *sensus communis*, in fact, combined the meanings of *koine aesthesis* and *koine ennoiai* together with the notion of the sense of a community to produce the very rich conception of "the primary truths residual in society," primary truths that are universal but linguistically and culturally mediated.<sup>23</sup> As John D. Schaeffer observes, Vico's *sensus communis* contains a sense of the natural law in recognizing the "underlying agreements" about basic human needs and utilities that obtain among all nations.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, according to Vico's understanding, "The *sensus communis* cannot be merely a static set of values embodied in a literary canon [but rather] is a capital constantly changing its outline as it is invested in various causes. The *sensus communis* is constantly reinterpreted and reshaped by the decisions of the community."<sup>25</sup>

Vico may have been influenced in his thinking about *sensus communis* by Anthony Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury, who may fairly be considered the originator of British common sense philosophy. Shaftesbury was Vico's contemporary and lived in Italy for a time. According to John D. Schaeffer, the two men may have had opportunity to meet and exchange ideas.<sup>26</sup> Shaftesbury had been working on a theory of *sensus communis* before Vico developed his own theory in *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (*On the Study Methods of Our Time*) and further in the *New Science*. Shaftesbury, however, traced the English "common sense" back to *koinonoemosune* (objectively: the commonly perceived or thought; subjectively: likemindedness) rather than to *koine aesthesis*. In his essay on *Sensus Communis*, he provides in

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 104. The phrase is Holthoorn's.

<sup>24</sup> Schaeffer, *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 105. See Vico's *New Science* I.ii.142-5.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>26</sup> Schaeffer, 41.

a footnote a remarkable account of the early development of the concept. I beg the reader's leave to quote the somewhat lengthy passage in full:

The Greek word is κοινονοημοσύνη, which Salmasius interprets *the moderate, the usual and respected mind of a man, which takes thought for the communal good in some way and does not refer everything to its own advantage, and also has regard of those with whom it is engaged, thinking modestly and reasonably about itself. But on the other hand, all the conceited and arrogant think that they are born only for themselves and their own benefits and, in favour of themselves, they disdain and neglect others. And these are those who can properly be said not to possess sensus communis. For so Juvenal understood 'sensus communis' in Satire 8. Galen calls 'philanthropy and goodness' what Marcus, speaking of himself, calls κοινονοημοσύνη and, elsewhere, when he speaks about the same thing, 'moderation and good judgment,' which is how Marcus expressed his gratitude to him [Galen] for accompanying him to the German war. In the same manner, Isaac Casaubon, who says that Herodian calls this the *mean and equal measure: Indeed, Antoninus adds as though interpreting this saying, 'and the injunction to friends neither to dine with him at all nor necessarily to go off abroad with him.'* This, I am persuaded, is the *sensus communis* of Horace (*Satires* I.3.66) which has been unobserved (as far as I can learn) by any of his commentators: it being remarkable withal that in this early satire of Horace, before his latter days and when his philosophy as yet inclined to the less rigid assertors of virtue, he puts this expression (as may be seen by the whole satire taken together) into the mouth of a Crispinus, or some ridiculous mimic of that severe philosophy, to which the coinage of the word κοινονοημοσύνη properly belonged. For so the poet again (*Satires* I.4.77-8) uses the word *sensus*, speaking of those who without sense of manners or common society, without the least respect or deference to others, press rudely upon their friends and upon all company in general without regard to time or place or anything besides their selfish and brutish humour: *Not asking whether they do that without sense, whether they do it at an inopportune time. Obviously,* as old [Dionysius] Lambinus interprets it, though without any other explanation, referring only to the *sensus communis* of Horace in that other satire [on p. 48 of his edition (Frankfurt, 1577) of Horace, which Shaftesbury owned.] Thus Seneca: *Thus you will avoid hatred from the offense by harming nobody gratuitously: from which sensus communis will protect you* (*Epistles* 105.4). And Cicero accordingly: *It is the business of justice not to harm men; of finer feeling, not to cause offence* (*On Duties* I.28.99). It may be objected possibly, by some particularly versed in the philosophy above-mentioned [Greek], that the κοινός νοός to which the κοινονοημοσύνη seems to have relation is of a different meaning. But they will consider withal how small the distinction was in that philosophy between the ὑπόληψις and the vulgar αἰσθησις, how generally passion was by those philosophers brought under the head of opinion. And when they consider, besides this, the very formation of the word κοινονοημοσύνη upon the model of the other femalized virtues, the εὐγνωμοσύνη, σωφροσύνη, δικαιοσύνη, etc., they will no longer hesitate on this interpretation. — The reader may perhaps by this note see better why the Latin title of *Sensus Communis* has been given to this second treatise [of Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*]. He may observe, withal, how the same poet Juvenal uses the word *sensus* in *Satires* 15.133: *Sensus is the best part of us.*<sup>27</sup>*

---

<sup>27</sup> Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 48-9.

Shaftesbury sums up the old meaning of *sensus communis* (as generally understood by Juvenal, Marcus Aurelius, Horace, Seneca, and Cicero) as the “sense of the public weal and the common interest, love of the community or society, natural affection, humanity, obligingness, or that sort of civility which rises from a just sense of the common rights of mankind, and the natural equality there is among those of the same species.”<sup>28</sup> Vico clearly drew on these overlapping Roman connotations in his theory of *sensus communis*, as did Shaftesbury. Whether they did so independently, or Vico was motivated to work out his own more systematic view by Shaftesbury’s beginning, remains a mystery.

In any case, Shaftesbury theory was in its own right a brilliant synthesis and extension of the Roman senses of the concept. He conceived of *sensus communis* as a kind of social recognition of natural right, marked by an abiding concern for the public good. It was a kind of rationally substantive public spiritedness. This public spiritedness was rooted in natural social “affection,” and the naturalness of this affection, when persisted in, became self-evident to men of common sense, ultimately revealing timeless truths of human value. “A public spirit,” Shaftesbury says, “can come only from a social feeling or sense of partnership with humankind.” Fortunately, the requisite “social feeling” is natural.

If eating and drinking be natural, herding is so too. If any appetite or sense be natural, the sense of fellowship is the same. If there be anything of nature in that affection which is between the sexes, the affection is certainly as natural towards the consequent offspring and so again between the offspring themselves, as kindred and companions, bred under the same discipline and economy. And thus a clan or tribe is gradually formed, a public is recognized, and, besides the pleasure found in social entertainment, language and discourse, there is so apparent a necessity for continuing this good correspondency and union that to have no sense or feeling of this kind, no love of country, community or anything in common, would be the same as to be insensible even of the plainest means of self-preservation and most necessary condition of self-enjoyment.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 51-2.

Only “a more contracted public” (sub-national) can have genuine community, Shaftesbury says. *Sensus communis* is there direct and palpable, while on the level of “the body politic at large,” only the *idea* of it holds. The idea of it, or rather a passionate attachment to the idea of it, is nonetheless absolutely essential for the health of the body politic. For without a spirited devotion to the notion of *sensus communis*, political society will inevitably be rent by the “spirit of faction,” which is after all “no other than the abuse or irregularity of that social love and common affection which is natural to mankind.”<sup>30</sup>

It is patent to Shaftesbury that self-interest is inadequate as a source of social order. He blasts the “modern projectors,” the “narrow-minded philosophers”—he seems to have Hobbes and Locke chiefly in mind—who aim at “conquering nature” in order to “build after a more uniform way.” “You have heard it, my friend, as a common saying that ‘interest governs the world.’ But, I believe, whoever looks narrowly [closely] into the affairs of it will find that passion, humour, caprice, zeal, faction and a thousand other springs, which are counter to self-interest, have as considerable a part in the movements of this machine. There are more wheels and counterpoises in this engine than are easily imagined.”<sup>31</sup> Shaftesbury rejects the forced simplicity of Hobbesian and Lockean conceptions of society. Such artificial schemes do not do justice to the complexities of human nature. At the root of the modern tendency to proffer reductionistic accounts of human affairs, Shaftesbury thinks, is modern philosophy’s departure from common sense. Common sense judges matters on the whole, according to “the justness of a whole,”<sup>32</sup> and opts for richness over logical tidiness. The modern rejection, or neglect, of common sense entails serious moral consequences. “As notions stand now in the world with respect to morals,” Shaftesbury

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 52-3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 53-4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 67.

laments, “honesty is like to gain little by philosophy or deep speculations of any kind. In the main, it is best to stick to common sense and go no further.” He continues:

Men’s first thoughts in this matter [of morals] are generally better than their second, their natural notions better than those refined by study or consultation with casuists. According to common speech as well as common sense, ‘honesty is the best policy,’ but, according to refined sense, the only well-advised persons as to this world are arrant knaves, and they alone are thought to serve themselves who serve their passions and indulge their loosest appetites and desires.—Such, it seems, are the wise and such the wisdom of this world!

An ordinary man talking of a vile action in a way of common sense says naturally and heartily, ‘He would not be guilty of such a thing for the whole world.’ But speculative men find great modifications in the case, many ways of evasion, many remedies, many alleviations.<sup>33</sup>

Shaftesbury is not anti-philosophical—he understands his own writings to be a species of philosophy—but he is certain that we are better off to “moralize...according to common sense and without canting.” After all, “Some moral and philosophical truths there are, withal, so evident in themselves, that it would be easier to imagine half mankind to have run mad and joined precisely in one and the same species of folly, than to admit anything as truth which should be advanced against such natural knowledge, fundamental reason and common sense” as may be seen in the long run of human experience. Shaftesbury is distressed by the incapacity of many modern thinkers to see man complete and full-blooded, and the piling up of theoretical technicalities only seems to him to accentuate the substantive emptiness of their sense of human affairs. And the less theoretical modern approaches to understanding politics seem to him just as vacuous. “Some modern zealots,” he says, “appear to have no better knowledge of truth, nor better manner of judging it, than by counting noses. By this rule, if they can poll an indifferent number out of a mob, if they can produce a set of Lancashire noddles, remote provincial headpieces or visionary assemblers to attest a story of a witch upon a broomstick and a flight in the air, they triumph in the solid

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 61.

proof of their new prodigy and cry, *The truth is great and it will prevail!*<sup>34</sup> Both variants of modern political science<sup>35</sup> have lost sight of common sense and therefore of the *quality* of human community.

The key to preserving common sense, for Shaftesbury, is “wit”—a clever sense of “humour” that tests opinions by good-natured “raillery” or jesting.<sup>36</sup> We saw Shaftesbury employing wit just now in that comment on the dubiousness of polling as a measure of social truth. It is an attitude akin to the serious play or playful seriousness we see in a Socrates. It takes opinions seriously but not *too* seriously. Shaftesbury seems to play with the double meaning of “humour” in his discussion of wit—the humor of a people, their mood or emotional outlook, and what we would call a “sense of humor,” an ability to see absurdity in matters typically treated gravely or earnestly. A person of wit possesses the latter and appeals to the former: knowing well the humor of his fellows,<sup>37</sup> he can exploit their mood and make them see things in a different light, a *truer* light. *Sensus communis* for Shaftesbury emerges as a kind of mean between “zealotry” and frivolity,<sup>38</sup> a mean revealed by open debate, criticism, and especially good-natured, humane ridicule.<sup>39</sup>

Vico likewise saw wit as the essence of good sense and pivotal for directing the sense of the community. As Schaeffer explains: “The Baroque notion of wit [*acutezza*] becomes, in Vico’s hands, the mode of uniting metaphor with the *sententiae* [wise sayings, proverbs that would be recognized by ordinary people as containing obvious truths] and the *topoi* [commonplace elements of argument in rhetoric, ready tools for the forensic specialist].” “Vico claims that conceits [apt metaphors which reveal similarity in dissimilar things and

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>35</sup> I use the term “political science” here loosely and informally.

<sup>36</sup> Shaftesbury, 33-7.

<sup>37</sup> Note well that a sense of humor involves a sense of the humor of one’s acquaintances.

<sup>38</sup> Shaftesbury, 32, 43.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 35-9, 59-65.

bring a vast range of experience together in an image or turn of phrase] are arguments, that they teach by uniting beauty and truth in an oral performance. The orator creates the conceit by the force of his ingenuity working on the case at hand. The audience seizes it as simultaneously true and beautiful... The orator must use the common sense of the audience as that which connects his metaphor to the case.”<sup>40</sup> Vico works out this understanding of wit engaging the *sensus communis* in *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione*. Vico was a professor of rhetoric at the University of Naples and hit upon this formulation in his rhetorical studies. “Classical rhetorical theory revealed,” he thought, “that there were at least two possible roots for *sensus communis*: Aristotle’s what is held to be true by all, by most, or by the wisest—and Quintilian’s—a public utterance or ‘sentence’ traced to *sensus*, feeling, or opinion. Thus *sensus* for Vico had the dual meaning that sense still retains in English, a feeling or sensation, and an intellectual grasp on an idea, that is, ‘making sense.’ In his treatment of the conceit Vico intertwines these two linguistic roots into a concept of metaphor as argument. In the *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione*, he cultivates those roots to produce a theory of *sensus communis*.”<sup>41</sup>

Shaftesbury’s *sensus communis* was, like Vico’s after him, a kind of aesthetic judgment, but this judgment, while not a product of ratiocination, was clearly rational. It was a form of rational intuition. It was a sense of beauty or fitness, but also of truth. By it we may see the fit of a certain response to a certain circumstance to be self-evidently right, and this sense of rightness, in matters of any weight, is pregnant with normative implications. Indeed, *sensus communis*, for both Shaftesbury and Vico, is preeminently a *moral* attitude. Schaeffer helpfully

---

<sup>40</sup> Schaeffer, 63, 67. Regarding the Baroque *acutezza*, Schaeffer says, “To Baroque poets like Marino, Donne, and Herbert, and to Baroque theorists like Gracian, Tesauro, Sforza-Pallavicino, and Peregrino, wit meant combining two apparently dissimilar things into a metaphor that highlighted a heretofore unnoticed similarity” (63).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

describes *sensus communis* in terms of its “form,” “function,” and “content”: its form is “aesthetic beauty,” its function is “judgment,” and its content is “moral consensus.”<sup>42</sup> Neither Shaftesbury nor Vico mean to suggest that there is one and only one right response to a given circumstance—not at all—simply that some responses can be seen to fit, and others to be out of joint. The essential thing is that the man of wit finds something to say that *works* for the occasion, that meets the needs of the community for an answer.

Shaftesbury’s influence on Vico may be uncertain, but his influence on the course of thought in Britain is beyond question. In particular, his ideas on moral sentiments spurred the thinking of Francis Hutcheson and David Hume. According to McCosh, Hutcheson “did little more than expound [Shaftesbury’s] views, with less versatility, but in a more equable, thorough, and systematic manner.”<sup>43</sup> Like Shaftesbury, Hutcheson saw the moral sense as a kind of aesthetic faculty. But as Knud Haakonssen convincingly argues, for Hutcheson, “Moral perception is *not* a subjective affective experience; and moral judgements are thus not simply the expressions of such experience. Whether we make moral judgements of our own behavior or that of others, our moral perception and thus our moral judgement are explicitly *representative*, and thus either true or false.”<sup>44</sup> When we judge another to be virtuous, Hutcheson says, “the Quality approved by our moral Sense is conceived to reside in the Person approved, and to be a Perfection and Dignity in him.”<sup>45</sup> The moral sense perceives the moral quality of a person’s motivation, and judges it to be excellent or flawed, dignified or unworthy. Although the determinations of the moral sense are often attended

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>43</sup> James McCosh, *The Scottish Philosophy: Biographical, Expository, Critical, from Hutcheson to Hamilton* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1875), 35.

<sup>44</sup> Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 73.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted by Haakonssen from *Hutcheson’s Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (Dublin, 1738, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.), 129-31.



with pleasure or pain, these affective reactions are incidental.<sup>46</sup> The determinations themselves are objective: the quality observed either is or is not a moral quality; it either does or does not reflect human excellence. The substance of Hutcheson's "moral excellence" is love or benevolence, a tendency to actions that "contribute to the over-all happiness of the moral creation, the 'moral system.'"<sup>47</sup> The moral sense cannot function, however, without help of reason: "reason prepares moral judgements by establishing the subject of such judgements, namely the (likely) motivation to moral behavior in each particular case."<sup>48</sup> The renderings of the moral sense are literally irrelevant in cases where the motivation has been wrongly ascertained.

The similarity between Hutcheson's moral sense and Shaftesbury's common sense is evident. Both involve aesthetic moral judgments about attitudes and the acts (including speech acts) that flow from them, and in each case the quality of the attitudes and acts in question is determined by their tendency to promote the common good. Shaftesbury's *sensus communis* in fact presupposes a moral sense that functions just as Hutcheson says it does. In his "Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit," Shaftesbury claims to have shown that, "*Sense of right and wrong* [is] as natural to us as natural affection itself, and [is] a first principle in our constitution and make."<sup>49</sup> "Natural affection" is what gives rise to *sensus communis*, and the highest moral quality approved by the moral sense is the willful embrace of affection for others as the best and noblest thing in human nature.<sup>50</sup>

Like Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, Hume understands morality in aesthetic terms. Also like them, he is alert to the dangers of "zealotry": we noticed already Shaftesbury's

---

<sup>46</sup> Hutcheson makes this point in the same passage from the *Inquiry*.

<sup>47</sup> Haakonssen, 73-4.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 74. See Haakonssen's account of the process by which reason does this, 73-4.

<sup>49</sup> *Characteristics*, 179.

<sup>50</sup> See Shaftesbury's discussion of the relation between natural "public affections" and "self affections" in the same "Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit," *Characteristics*, 192-216.

recommending the use of wit to puncture the excess; Hutcheson, too, was famously keen to oppose zealotry of all kinds, political as well as religious; and opposing zealotry—or as he called it, “enthusiasm”—was a central motive of Hume’s political theorizing.<sup>51</sup> Hume even agrees with Hutcheson’s account of the moral sense on all essential points. If David Fate Norton’s account of Hume’s moral theory is accurate—and he makes a strong textual case<sup>52</sup>—one must conclude that Hume was a moral realist, in exactly the sense that Hutcheson was. In his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume explicitly rejects moral skepticism.<sup>53</sup> But Hume is generally taken—rightly, I believe—to have espoused philosophical positions that fatally undermine moral objectivity. In particular, his epistemological skepticism casts serious doubt on the possibility of moral knowledge. It was precisely this that motivated Thomas Reid to undertake his painstaking analyses of the operations of the mind in *An Inquiry into the Human Mind* and the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*. Hume seems to have thought that instinct, habit, and utility would prevent skepticism from spreading out beyond members of the intellectual class, and he himself thought that, beyond the obvious usefulness of moral distinctions for personal and social life, the instinct to believe in objective reality, including moral facts, was well nigh irresistible.<sup>54</sup> Reid was concerned, however, that others would follow who would take Hume’s epistemological skepticism with less equanimity—would take it as a revolutionary insight that “changes everything,” as we say—and, as a result, feel freer to ignore their natural beliefs. In the case of morality, such neglect of the plain verdicts of common sense could be disastrous. Reid was also troubled about the moral implications of Hume’s

---

<sup>51</sup> Haakonssen, 100.

<sup>52</sup> See Norton’s “Hume, human nature, and the foundations of morality,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 148-81.

<sup>53</sup> *Enquiry* (London, 1751), 169.

<sup>54</sup> See John Biro, “Hume’s new science of the mind,” in *Cambridge Companion to Hume*, 42, 58.

*theological* skepticism. Hume was satisfied that there are sufficient grounds for morality in human nature such that no supernatural reference is necessary.<sup>55</sup> But Reid was concerned that skepticism about a divine ground of moral order would altogether undermine people's confidence in the validity of their moral perceptions.<sup>56</sup>

Thomas Reid's name quickly became, after his death, virtually synonymous with common sense philosophy. For the better part of a century—from the late eighteenth to the latter nineteenth centuries—Reid's Common Sense philosophy “enjoyed enormous popularity in the United States, Great Britain, and France.”<sup>57</sup> But for much of the last century and a quarter, he has not been thought to be a philosopher of great importance, and the reputation of common sense philosophy suffered along with his own flagging fortunes. That is beginning to change. A recent resurgence of Reidian scholarship testifies to a growing sense that Reid was a philosopher ahead of his time. Nicholas Wolterstorff's judgment that Reid was “one of the two great philosophers of the latter part of the eighteenth century, the other being of course Immanuel Kant,”<sup>58</sup> is no longer an implausible position, as witness the impressive collection of essays in the recently compiled *Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*. Part of the reason for Reid's disappearance from the story of modern philosophy<sup>59</sup> was Kant's publicly expressed view that Scottish Common Sense thought was not worthy of serious consideration. The great German philosopher's dismissal of that school in the preface of his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* has become legendary. Because his statement there is so forceful and apparently devastating, and

---

<sup>55</sup> Norton, *Cambridge Companion to Hume*, 166-8.

<sup>56</sup> On Reid's account of the trustworthiness of our moral perceptions, see Terence Cuneo, “Reid's Moral Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*, eds. Terence Cuneo and René van Woudenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); on his view of the theological significance of epistemology, see Dale Tuggy, “Reid's Philosophy of Religion,” in *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Cambridge Companion to Reid*, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ix.

<sup>59</sup> *Cambridge Companion to Reid*, 1.

because any common sense philosopher wishing to be taken seriously must answer to Kant,

I submit it here in full:

Hume suffered the usual misfortune of metaphysicians, of not being understood. It is positively painful to see how utterly his opponents, Reid, Oswald, Beattie, and lastly Priestley, missed the point of the problem; for while they were ever taking for granted that which he doubted, and demonstrating with zeal and often with impudence that which he never thought of doubting, they so misconstrued his valuable suggestion [that reason is completely in the dark about the connection between cause and effect] that everything remained in its old condition, as if nothing had happened. The question was not whether the concept of cause was right, useful, and even indispensable for our knowledge of nature, for this Hume had never doubted; but whether that concept could be thought by reason *a priori*, and consequently whether it possessed an inner truth, independent of all experience, implying a more widely extended usefulness, not limited merely to objects of experience. This was Hume's problem. It was a question concerning the *origin* of the concept, not concerning its indispensability in use. Were the former decided, the conditions of its use and the sphere of its valid application would have been determined as a matter of course.

But to satisfy the conditions of the problem, the opponents of the great thinker should have penetrated very deeply into the nature of reason, so far as it is concerned with pure thought—a task which did not suit them. They found a more convenient method of being defiant without any insight, viz., the appeal to *common sense*. It is indeed a great gift of heaven to possess right or (as they now call it) plain common sense. But this common sense must be shown in deeds by well-considered and reasonable thoughts and words, not by appealing to it as an oracle when no rational justification of oneself can be advanced. The appeal to common sense when insight and science fail, and no sooner—this is one of the subtle discoveries of modern times, by means of which the most superficial ranter can safely enter the lists with the most thorough thinker and hold his own. But as long as a particle of insight remains, no one would think of having recourse to this subterfuge. Seen in a clear light, it is but an appeal to the opinion of the multitude, of whose applause the philosopher is ashamed, while the popular charlatan glories and confides in it. I should think Hume might fairly have laid as much claim to common sense as Beattie and, in addition, to a critical reason (such as the latter did not possess), which keeps common sense in check and prevents it from speculating, or, if speculations are under discussion, restrains the desire to decide because it cannot satisfy itself concerning its own principles. By this means alone can common sense remain sound. Chisels and hammers may suffice to work a piece of wood, but for etching we require an etcher's needle. Thus common sense and speculative understanding are both useful, but each in its own way: the former in judgments which apply immediately to experience; the latter when we judge universally from mere concepts, as in metaphysics, where sound common sense, so called in spite of the inappropriateness of the word, has no right to judge at all.<sup>60</sup>

Now virtually every word of this scorching critique is fairly applied to Beattie and Oswald and Priestley. Indeed, to the extent that Scottish Common Sense in the early nineteenth

---

<sup>60</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), 4-5.

century fell out of favor in Germany and other parts of the Western world, these men may be held primarily responsible. But *nothing* Kant says in those lines is true of Reid.

Take first the matter of causation. As Terence Cuneo observes, “Reid is a Humean about (non-agent) causation.”<sup>61</sup> As Reid himself writes in an unpublished manuscript, “Mr Humes reasoning on this Subject In <his> Essay on Necessary Connexion would have convinced me if I have not been convinced before, by S. I Newton.”<sup>62</sup> But that Reid appreciated the problem with which Hume (and later, Kant) was concerned is clear enough from his *published* writings. In his *Essays on the Active Powers*, Reid writes:

*Nature* is the name we give to the efficient cause of innumerable effects which fall daily under our observation. But, if it be asked what nature is—whether the first universal cause or a subordinate one, whether one or many, whether intelligent or unintelligent—upon these points we find various conjectures and theories, but no solid ground upon which we can rest. And I apprehend the wisest men are they who are sensible that they know nothing of the matter.

From the course of events in the natural world, we have sufficient reason to conclude the existence of an eternal intelligent First Cause. But whether He acts immediately in the production of those events, or by subordinate intelligent agents, or by instruments that are unintelligent, and what the number, the nature, and the different offices, of those agents or instruments may be—these I apprehend to be mysteries placed beyond the limits of human knowledge. We see an established order in the succession of natural events, but we see not the bond that connects them together.<sup>63</sup>

Wolterstorff sums up Reid’s view on causation succinctly: “We know that we ourselves, in the exercise of our active powers, are efficient causes; we know that God must be an efficient cause. That’s all we know about efficient causality.”<sup>64</sup> We know nothing of other efficient causes that may be at work in nature, much less why they should work as they do, and we know nothing of why, or even how, divine and human efficient causality work as

---

<sup>61</sup> *Cambridge Companion to Reid*, 256.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>63</sup> *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, eds. Ronald Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1983), I.v, 304-5.

<sup>64</sup> Wolterstorff, 257.

they do. We are able to discover laws of nature—regularities in the way things happen—and explain many of these laws by subsuming them under greater, related laws. But we can say nothing meaningful at all about the nature of causation. We can see that certain factors are involved in the production of certain effects but cannot see why things should work that way.<sup>65</sup>

As Cuneo and Woudenberg note, Kant’s accusation that Reidian common sense is an “appeal to the opinion of the multitude, of whose applause the philosopher is ashamed...when no rational justification for one’s position can be advanced...when insight and science fail,” is “more than a little ironic, for Reid himself would not have denied that there is a sense in which appealing to common sense—to what it ‘is ridiculous to doubt’—is humiliating for the philosopher.”<sup>66</sup> The passage from Reid’s *Essay on the Intellectual Powers* that Cuneo and Woudenberg quote in support of their observation is too poignant to pass by:

When I remember distinctly a past event, or see an object before my eyes, this commands my belief no less than an axiom. But when, as a Philosopher, I reflect upon this belief, and want to trace it to its origin, I am not able to resolve it into necessary and self-evident axioms, or conclusions that are necessarily consequent upon them. I seem to want that evidence which I can best comprehend, and which gives perfect satisfaction to an inquisitive mind; yet it is ridiculous to doubt, and I find it is not in my power. An attempt to throw off this belief, is like an attempt to fly, equally ridiculous and impracticable.

To a Philosopher, who has been accustomed to think that the treasure of his knowledge is the acquisition of that reasoning power of which he boasts, it is no doubt humiliating to find, that his reason can lay no claim to the greater part of it.<sup>67</sup>

In Reid’s case at least, Kant mistakes humility for subterfuge.

Nor does Reid’s humility take the form of foreclosing questions about the “mysteries” that face him. He probes deeply into the workings of the human mind and into

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 257-60.

<sup>66</sup> *Cambridge Companion to Reid*, 10.

<sup>67</sup> *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. Derek R. Brookes, with annotations by Derek R. Brookes and Knud Haakonssen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), II.xx: 233.

the workings of nature. No, the great difference between Reid and Hume, and between Reid and Kant, is not the subtlety with which they think (Reid holds his own here) or the care with which they observe (although here Reid surely has the advantage) but the place from which they start their inquiries. Reid starts with what is given in experience—*everything* given in experience—while Hume and Kant begin with Cartesian doubt. Hume and Kant say, effectively, “Prove to me that what I seem to know is real;” Reid says, “How should I understand what I seem to know?” Reid in the *Inquiry* describes the Humean and Kantian skeptic thus: “The skeptic asks me, Why do you believe the existence of the external object which you believe?...There is nothing so shameful in a philosopher as to be deceived and deluded; and therefore you ought to resolve firmly to withhold assent, and to throw off all this belief of external objects, which may be all delusion.”<sup>68</sup> As Wolterstorff explains, “Reid’s skeptic is a foundationalist of the classically modern sort.”<sup>69</sup> “To be a classical foundationalist with respect to some particular truth-relevant merit,” Wolterstorff continues, “is to hold that a condition of some judgment or belief possessing that merit is that it be an ideally formed belief,” a belief formed on the basis of direct acquaintance with facts. “The classically *modern* foundationalist [my emphasis] is a classic foundationalist who embraces the position [that] the only source of acquaintance with facts is inner awareness, with reason understood as a special case thereof: reason yields acquaintance with the logical properties of states of mind and their logical interconnections.”<sup>70</sup> Reid thinks this “classically modern foundationalist” position cannot be safely assumed. He thinks that we have no good reason *a priori* to privilege one kind of seeming awareness over others. Our awareness of external objects *seems* as real as our awareness of logical relations, and seemings are all we have to

---

<sup>68</sup> *Inquiry* VI, xx.

<sup>69</sup> Wolterstorff, 187.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

begin with in our investigation of what is. In the course of his investigations, the philosopher notices certain regularities, and among these are Reid's principles of common sense. These are principles the philosopher must take for granted "in his posing of questions, in his raising of doubts, in his offerings of reasons." As he cannot help but take these principles for granted, Reid insists that he ought to treat them with respect and recognize their authority. This does not mean he shouldn't question and challenge these principles, only that he should recognize that the burden of proof is on him in doing so, not on those who take them to be reliable.<sup>71</sup>

What are these principles of common sense? Reid calls them "first principles or self-evident truths," and divides them into "first principles of contingent truths" and "first principles of necessary truths." Of the former, Reid lists twelve:

1. First, then, I hold, as a first principle, the existence of every thing of which I am conscious.
2. Another first principle, I think, is, that the thoughts of which I am conscious are the thoughts of a being which I call myself, my mind, my person.
3. Another first principle I take to be, that those things did really happen which I distinctly remember.
4. Another first principle is our own personal identity and continued existence, as far back as we remember anything distinctly.
5. Another first principle is, that those things do really exist which we distinctly perceive by our senses, and are what we perceive them to be.
6. Another first principle, I think, is, that we have some degree of power over our actions, and the determinations of our will.
7. Another first principle is, that the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error, are not fallacious.
8. Another first principle relating to existence, is, that there is life and intelligence in our fellow men with whom we converse.
9. Another first principle I take to be, that certain features of the countenance, sounds of the voice, and gestures of the body, indicate certain thoughts and dispositions of mind.
10. Another first principle, appears to me to be, that there is a certain regard due to human testimony in matters of fact, and even to human authority in matters of opinion.
11. There are many events dependent upon the will of man, in which there is a self-evident probability, greater or less, according to the circumstances.

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 246-7.



12. The last principle of contingent truths I mention, is, that, in the phenomena of nature, what is to be, will probably be like to what has been in similar circumstances.<sup>72</sup>

Reid calls these “contingent” because some of them depend on certain prior conditions, e.g., a normally functioning mind, and the rest because they might conceivably have been otherwise than they are. The necessary truths could not be other than they are. Reid names six classes of necessary truths:

1. There are some first principles that may be called *grammatical*: such as, *That every adjective in a sentence must belong to some substantive expressed or understood; That every complete sentence must have a verb.*
2. There are *logical* axioms: such as, *That any contexture of words which does not make a proposition, is neither true nor false; That every proposition is either true or false; That no proposition can be both true and false at the same time; That reasoning in a circle proves nothing; That whatever may be truly affirmed of a genus, may be truly affirmed of all the species, and all the individuals belonging to that genus.*
3. Every one knows there are *mathematical* axioms.
4. I think there are axioms, even in matters of *taste*. Notwithstanding the variety found among men, in taste, there are, I apprehend, some common principles, even in matters of this kind.
5. There are also first principles in *morals*. *That an unjust action has more demerit than an ungenerous one: That a generous action has more merit than a merely just one: That no man ought to be blamed for what it was not in his power to hinder: That we ought not to do to others what we would think unjust or unfair to be done to us in like circumstances.* These are moral axioms, and many others might be named which appear to me to have no less evidence than those of mathematics.
6. The last class of first principles I shall mention, we may call *metaphysical*. I shall particularly consider three of these, because they have been called in question by Mr Hume. The *first* is, *That the qualities which we perceive by our senses must have a subject, which we call body, and that the thoughts we are conscious of must have a subject, which we call mind...* The *second* metaphysical principle I mention is—*That whatever begins to exist, must have a cause which produced it...* The *third* supposition is—That [causation] is to be admitted as a first or self-evident principle. Two reasons may be urged for this. The universal consent of mankind, not of philosophers only, but of the rude and unlearned vulgar... That mankind not only assent to it in speculation, but that the practice of life is grounded upon it in the most important matters, even in cases where experience leaves us doubtful; and it is impossible to act with common prudence if we set it aside.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> *Essay on the Intellectual Powers* VI.v, as quoted in *Cambridge Companion to Reid*, 78-9.

<sup>73</sup> *Essay on the Intellectual Powers* VI.vi.

Reid takes pains to show in the text why all the foregoing *must be taken* as first principles. What sets him apart from Hume and Kant, and what in his view generally sets the man of common sense apart from the skeptic, is that he does not think our inability to *explain* these principles *in itself* gives any reason to doubt them.

Witherspoon was well acquainted with the works of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Reid, discussed them in his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, and recommended them to his students for closer study. Hutcheson's *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* and his *Moral System* were particularly important for the lectures: Witherspoon clearly used them as a template for organizing the course, despite keeping up a running dispute with Hutcheson on certain key points throughout. McCosh likewise knew Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Reid well, and was especially impressed and influenced by Reid's works.<sup>74</sup> Of course, both Witherspoon and McCosh were deeply immersed in the Scottish school, and so had read a great many other books of Scottish philosophy beyond those of Hutcheson, Hume, and Reid.

The last great common sense philosopher with whom we need concern ourselves—for purposes of this study—is Sir William Hamilton. McCosh calls him “the most learned of all the Scottish metaphysicians.”<sup>75</sup> McCosh ought to have known, for he studied under Hamilton at the University of Edinburgh. Hamilton tried to synthesize the insights of Reid and Kant, with varying success. Perhaps his greatest contribution to common sense philosophy was his remarkable scholarly essay “On the Philosophy of Common Sense; or Our Primary Beliefs Considered as the Ultimate Criterion of Truth,” which must be

---

<sup>74</sup> McCosh was especially knowledgeable about the history of philosophy in Scotland, as witness his landmark study, *Scottish Philosophy* (cited above).

<sup>75</sup> McCosh, *Scottish Philosophy*, 415.

considered a classic, perhaps the best short account of the subject ever written.<sup>76</sup> Therein he describes common sense principles as “the primary elements of cognition”—“primary propositions...cognitions at first hand...fundamental facts, feelings, beliefs...that as elements of our mental constitution—as the essential conditions of our knowledge—*must* by us be accepted as true.”<sup>77</sup> The formulation “primary propositions,” which Hamilton uses frequently, is unfortunate, as it gives the impression that these fundamental principles of the mind appear *as* propositions, when what he means to convey is that these spontaneous primary beliefs may, on being noticed, be easily expressed in propositional form, as Reid expresses them above. “To argue from common sense,” Hamilton says, “is simply to show, that the denial of a given proposition would involve the denial of some original datum of consciousness; but as every original datum of consciousness is to be presumed true, that the proposition in question, as dependent on such a principle, must be admitted.” The original data of consciousness must, if the deliverances of consciousness are to be trusted at all, be presumed true until proved false. This much, however, as Hamilton points out, is uncontroversial. “The facts of consciousness, as mere phenomena, are by the unanimous confession of all Sceptics and Idealists, ancient and modern, placed high above the reach of question,” and Hamilton gives a list of citations to prove it. The real debatable issue is whether these bare phenomena may be “viewed as attestations of more than their own existence, seeing that they are not, in this respect, placed beyond the possibility of doubt.”<sup>78</sup> That is, can we trust the data of consciousness *as indicators* of really existing things beyond the mind?

---

<sup>76</sup> Of particular value is Hamilton’s compendium of conceptual equivalents to common sense he finds in ancient and modern philosophical texts.

<sup>77</sup> Hamilton, in Note A. of his “Supplementary Dissertations; or Excursive Notes, Critical and Historical,” appended to *The Works of Thomas Reid, D.D.*, vol. 2, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, ed. Hamilton (Edinburgh: Maclachlan and Stewart, 1863), 743.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 743-5.

On examination, Hamilton finds ten principles relevant to philosophy that are “either self-evident, or admit of easy proof”:

1. The end of philosophy is truth; and consciousness is the instrument and criterion of its acquisition. In other words, philosophy is the development and application of the constitutive and normal truths which consciousness immediately reveals.
2. Philosophy is thus wholly dependent upon consciousness; the possibility of the former supposing the trustworthiness of the latter.
3. Consciousness is to be presumed trustworthy, until proved mendacious.
4. The mendacity of consciousness is proved, if its data, immediately in themselves, or mediately in their necessary consequences, be shown to stand in mutual contradiction.
5. The immediate or mediate repugnance of any two of its data being established, the presumption in favour of the general veracity of consciousness is abolished, or rather reversed. For while, on the one hand, all that is not contradictory is not therefore true; on the other, a positive proof of falsehood, in one instance, establishes a presumption of probable falsehood in all.
6. No attempt to show that the data of consciousness are (either in themselves, or in their necessary consequences) mutually contradictory, has yet succeeded.
7. No philosopher has ever formally denied the truth or disclaimed the authority of consciousness; but few or none have been content implicitly to accept and consistently to follow out its dictates. Instead of humbly resorting to consciousness, to draw from thence his doctrines and their proof, each dogmatic speculator looked only into consciousness, there to discover his preadopted opinions.
8. The first and most obtrusive consequence of this procedure has been, the multiplication of philosophical systems in every conceivable aberration from the unity of truth.
9. The second, but less obvious, consequence has been, the virtual surrender, by each several system, of the possibility of philosophy in general. For, as the possibility of philosophy supposes the absolute truth of consciousness, every system which proceeded on the hypothesis, that even a single deliverance of consciousness is untrue, did, however it might eschew the overt declaration, thereby invalidate the general credibility of consciousness, and supply to the sceptic the premises he required to subvert philosophy, in so far as that system represented it.
10. And yet, although the past history of philosophy has, in a great measure, been only a history of variation and error...yet the cause of this variation being known, we obtain a valid ground of hope for the destiny of philosophy in future. Because, since philosophy has hitherto been inconsistent with itself, only in being inconsistent with the dictates of our natural beliefs...it follows, that philosophy has simply to return to natural consciousness.<sup>79</sup>

Hamilton then offers three guidelines for keeping philosophy from so much variation and error:

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 746-7.

- 1) That we admit nothing, not either an original datum of consciousness, or the legitimate consequence of such a datum;
- 2) That we embrace all the original data of consciousness, and all their legitimate consequences; and
- 3) That we exhibit each of these in its individual integrity, neither distorted nor mutilated, and in its relative place, whether of pre-eminence or subordination.<sup>80</sup>

Here, then, is the key point in responding to the skeptic: that included in the data of consciousness during an act of perception is a sense or awareness of the externality and independent existence of an object perceived. “In the act of sensible perception, I am conscious of two things;—of *myself* as the perceiving subject, and of an *external reality*, in relation with my sense, as the *object perceived*. Of the existence of both these things I am convinced: because I am conscious of knowing each of them, not mediately, in something else, *as represented*, but immediately in itself, *as existing*. Of their mutual independence I am no less convinced; because each is apprehended equally, and at once, in the same indivisible energy, the one not preceding or determining, the other not following or determined; and because each is apprehended out of, and in direct contrast to, the other.”<sup>81</sup> One must abstract from the ordinary experience, from the original contents of consciousness, to take seriously the notion that we know nothing of the world beyond our minds.

All this may seem far removed indeed from matters of politics, and in fact Hamilton wrote little of direct applicability to political life, but his writings are nonetheless part of a broad effort of common sense thinkers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to combat a growing philosophical skepticism they took to be dangerous in the long term to moral and political order. As Haakonssen demonstrates, this movement emerged out of the larger Protestant natural law tradition that can be traced back to Grotius’ seventeenth-century classic *De iure belli ac pacis* (*The Law of War and Peace*) and extends to the American founding

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 747.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

and beyond, and which was itself preoccupied with overcoming modern skeptical tendencies.

Scholastic natural law theory, as represented by [Francis] Suárez...was an obvious target for the sort of moral scepticism which had been revived at the Renaissance and which continued to have great influence in the formulations given it by thinkers such as Montaigne and Charron. Scholastic natural law seemed to presuppose a degree of knowledge about God, the world, and human nature which it was only too easy for sceptical criticism to undermine. Not least, it operated with an idea of God and of the relationship between God and man which could hardly be considered 'natural' unless it could be shown to be persuasive outside the Christian world, for example in the new colonies in the Americas and elsewhere. One of the main points of modern scepticism was that this was not the case. Religious and moral notions were so relative to time and place that no theoretically coherent account could be given of them. Not least, such notions were relative to each person's interest or individual utility. This connection of an Epicurean theme with Renaissance relativism was made with particular effect when Grotius in the 'Prolegomena' to his *De iure belli ac pacis* (1625) singled out Carneades as the classical representative of all scepticism. A continuing ambition of modern natural law was therefore to overcome such scepticism.<sup>82</sup>

This ambition manifestly animated Scottish natural jurisprudence and moral philosophy, and was the driving force behind Scottish Common Sense philosophy, for which natural law and natural justice were central concerns. Indeed, common sense for the Scottish Common Sense philosophers contained within itself the rudiments of natural right and natural law. According to Haakonssen, "The mainstream of Scottish moral philosophy in the eighteenth century [is] a basically cognitivist and realist tradition. It stretches from Francis Hutcheson and George Turnbull via Lord Kames, Adam Ferguson, Thomas Reid, and the Common Sense philosophers, to Dugald Stewart and his circle; and it forms the philosophical backbone of more popular moralizing by enlightened clergymen and others, such as the group of 'moderate literati' now so well explored. Though exhibiting variations in moral psychology, epistemology, and ontology, as well as theology, these thinkers generally claimed that mankind's potential for moral knowledge has an extent and a certainty quite beyond that allowed by Hume and [Adam] Smith, and they took this to have important political

---

<sup>82</sup> Haakonssen, 24-5.

implications.” Hume and Smith, then—the best remembered Scottish philosophers today—were decidedly out of the mainstream of the Scottish moral philosophy of the time.<sup>83</sup>

In fact, while Hume and Smith were read and respected by the American founders, other Scottish thinkers cumulatively may well have had a larger influence on them. With some of the founders they certainly did. Witherspoon and James Wilson, the two leading Scotsmen of the founding generation, favored Hutcheson and especially Reid over Hume and Smith.<sup>84</sup> James Madison was a student of Witherspoon’s at Princeton, shared Witherspoon’s basic religious convictions and political philosophy, and maintained close ties to the older man as long as the latter lived, and so seems likely to have shared the professor’s criticisms of Hume as well as his appreciation for Hume’s practical political wisdom.<sup>85</sup> The other leading founders certainly read Hutcheson, Kames, and Ferguson, if not always Reid,<sup>86</sup> as well as Hume and Smith. (Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, incidentally, was as well known to the founding generation as his later, ultimately better remembered *Wealth of Nations*.)

In any event, the *idea* of common sense, in a form most familiar from Scottish writings, was firmly embedded in the American psyche. When Thomas Paine wrote his famous pamphlet in 1776, its title resonated with the American public in a way we can scarcely appreciate today because of the pervasive influence of the Scottish philosophy among the educated of the time. Jefferson, writing to Henry Lee in 1825, said that the

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 63-4.

<sup>84</sup> Regarding Wilson, see Mark David Hall, “Wilson’s Moral Epistemology,” in *The Political and Legal Philosophy of James Wilson, 1742-1798* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

<sup>85</sup> See James H. Smylie, “Madison and Witherspoon: Theological Roots of American Political Thought,” *Princeton University Library Journal*, XXII (1961), 118-32; Ellis Sandoz, *A Government of Laws: Political Theory, Religion, and the American Founding* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 184-5.

<sup>86</sup> Reid’s ethical and political theory was not published during his lifetime or for a long time after, and so Reid’s work was in those days of a more purely philosophical interest. His ethical and political theory can be studied now thanks to Haakonssen’s edition of Reid’s *Practical Ethics: Being Lectures and Papers on Natural Religion, Self-Government, Natural Jurisprudence, and the Law of Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

Declaration of Independence was meant “not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent.” It was meant at the same time to express the common sense of the American people, to be “an expression of the American mind” and of “the harmonizing sentiments of the day,” not of opinions peculiar to Jefferson or other founders.<sup>87</sup> Jefferson’s Declaration thus expressed both senses of the old common sense: common sense as self-evident truth (“We hold these truths to be self-evident”) and common sense as the sense of the community grounded in common convictions and understandings that are universally valid.

William James, for his part, said at the outset of his Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that his philosophic imagination had been lastingly animated by Scottish Common Sense: “The glories of the philosophic chair of this university [Edinburgh] were deeply impressed on my imagination in boyhood. Professor Fraser’s *Essays in Philosophy*, then just published, was the first philosophic book I ever looked into, and I well remember the awestruck feeling I received from the account of Sir William Hamilton’s class-room therein contained. Hamilton’s own lectures were the first philosophic writings I ever forced myself to study, and after that I was immersed in Dugald Stewart and Thomas Brown. Such juvenile emotions of reverence never get outgrown.”<sup>88</sup> This vignette is especially interesting in light of the similarity between Hamilton’s guidelines for philosophizing quoted above and James’ own account of the fundamental “postulate” underlying his own radical empiricism: “The postulate is that the only things that shall be

---

<sup>87</sup> Jefferson, Letter to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, eds. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: Modern Library, 1998), 656-7.

<sup>88</sup> VRE, 11.



debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience. [Things of an unexperienceable nature may exist ad libitum, but they form no part of the material for philosophic debate.]”<sup>89</sup> Elsewhere James describes his “methodical postulate” this way: “Nothing shall be admitted as fact, it says, except what can be experienced at some definite time by some experient; and for every feature of fact ever so experienced, a definite place must be found somewhere in the final system of reality. In other words: Everything real must be experienceable somewhere, and every kind of thing experienced must somewhere be real.”<sup>90</sup> The resemblance of James’ philosophic method as expressed here to Hamilton’s in the latter’s essay on common sense is remarkable. I cannot help but wonder whether the germ of James’ vision for a radically empirical philosophy was caught in his early study of Hamilton. In any case, the common sense attitude expressed in Hamilton’s guidelines is unmistakably the same attitude James adopts as fundamental to his philosophic enterprise.

James’ attitude toward skepticism, moreover, bears a striking resemblance to Thomas Reid’s. Reid’s skeptic, you will recall, says in effect, “There is nothing so shameful in a philosopher as to be deceived and deluded; and therefore you ought to resolve firmly to withhold assent, and to throw off all this belief of external objects, which may be all delusion.”<sup>91</sup> This sounds very much like the skeptical posture James challenges in “The Will to Believe.” There James responds to W. K. Clifford’s claim that, “It is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”<sup>92</sup> Like Reid, James suggests that such commitments are passional rather than rational and reflect an unaccountable privileging of the desire to avoid error over the desire to discover the truth,

---

<sup>89</sup> MT, 7.

<sup>90</sup> ERE, 81.

<sup>91</sup> Reid, *Inquiry* VI.xx.

<sup>92</sup> James finds the statement in Clifford’s “The Ethics of Belief,” *Contemporary Review* (1877) 29: 283-309.

whatever the risk. Clifford's position, he thinks, stems from a "horror of becoming a dupe." But James "can believe that worse things than being duped may happen to a man in this world," and finds "a certain lightness of heart [about the possibility of error] healthier than this excessive nervousness" about it.<sup>93</sup> James' attitude here exhibits the playful seriousness Shaftesbury called for, an attitude perhaps nowhere more poignantly modeled than by Socrates in the *Phaedo*, in which he tries (waiting for *his own* death by execution!) to encourage his friends to adopt a more playful mood in exploring such uncertain matters as what happens to a man after he dies. After making an educated guess as to what men are likely to face in the afterlife, Socrates says to them, "Of course, no reasonable man ought to insist that the facts are exactly as I have described them. But that either this or something very like it is a true account of our souls and their future habitations—since we have clear evidence [from the preceding argument] that the soul is immortal—this, I think, is both a reasonable contention and a belief worth risking, for the risk is a noble one."<sup>94</sup> James himself doubted the existence of the soul as classically conceived, but he shared Socrates' attitude toward the possibility of immortality and, more to the point, he took the "risk" of believing for the sake of discovering true goods to be more reasonable than a cringing withdrawal from the search for fear of going astray. In the end, "Scepticism...is not avoidance of option; it is option of a certain particular kind of risk. *Better risk loss of truth than chance of error*—that is your faith-vetoer's exact position." He concludes: "A rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule," and "this command that we shall put a stopper on our heart, instincts and courage, and *wait*—acting of course meanwhile more or less as if religion [and by

---

<sup>93</sup> WB, 24-5.

<sup>94</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 114d, as translated by Hugh Tredennick in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 94.

implication, a greater meaning of human life] were *not* true—till doomsday, or till such time as our intellect and senses working together may have raked in evidence enough—this command, I say, seems to me the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave.”<sup>95</sup>

One of the things for James worth the risk of believing, both because the probabilities seem to lie that way and because the payoff for being right could be enormous, was that a deeper moral order guaranteeing our highest ideals is available to us, though it cannot be proved beyond all doubt. He was cautiously confident with Witherspoon and McCosh that he had found sufficient grounding for a robust, rich, and well-ordered moral life.<sup>96</sup>

The ultimate aim of the present study is to consider common sense as a cultural and political force. In many respects, the influence of common sense on politics and culture is indirect, and therefore it is not always easily observable. The significance of a deeply rooted tradition of common sense is most easily seen negatively, in its absence. Eric Voegelin’s comment (quoted, p. 6 above) on the absence of a tradition of common sense in twentieth-century Germany is instructive. He had been driven to study ancient Greek philosophy—which he came to understand as a philosophical differentiation of the common sense attitude—by his perplexity over how an ideological movement as monstrous as National Socialism could have resonated in the advanced German culture in which he grew up. His conclusion that it was the absence of a common sense tradition in Germany that made the phenomenon of Nazism possible there should give us pause. A tradition of common sense does not guarantee a noble politics, but it does serve as a powerful antidote to ideological

---

<sup>95</sup> WB, 30-2.

<sup>96</sup> All this is suggested in James’ extraordinary essay, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” in WB, 141-62. I discuss the piece extensively in Chapter 5.

depredations. What more common sense portends politically, I will try to show in the following chapters.

## WITHERSPOON'S 'PLAIN COMMON SENSE'<sup>97</sup>

John Witherspoon's moral philosophy represents a nascent form of the Scottish Common Sense philosophy that reached its apex in the thought of Thomas Reid. Witherspoon was acquainted with Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind* by the time he penned the lecture notes that compose his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, but his lectures owed much less to Reid than to Francis Hutcheson, from whose *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* and *System of Moral Philosophy* he borrowed extensively.<sup>98</sup> Jack Scott, editor of an annotated edition of the *Lectures*, fairly sums up Witherspoon's importance in the history of American common sense philosophy in saying that, "In terms of Scottish Common Sense philosophy, Witherspoon's thought is neither original nor profound. Rather, his real significance is in making Princeton a citadel of Scottish realism—a citadel that, in turn, dominated philosophical thought in American higher education for many decades."<sup>99</sup> However, while few of the ideas in the *Lectures* are original to Witherspoon, his *synthesis* of the ideas of others—Joseph Butler, Anthony Ashley Cooper (Lord Shaftesbury), Samuel Clarke, Hume, Locke, and others, as well as Hutcheson—is. His own unique

---

<sup>97</sup> Witherspoon employs the phrase in his "History of a Corporation of Servants," in *Works of the Reverend John Witherspoon*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1800-1801), 360. *Works* cited hereafter as *WJW*.

<sup>98</sup> Indeed, by modern standards of scholarship, Witherspoon's borrowing from Hutcheson borders on plagiarism. But standards of scholarship were different in those days, and the question of plagiarism is rendered essentially moot in any case by the fact that the *Lectures* were not meant for publication. John Rodgers, who edited Witherspoon's *Works*, writes in his prefatory note to the *Lectures* that Witherspoon "did not intend these lectures for the press, and . . . once compelled a printer who, without his knowledge, had undertaken to publish them, to desist from the design, by threatening a prosecution as the consequence of persisting in it." Rodgers says further that Witherspoon viewed the *Lectures* "as little more than a syllabus or compend, on which he might enlarge before a class at the times of recitation; and not intending that they should go further, or be otherwise considered, he took freely and without acknowledgement from writers of character such ideas, and perhaps expressions, as he found suited for his purpose." In *Funeral Discourse* of John Rodgers, Sr. Minister of United Presbyterian Churches, *WJW*, vol. 3. It is possible that Witherspoon had his students use Hutcheson's books as primary texts for the course; in any case, Hutcheson's *Inquiry* and *System* are listed in the recommended readings he appended at the end of the *Lectures*.

<sup>99</sup> Jack Scott, "Introduction" to *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy by John Witherspoon* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982), 33. (Scott's edition of the *Lectures* is used throughout, cited as *LMP*.)

synthesis helped shape the contours of American political theory during the founding era through his classes at Princeton, the “School of Statesmen,”<sup>100</sup> through the widespread use of his lectures at universities across the country,<sup>101</sup> and through his most famous student, James Madison, whose leading political principles bear strong resemblance to ideas emphasized in the *Lectures*.<sup>102</sup>

Broadly stated, Witherspoon’s own brand of common sense philosophy is grounded in experience, structured by human nature, and motivated by a high-minded pragmatism. The experience to which Witherspoon’s commonsense approach appeals is the combined

---

<sup>100</sup> Princeton earned this appellation for turning out an unusually high number of graduates who would become high-ranking public officials. Witherspoon himself taught so many of these that Garry Wills has said, “Witherspoon was probably the most influential teacher in the entire history of American education.” Wills, *Explaining America: The Federalist* (Harmondsworth, England, 1981), 16. On both Princeton’s reputation as the “School of Statesmen” and Witherspoon’s leading part in giving it that standing, see Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, *Princeton, 1746-1896* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 115-16.

<sup>101</sup> Witherspoon’s influence on American higher education, directly through his *Lectures* and indirectly through Princeton graduates who studied under him or under one of his Princeton protégés, seems to have been massive. John Edwin Pomfret has observed that in his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, “John Witherspoon . . . furnished a cohesive and logical synthesis that was to set the Princeton pattern for long generations.” Pomfret, “Philip Lindsley: Pioneer Educator of the Old Southwest,” in *The Lives of Eighteen from Princeton*, ed. Willard Thorp (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 158. Princeton, in turn, was to exert an extraordinary influence on American higher education generally. According to John J. Walsh, “Princeton’s educational influence [during the colonial period] quite literally dominated much of the thinking in educational circles all over the country.” Walsh, *Education of the Founding Fathers of the Republic: Scholasticism in the Colonial Colleges* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1935), 162; quoted in Scott, 51-2. Much of this influence was Witherspoon’s doing, and bore his imprint. This influence, moreover, continued decades after the formation of the republic. Scott notes that “Scottish realism largely dominated the American intellectual scene during the first half of the nineteenth century, and Witherspoon’s *Lectures* were no small factor in the dissemination of this philosophy.” Scott, 50-1. See also Wertenbaker, 113-15; and Donald Robert Come, “The Influence of Princeton on Higher Education in the South before 1825,” in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, vol. 2, no. 4 (Oct., 1945): 359-96, both of which point to the importance of Witherspoon’s *Lectures*.

<sup>102</sup> Regarding Witherspoon’s influence on Madison, see James H. Smylie, “Madison and Witherspoon: Theological Roots of American Political Thought,” *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 22 (Spring 1961): 118-32; Ralph Ketcham, “James Madison at Princeton,” *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 28 (Autumn 1966): 24-54; and Garrett Ward Sheldon, *The Political Philosophy of James Madison* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) 10-15. In particular Witherspoon seems to have impressed Madison with the corruption of human nature and the corresponding need for restraints on individuals and on government itself. Sheldon notes that, while influence is difficult to prove, “the conceptual similarities between Madison’s thought and that of his Princeton tutor [Witherspoon] are compelling”: Witherspoon’s view of human nature is reflected in Madison’s *Federalist* 51, and his view of republican government in *Federalist* 10; and he approved of the Constitution of 1787 “as embracing principles and carrying into effect measures which he had long advocated, as essential to the preservation of the liberties, and the promotion of the peace and prosperity of the country.” “The political theory that Madison received from his master and mentor, as shown in Witherspoon’s *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, blended the three dominant ideologies of Revolutionary America: Calvinist Christianity, classical republicanism, and Lockean liberalism” (13-15).

experience of the individual social scientist and of mankind generally through the ages. As a social scientist, Witherspoon begins with an inductive exploration of political reality, of man and society, and complements this personal kind of knowing by acquaintance with a broad knowledge of the common experience of man as revealed in the seminal works (both ancient and contemporary) of philosophy and history.<sup>103</sup> This deep and broad experience of political reality discloses a human nature consistent through time and intimating in its structure and dynamics a tolerably clear natural order and purpose for individual and social human affairs. Human nature thus becomes, at least in its essential elements, a constant in political reality, a coherent form out of which fundamental ethical and political principles may be drawn. The commonsense analysis of man is directed and driven by a noble pragmatism that asks what will enable man to be true to his evident essential nature (this constitutes his *duty*) and what will enable him to maximize his potentiality (this constitutes his *freedom*). “Common sense,” then, in Witherspoon’s case, is not only the ordinary good sense of ordinary people (although it certainly includes that), but also the funded good sense of educated and engaged men across the centuries – men well acquainted with the great meditations on human nature and the perennial human problems, not detached from the experiences of ordinary people or lost in abstract speculations, but participating on all levels in the world of which they are part and drawing their principles and constructing their theories from the concrete facts of human existence as they present themselves “on the ground.”

Common sense philosophy has historically always been concerned with exploring a middle way between skepticism and dogmatism,<sup>104</sup> and Witherspoon’s version of it is no exception. Skepticism in Witherspoon’s day was represented most formidably by David

---

<sup>103</sup> Witherspoon’s basic approach was constantly to compare dialectically the accounts of the great writers with his own concrete observations of life.

<sup>104</sup> See Introduction.

Hume, who had called into question the mind's ability to know anything beyond its own perceptions, which themselves had no definite demonstrable relation to the outside world. Dogmatism (as Witherspoon saw it, at least) took the shape of Bishop George Berkeley's "immaterialism" or spiritualism, an early form of idealism that made the universe a constellation of ideas in the minds of its inhabitants. In the *Lectures*, Witherspoon tries to forge a *via media* between skepticism and idealism, reaffirming the mind's spiritual quality and capacity to know objective moral truth, on the one hand, and its rootedness in the body and the material world, on the other. The search for foundations, as Witherspoon suggests in his "Recapitulation" of the *Lectures*, had taken a different form in modernity than it had among the ancients: "I am not sensible that there is any thing among the ancients, that wholly corresponds with the modern dispute upon the foundation of virtue." He explains:

The great inquiry among the ancients was, what was the *summum bonum*? by which it seems they took it for granted, that virtue and happiness were the same thing. The chief combatants here, were the Stoics and the Epicureans. The first insisted that virtue was the *summum bonum*, that pleasure was no good, and pain no evil: the other said that the *summum bonum* consisted in pleasure, or rather that pleasure was virtue: the Academics and Platonists went a middle way between these.<sup>105</sup>

(One gets the sense here that Witherspoon admires the Academics and Platonists for taking a middle way.) Ancient philosophers generally had been preoccupied with human ends (human potentiality and destiny), modern philosophers with beginnings (origins and foundations). For the ancients, virtue was especially a question of ends, but for the moderns the critical question concerning virtue was its foundation, its source. Witherspoon admirably addresses both foundations and ends in the *Lectures*. For him, foundations and ends are directly and inseparably connected: the foundation of human virtue is the design of human nature, and this design suggests a purpose and an end for man.

---

<sup>105</sup> Jack Scott, *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy, by John Witherspoon* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982), 187. Cited hereafter as *LMP*.



Witherspoon derives his ethics from human nature, and his politics from his ethics. In the introductory lecture of the series, Witherspoon defines “moral philosophy” as “that branch of Science which treats of the principles and laws of Duty or Morals.”<sup>106</sup> It is the “superior science” to which all other sciences – including mathematics and natural science – are “but hand-maids”<sup>107</sup> and includes under its rubric both ethics and politics. At its most fundamental level, moral philosophy is really “nothing else but the knowledge of human nature.”<sup>108</sup> Duty is subjection to “some law [or] to some superior, to whom we are accountable,”<sup>109</sup> and the “principles of duty ... must be drawn from the nature of man. That is to say, if we can discover how his Maker formed him, or for what he intended him, that certainly is what [he] ought to be.”<sup>110</sup> The principle or law determining our duties as human beings is ultimately the design of human nature itself, and the superior to whom we are accountable is God, the architect of human nature.<sup>111</sup>

### **CORRUPTION OF HUMAN NATURE**

What, then, is the design of human nature? This is not immediately obvious, unfortunately, thanks to its corruption. Because of “the depravity and corruption of our nature,” we are “apt” to take “many things as dictates of human nature, which are in reality

---

<sup>106</sup> *LMP*, 64.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>111</sup> Witherspoon does not take either the existence or the nature of God for granted; he gives considerable space to analyzing various proofs of God’s existence and exploring rationally the probable contours of God’s nature (Lectures VI and VII). He is clearly concerned, as a Presbyterian clergyman, with the question of the compatibility of the ethical and political principles of sound moral philosophy – based, as he presents it, on reasoned observations of human nature – with the teachings of Scripture, and raises the issue directly in the third paragraph of this introductory lecture. He does not seem to be worried, however, about what reason will find: “If the Scripture is true, the discoveries of reason cannot be contrary to it; and therefore, it has nothing to fear from that quarter. And as we are certain it can do no evil, so there is a probability that it may do much good. There may be an illustration and confirmation of the inspired writings, from reason and observation, which will greatly add to their beauty and force.” *LMP*, 64. If the Scripture is false, we may surmise, it is no good to us anyway. After completing the Lectures, Witherspoon is confident enough to say on the basis of his findings: “There is nothing certain or valuable in moral philosophy, but what is perfectly coincident with the scripture.” *Ibid.*, 187.

propensities of nature in its present state, but at the same time the fruit and evidence of its departure from its original purity.”<sup>112</sup> The problem of corruption is apparent in the manifestly self-destructive and anti-social tendencies of man, in man’s all-too-obvious proclivity for injustice. In a sermon, *Man in His Natural State*, Witherspoon tries to show that the corruption of human nature reveals itself not only in Scripture but also in “the visible state of the world, and our experience.” He says that the tendency toward evil and the aversion to good in man is evident in human beings from childhood, and offers as corroboration the following observations: the difficulty of raising a child well and the fact that wrongdoing does not need to be taught but requires only “license” to be learned; the difficulty of overcoming the propensity to evil even for the religiously committed; the “pernicious effects” of immorality on societies and private persons; the testimony one hears about the behavior and attitudes of others; the testimony of one’s own conscience about one’s own motives and actions; the universal practice of offering sacrifices among ancient nations; the misery so pervasive in the human experience; and the “natural terror and fear, with which men are possest of the presence of God, or any remarkable token of his power, which is an indication of guilt, or an apprehension of wrath.”<sup>113</sup> There is, Witherspoon suggests, a virtually endless supply of empirical evidence for the fact of human depravity or, to use the Christian term, “sin.”<sup>114</sup>

It would be a mistake, however, to take this corruption as the standard of normality. Indeed, the very notion that man is corrupt, that he is not what he should be, suggests a

---

<sup>112</sup> *LMP*, 66. Compare Witherspoon’s observation that the clear outlines of human nature are obfuscated by its corruption to Socrates’ appropriation of the myth of the sea-god Glaucos in Plato’s *Republic*, 611b-612a.

<sup>113</sup> John Witherspoon, *Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon*, 4 vols., 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1800-1801), II: 162-6. Hereafter cited as *WJW*.

<sup>114</sup> The Greek term for “sin” used in the New Testament is *hamartia*, an old archery term meaning “missing the perfect mark,” used to signify the distance from the point on the target where an arrow actually terminates and the bull’s-eye. The sinful condition of man, then, is his falling short of the perfect or complete condition for which he was designed.

standard by which he may be judged and against which he falls short. A common theme in the philosophy of man in Witherspoon's day, derived most directly from Hobbes but evident as early as Machiavelli, was that man's selfishness is what is most basic to his nature and is therefore the proper foundation for a theory of politics. To Witherspoon, selfishness is indeed endemic to human nature in its current state, but he thinks the facts elucidated above suggest that selfishness is man's ruin rather than his true shape. This corruption, furthermore, is not total; man retains in his twisted state a capacity for goodness and may, with grace and discipline, approximate his original, unspoiled nature in some measure. The problem of selfishness is quite real and must be taken seriously as a realistic limitation on political endeavors, but the statesman should take his moral and political bearings from the uncorrupted form of man rather than from the corrupted if he is to attain the best political life possible in the circumstances.

#### **COMPOSITION OF HUMAN NATURE**

Given the problem of corruption, what can we say with confidence about human nature in its proper form? The most basic observation, to Witherspoon, is that man "is a compound of body and spirit."<sup>115</sup> This was not an uncontested point even in Witherspoon's day. Hobbes had already reduced man to an organic machine—nature, including human nature, was at its most irreducible level merely matter-in-motion<sup>116</sup>—and even Locke, an apparently genuine proponent of the Christian religion, had through his sensationalist epistemology called into question the degree to which man could really *know* the spiritual in any meaningful sense, provoking a heroic but unsuccessful effort by Berkeley to restore "spiritual substance" to the theoretic centrality it assumed in premodern Christian

---

<sup>115</sup> *LMP*, 70. Witherspoon uses "spirit" interchangeably with "mind" and "soul."

<sup>116</sup> As Hobbes puts it in the introduction to his *Leviathan*, "life is but a motion of limbs."

philosophy.<sup>117</sup> Witherspoon, for his part, clearly understood the spirit of man as something real, fully as real as his body, not separable from the body short of death but distinct from it.

Witherspoon does not at this point in the *Lectures* provide evidence for the existence of spiritual substance, but he does try to give something like a proof of spirituality in his discussion of the attributes of God in Lecture VI. While he freely acknowledges that, “we cannot at present form any complete or adequate ideas of a spirit,” he is convinced that “mind or intelligence must be a substance altogether distinct from matter,” given that “all the known properties of matter are incapable of producing thought.”<sup>118</sup> This immaterial locus of intelligence is for Witherspoon also that part of man capable of interaction with divine reality. He attempts in several of his writings to address this dimension of human spirituality empirically, looking to his own and others’ actual experiences. In a number of his sermons Witherspoon speaks of “vital” or “inward” religion as a growing intercourse with divine “presence,” most remarkably in *The Object of a Christian’s Desire in Religious Worship*, in which he meditates on the meaning of “true piety.” True piety, he says, “is the same in substance in all ages, and points at one thing as its centre and its rest, the knowledge and enjoyment of God.” Through the course of the sermon Witherspoon makes clear that he does not mean by this merely an intellectual appreciation of God’s nature but an experience of his presence, a “real, inward, and sensible communion with God.” He goes on to say that “the real and proper knowledge of the glory of God is by inward and spiritual illumination . . . It is one thing to think, and speak, and reason on the perfections of God, as an object of science, and another to glorify him as God, or to have a deep and awful impression of him upon our hearts. Real believers will know this by experience. A discovery of the glory of

---

<sup>117</sup> In this effort, he in fact went far beyond anything contemplated by the leading Christian philosophers of old (Augustine, Aquinas, etc.). Berkeley says in sec. 7 of *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* that “there is not any other substance than *spirit*, or that which perceives.”

<sup>118</sup> *LMP*, 98.

God, is not to inform them of a truth which they never heard before, but to give lively and penetrating views of the meaning and importance of those truths which they had, perhaps, heard and spoken times without number.” Further on Witherspoon emphasizes the importance of “that overwhelming sense of his presence which believers have sometimes in his worship in public or in secret.” Such experiences of God, he thinks, while perhaps not frequent and anything but ordinary, are meant to be the driving center of men’s lives, for “man was made for living upon God.”<sup>119</sup> Significantly, Witherspoon clearly understood such religious experiences to have direct relevance for political life, as we shall see.

On the most basic level, then, man is body and spirit, two distinct but connected substances. But Witherspoon explicitly rejects attempts (such as those of Descartes with his strict duality of body and spirit) to separate starkly the physical and spiritual dimensions of man. According to Witherspoon, “body and spirit have a great reciprocal influence one upon another.” The body influences “the temper and disposition of the soul,” and the soul impacts “the state and habit of the body. The body is properly the minister of the soul, the means of conveying perceptions to it, but nothing without it.”<sup>120</sup> Nothing related to man, it seems, is either a purely physical or a purely spiritual affair. Everything human, by virtue of being human, is a mixture of animal and spirit. Politics deals primarily with outward behavior, but its quality is determined by the spiritual condition of those who collectively make up society, for no political system can facilitate a good life for them if they lack the inward integrity to carry out their duties and respect the rights of others, and “true religion” is the only sure ground of good morals.<sup>121</sup> Religion, conversely, is specially interested in the

---

<sup>119</sup> *WJW*, II: 9-15.

<sup>120</sup> *LMP*, 70.

<sup>121</sup> As Witherspoon says in Lecture XIV, p. 159: “to promote true religion is the best, and most effectual way of making a virtuous and regular people. Love to God, and love to man, is the substance of religion; when these prevail, civil laws will have little to do.”

soul but is also much concerned with the body. As Witherspoon says in another of his sermons, “True religion is nothing else but an inward temper *and* outward conduct suited to your state and circumstances in providence at any time [emphasis added].”<sup>122</sup>

Witherspoon devotes most of the *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* to outlining duties related to outward conduct, but he begins them with an analysis of soul. He discovers three basic “faculties” of the soul, or “mind” – “the understanding, the will, and the affections.” These faculties are not discrete, insular parts of the mind but rather distinct “qualities” of the one substance, “different ways of exerting the same simple principle. It is the soul or mind that understands, wills, or is affected with pleasure or pain.”<sup>123</sup> “Faculty,” then, should be understood on this account to mean “function.” The understanding “seems to have truth for its object;” its function is, to put it precisely, “the discovering of things as they really are in themselves, and in their natural relations one to another.”<sup>124</sup> The acts of will can be reduced to “desire and aversion, or in other words, chusing [sic] and refusing,”<sup>125</sup> and the function of the will seems to be to choose the true and the good, or the best of available alternatives, and to refuse the false and bad. Affections—“called also passions because often excited by external objects”—are “strong propensities, implanted in our nature, which of themselves contribute not a little to bias the judgment, or incline the will,”<sup>126</sup> and their appropriate function, as ensuing lectures seem to indicate, is to support judgment and will in favoring the right and the good. It would seem, then, that misplaced affections are the source of human corruption—clouding the understanding, misdirecting the will, in short, undermining the normal functioning of the soul. We have an early suggestion, then, that

---

<sup>122</sup> *WJW*, III: 46.

<sup>123</sup> *LMP*, 71.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-2.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

restraining and redirecting the affections will be central to the project of recovering human excellence.

## **EPISTEMOLOGY**

After describing the soul's essential faculties, Witherspoon plunges into a lengthy discussion of epistemology, which occupied a central place in Witherspoon's moral philosophy, as it did in Scottish philosophy generally. This special attention to epistemological concerns was motivated by a desire to restore a confidence in reason that had been badly shaken in the modern epoch. Witherspoon said that the function of the understanding was "the discovering of things as they really are in themselves, and in their natural relations one to another." Unlike the great skeptic David Hume, Witherspoon seems to think that the mind of man can actually penetrate to the essence of things and can see, to some degree at least, the true nature both of what they are and how they are related. Like many others of his day, Witherspoon was alarmed at the spiritual and moral implications of Humean skepticism: if Hume was right that we cannot know anything beyond sensational impressions in the mind, then it seemed to him impossible that we could know spiritual realities or moral truths.<sup>127</sup> Skeptical epistemology needed to be answered to show that moral philosophy has solid objective foundations.

Understanding adequately the epistemological problem as it appeared in the late eighteenth century requires descending to its roots. Hume's skepticism emerged out of a

---

<sup>127</sup> Immanuel Kant was famously motivated in his philosophizing by a desire to overcome Hume's objections to the capabilities of reason (see Kant's Introduction to his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*) as was Thomas Reid (see Reid's Dedication to his *Inquiry*). It should be apparent to the reader by now that, whatever else his moral theory may have in common with that of Kant (such as his emphasis on duty), Witherspoon's approach is fundamentally different from Kant's in certain respects: Kant adopts a kind of Cartesian strict separation of matter and spirit – of *phenomenal* and *noumenal* – and of all that relates to each; Witherspoon rejects any such sharp division. Kant holds that man cannot know things-in-themselves or the true nature of the relations of things; Witherspoon evidently thinks that he can. The centrality of duty to his moral philosophy notwithstanding, Witherspoon's response to the challenge of skepticism had much more in common with Reid's than with Kant's.

particular philosophic context. Aristotelian and Scholastic principles, which long dominated Western higher education, had begun in previous centuries to harden into a dogmatic system of ideas that it was philosophic (and sometimes theological) heresy to question. These principles were not necessarily wrong, but they had lost whatever meaning they once had because they had become disconnected from the primary experience of reality, had become merely a body of superficially examined abstractions that one could take or leave as a block, and it is not surprising that some of the deeper thinkers of the modern age decided to leave it, finding it intellectually and spiritually unsatisfying. Francis Bacon's analysis of the philosophical legacy of Aristotle and the Scholastics in his *Novum Organum* captured the growing sentiment of modern philosophers: "Aristotle . . . corrupted natural philosophy by logic—thus he formed the world of categories, assigned to the human soul, the noblest of substances, a genus determined by words of secondary operation . . . and imposed innumerable arbitrary distinctions upon the nature of things; being everywhere more anxious as to definitions in teaching and the accuracy of wording of his propositions, than the internal truth of things;" the Scholastics, for their part, took the preoccupation with definitions and propositions to new extremes, and further corrupted philosophy "by the mixing of it up with superstition and theology."<sup>128</sup> Bacon did not perhaps give the Aristotelian tradition its due, but he did seem here to have fingered a real problem in ancient philosophy: an excessive formalism and tendency to flights of ungrounded speculation that sometimes led philosophers away from the real substance of things.

By Witherspoon's day the situation in philosophy had become quite unsettling: The salutary impulse to reconnect philosophy to man's primary experience of reality was resulting in a discrediting not only of the defects noted by Bacon but of Aristotle and the Scholastics

---

<sup>128</sup> *Novum Organum*, I.63, 65.



in general. The entire Aristotelian-Scholastic regime was being dismantled, including its highly differentiated analyses of psychic and social order, but offering in its place no viable alternative. Aristotelian and Scholastic metaphysics, ethics, and politics continued to be studied to some degree (a lesser degree), but without much depth of penetration, and David Hume had taken the criticism of reason to its furthest extreme yet, casting serious doubt on our ability to know the reality even of the physical world, much less of the soul or God or spiritual order. In this context, it was inevitable and essential that epistemology be given a central place in moral and political reasoning, for the sake of restoring confidence in reason's ability to grasp the truth of reality.

Witherspoon's epistemology is, in the tradition of the so-called "British empiricists" (Locke, Berkeley, and Hume) and of the Scottish Common Sense philosophers (most notably Hutcheson and Reid), inductive. As he says in his "Recapitulation" at the end of the *Lectures*: "It is always safer in our reasonings to trace facts upwards, than to reason downwards, upon metaphysical principles."<sup>129</sup> The social scientist must begin with the facts on the ground, so to speak, and construct his theory to fit the facts rather than impose a theoretical construct and try to arrange the facts within it; otherwise, he distorts reality for the sake of theoretical neatness and convenience. When important new facts are discovered that do not fit into the theory, the theory must be reconfigured, or reconstructed altogether.<sup>130</sup> Witherspoon no doubt agreed with the approach articulated in Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind*:

---

<sup>129</sup> *LMP*, 186.

<sup>130</sup> Thomas Kuhn has observed that scientific developments almost necessarily take the form of paradigm shifts, destruction of old paradigms of scientific interpretation and methodology and replacement with new ones when the former prove incapable of explaining important anomalies. See *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 91-7. It is not clear, however, why rigid "professional commitments" to certain paradigms (see Kuhn, 4-6) should be necessary in the first place within the scientific community. The best policy would seem to be a provisional adoption of paradigms and a willing acceptance of paradigms that better explain the phenomena in question. That science is not a purely objective enterprise is

Conjectures and theories are the creatures of men, and will always be found very unlike the creatures of God. If we would know the works of God, we must consult themselves with attention and humility, without daring to add anything of ours to what they declare. A just interpretation of nature is the only sound and orthodox philosophy: whatever we add of our own, is apocryphal, and of no authority.<sup>131</sup>

Witherspoon's epistemology is generally based on that of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. This appears problematic at first blush because Hume's skepticism was largely the product of a radicalization of Locke's epistemology in the *Essay*. Locke had said that all knowledge is derived indirectly through reflection on the sensations received from the sense organs and on the operations of the mind in organizing and interpreting the information they convey.<sup>132</sup> Witherspoon follows Locke in finding only "two ways in which we come to the knowledge of things, viz. 1<sup>st</sup>, Sensation, 2<sup>nd</sup> Reflection."<sup>133</sup> Unlike Locke, however, Witherspoon—following Hutcheson—divides the sensations into external and internal varieties,<sup>134</sup> suggesting that the spirit senses as well as the body. Locke had understood all sensation to be external (seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, tasting) while reflection (on the impressions in the mind made by external sensations and on the operations of the mind in response to sensory experience) was internal. Witherspoon agrees with Locke that sensory experience is the foundation of all knowledge: he takes as "a first

---

poignantly illustrated by the fact that professional pride and hunger for recognition so often outweigh a concern for truth among so many in the scientific world. Humility, openness, and commitment to truth above personal considerations would seem the hallmarks of the *true* scientist.

<sup>131</sup> Thomas Reid, *The Works of Thomas Reid, D.D., Now Fully Collected, with Selections from his Unpublished Letters*, ed. William Hamilton, vol. 1, 6<sup>th</sup> edition (Edinburgh: MacLachlan and Stewart, 1863), 97.

<sup>132</sup> See *Essay*, I.ii.1-5.

<sup>133</sup> Strangely, however, Witherspoon discusses reflection literally not at all (he does not even provide a basic definition of the term), devoting his entire analysis to the various kinds of sensation. The absence of any discussion of the nature of reflection is a major deficiency in Witherspoon's account. This lacuna is probably due, in part, to the fact that sensation, and particularly the "internal sensation" of "moral excellence" by the "moral sense," is for Witherspoon both the foundation and the immediate object of all reasoning, including moral and political reasoning. Reflection in Witherspoon's scheme would seem to be, as in Locke's, ultimately reflection on the sensations and what they reveal about the world and the human condition, and Witherspoon consistently asserts the superiority of "conviction" to "all speculative reasoning" throughout his writings. (This particular formulation is taken from his *Introductory Lecture on Divinity*, *WJW* IV: 22.) We can surmise that "reflection" for Witherspoon is simply sustained and careful observation of data conveyed by the sensations and reasoning about their implications.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

principle” that “our senses are to be trusted in the information they give us,” and this is important because “they are the foundation of all our after reasonings.”<sup>135</sup> Like Locke, he believes that each external sensation carries with it a “supposition . . . that it is produced by an external object.” He seems to stop short, as Locke does, of supposing that we can perceive external objects directly, suggesting that we perceive only the sensations created by the actions of such objects on our senses: we have a kind of mediated perception of the world. Thomas Reid shows through his careful observations of human perception that in fact our perception of external objects is quite distinct from the sensations produced in us by them; the hardness perceived in a table top, for example, is distinguishable from the feeling in the hand when pressed down on the table’s surface.<sup>136</sup> Witherspoon, who read at least Reid’s *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*,<sup>137</sup> does not seem to have taken sufficient notice of the implications of such findings, the most important of which was that we perceive external objects as directly as we perceive the sensations within us produced by the objects; you directly perceive the hardness of the table quite as much as the pressure on your hand as you press down. Hardness, while felt by the hand, is not perceived to be a quality of hand, but of table. Thus, your perception of external things is as reliable as your perception of your own sensations, so that, as Reid contended, if you doubt your perception of the table you must, on the same grounds, doubt your perception of the sensation you feel in your hand. Hume can radically doubt his ability to perceive anything beyond his sensations, but he cannot consistently continue to trust in his perception of the sensations themselves. Reid argues in essence that Hume is not a consistent skeptic. In fact, Hume’s behavior betrays him: he continues to act as if he has a real awareness of the external world.

---

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. He surely has Reid’s *Inquiry* in mind here.

<sup>136</sup> See *Inquiry*, V.ii.

<sup>137</sup> Witherspoon includes the work in his list of modern readings at the end of the *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*.

He continues to work; he continues to meet and correspond with friends; he continues, in short, to live as a normal human being. It is one thing to question one's perceptions; it is quite another to disbelieve them.<sup>138</sup>

The great difficulty with perception is the possibility of being deceived. We have all had the experience of thinking we saw water on a sun-baked highway only to discover that it was a mirage created by the sun's rays reflecting off the asphalt surface. Witherspoon is well aware of the problem of illusion and the possibility of mistaken perception, but holds that "The few exceptions of accidental irregularity in the senses, can found no just objection to [their status as the foundation of knowledge], as there are so many plain and obvious ways of discovering and correcting it."<sup>139</sup> In the example just given, we can correct our misperception of water on the highway by attaining a more direct view of the stretch of pavement in question. "The reality of the material system," Witherspoon says, "may be easily established, except upon such principles as are subversive of all certainty, and lead to universal skepticism; and persons who would maintain such principles, do not deserve to be reasoned with, because they do not pretend to communicate knowledge, but to take all knowledge from us."<sup>140</sup> Here is a clear example of Witherspoon's high pragmatism,<sup>141</sup> a pragmatism recognizing that if we are to understand anything at all about the human

---

<sup>138</sup> See *WTR*, 129-30. Hume admits all this very candidly in sec. 12, part 2 of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Skeptical "principles may flourish and triumph in the schools; where it is, indeed, difficult, if not impossible, to refute them. But as soon as they leave the shade, and by the presence of the real objects, which actuate our passions and sentiments, are put in opposition to the more powerful principles of our nature, they vanish like smoke, and leave the most determined sceptic in the same condition as other mortals."

<sup>139</sup> *LMP*, 73.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Witherspoon's brand of pragmatism—as, I will show, James' more formal variety—should be sharply distinguished from the relativistic form of it exemplified today by Richard Rorty. Witherspoon resorts to pragmatism to open a way to truth. Rorty's pragmatism, conversely, deliberately eschews the search for ultimate truths as destructive of social relations: irresolvable conflicts among people arise when individuals disagree about truth claims, and so, for the sake of keeping the peace, Rorty wants to lay aside once and for all the traditional philosophical preoccupation with ultimate truth. This is a "low" kind of pragmatism in the sense that there is no room in it for ambition.

situation or to be capable of any meaningful action we must have some minimal trust in our ability to know.

The other major epistemological approach in Witherspoon's day (besides skepticism), as hinted before, was that of idealism, with its reduction of all experience and indeed of all reality to mental phenomena. Idealism reached its full flower in Germany, of course, especially with Hegel, but it had already appeared in Witherspoon's time in the form of Jonathan Edwards's and more prominently of Bishop Berkeley's "Immaterialism."<sup>142</sup> Berkeley was among the first to recognize the materialist and skeptical implications of Locke's *Essay*—of Locke's grounding all knowledge in the five senses—and he endeavored in his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* to make a solid case for the existence and primacy of spiritual substance. According to Berkeley's theory of knowledge, the material world exists only as perceived by the mind. We can certainly know our own spiritual existence by the inescapable fact of our mental life, as Descartes recognized, but we cannot know objects external to ourselves apart from perceiving them with our minds. Berkeley's conclusion from this is that there is no real existence of external objects apart from the mind's perception of them: the material world is contingent on the spirit, in which we participate. Ironically, Berkeley's calling into question the independent existence of physical realities paved the way for Hume's skepticism.<sup>143</sup>

---

<sup>142</sup> Edwards was elected president of Princeton in 1758, ten years before Witherspoon's installment as president of the college, bringing his immaterialist philosophy with him. Ashbel Green says in his *Life of John Witherspoon* that when Witherspoon arrived at Princeton, he "first reasoned against [the immaterialism that had taken root there], and then ridiculed it, till he drove it out of the college." Green, *Life of the Revd. John Witherspoon, D.D., LL.D.*, ed. Henry Lyttleton Savage (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 132.

<sup>143</sup> Hume accepted Berkeley's premise that all we know are our perceptions, but unlike Berkeley concluded from this that we are completely ignorant of the relation between those perceptions and the world external to our minds. Berkeley's claim that all substance is spirit, it seems, was for Hume theoretically possible but by no means necessary: we simply do not know the actual status of the world beyond our perceptions or of our relation to it. See Hume's *Enquiry*, sec. 12, part 1.

To Witherspoon, Edwardsean and Berkeleyan immaterialism was no more convincing than Humean skepticism. Both were reductions of reality unwarranted by the empirical evidence. The most fundamental problem with immaterialism, Witherspoon suggests, is that it annihilates the “distinction between truth and falsehood”: if the material world is a product of the knowing mind, the content of what is known cannot be said to be true or false; it has no absolute basis in reality. The upshot is that “truth” is nothing more than a phantasmic creation of the mind and necessarily as contingent and changeable as one’s own stream of thought. Witherspoon concludes that the “immaterialist system” is “a wild and ridiculous attempt to unsettle the principles of common sense by metaphysical reasoning, which can hardly produce anything but contempt in the generality of persons who hear it, and which I verily believe, never produced conviction even in the persons who pretend to espouse it.”<sup>144</sup> By “metaphysical reasoning,” Witherspoon means not theorizing *per se* but making deductions from groundless speculative assumptions. Berkeley’s spiritualism is as much opposed to common sense as Hume’s skepticism. Again, we all act as if, and cannot help acting as if, the physical objects we perceive around us are actual objects existing independently of our thoughts about them, to which we must to some degree take into account and adjust ourselves. It might seem odd that such considerations are necessary, but such was the crisis of thought in late eighteenth-century Western civilization. But while these epistemological debates no longer preoccupy our public intellectuals, the uncertainty they left behind about our capacity to know truth and reality remains.

Witherspoon’s common sense philosophy, then, tries to steer clear of both the Scylla of skepticism and the Charybdis of idealism, even with regard to external sensation. It is

---

<sup>144</sup> *LMP*, 74.

with *internal* sensation, however, and particularly with the “moral sense,” that the ethical and political ramifications of Witherspoon’s commonsense approach emerge most clearly. Some internal sensation, according to Witherspoon, also arises from external objects, “but by abstraction,” perceiving in them “something farther than merely the sensible qualities” such as “a sense of beauty,” “pleasure in imitation,” “a sense of harmony,” and “a sense of order or proportion.”<sup>145</sup> In addition to these “reflex senses,”<sup>146</sup> which spontaneously and reflexively arise on the experience of various outer phenomena, there is another internal sense, distinct from them, which “intimates and enforces duty, previous to all reasoning” – the *moral sense*. The moral sense is “a sense and perception of moral excellence, and our obligation to conform ourselves to it in our conduct” and is “precisely the same thing with what, in scripture and common language, we call conscience. It is the law which our Maker has written upon our hearts.”<sup>147</sup> Witherspoon’s formulation here is significant: the moral sense “intimates and enforces duty *previous to all reasoning*.” This means that moral truth is not *achieved* but rather *clarified* through reasoning. Indeed, the moral sense is the motive force of all moral reasoning: moral deliberation is a struggle to make sense of the faint impressions of conscience; the concern to be moral in the first place, the conviction to adhere to the right and the good, would not exist apart from its intimations and

---

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. St. Thomas Aquinas provided the classic Christian formulation of conscience in the *Summa Theologica* I-II, Q94 on natural law, a formulation echoed (though probably unwittingly) by Witherspoon. His technical term for conscience is *synderesis*, “the law of our mind . . . a habit containing the precepts of the natural law, which are the first principles of human actions.” These “precepts of the natural law” in turn, as we know from I-II, Q91, art.2, are derived through a “participation of the eternal law [of God’s providence] in the rational creature.” This participation of eternal law in the rational creature *is* natural law. Thomas Aquinas, *The Political Ideas of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Dino Bigongiari (New York: Hafner Press, 1953), 43, 13.

commands.<sup>148</sup> The moral sense will prove to be central to Witherspoon's ethical and political theory.

"The opposers of innate ideas" – Witherspoon explicitly references Locke, who argued in his *Essay* against any innate conceptions of morality, holding that all ideas, including moral concepts, are *acquired* (as opposed to being *discovered*) through experience—"and of the law of nature, are unwilling to admit the reality of a moral sense, yet their objections are wholly frivolous."<sup>149</sup> Locke's observation that no list of innate principles is universally recognized is not in itself, Witherspoon suggests, an adequate argument against their existence. It may suggest only that such principles cannot be recognized and consistently practiced apart from diligent, careful, prolonged application. The attainment of a mature ethics requires much study and practice just as does that of a refined appreciation for art. The recognition of the need for cultivation to achieve a refined sense of morality hardly disproves the existence of an innate moral sense. Indeed, it presupposes it; for how can one cultivate what is not there? In the *Essay* Locke makes "frivolous" observation that many alleged innate ideas are not obvious to all; Witherspoon means to point out that certain truths about morality are self-evident, and therefore obvious, only on close inspection. Self-evident truths are not necessarily always self-evident to all people everywhere (although they could be potentially); they are self-evident only to those who have observed carefully. It *is* possible, then, according to Witherspoon, to articulate certain fundamental moral principles, and he in fact goes on in the course of the *Lectures* to try to do

---

<sup>148</sup> Witherspoon always speaks of "reason" and "reasoning" in the sense of cognition or calculation rather than of intuitive, experiential knowing or awareness. Yet it is arguable that by "reason" ancients like Plato and Aristotle meant to include what Witherspoon calls "moral sense." Indeed, Witherspoon recognizes a rational component in duty, as he reveals in Lecture IV in his discussion of "the foundation of virtue."

<sup>149</sup> *LMP*, 78.



so.<sup>150</sup> These principles, themselves, however, are derived from something even more fundamental, from the moral sense, the “sense and perception of moral excellence” and the corresponding sense of “obligation to conform ourselves to [to this perceived moral excellence] in our conduct.”

These moral principles are one sort – the most important sort, to Witherspoon’s mind – of common sense principles. Witherspoon later in the *Lectures* speaks of Reid’s discovery of “certain first principles or dictates of common sense, which are either simple perceptions, or seen with intuitive evidence. These are the foundation of all reasoning, and without them, to reason is a word without a meaning. They can no more be proved than you can prove an axiom in mathematical science.”<sup>151</sup> Reid includes among his examples of common sense principles (the reader will recall): (1) things we distinctly perceive with our senses actually exist and are what we perceive them to be; (2) the faculties by which we distinguish truth from error are not fallacious; (3) we have some power over our actions and wills; (4) there is “a self-evident probability” in many events contingent on human will; (5) what will be is likely to be similar to what has been in similar circumstances; (6) unjust actions are worse than merely ungenerous ones; (7) whatever begins to exist must have been produced by a cause; (8) signs of design and intelligence in what exists imply design and

---

<sup>150</sup> Witherspoon’s case here against Locke turns on whether Locke understood innate ideas to be concepts fully formed in the mind from birth—this is how he speaks of them, and if he means this description seriously and not as satirical exaggeration, his attack on them indeed seems “frivolous,” as who ever literally believed such a thing?—or whether he meant something else. Locke seems to be attacking something like the Platonic notion of Ideas implanted in our nature that can be accessed by anamnetic recollection, but if so, Locke’s interpretation of Plato’s teaching seems rather oversimplified. In the *Essay*, he explicitly mentions *koinai ennoiai* as a synonym for innate ideas or principles (in I.ii.1), and, as I noticed in my introduction, the *koinai ennoiai* of the Stoics are forerunners to the common sense principles of Reid and others, and so Locke’s critique of innate ideas is of great interest for common sense philosophy. The difficulty is that there is an ambiguity about the way philosophers have used these terms—*koinai ennoiai*, common sense principles, etc. Sometimes they do speak of them, as Hamilton did—misleadingly—as “propositions” or the like. So in fairness to Locke, the formulations of the common sense philosophers have not always been felicitous.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-7.

intelligence in the its cause.<sup>152</sup> Common sense principles such as these are the most fundamental elements of human understanding in that they have no antecedents. Although they are the foundation of all reasoning, no logical reason for them can be given. Nevertheless, as constants in experience, they must be accepted as part of empirical reality.<sup>153</sup>

The sense of “obligation” inherent in the moral sense is not to be confused with another internal sensation, the “sense of honor and shame.” While this latter sense may be “an assistant or guard to virtue, by making us apprehend reproach from others for what is in itself worthy of blame,” it is no guarantor of virtue because others may be mistaken in their sentiments and opinions about what is, in fact, blameworthy or praiseworthy.<sup>154</sup> The obligation of conscience, conversely—as “the law which our Maker has written on our hearts”—is authoritative, and should be obeyed even at the cost of public disapprobation. It is not merely a personal “sentiment” or “opinion” but a “perception” of a fundamental, normative pattern in nature—a perception of the pattern of human nature evidently designed by the Creator and the moral obligation of each, in recognition of true human excellence, to conform himself to it in every way.

Witherspoon’s common sense epistemology, then, to sum up, is inductive, realist, pragmatic, and balanced, and anchored in the moral sense. Its starting point is an inductive exploration of the contents of human experience. It is a form of realism in that it places reasonable confidence the general trustworthiness of human perception (with allowances for the need occasionally to correct *misinterpretations* of otherwise reliable information conveyed by external and internal senses) and affirms a correspondence between perception and reality

---

<sup>152</sup> *WTR*, 442-454.

<sup>153</sup> Of course, many of these principles are disputed, but that does not at all affect their status as first principles. The principles can be denied, ignored, even disbelieved on a purely intellectual level, but they cannot be resisted. Men fail to heed them at their own peril.

<sup>154</sup> *LMP*, 79. Witherspoon here may mean to distance himself from Adam Smith’s socially derived “impartial spectator.” See Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* II.i.2 and III.1.2-3.

without collapsing the distinction between mind and matter. It pragmatically insists on interpretations of the facts that do not restrict human consciousness or paralyze purposive action but leave room for human development and growth in meaning. It aims at balance, trying to give due weight to all dimensions of human experience and all evidence of the senses. Most importantly, for moral philosophy, it locates the foundation of human excellence in the moral sense and its perceptions of right and wrong.

## **ETHICS**

If moral principles are appropriately drawn from human nature, and human nature is as Witherspoon has described it, how exactly are the principles derived? To begin to answer this question, Witherspoon returns to the moral sense and more specifically, to the *obligation* imposed by the perception of moral excellence. How do we determine the precise nature of this obligation? “One way,” he notes, “is to consider what indications we have from our nature of the way that leads to the truest happiness.” Our nature, he says, echoing Hutcheson, would seem to indicate three basic paths to human happiness: 1) the “gratification of the external senses,” desiring “what is pleasing” and avoiding “what is disgustful” to the body; 2) the delight of “the finer powers of perception” – through “poetry, painting, music, &c. the exertion of genius, and exercise of the mental powers in general”— which is a pleasure “much more refined” than the physical kind, “and which does not so soon satiate;” and 3) the delight in “moral excellence,” “a pleasure arising from doing what is dictated by the moral sense.” He agrees with Hutcheson that the last is the superior kind of pleasure, “being most noble, pure, and durable,”<sup>155</sup> and therefore that the way leading to the truest happiness is a life of contemplating, and acting in accord with, moral excellence.<sup>156</sup>

---

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> The ancients, of course, thought of happiness as the natural goal of human striving, but happiness was for them clearly not, or at least not primarily, a life of love for moral excellence. They understood happiness in the

However, he finds unconvincing Hutcheson's thesis that moral obligation is grounded solely in the natural delight in moral excellence.<sup>157</sup> It seems to Witherspoon that "the moral sense carries a good deal more in it than merely an approbation of a certain class of actions as beautiful, praiseworthy, or delightful, and therefore finding our interest in them as the most noble gratification. The moral sense implies also a sense of obligation, that such and such things are right and others wrong; that we are bound in duty to the one, and that our conduct is hateful, blamable, and deserving of punishment, if we do the contrary; and there is also in the moral sense or conscience, an apprehension or belief that reward and punishment will follow, according as we shall act in the one way, or in the other."<sup>158</sup> However elegant it may be from a speculative standpoint to make happiness the sole motivation of right behavior, the empirical fact is that we are often moved to moral conduct by a sense of duty, a feeling that we will be unworthy if we do otherwise. This feeling, moreover, is based on a vision of right and wrong prior to it or to any process of reasoning.

Witherspoon does not want, Kant-like, to remove considerations of happiness from ethical theory altogether—this too would be unfaithful to the facts of human nature—but

---

truest sense to be essentially love of the good. The great Greek and Christian philosophers of the ancient world (Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas) all saw moral excellence as a necessary prerequisite to philosophy, which they all understood as either a search for or a participation in the highest good and therefore as the way to the most complete happiness. But this means that, for them, moral excellence is a step along the way to something better. It is not that they thought that moral character, moral deliberations, moral behavior could or should be discarded at some point, but that the achievement of moral virtue, though good in itself, is for the sake of something higher. Witherspoon seems to have been inconsistent on this point, in light of his describing man's highest end in *The Object of a Christian's Desire in Religious Worship* as "enjoying God" (see p. 9 above).

<sup>157</sup> Witherspoon may have misread Hutcheson on this point. Haakonssen has made a good case that, though on Hutcheson's account delight is inherent in the recognition of moral excellence, the element of delight is not the basis of obligation. See Haakonssen's excellent treatment of the question in *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy*, 71-5. Hutcheson defines the moral sense as "a natural and immediate determination to approve certain affections, and actions consequent upon them; or a natural sense of immediate excellence in them, not referred to any other quality perceivable by our other senses or reasoning." Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, Liv.4.

<sup>158</sup> *LMP*, 80.

rather to clarify issues and establish priorities. Part of what needs clarifying is what is meant by virtue.

### **THE NATURE, FOUNDATION, AND OBLIGATION OF VIRTUE**

What is virtue? Witherspoon has already suggested that virtue is faithful adherence to the design of human nature, and so it is appropriate that he defines it here functionally as “the rule by which I must try every disputed practice”—it is the nature of virtue to impose a rule or standard for practice. What, then, is that rule? All moral systems, in establishing the rule, “must have recourse to one or more of the following, viz. Conscience, reason, experience.”<sup>159</sup> The leading moral systems of Witherspoon’s day located the *foundation* of virtue either in the will of God, “the reason and nature of things,” the public interest, or private interest.<sup>160</sup> Witherspoon briefly evaluates the adequacy of each as a foundation for virtue and, evincing again his commonsense openness, balance, and resistance to formulaic dogmatism, concludes that, “there is something true in every one of them,” but that “they may be easily pushed to an error by excess.”<sup>161</sup> Of the foundation of virtue, he concludes: “we ought to take the rule of our duty from conscience enlightened by reason, experience, and every way by which we can be supposed to learn the will of our Maker, and his intention in creating us such as we are. And we ought to believe that it is as deeply founded as the nature of God himself, being a transcript of his moral excellence, and that it is productive of the greatest good.”<sup>162</sup>

Witherspoon thus incorporates conscience, reason, and experience all into virtue, and finds the foundation of virtue ultimately in the will of God and in the natural order that

---

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 85-6.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 87. Witherspoon’s understanding of conscience as “a transcript of [God’s] moral excellence” strongly resembles St. Thomas’s notion of *synderesis*. See footnote above, p. 20, on Thomas’s use of the term.

is a manifestation of that will. Conscience, as the “transcript” of God’s character, is the authoritative rule of our duty, but our minds do not always clearly understand its dictates, so that conscience needs illumination. Reasoning about our nature helps us to see it for what it is, to see in it the evidences of design, to trace its outlines, to understand how the human being is meant to function in light of it. Experience—our own and that of others, as learned through observation and reading—shows us that we are often misled in our moral choices by strong desires, uncontrolled passions, bad advice, or distorted thinking. Revelation, which we know to be for Witherspoon a most essential “way by which we can be supposed to learn the will of our Maker,” throws, comparatively speaking, a flood of light on the intimations of conscience. Through all of these means, the obligation felt by the moral sense takes shape and meaning, the vaguely discerned becomes sharper and surer.

What of public and private interest? It turns out that each of them, properly understood, is part of virtue as well. Their part becomes especially clear with respect to the *obligation* of virtue. Duty is one half of the obligation of virtue; interest is the other half. In terms of duty, the obligation of virtue “implies that we are under some law, or subject to some superior, to whom we are accountable.” In terms of interest, it “implies that nature points [virtue] out to us as our own greatest happiness.”<sup>163</sup> Doing our duty, then, is in our best interest, and interest is therefore a motive to virtue. Or more precisely, our obligation to virtue is partly to God (duty) and partly to ourselves (interest). The nature of the case, however, as Witherspoon suggests, requires a ranking of obligations. Duty must come first, then the public, and then the private interest.<sup>164</sup>

---

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>164</sup> For Witherspoon, public interest and private interest are harmonious and should not be opposed to one another. In particular, and in contradistinction to Hutcheson and Bernard Mandeville (author of *Fable of the Bees*), the public interest neither necessitates nor justifies private vice. *LMP*, 86-7; on Mandeville, see also p. 162. Witherspoon acknowledges that one’s personal interests must sometimes be sacrificed to the public

Witherspoon provides a highly textured account of the obligation of duty. He spoke previously of the sense of obligation inherent in the moral sense. He now describes this obligatory thrust of the conscience more precisely as a sense “of self-approbation and remorse, which plainly show us to be under a law, and that law to have a sanction.”<sup>165</sup> More precisely, conscience intimates “a natural sense of dependence” and “belief of a Divine Being” who is “not only . . . our Maker, preserver and benefactor, but . . . our righteous governor and supreme judge.” The obligation of duty ultimately rests in “the being and perfections of God,” which excite admiration and urge recognition and honor by their intrinsic excellence. The awareness of a righteous governor and supreme judge, moreover, carries with it a “belief or apprehension of a future state of rewards and punishments.”<sup>166</sup> These experiences of conviction, dependence, and belief in ultimate accountability, it seems, are fundamental to the human psyche and—as impressions of the divinely established moral sense—inherently ennobling.

The obligation of interest seems inseparable from the obligation of duty. Duty to God involves expectations of rewards and punishments, and these necessarily raise a concern for one’s own good. Against Shaftesbury’s claim that consideration of rewards and punishments reduces virtuous living to a “mercenary” enterprise, Witherspoon insists that

---

interest, but warns that “to make the good of the whole our immediate principle of action, is putting ourselves in God’s place, and actually superceding the necessity and use of the particular principles of duty which he hath impressed on the conscience.” Ibid., 87. Witherspoon seems to think it arrogant to pretend to understand the dynamics of the public interest well enough to attempt to regulate all behavior by this principle. Duty, as intimated by conscience, must remain the immediate rule of conduct even in public affairs.

<sup>165</sup> Witherspoon’s account of conscience here and elsewhere in the *Lectures* bears many resemblances to that of Butler, Bishop of Durham, whose brilliant series of *Fifteen Sermons Preached at Rolls Chapel* is a classic of British moral theory. Butler spoke of “conscience” as “a moral approving and disapproving faculty” that “from its very nature manifestly” claims “superiority” over all other principles of human nature, over all “appetites, passions, and affections.” It is, Butler averred, as the rightfully supreme principle in man, the very law of human nature. Our “obligation to obey” the dictates of conscience, therefore—as Witherspoon fully agreed—is premised on the status of conscience as the law or standard of human nature. *The Works of Joseph Butler, D.C.L., Sometime Lord Bishop of Durham*, ed. W.E. Gladstone, 2 vols., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), I: 327, II: 54-5, 60.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 91-2.

rewards and punishments provide a “a secondary motive” to virtue—after a sense of virtue’s intrinsic excellence and the sense of duty and dependence on God—that is “absolutely necessary to reclaim men from vice and impiety” and to encourage them in the hope of the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Of course, the benefits of virtue are not restricted to the afterlife: there is a “manifest tendency of a virtuous conduct to promote even our present happiness.” For Witherspoon, the obligation of virtue in the end includes *all* the following: “A sense of its own intrinsic excellence—of its happy consequences in the present life—a sense of duty and subjection to the Supreme Being—and a hope of future happiness, and fear of future misery from his decision.”<sup>167</sup>

#### **THE FUNDAMENTAL DUTIES OF MAN**

Interest is a critical part of the motivation to virtue, but duty alone determines principles. Indeed, Witherspoon conceives of moral principles *as* “duties.” Following Hutcheson, he considers the duties of man in light of the fundamental “states of man,” which may be subsumed under two general categories: “natural” states and “adventitious” states. The ethical imperatives of natural states are “necessary and universal”—they apply to all men, everywhere, at all times—while those of adventitious states apply only to individuals in special circumstances.<sup>168</sup> The distinction between natural and adventitious states seems a recognition that human ethics are not based on the structure of human nature alone, but also on the human condition, the context within which man lives. Human nature itself seems to point beyond itself, so that human excellence cannot be understood apart from an understanding of the fundamental relations of man to the larger reality in which he participates.

---

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 92-4.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 95.



The fundamental human relations addressed by Witherspoon are man's relation to God, to his fellow man, and with himself, and he correspondingly classes the duties of man as duties to God, duties to others, and duties to self.<sup>169</sup> Before isolating the basic duties to God, Witherspoon gives a good deal of attention to various proofs of the existence of God and to God's evident "perfections."<sup>170</sup> This is necessary, it seems, to establish God's claim on our duty to him. As God exists and is perfectly wise, just, and good, our general duty to God is "to obey him and submit to him in all things." This duty encompasses "every branch of moral duty to our neighbor and ourselves, as well as to God." "Every good action," Witherspoon explains, is really "an act of obedience to God" because God is the source of all good and all justice. Witherspoon previously observed that part of the foundation of virtue is "a sense of dependence and subjection to God." What, he asks, probing deeper, is "the foundation of the divine dominion"? The foundation of God's dominion is not merely his power and will, but also his "infinite excellence" and his ownership of the world and providence over it—his "original production and continual preservation of all creatures."<sup>171</sup> God has a right to rule, a right to obedience and submission in all things as the Maker and Preserver of all, and because God is infinitely excellent, doing what is right—even for others or ourselves—necessarily involves conformity to his will and character in every case.

Man's special duties to God are those he owes immediately to him. These include both "internal duties" and "external duties." The basic internal duties to God, according to

---

<sup>169</sup> The one fundamental relation Witherspoon does not address is man's relation to the natural world. In consequence, he neglects a potentially significant sphere of human ethics, man's responsibilities to the earth and to non-human life. But it seems likely he would range any such responsibility under man's duties to God, taking the earth and its plant and animal populations to be, as presented in the Bible, gifts to man for him to possess and use well. It is probably no accident, in light of his Christian faith, that Witherspoon's classes of duties seem to correspond to Christ's "greatest commandments" to "Love the Lord your God" and "your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37,39.)

<sup>170</sup> *LMP*, 95-103.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-4.

Witherspoon, are “love, fear, and trust.”<sup>172</sup> Love to God involves “a disinterested love of God” for who he is, and a “desire” for him as the source of all good things and the one above all whose favor is meaningful. The fear we owe God is not a “servile fear” of divine punishment—which is only appropriate for those who live in defiance against God—but a “veneration” of divine perfection and greatness. Trust is “a continual dependence on God for every thing we need, together with an approbation of, and absolute resignation to, his providence.”<sup>173</sup> Together, these seem to describe the soul or spirit rightly oriented toward God. The external special duties to God include “all proper and natural expressions of the internal sentiments,” most notably “public and social worship” and prayer.<sup>174</sup>

As some of his sermons, essays, and speeches indicate, both the internal and the external special duties to God are for Witherspoon foundational for sound political order. Public calls to worship and prayer provide opportunities for expressions of love, fear, and trust by the people at large.<sup>175</sup> Witherspoon says in a sermon *Delivered at a Public Thanksgiving after Peace*, following the cessation of hostilities with Britain in 1781, that “impiety towards God” is “the true and proper cause of every disorder among men.”<sup>176</sup> As Witherspoon has suggested, conscience—the source of moral order—communicates a sense of duty and subjection to God. As surely as piety is the source of order, impiety is the root of disorder. It is therefore highly appropriate that citizens collectively acknowledge God’s goodness,

---

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 104-5.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 104-5.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 105-7.

<sup>175</sup> Such calls were made regularly in the course of the Revolutionary War by the Continental Congress—for prayer, fasting, and thanksgiving. During the American founding period, colonial (and later state) governments and also the national government regularly requested selected clergymen to speak on election days, officially recommended days of prayer, fasting, or thanksgiving, and commemorations of various historical events on what the Bible had to say about the subject at hand. These “political sermons,” as they have come to be called, played an extraordinarily important role during the founding era in shaping public opinion. Recent republications of some of these sermons, along with helpful editorial comments, can be found in Ellis Sandoz, *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), and Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, *American Political Writing during the Founding Era, 1760-1805* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1983).

<sup>176</sup> In *WJW* III: 84.

righteousness, and providence and call on him for forgiveness of wrongs and assistance in righting them. If such expressions flow from genuine remorse and a deep awakening to society's dependence on God, as well as its obligations to him, the ground is laid for a reordering of the psychic community of which society is composed.<sup>177</sup>

The second great class of duties is man's duties to man. In general, the duty to man "may be reduced to a short sum, by ascending to its principle. Love to others, sincere and active, is the sum of our duty. Benevolence . . . ought not to be considered as the whole of virtue, but it certainly is the principle and sum of that branch of duty to others." This love to others, to be specific, "ought to have for its object their greatest and best interest and therefore implies wishing and doing them good in soul and body."<sup>178</sup> The application of this general principle to *particular* duties seems to Witherspoon to require an examination of "the rights or claims that one man has upon another." He immediately stresses that, "Rights and obligations are correlative terms. Whatever others have a just right or title to claim from me, that is my duty, or what I am obliged to do to them."<sup>179</sup> This point is worth dwelling on a little because it highlights a very important fact about rights theory in the American founding era, that *rights* had not yet been divorced from *right* in the sense of "just." Witherspoon's understanding of rights as necessarily correlative with duty was typical both of the founding clergy and of the leading lights of the founding generally, as a close examination of founding documents makes unmistakably clear.<sup>180</sup>

---

<sup>177</sup> As the psyche is what is most fundamental to man, it is necessarily what is most fundamental to human society. In human affairs, everything hinges on the soul. This is the central insight both of Plato's *Republic* and of Augustine's *City of God*.

<sup>178</sup> *LMP*, 109-10. Hutcheson had made benevolence the highest virtue: see Haakonssen, 73.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>180</sup> Just a few examples: Washington links "natural justice" and "natural right" in a letter to Bryan Fairfax in 1774. *George Washington: A Collection*, ed. W.B. Allen (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988), 38. Hamilton in *The Farmer Refuted* makes natural rights dependent on natural law, understood as (he quotes Blackstone) that law "coeval with mankind . . . dictated by God himself . . . superior in obligation to any other [and] binding over all the globe, in all countries, and at all times." In *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett (New York:

Witherspoon's treatment of the subject is remarkable, however, for the clarity he brings to the issue:

Right in general may be reduced, as to its source, to the supreme law of moral duty; for whatever men are in duty obliged to do, that they have a claim to, and other men are considered as under an obligation to permit them. Again, as our own happiness is a lawful object or end, we are supposed to have each a right to prosecute this; but as our prosecutions may interfere, we limit each other's rights; and a man is said to have a right or power to promote his own happiness by those means which are not in themselves criminal or injurious to others.<sup>181</sup>

As Abraham Lincoln was later to observe, in the spirit of the founders, one "cannot logically say that anybody has a right to do wrong."<sup>182</sup> "Rights" in any meaningful sense are necessarily limited and consistent with what is right by nature. The fundamental rights of man as Witherspoon presents them seem then to be the right to carry out one's moral obligations without interference and the right to pursue one's own happiness insofar as this pursuit does not prevent others from doing *their* duty and pursuing *their* reasonable happiness.

Having clarified what he means by "rights," Witherspoon presents several (overlapping) classifications of rights we have a duty to respect in others.<sup>183</sup> The first

---

Columbia University Press, 1961), vol. 1, 87. Adams proclaims in his draft of the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 that "piety, justice, moderation, temperance, industry, and frugality are absolutely necessary to preserve the advantages of" the natural right of liberty and to sustain free government. John Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), vol. 4, 220, 227. Even Jefferson, who leaned more to the French way of thinking about rights than most of the founders, seems to have been convinced of the necessity of joining natural rights with natural justice. In his discussion of slavery in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson holds that the "only firm basis" of national liberties is "a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God" and that the liberties of others, including those of slaves "are not to be violated but with his wrath." *Thomas Jefferson: Selected Writings*, ed. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 1957), 51. See also Haakonssen's discussing of the relation of rights and duties in America's founding-era thought, "From Natural Law to the Rights of Man: A European Perspective on American Debates," in *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy*.

<sup>181</sup> *LMP*, 110.

<sup>182</sup> "Fifth Joint Debate: Galesburg, October 7, 1858," *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858*, ed. Robert W. Johannsen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 225.

<sup>183</sup> As Scott points out, Witherspoon follows Hutcheson especially closely in his rights scheme. *LMP*, 113. See Book II of Hutcheson's *System of Moral Philosophy*. It should be pointed out, however, that Hutcheson's formulations of rights are themselves highly derivative: the notion of perfect and imperfect rights, for example, is taken from Hugo Grotius's *De jure belli ac pacis* (*On the Law of War and Peace*), and much of the rest of Hutcheson's discussion of rights seems a reworking of Lockean rights theory.

classification is “natural or acquired” rights, corresponding, apparently, to the “natural” and “adventitious” states of man. “Natural rights,” he explains, “are such as are essential to man, and universal—acquired are those that are the fruits of industry, the effects of accident or conquest.”<sup>184</sup> The second category of rights are “perfect and imperfect” rights, the former being rights so critical to social order or personal well-being that “we may make use of force to obtain them when they are denied us,” and the latter “such as we may demand, and others ought to give us,” but which do not justify the use of force to guarantee. Self-preservation is an example of a perfect right, gratitude in return for a favor of an imperfect right.<sup>185</sup> “Alienable and inalienable” rights comprise the third category: “The first we may, according to justice and prudence, surrender or give up by our own act; the others we may not.” One may rightly surrender his “goods, lands, money” and even, for the common good, certain of his natural rights—he may give up, for example, some measure of self-defense and the handling of property disputes for the greater protection of all through the more powerful and impartial apparatus of the state.<sup>186</sup> One either cannot or should not, however, surrender his “right to judge for himself in all matters of religion” or fully alienate his rights to life, liberty, and property.<sup>187</sup> Finally, rights may be grouped according to their object: rights

---

<sup>184</sup> Political theorists of the late eighteenth century typically listed as the basic natural rights “life, liberty, and property,” a formulation broadened to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence.

<sup>185</sup> Locke, following Hobbes, had made self-preservation the fundamental natural right, but Locke’s notion of self-preservation was more expansive than Hobbes’s, including not only the preservation of one’s body against violent death but also the preservation of one’s property—understood broadly as “life, liberty, and estate”—which for Locke required the free use of his mental faculties and body as well as of his land and material possessions. Witherspoon, as most American thinkers of his generation, adopted Locke’s more expansive understanding of self-preservation, and, perhaps more than most Americans, mitigated the atomizing tendencies of Locke’s focus on individual self-preservation by recognizing, as Hutcheson and other Scottish philosophers, the importance of man’s natural benevolent affections.

<sup>186</sup> On the partial surrender of natural rights for the sake of protecting what is not surrendered, see Locke’s *Second Treatise*, chapter 7.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 111. By the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Witherspoon and the founders generally had come to believe that a man literally *cannot* divest himself completely of the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, even if he fails to assert and exercise them. Scott makes essentially the same observation in a footnote on p. 113.

pertaining to one's own person and actions are called "liberty;" to personal possessions "property;" over the persons and actions of others "authority." There are also rights "in the things which are the property of others"—contract rights.<sup>188</sup>

The inclusion of imperfect rights among the others sets Hutcheson's and Witherspoon's theory of rights apart from Locke's. Locke's rights, as outlined in his *Two Treatises of Government*, imply only *negative* duties—duties not to interfere with others. Imperfect rights correlate to *positive* duties, requiring action on others' behalf. Witherspoon characterizes the negative duties as "justice," and the positive ones as "mercy." In his discussion of the justice of God, he had defined justice as "an invariable determination to render to all their due."<sup>189</sup> He now describes *justice* more specifically as "giving or permitting others to enjoy whatever they have a perfect right to—and making such an use of our own rights as not to encroach on the rights of others," and *mercy* as "the exercise of the benevolent principle in general, and of the several particular kind affections,"<sup>190</sup> springing from "a readiness to do all the good offices to others that they stand in need of, and are in our power." Acts of mercy, Witherspoon says, generally "belong to the class of imperfect rights, which are strongly binding upon the conscience, and absolutely necessary to the subsistence of human society; yet such as cannot be enforced with rigor and precision by human laws."<sup>191</sup> Mercy, it appears—the distinctly Christian virtue—completes justice on the level of society by reaching to those relations, attitudes, and actions that human laws cannot adequately address.<sup>192</sup>

---

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>190</sup> The "particular kind affections" are the natural affections for family, friends, and country. *LMP*, 109.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 111-12.

<sup>192</sup> Note that for Witherspoon mercy extends to everything people *need*, not necessarily to everything they *want*, so that while it may soften justice it does not negate it. People need forgiveness of wrongs committed when they humbly seek it, for example, but forgiveness is not a grant of license.

The last great class of duties consists of the duties to self, a “branch of duty . . . as real and as much founded in the moral principle, as any of the former.” Witherspoon is adamant on this point: “Conscience as clearly testifies the evil of neglecting [the duty to self]—and vicious conduct in this respect does and generally lead us not only to misery, but to shame.” There are two kinds of duty to self: “self-government” and “self-interest.” *Self-government* involves keeping “our thoughts, desires and affections, in due moderation.” Due moderation is transgressed when personal indulgence interferes with our duties to God, others, or ourselves.<sup>193</sup> The duty of *self-interest* is generally the duty to seek one’s own good, in soul and body.<sup>194</sup> With regard to the soul, it requires attention to one’s “relation to the Divine Being” and to “procuring his favor.” Perhaps our greatest duty to ourselves is “to guard against any thing that may be hurtful to our moral character, or religious hopes.” While the care of the soul takes priority, however, the care of the body is essential as well. Our duty to ourselves requires that we “take all proper methods to preserve and acquire the goods both of mind and body”—“to acquire knowledge, to preserve health, reputation, possessions.”<sup>195</sup> In context, the obligation to pursue the goods of the body is clearly not an endorsement of unlimited acquisition. Our pursuit of bodily well-being is limited by the duty of self-government—to moderate our passions—and the duty to care for our souls, as well as the duty to respect the rights of others. “Most of our duties to ourselves,” Witherspoon says, closing out the subject, “resemble the duties of justice and mercy to

---

<sup>193</sup> We have a duty to *ourselves* to be moderate because “an excessive indulgence of any passion, *love, hatred, anger, fear*, discomposes us exceedingly, and is an evil instead of a blessing.” *LMP*, 114.

<sup>194</sup> Self-interest as Witherspoon speaks of it here is not to be confused with *selfishness*, which would violate one’s duties to God and others and would not be genuinely good for the self, in any case.

<sup>195</sup> *LMP*, 114-15.

others.”<sup>196</sup> He argues, then, that the Golden Rule applies equally in reverse: we are to do to ourselves as we ought to do to others.

### **WITHERSPOON’S COMMON SENSE ETHICS**

What can we conclude about Witherspoon’s ethical theory as a whole? First, it is an outgrowth of his common sense understanding of human nature and human epistemology. It derives its ethical principles from perceptions of the moral sense, but applies those principles with a due consideration of human inclinations: interest is subordinated to duty, but happiness has its place. Furthermore, duty and interest are for Witherspoon inseparably linked. Interest points to duty, and duty supports true interest. The common sense view of moral perception and the balanced, all-things-considered attitude of common sense is evident. Second, Witherspoon’s theory of rights takes both duty and interest *seriously*. Rights are coupled with duties because grounded in justice and mercy. But part of what is owed to others and to self and therefore part of duty is respect for one’s own and others’ interests. This means most importantly taking care for spiritual and moral health, but it also means facilitating liberty of mind and body and material well-being. Finally, looming in the background of Witherspoon’s ethical framework is the concept of law. Witherspoon said early in his discussion of ethics that he was looking for a “rule by which I must try every disputed practice.”<sup>197</sup> He has pointed to the laws of God’s character inscribed on the conscience, the laws of God’s providence, and human laws that guarantee the “perfect rights” of citizens. Near the end of his discussion of ethics, he says explicitly that “morality in general” may be understood in terms of conformity to law.<sup>198</sup> His law-based ethics do not, however, harden into rigid inflexibility. They take full cognizance of the variety of

---

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 116.



human circumstances. In determining the moral status of actions, Witherspoon says, one must consider “(1) the good done (2) the principle from which it flows,—self-interest of the contracted kind, benevolence, or hope of reward (3) the hindrances or opposition that must be surmounted, as interest, inclination, difficulty.”<sup>199</sup> For a more precise understanding of the implications of Witherspoon’s conception of law, we must turn to his political theory.

## **POLITICS**

Witherspoon’s politics are firmly grounded in the ethical guidelines he has derived from human nature. Politics, in fact, is for Witherspoon simply an extension of ethics; it is “but another and more complete view of the same things drawn out more fully, and applied to particular cases.” Political theory specifically concerns “the principles of social union, and the rules of duty in a state of society.”<sup>200</sup> Witherspoon’s ethics aimed at the integrity of the person; his politics aims at the integrity of society. Social cohesion for him seems specially to depend on moral order, and for this reason the civil law aims ultimately at reinforcing the laws of conscience: “Political law is the authority of any society, stampd upon moral duty.”<sup>201</sup> Consequently, Witherspoon devotes considerable space in the political portion of the *Lectures* to meditations on law.

## **HUMAN SOCIETY**

Like Locke, and like most eighteenth-century political theorists, Witherspoon tries to arrive at the “principles” upon which “society is formed” by imaginatively considering what man would be like outside the “social state.” That is, he looks to the so-called “state of nature.” Comparing Hobbes’s view of the state of nature as a state of perpetual war of all

---

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 117. Compare the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1120-1123b, where Aristotle describes moral virtue as feeling and acting according to the mean, “at the right time, toward the right objects, toward the right people, for the right reason, and in the right manner.” Trans. Martin Ostwald.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

against all with Shaftesbury's and Hutcheson's that it is a "state of society," that men are naturally drawn into society by their natural social affections, Witherspoon again stakes out a middling position. He agrees with Shaftesbury and Hutcheson "that the principles of our nature lead to society—that our happiness and the improvement of our powers are only to be had in society . . . and that in our nature, as it is the work of God, there is a real good-will and benevolence to others," but also accepts Hobbes's argument "that our nature as it is now, when free and independent, is prone to injury, and consequently to war . . . that in a state of natural liberty, there is no other way but force, for preserving security and repelling injury," making "the inconveniences of the natural state" numerous.<sup>202</sup> Even outside civil society, Witherspoon suggests, man is sociable and drawn to live and commerce with others by natural benevolent affections; at the same time, man in his corrupted condition possesses within himself a countervailing tendency toward injustice, toward pursuing his own happiness (the baser sort) at the expense of the happiness and well-being of others. Hence, it is "equally true" "that nature prompts to society, and . . . that necessity and interest oblige us to it."<sup>203</sup>

Natural rights, it should not be surprising, exist in a state of nature; both "perfect" and "imperfect" rights can be found there. It is worth quoting fully Witherspoon's list of the perfect rights in the state of nature, as these rights compose the foundation of Witherspoon's ideal political order. They include:

(1.) a right to life. (2.) A right to employ [one's] faculties and industry for his own use. (3.) A right to things that are common and necessary, as air, water, earth. (4.) A right to personal liberty. (5.) A power over his own life, not to throw it away unnecessarily, but for a good reason. (6.) A right of private judgment in matters of opinion. (7.) A right to associate, if he so incline, with any person or persons, whom he can persuade (not force)—under this is

---

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 122-3.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 123.

contained the right to marriage. (8.) A right to character, that is to say, innocence (not fame).<sup>204</sup>

The full list of rights seems reducible to a general right to the free and just use of one's mind and body. According to Witherspoon, "it would be unjust and unequal for any individual to hinder or abridge another in any one of them, without consent, or unless it be in just retaliation for injury received."<sup>205</sup> This comment implies, first, that natural liberties may *in some degree* be given up by consent for the sake of some greater good, and second, that one can forfeit some or all of his natural liberties by inflicting criminal injury on others. Witherspoon here says comparatively little about imperfect rights, among which are rights to "gratitude, compassion, mutual good offices," except to note that they "must be the same in a natural and in a social state, because the very definition of an imperfect right is such as you cannot use force to obtain."<sup>206</sup>

Witherspoon defines human society generally as "an association or compact of any number of persons, to deliver up or abridge some part of their natural rights, in order to have the strength of the united body, to protect the remaining, and to bestow others." Society of any kind is formed for the sake of protecting natural rights<sup>207</sup>—in essence, natural liberty—and of forging new rights, and it always implies some kind of contract.<sup>208</sup> Liberty is a paramount concern for Witherspoon: "Liberty either cannot or ought not be given up in a social state," and "the end of the [social] union should be the protection of liberty, as far as it

---

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> So far, this is classic Locke. Witherspoon does not mean to suggest, however, that societies are formed *purely* for the protection of natural rights. As Witherspoon said previously, people are naturally drawn into society by their social affections. The point here does not seem to be the direct intention or motivation behind the formation of society so much as the functional purpose of society.

<sup>208</sup> Contracts need not be explicit; they can be "implied." Witherspoon makes the common-sense observation that the establishment of social arrangements, which imply certain contractual relations—that is, relations involving mutual obligations—have often been informal, incremental, and unrecorded. Significantly, he seems to regard the making of contracts in general as natural, however conventional many of the aims and stipulations of particular formal contracts may be. Furthermore, he sees all contracts, formal or implied, as binding on the conscience. See Witherspoon's discussion of formal contracts below.

is a blessing.”<sup>209</sup> Why is liberty so important? Witherspoon gives some indication of why when he says later of *civil* liberty that its value “chiefly consists in its tendency to put in motion all the human powers. Therefore it promotes industry, and in this respect happiness—produces every latent quality, and improves the human mind.”<sup>210</sup> At stake in the protection of liberty is nothing less than the maximization of human potential. “Reason,” therefore, “teaches natural liberty, and common utility recommends it.”<sup>211</sup>

The dual impetus of reason and utility becomes a central theme in Witherspoon’s discussion of politics. As we shall see, Witherspoon points again and again to the necessity of uniting reason—or, as he sometimes says, “nature”—and utilitarian concerns in the working out of political order. This is a good place to pause and make explicit some connections tying together Witherspoon’s conception of human nature, his ethics, and his politics. Although we did not take notice of it before, Witherspoon had in his account of the psychic faculty of the understanding, which he said “seems to have truth for its object,” raised the question of whether “goodness” might instead be the true object of the understanding. He there pronounced “the connection between truth and goodness” to be “a subject of great moment, but also of great difficulty.” His own conclusion in the matter was that truth is the proper object of the understanding, and goodness of the “heart” or affections.<sup>212</sup> The relation between the truth and the good, then, has its counterpart in human nature, and seems to be the ultimate ground for Witherspoon of the relation between duty and interest in ethics, and thereafter between reason and utility in politics. The understanding recognizes the truth about human nature and human society and unfolds ethical and political principles on the basis of the truth perceived. The basic laws for man

---

<sup>209</sup> *LMP*, 124.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

and society are recognized specifically in the moral sense. Conscience, then, is more akin to the understanding than the affections. But the dictates of conscience powerfully impact the affections—the heart “recognizes” them as good and is *affected* by them. Unfortunately, it is also true that the understanding is sometimes deceived, and the affections sometimes drawn away by unworthy objects. The great trick ethically speaking is to attach affections to what is right and best—or in other words to connect interest with duty by showing what duty demands to be in fact what is most desirable in its own right. Politically, the great desideratum is to wed in the popular mind public utility to what is right by nature (by “the reason and nature of things”), to show that a firm attachment to the latter is in fact more useful, more practical, and more satisfying than any of the alternatives.

This brings us to another, crucially important point about the liberty society is obliged to protect. Witherspoon’s posited end of society to protect liberty “as far as it is a blessing” foreshadows the declared purpose of the U.S. Constitution, in its preamble, to “secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” Witherspoon’s formulation, however, captures something integral to the founding generation’s conception of liberty that the Constitution’s language does not: that there are definite limits to liberty, and that liberty deserves to be protected only insofar as it is a blessing. Witherspoon, like a host of founding era clergymen, carefully distinguished between liberty and license, considering the latter a curse and in fact a hindrance, in the long run, to true liberty.<sup>213</sup>

---

<sup>213</sup> In his sermon *Delivered at a Public Thanksgiving after Peace*, for example, Witherspoon warned, “let us guard against using our liberty as a cloak for licentiousness; and thus poisoning the blessing after we have attained it.” *WJW* III: 84. (Witherspoon alludes here to I Peter 2:16; see also Galatians 5:13.) The distinction between liberty and licentiousness is a constant refrain in the political sermon literature of the founding period. Samuel West perhaps said it best in his 1776 Election Day Sermon *On the Right to Rebel Against Governors*: “where licentiousness begins, liberty ends.” West’s explanation of the point is memorably forceful: “When a man goes beyond or contrary to the law of nature and reason, he becomes the slave of base passions and vile lusts; he introduces confusion and disorder into society, and brings misery and destruction upon himself. This, therefore, cannot be called a state of freedom, but a state of the vilest slavery and the most dreadful bondage.

Critical to the maintenance of liberty in society, Witherspoon believes, is the protection of material property. The foundation of property, he says, is “every particular person’s having a confessed and exclusive right to a certain portion of the goods which serve for the support and conveniency of life.” Private property is “essentially necessary” in civil societies of any size, and is “founded upon the reason of things and public utility.” He gives four reasons why private property is so essential:

Without private property

- [1.] No laws would be sufficient to compel universal industry.
2. There is no reason to expect in the present [corrupted] state of human nature, that there would be a just and equal distribution to every one according to his necessity, nor any room for distinction according to merit.
3. There would be no place for the exercise of some of the noblest affections of the human mind, as charity, compassion, beneficence, &c.
4. [There would be] little or no incitement to the active virtues, labor, ingenuity, bravery, patience, &c.<sup>214</sup>

Each of these points seems to reflect both the “the reason of things” and “public utility,” showing private property to be grounded in human nature and the human condition and useful to society at large as well as to individuals—necessitated, therefore, by nature and social well-being alike. The precise way of establishing and protecting property is determined solely by “common utility,” however, and common utility requires securing “a right to the fullest use” of property (short of causing injury to others), “a right of exclusion” (prohibiting others from “any way intermeddling with what is our property”), and “a power to alienate” (to alter, exchange, or donate).<sup>215</sup>

Having adumbrated the basic function of society (protecting natural liberty and natural rights) and pointed out the primary material means by which this function is rendered effective (private property), Witherspoon proceeds to examine more closely the

---

The servants of sin and corruption are subjected to the worst kind of tyranny in the universe.” In Hyneman and Lutz, vol. 1, 415.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 126-7.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 127-8.

structure of society. Society is divisible into two fundamental parts: domestic and civil. *Domestic society* involves the relations “of marriage,” “of parents and children,” “of master and servant.”<sup>216</sup> *Civil society* is “the union of a number of families in one state, for their mutual benefit.”<sup>217</sup> The fundamental units composing civil society, then—significantly—are families, rather than, as Locke would have it, individuals.<sup>218</sup> Witherspoon examines all the relations of domestic and civil society in terms of their naturalness, their utility, and especially the rights and duties of the different persons involved.

### **DOMESTIC SOCIETY**

All of the relations of domestic society are jointly structured by nature and utility. Marriage is natural for human beings—as creatures “manifestly superior in dignity to the other animals”—for keeping them “reigned in by modesty” and for promoting “reason and friendship, and some of the noblest affections” between male and female. According to Witherspoon, “reason and nature” suggest the following about the *nature* of “the marriage contract”: 1) It should be “between one man and one woman.” 2) “The fundamental and essential point of the contract is fidelity and chastity,” which are “essential to the purpose of the union.” 3) “The contract should be for life—otherwise it would be short, uncertain, and mutual love and industry greatly weakened.” 4) “If superiority and authority be given to the man”—a policy Witherspoon does not explicitly insist on—“it should be used with so much gentleness and love as to make it a state of as great equality as possible.” 5) Although there are some legitimate occasions for it, divorce should generally be discouraged.<sup>219</sup> Marriage—

---

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>218</sup> In viewing the family as a fundamental building block of society, Witherspoon is closer to Aristotle than to Locke.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-5. Witherspoon notes approvingly that “our law permits [divorce] only on three accounts—adultery, willful and obstinate desertion, and incapacity,” but resists extending the legitimate causes of divorce (as Hutcheson did) to “contrariety of temper, incurable diseases, and such as would infect the offspring.” *LMP*, 134-5.

as necessary for the upbringing and education of offspring—is also useful for the “public good” of having a well-bred and educated population.<sup>220</sup>

The relation between parents and children, Witherspoon observes, “is distinguished by the strongest instinct of parental affection,” which “seems necessary, as the education of children is a duty requiring so much time, care and expense, which nothing but the most rooted affection would submit to”—again, the relationship is both natural and useful. Parents and children each have certain natural rights vis-à-vis one another. Parents have a right of authority, requiring the obedience of the children, and a right to the children’s gratitude. The first, according to Witherspoon, is a perfect right, while the second, of course, is an imperfect right. He stresses that the “end” of parents’ right of authority is the “instruction and protection” of the children, and is “limited by the advantage of the children;” parents do not, therefore, have a rightful power of life and death over them. Children, for their part, have a right, when they come of age, “to judge for themselves in matters of religion,” and presumably a right to protection and care.<sup>221</sup> In speaking of the relation between “master and servant,” Witherspoon intends both employer-employee relations and relations between slaves and slaveholders. The inclusion of the slave-slaveholder relation in this discussion is significant, because in the discussion he places careful limits on the rights of masters and gives important rights to the servants. The master-servant relation is natural, he suggests, in that “some are superior to others in mental powers and intellectual improvement,” while “some make it their choice, finding they cannot live otherwise better, to let out their labor to others for hire.”<sup>222</sup> The relation is also useful for both parties in the relationship—the enterprising need help in executing their schemes,

---

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 135-6.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 137.



and more ordinary folk need jobs. Significantly, the naturalness of hierarchal work relations does not suggest any kind of right to domination. The master's right over the servant is limited to "a right to the labors and ingenuity of the servant, for a limited time, or at most for life," and he has "no right either to take away life, or to make it insupportable by excessive labor." "The servant," while he is obligated to contribute his labors and ingenuity pursuant to the terms of his contractual relationship to the master, "retains all his other natural rights."<sup>223</sup> Note that the servant comes into the master-servant relationship freely and for his own benefit—he *chooses* to let his labor out for *hire*. With this stipulation Witherspoon seems to reject chattel slavery as necessarily illegitimate and a violation of natural rights. In point of fact, Witherspoon *does* reject chattel slavery, as his comments on slavery in Lecture X demonstrate: "it is certainly unlawful to make inroads upon others, unprovoked, and take away their liberty by no better right than superior power," and "it is very doubtful whether any original cause of servitude can be defended, but legal punishment for the commission of crimes."<sup>224</sup>

### **CIVIL SOCIETY**

All of the aforementioned domestic relations imply some kind of contract, either formal or informal. Civil society is also a product of contractual relations, and in the case of civil society, the contract implies: 1) "The consent of every individual to live in, and be a member of that society." 2) "A consent to some particular plan of government." 3) "A mutual agreement between the subjects and rulers; of subjection on the one hand, or protection on the other."<sup>225</sup> Society, for Witherspoon, is again both natural and useful, and each of the elements of the social contract seem to be grounded both in nature and utility.

---

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 125-6.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 140.

Every society consists of at least two classes, *rulers* and *ruled*, each having their own peculiar rights and duties. The “essential” rights of rulers—“such as in general must be vested in rulers in every society”—include powers of legislation, taxation for public expenditures, administration, and representation.<sup>226</sup> Some “less essential” rights of rulers—less essential “because they may be more varied than the others”—include “coining of money—possessing or managing public edifices—conferring honors on officers, &c.” The rights of subjects, Witherspoon tells us, “cannot be enumerated, but they may all be summed up in *protection*, that is to say, those who have surrendered part of their natural rights expect the strength of the public arm to defend and improve what remains.”<sup>227</sup> The people do retain a right of revolution, but this right exists only when government exercises its power in a “manifestly tyrannical manner,” and then “only when it becomes manifestly more advantageous to unsettle the government altogether, than to submit to tyranny.”<sup>228</sup>

Witherspoon has asserted that the social contract for civil society involved “consent to some particular plan of government.” The possible forms of government to which the

---

<sup>226</sup> Witherspoon subsumes adjudication, or the judicial power, under administration. “Representation,” as Witherspoon uses the term here, means “appearing and acting in the name of the whole, in all transactions, with adjacent independent states, chiefly for the purpose of making war and peace,” and is therefore a function of *all* governments, not just democratically elected ones.

<sup>227</sup> The general understanding of the founders was that the rights of rulers were strictly limited, while the rights of the people were far too numerous to be exhaustively elaborated. This is reflected, of course, in the Declaration of Independence, where “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are said to be “*among*” the rights endowed by the Creator, and in the Ninth Amendment to the Constitution, which stipulates, “The enumeration in the Constitution of certain rights shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.” Note the suggestion that most rights, while they may be *recognized* and *protected* by the government, are not *given* by government.

<sup>228</sup> *LMP*, 145. The reason for hesitation regarding the dismantling of government is that “resistance to the supreme power...is subverting the society altogether, and is not to be attempted til the government is so corrupt as that anarchy and the uncertainty of a new settlement is preferable to the continuance as it is.” The meaning of the right of resistance is “not, that any little mistake of the rulers of any society will justify resistance. We must obey and submit to them always, till the corruption becomes *intolerable* [italics added]; for to say that we might resist legal authority every time we judged it to be wrong, would be inconsistent with a state of society, and to the very first idea of subjection.” Witherspoon’s conservative hesitation to resort to revolution was typical of the approach of the American founders. When Witherspoon decided resistance against Britain was justified for the American colonies, however, he was among its most ardent advocates. On Witherspoon’s prominent role thereafter in pressing for revolution, see Jeffrey Morrison’s *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*.

members of society may give assent, he says, are monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, or some combination thereof. Witherspoon adopts Aristotle's simple categorization of the "simple" (unmixed) forms by number of rulers—government ruled by one, few, or many—as most early moderns did, but unlike some modern thinkers retains Aristotle's classification of regimes as good (in which the rulers govern for the common good of society) or bad (in which they use their powers for their own private interest). He actually presents four criteria by which to judge regimes:

(1) Wisdom to plan proper measures for the public good. (2) Fidelity to have nothing but the public interest in view. (3) Secrecy, expedition, and dispatch in carrying measures into execution, and (4) Unity and concord, or that one branch of the government may not impede, or be a hindrance to another.

Applying these criteria to monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, Witherspoon concludes:

"If the true notion of liberty is the prevalence of law and order, and the security of individuals, none of the simple forms are favorable to it."<sup>229</sup> The "true notion of liberty" expressed here recalls the distinction between liberty and license. This kind of ordered liberty, the end of civil society, appears unattainable in any durable form by any of the simple forms of government because of the absence of safeguards against tyranny.

The solution to this difficulty is to devise a mixed or "complex" form of government "so that the one principle may check the other."<sup>230</sup> Witherspoon does not counsel ultimate reliance on any structure of government, no matter how well devised, being convinced that virtue in the people is the best guarantor of political liberty. As he said in his influential political sermon *Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men* on the eve of revolution, "Nothing is more certain than that a general profligacy and corruption of manners make a people ripe for destruction. A good form of government may hold the rotten materials

---

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 142-3.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 144.

together for some time, but beyond a certain pitch, even the best constitution will be ineffectual, and slavery must ensue.”<sup>231</sup> Yet, as Madison was to say in *Federalist* 51, echoing his old master’s balanced view, while “dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government . . . experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions.” The way to effect such “auxiliary precautions” in Witherspoon’s thinking is to construct government in such a way that those “who have a share in managing it [are] so balanced, that when every one draws to his own interest or inclination, there may be an over poise upon the whole.”<sup>232</sup> Madison’s solution in *Federalist* 51 is remarkably similar: “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place.” Witherspoon’s influence on Madison is apparent.<sup>233</sup>

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Witherspoon has elaborated the rights and duties of individuals within society in all their relations, but it remains to be considered what are the reciprocal rights and duties of *nations* one to another. For Witherspoon, the case is very similar between individuals and nations: “Separate and independent states are, with regard to one another, in a state of nature, as man to man before the commencement of civil society.” He echoes Locke here. As “reason, conscience, and common utility” pointed to the natural rights and obligations of individuals, so also they point to “a law of nature and nations.”<sup>234</sup> Nations have, according to Witherspoon, essentially the same perfect and imperfect rights as individuals, “save that

---

<sup>231</sup> *WJW* III: 41.

<sup>232</sup> *LMP*, 144.

<sup>233</sup> Both of the *Federalist* papers for which Madison is most famous, nos. 10 and 51, seem to owe much to the influence of Witherspoon. See Smylie.

<sup>234</sup> The phrase is taken from Samuel Pufendorf’s treatise *De jure natural et gentium*, which translated is *On the Law of Nature and Nations*. Witherspoon, and Hutcheson, too, relied heavily on Pufendorf and Grotius for their ideas on international law.

there is usually less occasion [in international relations] for the imperfect rights.”<sup>235</sup> The “sanction” of the law of nature and nations “is no other than a general sense of duty, and such a sense of common utility, as makes men fear that if they notoriously break these laws, reproach and infamy among all nations will be the effect, and probably resentment and indignation by common consent.” Again, conscience-reason-nature is united with utility. The only manner of enforcing the law of nature and nations is the use of force. As a result, the “chief or only object” of this law is “the manner of making *war* and *peace*.”<sup>236</sup>

The main considerations regarding the question of war, Witherspoon says, are the occasions for just war, the legitimate timing for commencing hostilities, the legitimate duration of war, and the appropriate means of prosecuting war.<sup>237</sup> The last three seem to be essentially special considerations of justice in wartime. The legitimate cause of *making* war is generally “the violation of any perfect right—as taking away the property of the other state, or the lives of its subjects, or restraining them in their industry, or hindering them in the use of things common, &c.”—with the exception of the “right to character” (that is, the right of a nation not to have its reputation falsely maligned).<sup>238</sup> From the standpoint of reason alone, any time after receiving an injury is an acceptable time to commence hostilities in a just war, but the custom of making declarations of war first, having been established, should be honored. The duration of war “should be according to natural equity, till the injury be completely redressed, and reasonable security given against future attacks: therefore the practice, too common, of continuing a war for the acquisition of empire is to be

---

<sup>235</sup> See Witherspoon’s list of the perfect and imperfect rights of individuals above, p. 41.

<sup>236</sup> *LMP*, 150-1.

<sup>237</sup> Witherspoon’s discussion of war has special resonance in the early twenty-first century during the United States’ historic “war on terrorism.” Many of the issues raised by Witherspoon are central themes in today’s debates about the legitimacy and legitimate conduct of the war on terrorism.

<sup>238</sup> *LMP*, 151. Witherspoon explains: “National calumny [although a violation of a perfect right] is scarcely a cause for war, because it cannot be frequent or of great effect. The violation of imperfect rights cannot usually be a cause of war between nations;” only in exceedingly rare, special cases should a nation go to war over violations of imperfect rights.

condemned.”<sup>239</sup> Finally, the legitimate way of prosecuting war is generally “by force or open violence” against “the person and goods, not only of the rulers, but of every member of the hostile state;” however, “acts of cruelty and inhumanity” are to be carefully avoided, “and all severity that has not an immediate effect in weakening the national strength of the enemy is certainly inhumanity—Such as killing prisoners whom you can keep safely—killing women and children—burning and destroying everything that could be of use in life.”<sup>240</sup>

Although he allows the legitimacy of concealing plans and intentions and of strategic deception, he is dubious about the morality of direct deception in wartime. For Witherspoon, even in war integrity is absolutely essential, in terms both of justice and utility. With respect to justice, not only must the reasons for going to war be just, but the war itself must also be conducted in good faith. Anticipating the objection that “strict adherence to all the laws [of war] above laid down, would give any party a great advantage who should take the liberty of transgressing them,” Witherspoon suggests that such Machiavellian maneuvering actually undermines the viability of the forces who attempt them. Breaking faith may indeed achieve a short-term tactical advantage, but it undermines the respect both of enemies and allies, and this could prove devastating in the long run. Treachery provokes outrage, giving enemies newer and more powerful motivations for fighting and making them more willing to resort to treachery themselves, and making allies less willing to defend a partner who seems morally indefensible.<sup>241</sup>

Making peace—even more, it would seem, than making war—“ought to be [done] with the utmost sincerity.” The basic guidelines for making peace are as follows: “The

---

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 152-3. An example of the last, mentioned on p. 153, is the use of “poisoned weapons” and “the poisoning of springs or provisions.” The moral prohibition against such methods in Witherspoon’s day is much like the condemnation of biological and chemical weapons today: they are wrong because they inflict unnecessarily extensive and horrifying death and destruction.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 154-5.

terms of peace ought to be agreeable to the end of making war. Damages should be repaired, and security given against future injury. We have often said that nation to nation is as man to man in a state of natural liberty; therefore treaties of peace between nations should in general proceed upon the same principles as private contracts between man and man.”<sup>242</sup>

Witherspoon concludes the matter of the law of nature and nations with yet another affirmation of the union of natural justice and practicality: “On the whole, those things that have been generally received as the law of nature and nations, are founded on the principles of equity, and when well observed, do greatly promote general utility.”<sup>243</sup>

## **JURISPRUDENCE**

Witherspoon had said at the beginning of the *Lectures*, “Moral philosophy is divided into two great branches, Ethics and Politics, to [which] some add Jurisprudence, though this may be considered as a part of politics. Ethics relate to personal duties, Politics to the constitution, government, and rights of societies, and Jurisprudence, to the administration of justice in constituted states.”<sup>244</sup> In his discussion of ethics, Witherspoon found that ethical virtue is founded on conscience and enlightened by reason and the experience of mankind, and he tried to establish the fundamental duties of man to God, to others, and to self and to show that the cultivation of virtue and the performance of duty is very much in our best interest. In his lectures on politics, he explored the natural basis and outlined the natural constitution of society and evaluated the relative functional merits and demerits of the various basic forms of government. Up to this point, however, Witherspoon has given little attention to internal political dynamics—the *activity* of politics—focusing instead on natural norms and structural concerns: social relations, rights and duties, and institutions. He now

---

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 155. Witherspoon treats private contracts systematically in his account of “jurisprudence,” below.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 65-6.

reveals that in his view the main business of politics is the enactment and administration of *laws*. “Jurisprudence,” Witherspoon tells us, “is the *method* of enacting and administering civil laws in any constitution” [emphasis added].<sup>245</sup> It is therefore the practical political art *par excellence*.

The jurisprudential starting point is the constitution of society. As Witherspoon says, “a [political] constitution is excellent when the spirit of the civil laws is such as to have a tendency to prevent offences and make men good, as much as to punish them when they do evil.” This preventive and formative role of law “is necessary in some measure” because “when the general disposition of a people is against the laws, they cannot long subsist, even by a strict and rigorous execution on the part of the rulers.”<sup>246</sup> No system of government, however ingeniously constructed—as Witherspoon has suggested—can make good a society full of rotten people. The political order that counts most, then, is not the political constitution, but the concrete constitution of the people. A good political constitution will take this into account. This leads Witherspoon to the question: “how shall the magistrate manage this matter, or what can be done by law to make the people of any state virtuous?” He answers: “If, as we have seen above, virtue and piety are inseparably connected, then to promote true religion is the best and most effectual way of making a virtuous and regular people. Love to God, and love to man, is the substance of religion; when these prevail, civil laws will have little to do.” Given the right of private judgment in matters of faith, however, the actions of public officials in promoting religion must be strictly limited to encouraging piety by example, promoting and encouraging those known for piety and virtue and discountenancing those of a contrary character, and enacting laws punishing “acts of profanity and impiety,” by which Witherspoon seems to mean acts that various religious

---

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*



groups would consider desecrations of their respective faiths. One more way—one of the most effective ways—for government to promote a strong religious presence in society is, perhaps surprisingly, to “defend the rights of conscience, and tolerate all in their religious sentiments that are not injurious to their neighbors.”<sup>247</sup>

The civil laws, Witherspoon says, really have three fundamental aims: 1) “To ratify the moral laws by the sanction of the society.” 2) “To lay down a plan for all contracts in the commerce or intercourse between man and man.” 3) “To limit and direct persons in the exercise of their own rights, and oblige them to show respect to the interfering rights of others.”<sup>248</sup> The first object of the civil laws, then, is essentially to lend political support to the laws of conscience. This is done through civil “punishments annexed to the transgression of the moral laws.” Of course, not all immoral acts come under the purview of the civil laws, only those involving relatively serious wrongdoing, and it is vitally important that acts punishable by law are clearly defined, that some standard or uniform method be adopted for determining when crimes have actually been committed, and that guidelines for setting punishments be established.<sup>249</sup>

The second object of the laws is to regulate the making of contracts and disposal of property. Witherspoon defines a *contract* as “stipulation between two parties before at liberty, to make some alteration of property, or to bind one or both parties to the performance of some service.” He seems to understand contracts as, if not always completely natural, at least partly grounded in nature, a way human nature completes itself in practice: “Contracts are absolutely necessary in social life,” and social life, as we know from what he has already said, is at least partly natural. Witherspoon devotes (comparatively speaking) a great deal of

---

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 159-61.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 162-3.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 163-5.

space in his account of jurisprudence to his discussion of contracts, and this may be in part because his notion of contracts is so broad, encompassing all formal and informal, contractual and quasi-contractual relations: “Every transaction almost may be considered as a contract, either more or less explicit.” An arrangement between parties is a contract, however, only if established by *consent*.<sup>250</sup>

There are different kinds of contracts and different degrees of contractual obligation, but the kind of contract with which the civil laws are primarily concerned seems to be the “complete contract, with consent on both sides, and obligation upon one or both.”<sup>251</sup> The obligation of *all* contracts “rests ultimately on the obligation to sincerity in the social life,” which itself “arises from the testimony of conscience, and from the manifest utility and even necessity of sincerity to social intercourse.”<sup>252</sup> Once again, the appeal is made to nature—here, specifically to the dictates of conscience—and usefulness.

The last object of the civil laws, after lending political support to the moral laws and regulating contracts, is “limiting citizens in the exercise of their rights, so as they may not be injurious to one another, but the public good may be promoted. This includes the giving directions in what way arts and commerce may be carried on, and in some states extends as far as the possessions of private persons.” This last object of the laws is concerned with matters of public utility—“the manner of traveling, building, marketing, time and manner of holding all sorts of assemblies,” things “in themselves arbitrary and mutable.” Laws of strictly public utility, being necessary to the public good, are nevertheless binding in conscience.<sup>253</sup>

---

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 181-2.

## CONCLUSION

*Conscience* is almost literally the last word in Witherspoon's *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*,<sup>254</sup> and it certainly is the last word in his theory of common sense. The moral sense is for Witherspoon the decisive faculty of the mind, the foundation of virtue, and the source of duty both in ethics and politics. It is the ultimate basis of the civil laws, and only a firm adherence to its dictates, in Witherspoon's view, will ensure the success of those laws. The good man, the good citizen, and the good society will take due account of interest and utility but will in the end always make these legitimate concerns conform to what conscience demands.

This in the end is Witherspoon's great contribution to American thought: his was the only fully developed conscience-based theory of ethics and politics available at the founding, and it remains one of very few such theories articulated in the history of American philosophy. No comprehensive American theory of ethics and politics, as far as I am aware, gives the same attention and priority to the moral sense as does Witherspoon's. To be sure, Witherspoon made other contributions to American ethical and political philosophy. He was more responsible than anyone else for establishing Scottish Common Sense philosophy in America, and this philosophic approach was to dominate the American academy for a very long time. As Jeffrey H. Morrison has pointed out, Scottish realism "was (if we extend [it] into the Pragmatism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) the dominant philosophical school in America for nearly a century and a half after Witherspoon established it at Princeton."<sup>255</sup> Witherspoon's own unique version of common sense philosophy, blending conscience, reason, and experience to produce an ethical and political

---

<sup>254</sup> See p. 182.

<sup>255</sup> Morrison, 105.

theory balancing duty and interest, was itself a notable contribution. But what is most unique about this common sense vision, in the American context, is its extended articulation of the role of the moral sense in the creation of ethical and political order.

## MCCOSH'S SCIENTIFIC INTUITIONISM

If Witherspoon was the man most responsible for making Scottish Common Sense philosophy the leading school of thought in the United States, James McCosh was the last major advocate of that philosophical tradition in America, and indeed in the world. Witherspoon had possessed good philosophical instincts, but as a scholar and theoretician, he was neither especially imaginative nor terribly precise. He was more a man of action than a philosopher; his extraordinarily demanding responsibilities—his pastorate and his extensive involvement in the controversies of the Church of Scotland before he came to America, and in America his pastoral obligations, his leadership of the American Presbyterian Church, his vigorous participation in the politics of the War and the founding, his teaching duties, and most of all his monumental achievement of rescuing Princeton from dissolution (twice) and making it into “the School of Statesmen”—all this took much of the time and energy he might otherwise have devoted to refining his philosophical positions. James McCosh, on the other hand, was both a first-rate scholar and a very fine metaphysician. McCosh managed also to be a very active, reforming president at Princeton, which he put in a position to achieve the status of university shortly after he relinquished the helm there. But he had written his best work before becoming immersed in his presidential duties at Princeton, and even after assuming the burdens of managing a major collegiate institution he was able to give more time to scholarship and philosophical investigation than Witherspoon ever could.

H.G. Townsend wrote in 1934 that “Scottish realism . . . found in [McCosh] a culmination and a crystallization.”<sup>256</sup> This is undoubtedly true: as J. David Hoeveler has said, McCosh was “clearly the last major voice of the Scottish Enlightenment and the system

---

<sup>256</sup> H.G. Townsend, *Philosophical Ideas in the United States* (New York: America Book Company, 1934), 103.

of philosophical realism for which it is best known,”<sup>257</sup> and his chief philosophical writings are collectively a monument to clarity and precision. His greatest work, *The Intuitions of the Mind*, certainly should be ranked among the more important works of the Scottish realist tradition, as it provides perhaps the most thorough, lucid, and convincing case for grounding human knowledge and the various sciences in man’s primary or primitive experience of reality—that is, in common sense.

McCosh did not himself like the moniker “common sense,” believing it vague and misleading. “The word sense seems to associate the faculty [of intuition] with the bodily organism, with which certainly it has no connection,” he says, and the stipulation that “common sense” refers to a kind of internal mental sense does not come close to clearing matters up: as an internal sense the phrase has been used variously to mean a “sense common to all mankind” providing “an original inlet of knowledge,” “good sense” or “practical sense” (gained through cumulative experience), “the knowledge imparted by the senses in common” (Aristotle’s *koine aesthesis*), and “the aggregate of original principles planted in the minds of all, and in ordinary circumstances operating in the minds of all.”<sup>258</sup> McCosh and the Scottish realists are concerned primarily with the last meaning of the term, but the ambiguity of the term has bred confusion for those outside the Scottish Common Sense tradition, and even for those within it. Reid wanted to make use of two meanings, both good sense and the constellation of the mind’s original principles, but McCosh insists, “It is only in this last sense that [common sense] can be legitimately employed in

---

<sup>257</sup> J. David Hoeveler, *James McCosh and the Scottish Intellectual Tradition, from Glasgow to Princeton* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), ix.

<sup>258</sup> McCosh, *The Scottish Philosophy: Biographical, Expository, Critical, From Hutcheson to Hamilton* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1966), 221-2. Cited hereafter as *SP*. One might add another meaning: the common feeling of a particular people, as in the common sense of American colonists that King George III and Parliament were trampling on their long-held rights and liberties as Englishmen.

overthrowing skepticism, or for any philosophic purpose.”<sup>259</sup> He explains: common sense as good sense is, “according to an old saying, the most uncommon of the senses. This valuable property is not common to all men, but is possessed only by a certain number; and there are others who can never acquire it, and it is always the result of a number of gifts and attainments, such as an originally sound judgment and a careful observation of mankind and the world. In this signification, common sense is not to be the final appeal in philosophy, science, or any other department of investigation; though in all it may keep us from much error.” Common sense in this meaning cannot be a final appeal because it can be wrong: “Practical sense, as it claimed to be, long opposed the doctrine of there being antipodes and of the earth moving; it spoke contemptuously in the first instance of some of the greatest achievements of our world, the deeds of philanthropists, and the sufferings of martyrs; it laughed at the early poetry of Wordsworth and Tennyson. All that good sense can do in science and philosophy is to guard us against accepting any doctrine till it is settled by inductive proof.”<sup>260</sup> The final appeal, for McCosh, must be to those original principles of mind.

Reid’s combination or conflation of these two meanings of common sense, McCosh suggests, proved the undoing of Scottish Common Sense philosophy in Europe: “while perhaps contributing to the immediate popularity of Reid, and still more of Beattie, [it] turned in the end against them . . . in the estimation of philosophic thinkers, who, looking on the appeal as only to vulgar judgment, which may be prejudice, have denied the validity of the argument.”<sup>261</sup> Kant had dismissed the school of Reid for just this reason.<sup>262</sup> Reid had also failed to express “the precise nature of the principles of common sense, of their points

---

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 221-2.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>262</sup> See my introduction, p. 23.

of agreement and of difference, of their precise laws and varied modes of action.”<sup>263</sup> These deficiencies McCosh would try, with considerable success, to set right in his own philosophy.<sup>264</sup>

Unlike Witherspoon, McCosh never provided in one place a systematic ethical and political theory, but he did suggest the outlines of such a theory in various of his writings, most notably in *Method of the Divine Government*, *Intuitions of the Mind*, and *An Examination of J. S. Mill’s Philosophy*. These ethical and political conclusions are grounded in his understanding of human nature, which in turn is derived from an inductive investigation of the human mind. Let us turn first, therefore, to a consideration of McCosh’s epistemological findings.

## **EPISTEMOLOGY**

The broadest outlines of McCosh’s scientific, philosophic approach are evident in his description of common characteristics of Scottish philosophy. In the book bearing that name, he says that the Scottish philosophers generally proceed according to the method of observation and induction, employ self-consciousness as the instrument of observation, and, based on observations of consciousness, arrive at principles “which are prior to and independent of experience.”<sup>265</sup> The combination of these characteristics set Scottish philosophy apart, “on the one hand, from empiricism and sensationalism; and, on the other

---

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 222-3.

<sup>264</sup> McCosh’s straightforward judgments about the inadequacies of Reid’s philosophy should not be taken as constituting in any sense a rejection of it. McCosh held the highest respect for Reid personally and had a high regard for his work, however flawed. He thought Reid a keen observer of the facts of consciousness, and rendered this evaluation of his philosophical contribution: “The service which Reid has done to philosophy by banishing . . . intermediaries between perception and its external object cannot be over-estimated” (*SP*, 210). Of “the school of Reid” (he has in mind primarily Reid himself and Dugald Stewart), McCosh said that its “great work . . . consists in its careful investigation, in the inductive manner, first, of the faculties of the mind; and, secondly, and more particularly, of man’s primary and intuitive convictions;” its work was only a beginning, but provided a firm foundation on which to build an understanding of the fundamental laws of mental activity (*SP*, 305-7). Indeed, McCosh may be seen as the perfecter of Reid’s philosophy, and his philosophic approach really has much more in common with Reid’s than that of William Hamilton, to whom McCosh was so indebted for his philosophic training.

<sup>265</sup> *SP*, 2-7.



hand, from . . . dogmatism and *a priori* speculation.”<sup>266</sup> (Hume, of course, as a sensationalist, is a major exception to this generalization.) “To the Scottish school,” McCosh avers, “belongs the merit of being the first, avowedly and knowingly, to follow the inductive method, and to employ it systematically in psychological investigation.”<sup>267</sup> This was a self-conscious attempt to follow the advice of Francis Bacon to apply the inductive method utilized in the physical sciences (most famously by Newton) to other sciences, including logic, ethics, and politics.<sup>268</sup> Specifically, Scottish philosophers refused to follow the late medieval method of starting with given speculative principles and proceeding deductively to derive secondary principles from them, and insisted on beginning instead with the basic facts of consciousness, its capacities and activities—uncovered through careful, inductive explorations of the mind, partly through introspection and partly through observation of the thoughts and feelings of others as gathered from their words and deeds—from which could be derived fundamental laws or principles of consciousness. These principles of the mind would constitute the essential elements in human nature and form the basis for ethical and political principles.

McCosh describes his own philosophic procedure in detail in *Intuitions of the Mind* and *An Examination of J. S. Mill’s Philosophy*. The fundamental facts of consciousness, the facts that enable us to make sense of consciousness, are the *intuitions*, which he defines in the former book as “original perceptions” of the mental faculties—for example, of sense, of reason, of conscience—formed by apprehending “immediately” some object or fact.<sup>269</sup> By *consciousness* McCosh means simple mental awareness, which “reveals only the present state of

---

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>269</sup> McCosh, *The Intuitions of the Mind, Inductively Investigated* (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1860), 26, 30. Cited hereafter as *Intuitions*.

mind” in its particulars, and which must be carefully distinguished from the form of consciousness that is “derived from the individual exercises [of the mind] by a reflex process of abstraction and generalization.”<sup>270</sup> There is no innate awareness of principles in consciousness, only of individual facts actually apprehended; principles (of whatever kind) are derived by abstracting elements from those facts, collating abstracted elements into categories, and making generalizations about them.

McCosh gives his most concise description of this process in the *Examination of Mill's Philosophy*. It begins and ends, he tells us, with consciousness, with simple awareness. Consciousness must observe (turn its attention to) its own content, taking notice not only of what passes before it but also of what is contained in memory, and it must also, “in order to correct the narrowness of . . . personal observations,” look at “the convictions of other men” as suggested by “their deeds, ever passing under our notice, and as recorded in history” and by “their conversation and their writings, as the expression of human thought and sentiment.” Consciousness “has to take the first step, and the final step in the process” of arriving at fundamental principles or laws of the mind: “It has to observe and gather the original facts which suggest the law. It has again to collect and notice the verifying facts which establish the law. In comparison with these, the intermediate step, the ratiocination, is a subordinate and dependent one.”<sup>271</sup> This intermediate step of ratiocination involves analysis and theorization of the facts presented by consciousness. “In order to the discovery

---

<sup>270</sup> McCosh, *An Examination of Mr. J. S. Mill's Philosophy, Being a Defence of Fundamental Truth* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1866), 29-30. Hereafter *EMP*. In *Intuitions* 158-60, McCosh says abstraction “may be regarded, in an extended sense, as that operation of mind, in which, to use the language of Whately, ‘we draw off and contemplate separately any part of an object presented to the mind, disregarding the rest’ (Logic Anal. Out.) . . . In a narrower sense, abstraction is that operation of mind in which we contemplate the quality of an object separately from the object.” (Regarding this latter sense, he refers the reader to Mill's *Logic*, b. i. c. ii.) “Generalization,” McCosh says, “is dependent on abstraction, and arises out of it. In generalization we contemplate an indefinite number of objects as possessing a common attribute or attributes. A general notion is a notion of these objects.”

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-2.

even of an ‘intuitive principle,’” McCosh says, “there must be what Bacon calls ‘the necessary rejections and exclusions,’ or what Dr. Whewell calls the ‘decomposition of facts,’ and then the coordination of the facts into a law by induction.” Any “construction of metaphysics” will require “more . . . than a simple exercise of consciousness or introspection; there is need of discursive processes to work the facts into a science.”<sup>272</sup> Ratiocination is nevertheless subordinate and dependent to consciousness because, “When we [analyze and theorize], all we can do is to dissect the concrete [by abstraction], to generalize the individual, or find out the producing cause. But the errors will only multiply on us in these steps if we have not commenced with accurate observations.”<sup>273</sup>

The primary distinguishing mark of common sense—or as McCosh prefers, intuitional—philosophy is that it insists on maintaining always the concrete as the basis for all theorization. It is concerned not merely or even primarily with the logical consistency of concepts, but with realities, with existences or substances and their attributes and operations and relations to other substances; its enterprise is an exploration of reality in all its dimensions, and it has no use for any conceptualizations that have no ascertainable correspondence to fact. Intuitions themselves must not be exempted from this acid test of concreteness: in *Method of the Divine Government*, McCosh insists that “no intuition be admitted in philosophic or religious speculation, till it is proved by induction to be in the constitution of the mind—nay, till its nature and rule be pointed out.”<sup>274</sup>

Of course, insisting that the goal of philosophy is understanding reality put McCosh at odds with powerful intellectual movements of his own time that were gradually coming to dominate institutions of higher learning throughout the West. Hume had held that the mind

---

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>274</sup> *MDG*, 508.

knows only impressions received mysteriously through sensation; it does not, technically speaking, know external realities at all, but only infers them from its internal impressions (that is, there is no immediate apprehension of such realities, only of inward impressions); and much less does the mind have any knowledge of the nature of cause and effect or the relation between them, in bodies or in souls. Kant, after him (ironically, since Kant hoped to save man philosophically from the moral ignorance into which Hume's system necessarily threw him), held essentially that the mind cannot know substance—either of mind or matter—but only presentations or phenomena of substances supposed to exist but in themselves utterly mysterious: we cannot know the “*Ding an sich*” (the “thing in itself”), but merely an *appearance* before the mind that may or may not resemble the thing. Furthermore, the mind, in Kant's rendering, imposes subjective forms (space and time) on phenomena, so that even the phenomenal image itself may be distorted.<sup>275</sup> Kant's reduction of space and time to mere forms of the mind, with no more than subjective existence, was, to McCosh, “one of the most fatal heresies—that is, dogmas opposed to the revelations of consciousness—ever introduced into philosophy, and it lies at the basis of all the aberrations in the school of speculation which followed [most notably, he observes, in the thought of Fichte and Hegel]. For those who were taught that the mind could create space and time, soon learned to suppose that the mind could also create the objects and events cognized as in space and time, till the whole external universe became ideal, and all reality was supposed to lie in a series of connected mental forms.”<sup>276</sup> McCosh's pragmatic bent may be seen in this statement: he understands that Kant's philosophy represents a closure to the real, he feels that the loss of reality is a very great loss indeed and wishes to counteract it. But of course, showing this consequence of Kant's philosophy—an eclipse of reality—does not

---

<sup>275</sup> See *Intuitions*, 111, 204.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

prove that Kant was wrong; it does not show that reality can, in fact, be known. And in the end, if we will not accept the evidence of our perceptions, no proof is possible. But to McCosh it is reasonable to “go with” the evidence—to go against it is simply absurd—and the evidence of the perceptions, as he tries to show, if we will take note of *all* our perceptions, and not only certain kinds of perceptions prejudicially selected, suggest that we *do* know reality *in some degree*, and that reality *is* what it appears to consciousness, not something else.

Making the case for all this might seem a tall order, but McCosh manages to make it, and make it convincingly, in *Intuitions of the Mind* and *Examination of Mill's Philosophy*. Let me take his book on Mill first. The title of the book mirrors that of Mill's book on Hamilton: *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*. Although Hamilton was one of McCosh's intellectual mentors (or at least, one of his teachers), McCosh in his response to Mill is not trying to make a defense of Hamilton's philosophy, which he finds wanting in several crucial respects: primarily, Hamilton had been led astray in his attempts to join together with a Reidian common sense philosophy certain philosophical tenets of Kant. Rather, McCosh's *Examination* is a searching analysis of Mill's philosophical system, which had been presented in all its essential elements for the first time in Mill's critique of Hamilton.<sup>277</sup>

McCosh agrees with Victor Cousin (a French common sense philosopher), against Mill, that one must first understand the nature of ideas before he can accurately trace out their origin; Mill follows Locke, he says, in reversing that order.<sup>278</sup> The critical issue for Mill is the origin of ideas. Mill expressly adopts the “Psychological” rather than the “Introspective” method in examining consciousness because, as Mill says, the original revelations of consciousness are not available to us “in their primitive purity,” having been

---

<sup>277</sup> *EMP*, 10-11.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

“overlaid and buried under a mountainous heap of acquired notions and perceptions.”<sup>279</sup> Hamilton tended to portray the entire process of philosophy as a product of introspection, and Mill insisted that because of the layers of “acquired notions and perceptions” obscuring our original perceptions, introspection could not produce any sound philosophy. But Mill overcompensates, McCosh suggests: “after he has shown that introspection cannot do everything, he leaves upon us the impression that it can do nothing,” while in fact, as we have seen, introspection—or rather inspection both of one’s own perceptions and those of others—is the first and the last step in the philosophic process.<sup>280</sup> Mill says in his book on Hamilton that, “The proof that any of the alleged Universal Beliefs or principles of Common Sense are affirmations of consciousness, supposes two things—that the beliefs exist, and that they cannot possibly have been acquired.”<sup>281</sup> McCosh agrees with Mill that a rigorous discursive process of dissection, comparison, and testing of the mind’s convictions is essential, but he insists on taking into account *all* of the mind’s “perceptions, apprehensions, and beliefs.”<sup>282</sup> Mill, unfortunately, rather egregiously ignores many of these; he steadfastly refuses to take seriously any ideas or convictions not derivable from sensation, but sensation manifestly cannot account for our convictions about “mind and body, extension, personal identity, causation and moral obligation.”<sup>283</sup> On Mill’s second point, that alleged “Universal Beliefs” may be acquired rather than inherent in the constitution of the mind—for example, that, as McCosh puts it, “our idea of moral good” might be capable of decomposition into simpler elements—McCosh says that we should be open to this possibility, but that the question must be determined according to “the ordinary rules of

---

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 26-7. The quotation is from Mill, *Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy and of the Principle Philosophical Questions Discussed in His Writings* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1867), 145-6.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 30-1.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 35-6. Quotation in Mill, 147.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 39.

evidence.”<sup>284</sup> McCosh offers three specific such rules for any inquiry into the mind’s convictions: First, “No one is to be allowed to imagine that he has made a successful resolution into simpler elements, of an idea, belief, or conviction, unless he can explain all that is in the mental phenomenon.” As we just noticed, Mill violates this rule by attempting to derive all ideas from the senses (specifically, from sensations and associations of sensations), when sensations cannot account for all of them. Mill’s case appears plausible, McCosh says, only because he has ignored all ideas that cannot be thus accounted for.<sup>285</sup> The second rule: “In resolving an alleged fundamental idea or conviction into certain elements, we must assume only known elements, and we must not ascribe to them more than can be shown to be in them.” Again, Mill employs only sensations and associations of sensations to explain everything but does not successfully show that these elements are sufficient to produce ideas “of mind and body, of space and time, of personality and personal identity, of infinity and obligation to do good.”<sup>286</sup> The third: “Tests may be furnished to try intuitive truths.” Three tests, McCosh says, have been largely agreed on by great thinkers since Aristotle, but not always kept in clear focus or remembered together: the tests of self-evidence, necessity, and universality.<sup>287</sup> McCosh says he will take as fundamental elements of the mind those mental perceptions that Mill fails to reduce to simpler ones, “till some abler man (which is not likely to happen) makes the attempt and succeeds,” provided of course they stand the three tests.<sup>288</sup>

These tests of intuitions are fully explained in *Intuitions of the Mind*. “The primary mark of intuitive truth,” McCosh tells us there, “is self-evidence. It must be evident, and it

---

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 44-6.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 49.

must have its evidence in the object. The mind, on the bare contemplation of the object, must see it to be so and so, must see it to be so at once, without requiring any foreign evidence or mediate proof.”<sup>289</sup> I sit typing at a computer, a black lap-top with smooth keys; there is no other evidence for the computer’s existence or its attributes than the computer itself; it is pointless and absurd to ask for other evidence. Similarly, on contemplating a man’s ingratitude for a gift given him at great sacrifice, I immediately see this to be wrong, without any process of reasoning; no evidence is either necessary or possible beyond the fact itself; any explanation of *why* it is wrong must necessarily come after recognition of the fact of wrongness. Of course, for any object or truth to be self-evident, it must be clearly apprehended—it is not self-evident to one who has not observed it. Certainly “it is possible to fall into error in the application of this test, as in the application of any other; but this can take place only by negligence, by refusing to go round the object to which the conviction refers, and to look upon it as it is in itself, and in all its aspects.”<sup>290</sup> The necessity of the second test refers to “the irresistible nature of the conviction to the self-evidence.” It is thus a secondary test, dependent on the first. As McCosh explains, “When an object or truth is self-evident, necessity always attaches to our convictions regarding it.” These convictions or intuitions sometimes have the nature of knowledge, sometimes of belief, and sometimes of judgments, “in which we compare objects known or believed in.” “In the first [case] our cognition is necessary, in the second our belief is necessary, in the third our judgment is necessary.”<sup>291</sup> Universality, or “catholicity” as McCosh calls it in *Intuitions*, is not a primary but an auxiliary test of intuitive truth, for the reasons that “it is not easy to ascertain, or at least to settle absolutely, what truths may claim this common consent of humanity,” and that

---

<sup>289</sup> *Intuitions*, 38.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-9.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.



some things may be universal that are not necessary. This test is very useful, however, for social discourse: it gives us “confidence in addressing our fellow-men, for we know that there are grounds of thought common to them and to us, and to these we can appeal in reasoning with them.”<sup>292</sup>

What, specifically, *are* the intuitions of the mind—what are the “primitive,” self-evident, necessary, and universal cognitions, beliefs, and judgments? Take first the primitive cognitions. We know Being in the sense that we know existences presented to us. Kant claimed we know not things, but appearances; McCosh insists: “What we know is the thing manifesting itself to us,—is the thing exercising particular qualities.”<sup>293</sup> Indeed, we rarely if ever know everything there is to know about the thing, but we do know the thing as presented to us, in the qualities it manifests. There is no reason to believe that when I look at my bedroom, what I see is not the bedroom itself but only an appearance of a bedroom; the evidence of my sense is that I see directly a really existing bedroom, with its four walls, its bed, desk, etc., all external to me. The confusion about appearance versus reality arises from a lack of clarity about the process by which one sees. I claim to see something directly, and it is objected that vision requires an intermediary between the mind and the object seen—namely, the optical mechanism. But this objection turns out to be trivial: that the apparatus of the eyes is necessary for my vision does not in the least suggest that what I see with its aid is merely an image and not an object. It is objected further that my eyes can deceive me, but this (taken literally) is misleading as well: I am in fact deceived by misinterpreting what I see, not by my eyes. The old example of the oar appearing bent in the water does not in the least prove that vision is faulty; the vision is correct—the oar in

---

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 40-1. It might be added that universality also serves as a negative test of self-evidence and necessity: if any alleged knowledge, belief, or judgment is clearly *not* universal for all rational beings who clearly apprehend a given object or truth, then it cannot be self-evident or necessary.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 163.

fact appears bent from the refraction of the water; thinking that the oar itself is bent is a misinterpretation based on ignorance of the properties of water—one quickly dispelled, it should be added, by pulling the oar from the water. So, again, we know not images or representations (which are all derivative, although, at the same time, suggestive), but real things as experienced. At the level of primary experience, we have genuine knowledge, but only of things as presented to us; as we experience further aspects of things, our knowledge increases, resulting often in new interpretations of their meaning, but the original, limited experience gives genuine, though limited knowledge.

McCosh's analysis of primitive cognitions becomes clearer with his discussion of substance. What we know is substance existing, with active power, and with some permanence. "The mind starts with knowledge, and with the knowledge of things as having being. This is the foundation, the necessary foundation, of all other exercises." But the mind knows substances as having being because the substances possess active power: "We cannot know self, or the mind that knows, except as active, that is, exerting power, or as being affected. Nor can we know material objects except as exercising or suffering an influence—that is, a certain kind of power. They become known to us as having a power either upon themselves or upon other objects, and we express this when we say we know matter by its properties."<sup>294</sup> To know on the intuitional level, in other words, is to be influenced or affected by substances, spiritual or material. A property of a substance, as McCosh later suggests, is a peculiarity of the substance by which the substance "acts or manifests itself," and he employs the word "faculty" to speak of a property of mental powers, and "force" to refer to a property of material powers.<sup>295</sup> In addition to existence and active power, we know substances as possessing a permanence: "A substance is not a

---

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 165-6.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 178.

spectre which appeared when we began to see it, and which may cease to exist when we have ceased to view it. This conviction is at the basis of the belief in the abiding nature of every existing thing, amid all the changes it may undergo.”<sup>296</sup> In brief, by way of primitive cognitions we know concrete existences concretely, we know things directly, immediately.

The things a man thus knows directly and immediately are, specifically, his own body, external bodies, and his non-material self or personality. He could not escape the facts of his personality—his willing, evaluating, etc.—if he wanted to. He may attribute the facts of his personality to material causes, but as McCosh suggested in his critique of Mill, no one has successfully shown that material factors are able to account for those facts. At any rate, the facts are known, and known directly. Immediately cognizable qualities of bodies include extension (occupying space), number, motion, and of course, power, their exercising influence on themselves and other things.<sup>297</sup> On the level of the individual human being, McCosh holds, as Witherspoon did, that mind and body are mutually affective. Mind and body, he says, “have been so constituted as that the bodily organism acts on the mind, while mind is also capable of operating on the organism.” “The coexistence of the two is necessary,” in fact, “to any effect being produced, and the effect is the result of the two operating and cooperating. Thus in all perception through the senses there is a cerebral power and there is mental power, and without both there will be no result, no object perceived.”<sup>298</sup>

McCosh’s second kind of intuitions, the primitive *beliefs*, are necessary beliefs following from the primitive cognitions. A primitive belief, precisely, is a belief in something not immediately before the mind but raised by something that has been. Among the

---

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 180-7.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 191.

primitive beliefs, according to McCosh, are the beliefs in time and space (following from perceptions of concrete objects as having extension and separation from other extended objects, and actions as happening before and after other actions) and in infinity (following from the conviction or “positive affirmation [of the mind] that to whatever point we go, in reality or imagination, there must be a space and time beyond”).<sup>299</sup> Primitive *judgments*, the third class of intuitions, are necessary judgments arising on the comparison of known objects. The mind notices different objects and perceives certain relations among them; it then intuitively judges some of these to be necessary relations. There is the relation of identity (constituted by the continuing existence over time of a known object), of wholes and parts, of space, of time, of quantity, of resemblance, of active properties to substance, and of cause and effect.<sup>300</sup> It must be emphasized again that all these intuitions arise from observation, and are by no means self-evident or necessary ideas to those who have not made the requisite observations.

### **MORAL INTUITIONS**

Of particular importance to McCosh’s ethical understanding are the moral convictions. The conscience, McCosh elaborates, “is of the nature of a cognitive power,” not in making objects known, but in recognizing certain qualities in known objects—specifically, the moral qualities in the voluntary states and acts of rational creatures. Beliefs and judgments are also involved in the exercises of conscience: we believe certain acts to be good and others to be bad everywhere, at all times, whether or not we directly observe them performed, and in comparing moral cognitions and beliefs we are led to certain necessary moral decisions or conclusions, not as a product of reasoning or ratiocination but as something “seen” as soon as the necessary relations are seen: observing the relation between

---

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 196-209. The quotation is from p. 209.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 236-278.

man and God, for instance, we immediately conclude that we ought to obey God, or, observing a wrong act and its painful consequences, we spontaneously judge the suffering to be deserved.<sup>301</sup>

McCosh is explicit in *The Method of the Divine Government* about the importance of distinguishing carefully between conscience and (discursive) reason and recognizing their independent functions: “The understanding does not feel that it is called to justify itself to the conscience, nor is the conscience required to justify itself to the understanding . . . A thousand errors have arisen from imagining that the conscience should give account of itself to the understanding, and that the understanding should give account of itself to the conscience.”<sup>302</sup> Because awareness of right and wrong is intuitive and not a product of reasoning, insisting on rational arguments for moral behavior can actually have the effect of numbing the conscience, or rather making one numb to it, and of stunting moral development; a man should not wait for a reason to act on what he knows intuitively should be done. Hume and later Mill had both made the mistake of insisting that conscience give a rational account of itself because they failed to recognize the existence and nature of the intuitions and of self-evident truth. Conversely, reasoning would become intolerably burdensome—indeed, impossible—if one demanded a moral justification for beginning any train of thought.

In *Method*, McCosh is careful to point out that “a complete view of the conscience” requires a consideration of conscience under three aspects: “as proceeding upon and revealing a law [above itself] with authoritative obligations,” “as pronouncing an authoritative judgment upon actions presented to it,” and “as possessing a class of emotions,

---

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 286-7.

<sup>302</sup> *MDG*, 295-6.

or as a sentiment.”<sup>303</sup> The conscience, “though supreme within the mind . . . does not look upon itself as absolutely supreme . . . It points to a law prior to itself, above itself, independent of itself, universal, unchangeable, and eternal. The conscience is not the law itself, it is merely the organ which makes it known to us—the eye that looks to it.”<sup>304</sup> In its decisions, the conscience does not distinguish between true and false, or discover relations or resemblances, but simply declares the right or wrong of actions. These decisions, though not a product of reasoning, are of the nature of judgments rather than feelings; while every act of conscience is in fact accompanied by emotion, the decisive factor in each of these operations is not the feeling but the factual judgment that an action contemplated has the quality of rightness or wrongness.<sup>305</sup>

It is important to realize that conscience judges exclusively mental acts; that is, it judges not “outward actions” but “internal motives”—more specifically acts of will and “the mind or agent manifested in these acts” (one’s own and those revealed of others). No outward act in itself can be judged good or evil; it can only be so judged in its connection with the will of the actor. Likewise, affections and acts of mind become morally good or evil only in association with the will.<sup>306</sup> Conscience renders essentially four kinds of judgments on acts of will contemplated: “First, it authoritatively demands that certain actions be done. Secondly, it authoritatively insists that certain actions be not done. Thirdly, it declares that the performance of the first class of actions is good, commendable, rewardable. Fourthly, it announces that the omission of the first, or commission of the second class is wrong, condemnable, punishable.” The fourth class of moral judgments, significantly, gives rise to “fear of a supernatural power, and of coming judgments.” “It is this sentiment,” McCosh

---

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 296, 299, 302.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 299-304. Any moral theory founded on moral *sentiments*, then, would necessarily be inadequate.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 337-8. McCosh’s understanding of conscience here is essentially identical to Witherspoon’s.

says, “which, more than anything else, has retained the idea of God—in some cases very vaguely—among all nations.”<sup>307</sup>

## HUMAN NATURE

We have now seen enough to trace out the basic elements of human nature. Human nature is a matter of soul. The human body differs from the bodies of the lower animals only by a matter of degrees; it is the soul that makes man qualitatively different. The basic elements of human nature, then, are the basic elements of the soul, and these are, according to McCosh, intelligence or reason, conscience, will, and the “appetencies.” Intelligence involves the powers of cognition, belief, and judgment, and also the power of ratiocination. The conscience is the power of cognizing right and wrong qualities. The will is the power of choosing. The appetencies are natural inclinations—appetites, desires, feelings. Collectively, the appetencies, the will, and the conscience are the “motive powers.”

We observed already the operations of intelligence and conscience in the course of surveying McCosh’s epistemological investigations. A few things more, however, must be said of the appetencies and their relation to the other motive powers—the will and conscience. The *appetencies* include inclinations to activity, desires and aversions (inclining toward pleasure and away from pain), physical and mental cravings (for food, drink, and sex, and for “knowledge, esteem, society, power, property,” respectively), an inclination to beauty, social affections, and moral inclinations.<sup>308</sup> The *will* is that power of the mind that decides among the inclinations, and the *conscience* is the power that, addressing itself to the will, intuitively perceives “when a particular appetency should be allowed and when it should be restrained.”<sup>309</sup>

---

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 280-2. The quotation is from p. 281.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 284-5.

The conscience *is*, in a sense, capable of error, and its susceptibility to error derives from its relation to the will and the inclinations. How, it might well be asked, can the conscience be in error, given that moral convictions have the status of fundamental intuitions and are therefore self-evident, necessary, and universal? The short answer is that “while our decisions upon the acts presented may be intuitively certain, yet . . . the acts are not intuitively presented, and may be very inaccurately presented.” Conscience correctly judges the act as presented, but the act may be falsely or incompletely presented to conscience.<sup>310</sup> “If we look directly and fairly at moral excellence,” McCosh avers, “the mind must declare it to be good. But then first the mind may refuse to look at it at all, and secondly, it may not regard it in the right light.”<sup>311</sup> The mind may be deterred from looking straightforwardly at moral excellence by the distraction of wrongly directed desire or, as often happens, by efforts to escape the pain of guilt associated with the awareness of living in contradiction to the good. This is in fact the condition of most men: most men have dysfunctional consciences because they have dysfunctional souls; their souls are in such a condition as not to allow their consciences to function properly. McCosh describes the psychological dynamics in *Method of the Divine Government*:

The conditions of responsibility seem to be conscience, will, and intelligence—the conscience being the law, the will the agent, and the intelligence the means of announcing the state of the case to the law. The will, as the agent, is the immediate seat of good or evil, and all evil may be traced primarily to it. But the will, if depraved, will soon come to sway the intelligence, and the intelligence gives a false report to the conscience, which utters, in consequence, a false judgment. [Thus,] the moral disorder, beginning in the will, lies all along essentially in the will, which corrupts intelligence, which, again, deceives the conscience.

---

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 299-300.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 299.



The real problem, then, is not the conscience but the will: “Give us but a corrected will, and the intelligence will give faithful reports, and the conscience will become an unerring guide.”<sup>312</sup>

The corruption of the will and the corresponding disordering of the soul is precisely the problem of sin,<sup>313</sup> and this is a very serious problem for man. The problem is that not only that man is disordered, but also that, even when conscience is functioning properly, man does not always live according to its dictates; worse, when he wants to live according to its dictates, he finds himself unable to do so consistently, and racked by guilt for past and present wrongs. Nevertheless, it is important to note that for McCosh, human depravity is not total. He takes the “doctrine of depravity” to be thoroughly “established” by experience, but recognizes certain important “limitations” to it: first, men generally have some good qualities, and though their love is “commonly misdirected and perverted” with regard both to God and man, they show at least a capacity for loving well; second, “every particular kind of sin is not practiced by every man, or natural to every man;” and third, man “is not so corrupt that he cannot become worse.”<sup>314</sup>

## **ETHICS**

Not surprisingly, McCosh holds that any sound ethical theory must begin with the moral intuitions. “It is the special office of ethical science,” he says, “to generalize and express the cognitions, beliefs, and judgments of the moral power, and to derive rules from them by which to judge of actions.”<sup>315</sup> The ethical scientist must begin at the level of the concrete, with particulars: taking this wallet the fellow left on the table would be wrong, that

---

<sup>312</sup> *MDG*, 382.

<sup>313</sup> Compare McCosh’s account of the will and its corruption with Augustine’s in *City of God* XIV.6-9.

<sup>314</sup> *MDG*, 369-71. McCosh’s circumscription of depravity shows him to espouse, like Witherspoon, a moderated Calvinism. Scottish Presbyterians had generally softened Calvin’s doctrine of “total depravity.”

<sup>315</sup> *Intuitions*, 287.

woman's sacrifice for her child was commendable, and the like. Such particulars may be generalized and put in the form of ethical principles or of general or specific precepts: one should do good to others and not harm, "Thou shalt not steal," etc. "But a science of ethics fitted to serve any useful purpose," McCosh warns, "cannot be constructed from the mere native convictions of the mind. . . In order to serve the ends intended by it, ethics must settle what are the duties of different classes of persons, according to the relation in which they stand to each other, such as rulers and subjects, parents and children, masters and servants; and what the path which individuals should follow in certain circumstances, it may be, very difficult and perplexing." The complexity of human relations and circumstances, not to speak of the complexity of human motives and states of mind, means that ethics cannot be an exact science, that "demonstration [from first principles] can be carried but a very little way in ethics."<sup>316</sup> Much gathering of experience and much reasoning, and not a little divine assistance, will be required to work out any kind of complete ethical theory.

McCosh says explicitly that his ethical investigations are conducted "in the spirit and after the manner of Lord Bacon": in mental sciences (of which ethics is one) as well as in the natural sciences, "there should be an orderly observation of facts, accompanied by analysis, or, as Bacon expresses, the 'necessary exclusions' of things indifferent, and this followed up by a process of generalization in which we seize on the points of agreement." The difference between the material and the mental sciences is that while the former relies on the senses for its information, the latter relies on consciousness. "Ethics," as McCosh

---

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 407. In this, McCosh agrees with Aristotle, whom he generally much admires. Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b15ff: "Problems of what is noble and just, which politics examines, present so much variety and irregularity that some people believe that they exist only by convention and not by nature. The problem of the good, too, presents a similar kind of irregularity, because in many cases good things bring harmful results. There are instances of men ruined by wealth, and others by courage. Therefore, in a discussion of such subjects...we must be satisfied to indicate the truth with a rough and general sketch: when the subject and the basis of a discussion consist in matters that hold good only as a general rule, but not always, the conclusions reached must be of the same order...For a well-schooled man is one who searches for that degree of precision in each kind of study which the nature of the subject at hand admits." Trans. Ostwald.

defines it, “is the science of the necessary laws of our nature.” These laws or principles exist *a priori* in the mind but are not known intuitively as principles; they have to be discovered reflexively through *a posteriori* investigation of particular moral perceptions. “The historical method of inquiry,” as employed by Schleiermacher, “with whom ethics is an investigation of human nature, with its forms and tendencies developing itself in history,” is useful for the ethical theorist, but not, according to McCosh, sufficient: “as human nature is always presented in history as a complex web, in which good and evil are mixed together, it is needful to have a test to determine which is the one and which the other.” Only an inductive exploration of “man’s moral constitution” will provide such a standard.<sup>317</sup>

What is the purpose of ethical science? It is not, surprisingly, for practical guidance: “For the purposes of practical morality, it is not needful to determine the nature of ethical principles; for these principles operate spontaneously, and act best when we are not thinking of them, but are simply desiring to do what is right. So far as we need practical rules, these may best be learned from the Word of God and treatises founded upon it.”<sup>318</sup> Why, then, should one learn the principles of man’s moral nature? The reason for McCosh is to direct the soul upwards to God through an appreciative recognition of the divine marks in human nature. He wants in all his investigations of nature to rise “beyond mechanism to life, and beyond law to love,” and find “the traces of a living God whom we may admire and trust, and at the same time, revere and adore, and whose image, as we cherish it, assimilates our character to itself.”<sup>319</sup> For this, divine assistance will be necessary. (More on this shortly.)

In *Method of the Divine Government*, McCosh lays out some important preliminary distinctions for any inquiry into ethical science. There are, he says, four distinct subjects

---

<sup>317</sup> *MDG.*, 289-91.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, 456.

under the general subject of ethics that must not be confused: 1) “the mental process, the faculty or feeling, by which the distinction between vice and virtue is observed;” 2) “the common quality or qualities to be found in all virtuous action;” 3) “the rule by which we are to determine whether an action is virtuous;” and 4) “the consequences which follow from virtue and vice in the feelings of the mind and the experience of society.”<sup>320</sup>

We have already looked at McCosh’s account of the *mental process* by which the distinction between virtue and vice is observed: conscience recognizes a law above itself imposing authoritative obligations and itself makes authoritative moral judgments on the actions presented to it, and its decisions are supported by accompanying emotions, but its proper function depends on will and intelligence. Proceeding to the next subdivision of ethical inquiry, then, what are the *qualities that make virtue recognizable*? McCosh finds three essential to any virtuous action: the action is voluntary, it is right or lawful, and it is done in respect to God as the lawgiver.<sup>321</sup> Again, “there can be neither virtue nor vice where there is no exercise of the will.” McCosh includes as “exercises of will” not only positive volitions but also wish and desire, although he carefully separates wishes and desires from emotions: emotions *cannot* be sinful; wishes and desires *can*.<sup>322</sup> “Our moral nature,” he reiterates, “reveals a law which is—first, independent of it; secondly, binding upon it; and, thirdly, binding on all intelligent beings.” An action is virtuous if and only if it is both right (in accord with this law) and done because it is right; the will has chosen or desired the right as right.<sup>323</sup> McCosh does not agree with those like Francis Hutcheson who make benevolence or well-wishing the sum of virtue: love is certainly an essential component, but to be

---

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 309.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 310-12.

<sup>323</sup> This is not to deny that an action that incidentally accords with higher law is good, only that it is virtuous. Aside from the referencing of actions to God, McCosh’s account here of virtuous choice is much like Aristotle’s in Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

virtuous love must be rightly directed. Love is “the impellant of virtue,” justice “the rule”: “Love, ever ready to flow out like waters from a fountain, has unchanging justice determining its measure and direction, and furnishing it with a channel in which to flow.”<sup>324</sup> Finally, the law above the conscience that regulates human acts points to God as lawgiver. Recognition of God as lawgiver lends weight to the law and “constrains us to acknowledge that we owe supreme love and obedience to him, and this opens up a new and higher class of duties;” it “turns morality into religion, and makes all duties, even those which we owe to our fellow-men, to be also duties which we owe to God.”<sup>325</sup>

The next consideration for ethical theory is the *practical rule* for determining the virtue of actions. The problem here is one of distinguishing “between the voice of conscience and that of interest or passion.” Interest or passion can make things *seem* right that are not.<sup>326</sup> The key to distinguishing passion from dictates of conscience is to discover the law or principle of right action governing the particular action in question. Unfortunately, this has “invariably” been imperfectly done by men throughout history, and the reigning confusion has pointed to the need for a revelation of divine intentions regarding human activity. McCosh himself is convinced that the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures provide the kind of clear and reliable standard needed. All men everywhere possess the law of God in the form of conscience, but this law is obfuscated and rendered in varying degrees impotent by human passion. “Those who possess the inward principle [of conscience] will find stability and consistency imparted to morality by embodying its dictates in a code of precepts. . . . But the work of forming a moral code without revelation has ever been felt to be encompassed with great difficulties, and the result of such an effort has invariably been a very imperfect

---

<sup>324</sup> Ibid., 314-18.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid., 321. Here again, McCosh’s understanding and Witherspoon’s are identical. Indeed, McCosh’s entire analysis of conscience and virtue is much like Witherspoon’s.

<sup>326</sup> Less commonly, it also makes things seem wrong that are in fact good, or at least morally neutral.

and mutilated exhibition of the moral law itself.” In light of the perversion of human conscience and the difficulty of deriving an adequate code of precepts, McCosh believes it “absolutely necessary” for consistency in virtue to have a revealed, written code by which to measure one’s actions. This has not always been available, but fortunately, thanks to Judaic and Christian revelation, it has become available; before this appeared, men were without remedy, without a certain rule for determining uncertain cases, but when it became known, it became the standard. “The practical rule of obedience to those who are in possession of revelation,” then, “is the written law, as addressed to conscience.”<sup>327</sup>

McCosh makes the case for taking the Bible as divine revelation in *The Supernatural in Relation to the Natural*, the book that, added to *Intuitions of the Mind* and *Method of the Divine Government*, completes his philosophy. In *Method* he had been concerned with outlining the traces of divine design in nature—in the physical world and in human nature—and said that the natural world points to the supernatural as its source. In *The Supernatural in Relation to the Natural*, he shows how the supernatural system revealed in Scripture perfects the natural system. (He addresses therein the defects of the natural world as well as of human nature, but our concern here is strictly the latter.) Human nature appears to the candid, observing mind capable of good but falling far short of goodness; human beings are restless, uneasy, distressed, and long for a better life; conscience keeps calling attention to wrongs, but reason finds no remedy for them.<sup>328</sup> The Bible—in particular the New Testament—reveals a remedy for wrongs, a path to goodness, and a way to eternal happiness, all supernatural. The supernatural lifts and restores the natural, which was designed for the supernatural and needed it from the beginning. “The Bible comes to us as the Word of God,—pre-supposing that we believe in God, on the natural evidence supplied in his works without and

---

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 324-6.

<sup>328</sup> *MDG*, 470-3, 477.

convictions within. Pre-supposing that God and his eternal power and godhead may be thus so far known—yes *known* (*noumena kathoratai* is the language used, Rom. i. 20)—it comes to us to make him more fully known, as to what he is in himself, and as to what he has done for man.”<sup>329</sup> McCosh summarizes nicely how Scripture completes ethics in his *Examination of Mill’s Philosophy*: the Word reveals how to be relieved of the burden of past sin, gives motives to perform duties, provides “the regulating principle of our conduct, love to God and love to man,” “lays down many and varied precepts as to how we should feel and what we should do, in very many and varied situations, and supplies numerous warnings against evil, and examples of good;” beyond these, it “leaves the rest to ourselves, to the motives which it has called forth, and the royal law of love.”<sup>330</sup> Man’s restoration is clearly not merely a matter of additional knowledge, but of transformation, wrought (with human cooperation) “by the immediate indwelling and operation of the Spirit of God.”<sup>331</sup> It should be understood that Scripture does not provide an ethical science of its own, although in revealing man’s ultimate ends it draws out the arc of man’s natural moral principles to a logical conclusion; it rather provides intensely practical ethical rules and directs to the spiritual Source that enables man to follow them consistently.<sup>332</sup>

There is one more area of ethical investigation after the mental process of moral discernment, the qualities of virtuous action, and the practical rule for deciding particular cases: it is the question of the *consequences* of moral acts. McCosh observes that a “correspondence” obtains in nature between moral activity and certain effects. Two correspondences in particular are important here: 1) the internal correspondence of pleasurable emotions with virtuous, and painful emotions with vicious, affection; and 2) the

---

<sup>329</sup> McCosh, *The Supernatural in Relation to the Natural* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1862), 362.

<sup>330</sup> *EMP*, 383.

<sup>331</sup> *Supernatural*, 274.

<sup>332</sup> See *MDG*, 291.

external correspondence of social advantages with virtuous, and disadvantages with vicious, behavior. The virtuous affections are pleasant, and include both the pleasure of love, which is something “far higher and deeper than mere animal gratification,” and the pleasure of contemplating virtuous actions; the sinful affections, by contrast (envy, malice, or revenge, for instance), are painful. Virtuous and vicious affections, moreover, in addition to being pleasurable or painful in themselves, each raise in the mind associated ideas and feelings, and these influence the whole character. The external consequences of virtuous action include a “multiplication of happiness” *among people* as a natural response to justice and benevolence, an augmentation of confidence or trust among them, and, very often, prosperity—or “the success which generally follows the exertions of excellence.” The results of vicious actions are precisely the opposite, although evil is sometimes successful in the short term.<sup>333</sup>

McCosh’s foregoing critical subdivisions of ethical theory give us a general form of ethics; let us now look a little further into the first and last parts—into the determinations of conscience and the consequences of moral acts. The conscience, we have seen, is what allows us to recognize good and evil. Are there any generalizations we can make about what, substantively, conscience discerns in them? McCosh believes there are. He outlines in *Intuitions* some fundamental moral convictions involved in the exercises of conscience regarding the nature of moral good, sin and error, and the relation of moral good and happiness. We have already witnessed most of them, but it may be helpful to see them all together. Of the nature of moral good, McCosh says, conscience reveals that the moral quality recognized is a quality in the action itself, and not given to it by the contemplating mind; that moral good must be seen as such by all clear-seeing rational creatures; that when recognized it lays on us an obligation of attending to it; that some authority or standard of

---

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 326-8.



right exists above conscience that we are obliged to obey; that this obligation, when we have been led to believe in a Supreme Being, takes the form of law; that moral good is commendable and deserving of reward; that moral good pertains to the will and is “a quality of certain actions proceeding from Free Will;” and that this quality is not capable of being resolved into simpler elements.<sup>334</sup> But while it is “necessary for the conscience to decide in a certain manner” given certain facts, “it is not necessary that the will should do what the conscience commands.”<sup>335</sup> When the will falls away from the good commanded by conscience, when in its essential freedom it opts for evil rather than good, this is sin.<sup>336</sup> The conscience reveals of sin that it is a reality—“not a separate entity, like a plant or an animal,” but a quality of certain actions;<sup>337</sup> that it is a quality of *voluntary* acts; and that it is condemnable and deserves punishment.<sup>338</sup> Finally, with regard to the relation of moral good and happiness, the conscience reveals that the moral good of an act is “altogether independent of the pleasure it may bring;” that we ought to promote the happiness of all those capable of happiness (not as a utilitarian calculation, but as a *duty*); that, however much the evils of this present life may disunite them, happiness belongs with moral good; and that sin deserves pain as punishment.<sup>339</sup>

As I noted previously, McCosh spoke in *Intuitions* of the need for any adequate theory of ethics to establish “the duties of different classes of persons” according to the

---

<sup>334</sup> *Intuitions.*, 291-7; quotation on p. 296.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>336</sup> Recall the meaning of *hamartia* (Ch. 1, p. 45, n18).

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 301. McCosh insists in this same passage, against Augustine, that sin is not “a mere privation or a negation,” but a positive quality of an action proceeding from a misdirected will: “I can never bring myself to believe that deceit and envy and malice and ungodliness and lust, are merely the absence of certain qualities; they imply the presence of real qualities in the will of those who cherish the affections and commit the deeds.” McCosh does not actually mention Augustine by name here, but he *does* refer explicitly to Augustine in the same connection in *First and Fundamental Truths: Being a Treatise on Metaphysics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1889), 227.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 301-2.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 302-7.

relations they are in to others. These would fall in part under the general obligation to promote the happiness of all who are capable of happiness. Before we examine McCosh's classifications of duties, then, let us understand what McCosh means by this broader obligation to promote the happiness of others. He accepts the Benthamite-Millian principle of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" as an appropriate goal, but finds the philosophical foundation provided for the principle by those two thinkers to be grossly inadequate. Discussing Hume's utilitarianism in *The Scottish Philosophy*, McCosh articulates "the fundamental objections" to the utilitarian approach: "Whence the obligation lying on us to promote the happiness of others? to give to others their due? to keep our promises? From their utility, it is answered. But why are we bound to attend to what is useful? . . . why the reproach that follows, and which justifies itself when we have failed to keep our word? These questionings bring us to a justice which guards conventions, to a law which enjoins love."<sup>340</sup>

McCosh elaborates his position regarding utilitarian ethics fully in his *Examination of Mill's Philosophy*. There he identifies four essential problems with Mill's utilitarian theory. First, it fails to account for "the peculiar idea and conviction" regarding moral good and evil as it resides in consciousness. Mill admits that there are in consciousness feelings or judgments concerning right and wrong, but attributes these fully to interest and sympathy and their corresponding associations of ideas. McCosh freely concedes that "persons may be led by mere prudence to attend to the duties of an outward morality, and by a kind of disposition to relieve distress, altogether irrespective of a moral sense," but he insists on

---

<sup>340</sup> *SP*, 152.

taking seriously the intuition of obligation and the sense that if we neglect the obligation we are “blameworthy.”<sup>341</sup>

Second, Mill’s utilitarianism does not provide “sufficient sanctions to induce us to approve virtue and condemn vice,” or in other words, does not “contain within itself a body of motives or motive powers, fitted to lead to virtuous conduct.” It recommends seeking the greatest happiness of the greatest number but cannot say why anyone *ought* to do so, and it undermines religious sanction by jettisoning both conscience and the motive of adhering to divine will. Mill says in his *Examination of Hamilton’s Philosophy* that “the ultimate sanction. . .of all morality (external motives apart) [is] a subjective feeling in our minds,” which he thinks is as powerful a motive as can be had. But a faithful examination of consciousness, McCosh suggests, shows that the feeling of pleasure or pain associated with moral questions arises “in consequence of a *prior* perception” [emphasis added] of good or evil—the feeling does not exist independently, but derives from the perception. Mill describes moral feeling as “all encrusted over with collateral associations, derived from sympathy, from love, and still more from fear; from all the forms of religious feeling; from the recollections of childhood and of all our past life; from self-esteem, desire of the esteem of others, and occasionally even self-abasement;” this “mass of feeling,” he thinks, provides a kind of personal standard of right and simultaneously a powerful incentive not to violate it. Again, Mill is only half right: it is true, McCosh says, “that other and secondary motives may and should gather and cling around our primary conviction of duty, to aid and strengthen it,” but the fact remains that at the center lies the conviction. The inherent deficiency of Mill’s emotive standard of morality will make itself felt, McCosh believes, when “the intelligent

---

<sup>341</sup> *EMP*, 360-3. McCosh observes that Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Butler, then Reid, Dugald Stewart, and Thomas Brown in the Scottish school, and Victor Cousin and the Eclectic school of France all “have shown that the same facts and arguments which lead us to admit an original principle of sympathy, require us also to call in a cognitive and a motive moral power” (361-2).

youth [who] comes to rise beyond his educational beliefs, and to think for himself, will not be satisfied with the mere existence of the mass of feeling,” but will ask, “Is it justifiable, is it binding?” If this intelligent youth is taught that these associations “have no obligation [beneath them] in the reason or nature of things, then why should he not uncoil them?” Besides, even if he is satisfied with his complex of moral feeling, some of the feelings created by association may have a bad tendency when unregulated by conscience.<sup>342</sup>

The third problem with Mill’s utilitarian approach is that it does not furnish “a sufficient test of virtuousness of acts and virtuousness of agents.” Mill’s test, of course, is whether an act or an agent tends to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number. An obvious practical problem with this test, as McCosh observes, is that “in the complicated affairs of this world, the most far-sighted cannot know for certain what may be the total consequences of any one act.” More fundamentally, Mill provides no test for the virtuousness of motives (as distinguished from acts)<sup>343</sup> and does not adequately explain what makes an action wrong. “Mr. Mill speaks of ‘reproach’ being one of the checks on evil; but when,” McCosh asks, “is reproach justifiable? Not knowing what to make of sin, the system provides no place for repentance.” In the end, “The boundary line [in Mill’s system] between moral good and evil is drawn so uncertainly, that persons will ever be tempted to cross it without allowing that they have done so,—the more so that they are not told what they should do when they have crossed it.”<sup>344</sup>

Finally, Mill’s utilitarian ethics fails to account for *all* the virtues. Again, Mill is right to suggest that all have a duty to promote the happiness of others, but fails to establish it as a duty, to give motive and obligation to it. He is right to look to the consequences of behavior

---

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 367-73.

<sup>343</sup> The standard for McCosh is love regulated by law, or rightly directed love.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 373-7.

as an important consideration in all moral deliberations, but lacks any adequate measure of the true moral status of those consequences, or any appreciation for the fact that some actions are good and some bad in themselves, apart from any consideration of consequences. Indeed, certain actions cannot be rightly done for the sake of utility: the duty to love and revere God, for example, if done for utilitarian reasons, is not truly done. In short, while utility is a genuine good, it is not the only good, and it is not, in itself, a sufficient standard of virtue.<sup>345</sup>

The obligation to promote the happiness of all who are capable of happiness, then, demands much more than wishing others well and acting consistently according to sympathy; it is an obligation to do good to them and not evil, as good and evil are revealed by conscience, whether we feel sympathy for them or not. But even this is not sufficient; promoting happiness as emotional satisfaction, providing comfort and lawful pleasure and reducing suffering, does not fulfill human duty.<sup>346</sup> Often doing right entails suffering in the short term—in the form of struggle against internal evil, or resistance to external evil, or the foregoing of lesser, temporary goods for the sake of higher ones—and no one should ever communicate to others an idea that suffering is to be avoided at all costs or try to promote happiness or relieve misery in any way inconsistent with the moral integrity of either the giving or the receiving parties.

What, then, are the basic human duties? McCosh gives a rough outline of these in a late, slim volume entitled *Our Moral Nature: Being a Brief System of Ethics*. They can be classed

---

<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 377-81. On the need of conscience as well as utility, McCosh again agrees with Witherspoon.

<sup>346</sup> McCosh says explicitly in *First and Fundamental Truths*, 240, that “ethical principle [requires] more from man than that he should further the felicity of others.”

as duties to God, duties to man, and duties to self.<sup>347</sup> Duties are “something due, something to be paid,” and they are derived from the principles of human nature as discovered through an inductive investigation of the intuitions, in particular the moral intuitions rendered by conscience, and from moral ideas connected to the principles. The duties to God really encompass the duties to man and self, as all right is traceable ultimately to God, the architect of man’s moral constitution.<sup>348</sup> Still, the duties may be separated analytically into those specially owed to God, to others, and to self. The fundamental duties specifically directed to God are public and private worship (a cherishing of “reverent and devout feeling” and a willing dependence on God, expressed in praise and prayer) and carrying out missions in cooperation with divine causes (primarily communicating the gospel, suppressing vice and promoting morality). “In general,” we have a duty to obey God “whenever He has uttered a command, whatever be the sacrifice we are required to make.”<sup>349</sup>

Toward men, we generally owe honor, sympathy, and love. The “standard of love” to others is our own “instinctive love toward ourselves”—we should love our neighbors as ourselves. More specifically, we owe others integrity, which includes both personal trustworthiness and charitableness, respecting the integrity of others; veracity; and respect for others’ property, including the precious cargo of their “character and influence” as well as their material possessions. The duties to others can be further subdivided into the duties of communities, of masters and servants, of families, and of church and state. “The moral law is binding on communities,” McCosh says, “as it is upon single persons.” He does not mention any special duties to the various communities—“nations, towns, commercial

---

<sup>347</sup> This “ancient tripartite division of man’s duties had become an accepted part of contemporary teaching and lecturing practice, especially after Pufendorf adopted it in his *Duty of Man*.” Haakonssen’s introduction to Reid’s *Practical Ethics*, 49. Witherspoon, of course, adopted this same division of duties.

<sup>348</sup> Again, the resemblance of McCosh’s view of these matters to Witherspoon’s is striking.

<sup>349</sup> McCosh, *Our Moral Nature: Being a Brief System of Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1892), 31-5.

companies, and clubs”—with which one may be associated, but seems to assume that the same duties of individuals are simply applied on a larger scale. Servants owe their masters “such service as was understood at their engagement, [as] determined by custom or the law of the country,” and masters “should give respect both to the best interests and feelings of their dependents,” especially recognizing their right to “liberty of thought and of religious worship.” Within the family, father and mother have a duty to provide lovingly for their children’s welfare, seeing that they are not only raised to maturity but also trained for a future occupation; children are obliged to give to their parents affection and obedience, “except where their commands are seen to be clearly contrary to the higher demands of God;” brothers and sisters and more distant blood relations owe to one another perpetual affection and kindness. Sexual relationships are to be confined to marriage, and marriages should be supported by law; divorces should not be allowed except “from causes which virtually abrogate the relationship: by unfaithfulness. . .or by willful and proven abandonment.” The church and the state owe to each other a solemn recognition of their respective exclusive domains: “the church should not meddle with money or temporalities of any kind, except incidentally to secure buildings or stipends to its ministers,” and “the civil magistrate is not at liberty to interfere in spiritual matters, in the government or services of the church.”<sup>350</sup> There are duties the state owes to the people generally, too, and of course, duties the people owe to the state: the state or government owes the people protection of civil and religious rights, and the people owe the state “strict obedience,” so long as “the government keeps within its own province, having to do with men’s lives and

---

<sup>350</sup> McCosh acutely observes: “The temptation on the part of the Romish Church is to claim authority over the state. The disposition of some of the Protestant churches is to make the church subject to the state. The true position is that each should have its own position.” He seems to believe that some connection of church and state can be legitimate, so long as each maintains its independence, but that a complete institutional separation is much better, “both favoring peace and high morality in a country” (46).

their property.” In relation to other states, each state has a duty of considering “calmly and resolutely” whether its cause is just before it resorts to war.<sup>351</sup>

Our duties to ourselves include attending to our bodily health and preservation, maintaining chastity, training and improving—“so far as God allows”—our mental faculties, cultivating “an independence in forming our opinions, and courage in carrying them out,” developing personal character through virtuous habits, “especially habits of self-command, habits of industry, habits of perseverance, habits of thorough integrity, habits of charity. In short, we are to love ourselves “in the various positions in which we may be placed.”<sup>352</sup>

The great difficulty, however, is less knowing what one should do than *doing* it. Even the best ethical guidelines—for McCosh, those laid down in Scripture—cannot of themselves make a man good. There is still the intractable problem of the corrupted will disordering the soul. What is needed to produce good behavior is a righting of the will and a rectification of conscience. The will must be reformed, rightly oriented to higher goods, so that it will not lead the mind and conscience astray. The rectified conscience, restored to its rightful supremacy among the powers of the mind, will recognize consistently the good in sound ethical rules, and the will, now allied to conscience, will move the man consistently to act in conformity to them. But how are the will and the conscience made whole? According to McCosh, this can only be effected by a work of divine grace. A man’s conscience, when it is heard, points to a God who demands “obedience in all things, at all times, and in all places,” but also sees that the man does not and cannot deliver such obedience. But God has intervened; through Christ, “The majesty of the law is upheld, the justice of God is satisfied, and an obedience is provided by one from whom obedience is not required as for himself, but who has power in himself, and puts himself in circumstances to render it.”

---

<sup>351</sup> *Our Moral Nature*, 37-49.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-52.



Through him “the two essential moral attributes of God, his justice, and his benevolence,” are satisfied.<sup>353</sup> By the activity of God’s Spirit in the soul, one comes to realize the efficacy of Christ’s life and death, is taken through his own death to life in God.

This transforming process touches all of “the four indestructible principles in the human agent”—reason, conscience, affections, and will. Reason is satisfied through evidence, “partly external, arising from miracles properly attested, and the fulfillment of prophecy,” and “partly, indeed chiefly, internal,” the latter supplied by the transformations wrought in the soul. Christianity, McCosh says, is the only religion “which professes to be founded on evidence, and which is at pains to furnish it.”<sup>354</sup> Conscience is “pacified” by its recognition that God himself is pacified with Christ’s sacrifice<sup>355</sup> and “rectified” by its perception of the “pure standard of right and wrong” provided by God’s law.<sup>356</sup> The pain of guilt being removed, the affections flow out freely to God and the Savior, whose character, perfectly reflecting God’s, inspires the warmest love and admiration.<sup>357</sup> The will, swayed by these emotions, freely chooses to accept the divine offer of forgiveness and submit itself to the dictates of conscience and the law of God that conscience has affirmed.<sup>358</sup>

## **POLITICS**

McCosh nowhere in his writings presents a theory of politics. But he does make a number of statements, particularly in *Method of the Divine Government*, suggesting a conception of politics much like Witherspoon’s—a political approach grounded in conscience but alive to utilitarian considerations. Unlike Witherspoon, however, McCosh provides a penetrating analysis of the process by which the order of soul and society break down. Social disorder is

---

<sup>353</sup> *MDG*, 477-8.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 488.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 489.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 493.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 493-7.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, 501-3.

rooted in the disordering of the soul. We have seen that a malfunctioning conscience is caused by a bad will: the will inclines to lesser goods or unworthy objects, neglecting the higher for the sake of the lower, and through myopic preoccupation with the lower deceives intelligence, which consequently gives a false or partial report of the facts to the conscience, so that the latter renders a false judgment. But this is only the beginning of the soul's dissolution. The mind, recoiling from the pain of guilt associated with memories of sinful acts, increasingly tries to push out all such memories and "learns to present the deeds which it wishes to do or to avoid in a false [i.e., more attractive] light." Conscience, then, misinformed by reason and judging only an incomplete survey of facts regarding one's internal and external acts, ceases to be a reliable moral guide. It is rendered less effective in proportion to the will's corruption and the corresponding darkening of intelligence; the conscience is in effect corrupted along with will and intelligence. The process of this corruption can be divided analytically into four stages: First there is the "unenlightened conscience," in which "the mind avoids inquiry, because it does not wish to be disturbed," and the individual acts "according to the prevailing views of the age and country, without making any nice inquiry into their accuracy." Next there is the "perverted conscience," in which the mind is marked not only by ignorance, but "positive mistake," "calling good evil, and evil good;" corrupt will has "succeeded in calling in the conscience" to its service, so that "men feel as if they did right to be [wrong]." Then there is the "unfaithful conscience," when the conscience has simply ceased to inform of wrongs because of "the painful nature of the emotions which the contemplation of sin calls up, and the effort which the mind makes to avoid or deaden the sensation." Finally, there is the "troubled conscience," in

which the mind is characterized by “violent and convulsive movements of self-reproach which will at times break in upon the self-satisfaction of the most complacent.”<sup>359</sup>

McCosh is convinced that the psychological and social effects of bad conscience can be as devastating as those of bad will, and thinks the social ramifications of bad conscience deserve much more attention than they have generally been given by ethical and political theorists. He attributes much of the restlessness, anger, and anxiety in the world to “an unsatisfied conscience.” He is “inclined to refer not only much of human misery, but much more than is commonly supposed, of human sinfulness, to the working of an evil conscience. . . It is possible for the conscience to become a deranging instead of a regulating power; and when it does so, it becomes the most corrupting of all agents.” A continued resistance to conscience ends in a desperate last resort of condemning God as cruel and unjust, and from that point there is endless internal war, involving as it does not merely the passions, but conscience itself. As the soul becomes increasingly rebellious, there is even a “drying up of the natural affections,” first of affections towards God, and then of affections towards people as well.<sup>360</sup> Philosophers have generally paid far too little attention, McCosh thinks, to man’s existing condition of corruption in general, and to the central role of conscience in human psychological and social disorders in particular. Passions alone simply do not explain “the particular mode and intensity of human wickedness”—this is explained only by “a perverted moral sense.”<sup>361</sup>

Given that corruption in one of the above forms is the prevailing condition among men, how is society kept from utter dissolution? Fortunately, there are countervailing natural arrangements providing stability to human social life. Two positive arrangements are

---

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 383-7.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 395-406.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid., 408, 414.

the institutions of family and civil government, both of which are natural to humanity. The first institution counterbalances human selfishness with familial affection and the sense of mutual duty it engenders, and the second reinforces restraint by its commands and encourages obedience to law by the “palpable advantages” it affords to society. Obedience is further reinforced by “the feelings of allegiance, of loyalty, and nationality, which spring up in the human bosom.”<sup>362</sup> In addition to these positive arrangements, McCosh observes three negative arrangements in the human condition that promote stability: “the physical dependence of man” on a properly functioning body, which puts definite limits on what he can do; the uncertainty and brevity of his life, which often prevents him from trying or successfully executing “bolder schemes of ambition and wickedness;” and his dependence on other human beings, which keeps him friendly to them, if not out of “true affection or righteous principle,” then at least out of need.<sup>363</sup>

Indeed, evil is made to counteract evil at every level of society, not only in the home and in political society, but at the civilizational level as well. The advance of civilization perhaps makes man in one sense capable of greater evil because “the power of masses is greatly augmented by the intercommunication of ideas and sentiments,” but it brings with it new restraining forces, such as augmented “independence of thinking and acting” and greater awareness of the activities of ambitious men that comes with the advancement of learning and the spread of information. Society thus appears to be, in some measure at least, self-correcting: “Society, like the steam-engine, has regulators and safety-valves, all self-acting, ready to meet the threatened evil, from whatever quarter it may proceed.”<sup>364</sup>

---

<sup>362</sup> McCosh agrees here, as Witherspoon does (probably less deliberately) with Aristotle on the naturalness of the household and of political society.

<sup>363</sup> *MDG.*, 234-8.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

In all this, McCosh perceives a beneficent providential order that is flouted only at great peril. “It always happens that things advance most prosperously when there is no interference with them on the part of meddling wisdom, which is folly differing from folly only in this, that it is more conceited.” It dangerous to try to “alter the present constitution of things in favour of what might seem to human wisdom to be a better.” McCosh is not surprised to find that the experimental communities of the communists of his day “invariably, and very speedily, become scenes of wretchedness and dissension;” the communist theories of his era—propounded by St. Simon, Owen, and Fourier—were based, after all, on a radically defective understanding of human nature and the human condition. In particular, they all assume that men are naturally directed by enlightened or extended self-interest, when in fact they “are far more frequently swayed by feelings, sentiments, impulses, and passions.”<sup>365</sup> The context suggests that McCosh would also fault them for failing to recognize the naturalness of family and of civil government and for failing to come to terms with human limitations. This position has been historically vindicated: the failure of communism, of course, has been decisively and spectacularly demonstrated in the twentieth century, with the implosion of the Soviet Union. When the natural aids to virtue and restraints on vice are removed or radically rejected, the results are devastating. The cultural and economic devastation in the old Soviet Bloc is certainly a case in point. McCosh provides as his own illustrative examples the aftermath of the Athenian plague as recounted by Thucydides, the excesses of emperors and nobles in the late Roman Empire so poignantly conveyed by Gibbon, and the Reign of Terror in eighteenth-century France.<sup>366</sup> Even

---

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid., 248. To these we may well add the examples of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, and most recently, Saddam Hussein and Kim Il Jung in the twentieth century, all of whom have been driven in their bloody purges by ideologies that refuse to acknowledge human limitations or recognize any providential order binding on human

horrors like these, however, are held in check by natural means: the destruction caused by such activities itself proves a limit on wicked ambition, and eventually produces a backlash.<sup>367</sup>

If most philosophers have given insufficient attention to the corruption of human nature and failed to understand that this corruption is at the root of social disorder, other philosophers and perhaps most theologians have taken too little notice of “the original and indestructible structure of man’s moral nature.” McCosh categorically rejects “the miserably low and groveling views of those who would represent all and each of mankind as utterly selfish and dishonest.”<sup>368</sup> Even in corruption, traces of order are discernable in human nature:

(1.) [T]he conscience retains in the human mind its original claims of authority. The law is broken, but it is still binding. Then, (2.) There is room in the depraved heart of man for the play and exercise of all the high talents and susceptibilities with which man was originally furnished. (3.) There are still in the human mind many amiable and benevolent qualities. (4.) There are actions of moral honesty and integrity, and even of religion so called, performed in obedience to conscience.

The problem is that in the state of corruption the claims of conscience “are not attended to,” the talents and susceptibilities “are abused and perverted,” the affections are not rightly directed, and the actions performed in obedience to conscience are done in conformity to “a perverted conscience.”<sup>369</sup> And yet conscience, despite the disrupting effects of human corruption, remains the source of the “peace and decorum of society.” The genuine honesty, honor, and “disinterested philanthropy” that may be found among corrupt men are the result of “direct obedience, not indeed full and constant, but partial and occasional, to the dictates of conscience.” Even in the context of corruption, the conscience often

---

action. McCosh attributes the “never-ending schemes for the improvement of mankind” to a religious impulse on p. 471.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 408, 410. Perhaps McCosh has Hobbes in mind here, and perhaps also old-school Calvinists.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 410.

provides direction for the mind. Generally, conscience is able to provide this direction to corrupt minds when sin, once committed, is forced on the attention of conscience through external circumstances or through natural social affections. Men typically “avoid those sins which after commission must be constantly recalled by events ever recurring.” Above all, they shy away from wrongs that receive society’s strong condemnation for inflicting “immediate injury on the temporal interests of mankind.” For this reason, “we find the general tone of morality in society exercising a powerful influence on the individual members of it.” The “social and sympathetic feelings of man’s nature” will not let him become easily accustomed to inflicting significant injuries and pain on others.<sup>370</sup>

Other tendencies in human nature conducive to social order also remain operational in a state of corruption. First, there are physical and mental appetencies inherent in human nature. The physical appetites—hunger, thirst, sexual appetite—“compel man to be industrious and laborious, in order to obtain the food needful for their gratification” and “render him active on the one hand, and dependent on the other.” They encourage, in other words, productivity, discipline, and humility. Mental appetencies—the natural desires for knowledge, esteem, power, society, and property—also conduce to social well-being. The appetite for knowledge fosters the learning and discovery necessary for social improvements and restrains human wickedness by bringing human character under inspection and thereby under the sway of public opinion. The desire for honor, when not utterly perverted by evil, engenders “amiability, or that spirit that leads us to study the temper, the tastes, and feelings of our fellow-men,” helping thus to bind society together, and providing an added motive for philanthropic enterprises. The inclination to power, when not excessive, unites men “who would otherwise be isolated in all their actions, and

---

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 391-4.

wavering and unsteady in their movements” around charismatic leaders, combining their actions to produce powerful effects. The yearning for society gives rise to community and all the social offices and benefits of people’s living in close proximity to one another. The desire for property, when it does not turn into raw greed, encourages work, and the habit of working lends “a steadiness of aim and a spirit of caution to individual minds” and issues in “the accumulation of wealth,” which “tends to produce an elegance and a social order which cannot be found in communities stricken with poverty and constantly striving about the necessities of existence.” To these “primary impulses” may be added “the secondary principles” of “a calculating self-love” and a “habitual benevolence,” but “it is by the primary impulses fully as much as by the secondary principles of self-love and benevolence, that mankind are induced to maintain an outward decency and deportment, and society at large is made to clothe itself in becoming decorum.”<sup>371</sup>

Various classes of natural emotions also tend to promote social order in some way. “Arrestive” emotions (apprehension, fear, dread, terror), arising from perceptions of potential harm, help to make men cautious and support the development of “all the hardy virtues which grow upon caution.” “Instigative” emotions (hope, expectation), following the recognition of possible benefit, both stimulate human activity and promote human happiness. (Action ceases and happiness dies with the loss of hope.) “Adhesive and repulsive” emotions (desires and aversions), awakened on the contemplation of persons or objects possessing good or bad qualities, draw men toward good and away from evil. “Remunerative and punitive” emotions (enjoyment and contentment, grief and depression), emerging with the awareness of good or evil “as already attained,” reinforce the attraction to the one and the repulsion from the other. Sympathetic emotions—responsiveness to the joy

---

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 417-22. Self-love and benevolence were commonly put forward as fundamental principles of ethics in the ethical theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.



and sorrow of others—encourage men to help and protect one another. Finally, “aesthetic admiration and repugnance,” produced on the observation of order, beauty, and nobility and their opposites, help to keep the mind focused on worthy objects and cultivate a sense of “propriety and decorum” highly beneficial to the maintenance of social mores.<sup>372</sup>

Unfortunately, both appetites and emotions can be corrupted by a bad will, and when they are, their personally and socially beneficial effects are blunted and—too often—they become destructive. Especially damaging are vanity, ambition, avarice, prodigality, anger, resentment, envy, and party spirit. Yet even these, by providential arrangement, are made to have good effects, despite being wrong in themselves. Take away vanity and ambition, McCosh observes, “and it is impossible to calculate how much earthly excellence would be taken away, or rather to say how little would remain.” Citing Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus, he notes that the ugly vices of avarice and prodigality sometimes work in the public’s favor: the former often results in the accumulation of capital, and the latter burnishes the income of those who produce what the extravagant purchase. “We see,” he says, “how a nation may owe its commercial and political prosperity, not so much to the wisdom of its statesmen and citizens, as to the skillful adjustments of the government of God.” Anger and resentment, as destructive as they can be, also goad men to prevent and redress injustices, and violent conflicts “have been the means of checking other evils which would have spread inextricable disorder throughout society.” Envy, too, though “among the basest and most malignant of human passions,” often serves to check ambition and turn people against extravagant projects. And partisanship in politics and religion, while sometimes a source of great tumult, has also lead individuals to subject public measures to

---

<sup>372</sup> Ibid., 424-7.

“sifting investigation” and fostered “reading, inquiry, and reflection” through the interest generated by controversy.<sup>373</sup>

The arrangement of human nature and the other arrangements in the natural order together keep men from sinking into utter depravity and destroying themselves in their corruption. However, if man personally and socially is ever to move beyond the minimal level of restraint and stability enforced by these natural arrangements to full, robust maturity, a supernatural dynamic must be added to nature, the natural man must be infused with divine grace. Whatever benefits derive from the checks and balances providentially instituted in nature, they cannot match those following from a spiritually awakened and morally rebuilt community. The psychic reordering McCosh described on the personal level—the redirected will and affections, the informed intelligence, the rectified conscience—must take place on a grand scale.

---

<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 430-6.

## THE COMMON-SENSE BASIS OF JAMES' PRAGMATIC RADICAL EMPIRICISM

The place of common sense in William James's philosophy is not sufficiently appreciated. Some scholars have recognized that common sense was a sort of touchstone for James, but none has given a systematic treatment of its meaning and its place in James's philosophic *Weltanschauung*. This I will attempt to provide. James always took the common sense perspective as his starting point and default position. Sometimes he did so explicitly. Other times common sense lurked in the background like a ghost, reminding you of its presence only to trail away whispering in the air. James often spoke of common sense as if confident his readers (or auditors) knew just what he meant by the term. Probably he spoke of it this way because, as I have observed, Scottish Common Sense had been a major force in British and American universities for much of the nineteenth century, and the largely philosophical public to which he committed his thoughts could be assumed to be familiar with Common Sense thinking. I noted in the introduction that James told his audience at the Gifford Lectures, where he delivered the text of what would become *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, that his first philosophical studies were of Scottish Common Sense, and an attentive reading of his *Principles of Psychology* shows that he was well acquainted with the works of Reid, Stewart, Brown, Hamilton, and McCosh.<sup>374</sup> He probably could have expected his communicants to be at least generally familiar with the basic ideas, if not the writings, of these Common Sense philosophers. He did not make frequent reference to these thinkers outside of the *Principles*, but a close analysis of his writings shows unmistakably that the concept of common sense profoundly affected his own thinking about the world and man's existence in the world.

---

<sup>374</sup> James twice references McCosh, favorably, in the *Principles*, in notes on p. 556 and p. 702.

Pragmatism—at least the Jamesian version—is a philosophy grounded in and constantly checked by common sense. In “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth”—the central lecture within *Pragmatism*—James presents “common sense” as the most fundamental of three levels of truth generally accessible to human beings. Throughout his writings, common sense repeatedly emerges as something that must be taken into account if error and injury to human well-being are to be averted. Additionally, the pragmatic approach is motivated and driven by common-sense concerns, above all by a concern for the good of man as it is concretely available to him. Pragmatism takes human needs and interests seriously as being among the more important constituents of reality, and as potentially finding their fulfillment in the universe of which they are parts.<sup>375</sup> As James’s pragmatic conception of truth has been and continues to be very badly misunderstood, a few clarifying suggestions about what he means by “truth” are in order before we scrutinize his notion of common sense.

### **THE PRAGMATIC CONCEPTION OF TRUTH**

Truth is for James a matter of concrete relations between knower and known. The key to understanding James’s pragmatism is to grasp what he means by the “true” and the “real” and precisely how he sees the two to be connected. Truth, James says, “must obtain between an idea and a reality that is the idea’s object; and, as a predicate, it must apply to the idea and not to the object, for objective realities are not *true*...they are taken as simply *being*, while the ideas are true *of* them.”<sup>376</sup> One must never forget that for James truth is by definition a relation of one concrete reality (thought) to another outside it (another thought or thing); the failure to realize or remember this simple fact lies at the root of most

---

<sup>375</sup> As James puts it, we seem naturally to desire that, and certain correspondences between our capacities and the outer world suggest that, “the inmost nature of the reality is congenial to *powers* which you possess” (WB, 73).

<sup>376</sup> MT, 87.

misunderstandings of James's philosophy. The "pragmatic" element in James's approach to truth is the insistence that a hard criterion be supplied for speaking of any idea as "true" and the conviction that the only hard criterion available is that an idea makes some discernable difference in experience. A true idea is one that can be verified *some way* in experience. James's first public articulation of the pragmatic principle<sup>377</sup> remains one of his clearest. There James credits Charles S. Peirce with its first enunciation. "Peirce's principle"—based on the empirical observations that the aim of thought is belief and that belief is sought as a foundation for activity of some kind—is that the key to achieving clarity of thought is to consider what "possible difference of practice" a given idea makes. An idea's concrete practical effects, according to the principle, are all that we can know of any substance about it. Its meaning is precisely its capacity to produce just those effects it produces if believed and acted on.<sup>378</sup> James extends the principle by making the criterion of meaning the possible difference of *experience* an idea suggests: "The ultimate test for us of what a truth means is indeed the conduct it dictates or inspires. But it inspires that conduct because it first foretells some particular turn to our experience which shall call for just that conduct from us...[Therefore,] the effective meaning of any philosophic proposition can always be brought down to some particular consequence, in our future practical experience, whether active or passive; the point lying rather in the fact that the experience must be particular, than in the fact that it must be active."<sup>379</sup> The practical issue of truth, James suggests—and thus its meaning—is what manner of experience it suggests, and what is to be believed and

---

<sup>377</sup> "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," address delivered before the Philosophical Union at Berkeley, August 26, 1898; in *William James, Writings 1878-1899*, ed. Gerald E. Myers (New York: Library of America, 1992).

<sup>378</sup> In Peirce's words, "Our idea of anything is our idea of its sensible effects... Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955), 31.

<sup>379</sup> "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," 1080.

what done in light of this foreseen experience. This leads James to the following assertion of what, on his accounting, a pragmatic philosophy should be: “the whole function of philosophy ought to be 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 one which is true.”<sup>380</sup>

The foregoing extension of Peirce’s principle was too much for Peirce, who had only applied it to logic (as a means of attaining maximal clarity and consistency of thought) and believed that making experiential consequences the criterion of truth must end in radical subjectivism and relativism.<sup>381</sup> That a friend and colleague of Peirce’s caliber thought this the inevitable result of James’s formulation of the concept is striking testimony to just how difficult James found it to make himself understood on the matter. For one of the primary aims of James’s philosophic work was precisely to refute subjectivism and relativism (as distinguished from relativity, which James both acknowledged and defended).

The misunderstanding of James’s position revolves around his use of the term “experience.” He was misunderstood on this point, I want to suggest, not because he failed to articulate his meaning clearly, but rather because his conception of experience was so startlingly original and because his fullest and clearest elaboration of it did not receive much public attention until after his death in 1910, when Ralph Barton Perry compiled James’s articles on the subject and published the collection as *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. For James, both reality and truth are to be found *within* experience, but according to his conception of experience, this does not imply either radical subjectivism or idealism in the Berkeleyan sense. There *is*, James thought, an element of subjectivity in all perceptions, but there is also

---

<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 1081.

<sup>381</sup> See Peirce’s considered statements and restatements on pragmatism in “The Essentials of Pragmatism,” “Pragmatism in Retrospect: A Last Formulation,” and “Critical Common-Sensism,” chs. 17, 18, and 19, respectively in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Buchler.

an element of real objectivity in them. Subjectivity and objectivity in perception are two poles within one overarching “pure experience.” As Hunter Brown explains, “James understood subject and world to be simultaneously implicated in the constitution of experience.”<sup>382</sup> Pure experience is essentially undifferentiated primary experience, “the instant field of the present,”<sup>383</sup> “the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories,” “a *that*” not yet abstracted through reflection into any *whats*.<sup>384</sup> James uses the term “pure experience” in two quite different ways, however, and this dual usage must be borne in mind to avoid misunderstanding. Sometimes he speaks of the pure experience of an individual: “the instant field of the present” as it appears to a personal consciousness. The germ of his notion of pure experience in its personal dimension is already present in the *Principles*—in hindsight it seems clear that pure experience in this sense is equivalent to the present moment of James’ “stream of consciousness.” The following statement from Chapter XIII of the *Principles* would work well as a definition of pure experience on this level: “Experience, from the very first, presents us with concentered objects, vaguely continuous with the rest of the world which envelops them in space and time, and potentially divisible into inward elements and parts.”<sup>385</sup> At other times James employs the term “pure experience” to speak of the instant field of the present *in general*, as when he talks of a “world of pure experience.” Pure experience in this latter sense is essentially equivalent to what in the history of philosophy is more commonly called “being” or “what is”—in James’s words, “plain, unqualified actuality or existence.”<sup>386</sup> But James’s notion of being or existence differs from others in two ways. First, being as

---

<sup>382</sup> Brown, *William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 35.

<sup>383</sup> ERE, 13.

<sup>384</sup> ERE, 46.

<sup>385</sup> PP, 461.

<sup>386</sup> ERE, 13.

James understands it is dynamic, not static. From one moment to the next being is never exactly the same. There are continuities, to be sure—as James himself never tires of reminding us—and some constants in reality seem to remain amid the flux: as James observes in *Pragmatism*, “Our experience is all shot through with regularities.”<sup>387</sup> But the stream of things is never entirely the same as it was before. Second, being on James’s analysis must include the subjective within it. Our experiencing minds are as much a part of what is as the things we experience; the subject is as real as its objects. The implication of this for James is that “subjectivity and objectivity are functional attributes solely, realized only when [an] experience is ‘taken,’ i.e., talked-of, twice...by a new retrospective experience.”<sup>388</sup>

This “retrospective experience” is experience as constituted by selective attention, and is what is *usually* meant by “experience.” When we talk of our experiences, we do not ordinarily mean to include events undergone of which we were unaware but rather only those we noticed going through, happenings that we remember, and remember as having some significance or at least some interest for us. Or if the question concerns what has just transpired, we typically mean by “this experience” not James’ “immediate flux of life” but some circumscribed matter within the flux—what an excellent concerto that was, for example, not the rate of our breathing, the objects in our peripheral vision, the fidgeting of our fingers, or whatever else we *might* have noticed going on in and around us in the concert hall had we turned our thoughts to them. *Pure* experience consists of all the *possible* objects of attention at any given moment, experience in the usual sense only of selected features out of that massive whole. It is the latter, ordinary meaning of “experience” James employs in

---

<sup>387</sup> P, 99.

<sup>388</sup> ERE, 13.



the *Principles of Psychology* when he says, “My experience is what I agree to attend to.”<sup>389</sup> This kind of experience is secondary, while pure experience is primary.<sup>390</sup> *It is pure experience—together with, as we shall see, collective human experience—rather than personal experience as we ordinarily speak of it, which James takes as the test of truth.* James would have saved himself a lot of trouble trying to make himself understood if he had been able to make this point clear.

How, then, does James understand the relationship between experience and truth? When James puts forth experiential consequence as the criterion of truth, he does not mean to suggest that truth is whatever we would like it to be or whatever will produce the desired feelings of the moment. He means to suggest that truth must conform to the facts of experience, which (he believes) tell us all we can ever know about reality. Conformity to experienced or clearly experienceable fact is what makes an idea true. The experiential consequences to which James refers are the experienceable effects, whether we like them or not, that would obtain if we believed and acted on a given supposition. They are what show us whether the supposition was accurate. If I have an idea about something but am constantly rebuffed by the facts of experience when I “try it out”—whether the matter is “theoretical” or “practical”—I have good reason to think the idea is false. The level of experience *is* for James the level of reality, or at least as much of reality as human beings can have access to, and therefore making experience the test of truth in James’s mind is nothing more or less than making reality the test of truth. James prefers to speak in terms of “experience” rather than “reality” in part, I suspect, because the former term suggests concreteness in a way the latter does not, and it is in the concrete that we find the hard test of ideas that James is looking for.

---

<sup>389</sup> PP, 380.

<sup>390</sup> Note also that “experience” as “what I agree to attend to” is a purely *psychological* definition of the term. “*Pure* experience” is more than psychological; it contains *all* dimensions of the present moment—psychological, physical, social, etc.

In *Pragmatism*, James says that pragmatists hold to the usual notion of truth as “agreement with reality,” but insist on pressing the question of what exactly agreement with reality *means*, of “what may precisely be meant by the term ‘agreement,’ and what by the term ‘reality,’ when reality is taken as something for our ideas to agree with.”<sup>391</sup> Philosophers often present truth as a “copy” or “transcript” of reality, but James insists this concept of truth is inadequate. Conceiving of truth as a copy of reality works in some cases, as when we want a true idea of what a particular physical object looks like—say, a building downtown or a person we expect to find at the airport. But some realities are not amenable to copying in this way: James gives as examples “past time,” “power,” and “spontaneity.”<sup>392</sup> This consideration suggests that copying is only one *type* of agreement with reality and that, if we are to get an adequate conception of truth, we will have to consider a variety of types. An adequate conception of truth must answer the question, What do all the various types of agreement with reality have in common? James’s answer is that all of them bring us into closer working contact with the facts of experience. Truth is “essentially an affair of leading” to and through reality,<sup>393</sup> or more precisely, “into or up to, or towards, other parts of experience,”<sup>394</sup> terminating (if we follow them far enough) in “sense-percepts.”<sup>395</sup>

If this is what is meant pragmatically—i.e., concretely—by “agreeing” with reality, what is meant by “reality”? “‘Reality’ is in general what truths have to take account of”<sup>396</sup>—it is “something resisting, yet malleable, which controls our thinking as an energy that must be taken ‘account’ of incessantly (tho not necessarily merely copied).”<sup>397</sup> It is malleable in the sense that we can manipulate it in some limited ways, and it responds to our

---

<sup>391</sup> P, 96.

<sup>392</sup> P, 102.

<sup>393</sup> P, 103.

<sup>394</sup> P, 97.

<sup>395</sup> P, 104.

<sup>396</sup> P, 117.

<sup>397</sup> P, 124.

manipulation. But while we make genuine contributions to reality or change it in various ways by our own thinking and acting, this is not to say we simply create it: “All our truths are beliefs about ‘Reality’; and in any particular belief the reality acts as something independent, as a thing *found*, not manufactured.”<sup>398</sup>

But we know this independent something only because we have in fact found it, and this is why experience must be the touchstone of reality. “The only objective criterion of reality is coerciveness, in the long run, over thought. Objective facts...are real only because they coerce sensation.”<sup>399</sup> James means sensation in the broadest possible sense, as including perception and all concrete intellectual processes. “Every living man would instantly define right thinking as thinking in correspondence with reality,”<sup>400</sup> but what reality as a whole actually *is* remains somewhat obscure, to put it mildly.<sup>401</sup> The only standard available for determining which of the various “postulates” about reality is valid is experience: “each [such postulate] must depend on the general consensus of experience as a whole to bear out its validity.”<sup>402</sup>

Note James’s formulation here: “experience as a whole.” This rendering reminds again that James does not use the term “experience” in a narrow sense. While all immediate experience of the world is individual and personal, collective human experience offers a view of what *may* be known beyond our own personal encounters. James is careful in *Pragmatism* to specify that actual verification in sense-percepts is not necessary for most purposes for taking claims as true, that “verifiability” will suffice.<sup>403</sup> Moreover, James’s brand of empiricism is distinctly non-traditional. John E. Smith aptly warns that describing James as

---

<sup>398</sup> P, 117.

<sup>399</sup> “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence,” in *William James, Writings 1878-1899*, 908.

<sup>400</sup> Every living man in *James’s* day! Even this basic common-sense beginning has been jettisoned in our day by the likes of Richard Rorty, who has indeed rejected common sense generally.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*, 902.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, 904.

<sup>403</sup> P, 99-100.

an “empiricist” can mislead: “James was the philosopher of experience *par excellence*, but what he understood by experience was something far richer than the conception of experience that dominated classical British empiricism, and therefore attempts to assimilate his thought to that tradition are erroneous and misleading.”<sup>404</sup> In his pivotal essay, “A World of Pure Experience,” James explains that his “radical empiricism” is *empirical* in that he “starts with the parts and makes of the whole a being of the second order” (he mentions his likeness to “Hume and his descendants” here), and *radical* in that it “neither admits into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor excludes from them any element that is directly experienced.” And James (unlike Berkeley, Hume, J. Mill, and J.S. Mill) includes “conjunctive relations” as direct experienceables.<sup>405</sup> The resulting conception of experience is, as Smith noted, extraordinarily rich.

The difficulty in defining “reality” stems in part from the fact that we the experiencers are part of it; in some contexts it denotes that independently existing something that we encounter, but in the complete sense—reality “as a whole”—it must be understood as encompassing all of us and our encounters as well as the things encountered. Once we realize that James is ultimately concerned with reality in this latter, larger sense and that “experience” as James uses the term is a more concrete substitute for “reality,” his pragmatic meaning of truth as “agreement with reality” begins to come clear. Truth, James is trying to say, is a process *within* reality.

Truth is essentially a relation between two things, an idea, on the one hand, and a reality outside of the idea, on the other. This relation, like all relations, has its *fundamentum*, namely, the matrix of experiential circumstance, psychological as well as physical, in which the correlated terms are found embedded...What constitutes the relation known as truth...is just the existence in the empirical world of this fundamentum of circumstance surrounding object and idea and ready to be either short-circuited [because it is usually not necessary to explore thoroughly] or traversed at full length...The nature and place and affinities of the

---

<sup>404</sup> Smith, introduction to VRE, xxvii.

<sup>405</sup> ERE, 22-3.

object of course play as vital a part in making the particular passage possible as do the nature and associative tendencies of the idea; so that the notion that truth could fall altogether inside of the thinker's private experience and be something purely psychological, is absurd. It is between the idea and the object that the truth-relation is to be sought and it involves both terms.<sup>406</sup>

As far as James's philosophy goes, the beginning of wisdom is to realize that experience entails more than psychology.<sup>407</sup>

## COMMON SENSE

We are now in a position to consider James's account of common sense and its place within his larger philosophy. James combined the two primary meanings of common sense: as perceptual judgment and as common convictions or understandings. He wrote more often of the former sense, as most of his writings (psychological and philosophical) are preoccupied with epistemological concerns. He sometimes spoke of the latter in terms of "funded experience" and the "rich and active commerce" of experiences in the community of men.<sup>408</sup> For James, common sense in both respects is a variety of truth. In *Pragmatism*, he describes three basic levels of truth: the levels of common sense, of logic, and of theory.<sup>409</sup> Each kind of truth is a kind of leading towards or directly up to various experiences. The common sense level relates to "matters of fact,"<sup>410</sup> so that common sense truths terminate directly in experiences of the world, or of "things" in the world, including the "thing" called the "self" and even including moral and "religious" facts. Logical truths concern "relations

---

<sup>406</sup> MT, 91-2.

<sup>407</sup> In light of James's justifiably great fame for psychological analysis, this is especially important to bear in mind.

<sup>408</sup> See P, 34-9.

<sup>409</sup> In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James names mysticism as a distinct level of truth but observes that this kind is not *generally* accessible for validation on the level of first-hand, perceptual experience, although the fruits or consequences in the lives of those who have had such experience *are* amenable to public validation and constitute an important body of truth. More on this when we examine James's account of the religious foundations of order.

<sup>410</sup> P, 100.

among purely mental ideas”<sup>411</sup> and lead through our constellations of abstract ideas to certain abstract conclusions.<sup>412</sup> Logical truths, then, do not lead directly *to* concrete facts, but they do lead *towards* them: because they are derived ultimately from our mental classifications of “real objects,”<sup>413</sup> they suggest what facts must follow from certain orderings of other facts.<sup>414</sup> Theoretical truths concern truth relations more generally, and mediate between new ideas and “the whole body of other truths already in our possession.”<sup>415</sup> As new ideas are the product of new experiences and all truths derive somewhere from experience, theoretical truths also have a concrete basis and suggest what new experiences to expect from new coordinations of older and newer truths.

Of these three levels of truth, common sense is closest to reality. For James, as we have seen, the level of reality is “pure experience,” undifferentiated primary experience. It is here in pure experience that we find all the materials from which to build out our truths. If reality concretely considered is undifferentiated primary experience, common sense is essentially *differentiating* primary experience. At the common sense level, you may say, reality is still directly in view. However an observer might misconstrue the nature of the reality before him here, the common sense level of thought has at least this advantage over the other levels, that here objective reality *of some kind* is immediately present, here there is *something definitely real* to be known.<sup>416</sup>

As differentiating primary experience, common sense is also necessarily the first form of truth in order of time. James says it constitutes the first great “stage of

---

<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

<sup>412</sup> P, 101.

<sup>413</sup> Additionally, their form reflects “the very structure of our thinking.”

<sup>414</sup> Ibid.

<sup>415</sup> P, 102.

<sup>416</sup> In pure experience, thought is purely perceptual; in common sense thinking, percepts are correlated to concepts; logic and theory deal on the purely conceptual level.

philosophizing.”<sup>417</sup> For James, “philosophy” is simply “*man thinking*, thinking about generalities rather than about particulars.”<sup>418</sup> Philosophy is thus in James’s conception a specific kind of concrete experience of the broadest application. It denotes man’s effort to grasp the basic elements of reality—the broad sweep of reality-as-a-whole, and the larger patterns and movements detectible within that greater current. Common sense thinking on this view is appropriately classified as an incipient form of philosophizing. Like the Scottish Common Sense philosophers, James carefully circumscribes the philosophical meaning of “common sense”: “In practical talk, a man’s common sense means his good judgment, his freedom from excentricity [sic], his *gumption*, to use the vernacular word. In philosophy it means something entirely different, it means his use of certain intellectual forms or categories of thought.” These are intellectual forms inherited from our ancient ancestors that “have been able to preserve themselves throughout the experience of all subsequent time;” they collectively constitute “our fundamental ways of thinking about things” and “form one great state of equilibrium in the human mind’s development, the stage of common sense.”<sup>419</sup> Common sense notions may be questioned, and indeed philosophers have subjected them to intense scrutiny, but they have weathered the onslaught and continue to exercise an irresistible power over us: “Criticise them as you may, they persist; and we fly back to them the moment critical pressure is relaxed”—“Our later and more critical philosophies are mere fads and fancies compared with this natural mother-tongue of thought.”<sup>420</sup> James names as “the most important” common sense concepts

Thing;  
 The same or different;  
 Kinds;

---

<sup>417</sup> P, 81.

<sup>418</sup> SPP, 14.

<sup>419</sup> P, 83.

<sup>420</sup> P, 88.

Minds;  
Bodies;  
One Time;  
One Space;  
Subjects and attributes;  
Causal influences;  
The fancied;  
The real.<sup>421</sup>

These common sense concepts are derived directly from perceptual experience. On the level of common sense, concepts are never far removed from percepts, and this is what makes common sense generally so reliable. Philosophy in the Aristotelian tradition, James suggests, is essentially a technical elaboration of such common sense concepts: “The peripatetic philosophy, obeying rationalist propensities, has tried to eternalize the common-sense categories by treating them very technically and articulately.”<sup>422</sup> These technically articulated categories are, he observes, “magnificently useful [for] steering our discourse to profitable issues.”<sup>423</sup>

James does not think common sense infallible, nor does he find it adequate for all human purposes. While “for all utilitarian practical purposes [common sense] conceptions amply suffice,”<sup>424</sup> more precise conceptions are needed for attaining a genuine understanding of man and his environment and for enabling him to navigate ever more efficiently and advantageously across and through that environment. Common sense must be refined and supplemented by critical thought and science. Critical thought reveals the limitations of common sense conceptions, and science adds to them proven methods of verification and new means of managing experience. It is essential to remember, however, that neither

---

<sup>421</sup> P, 84-5.

<sup>422</sup> Recall Eric Voegelin’s appreciation of this point as it was expressed by Dewey in the latter’s *Human Nature and Conduct*—I quoted Voegelin’s comment on p. 5 of my introductory chapter.

<sup>423</sup> P, 90. I leave aside for now the question of whether this summary description of Aristotelian philosophy is adequate.

<sup>424</sup> P, 89.



critical philosophy nor science can ever simply *supplant* common sense—they can only *supplement* it. Common sense conceptions serve an indispensable function. Common sense “interpolates...‘things’ between our intermittent sensations,” so that we “connect all the remoter parts of experience with what lies before our eyes;”<sup>425</sup> critical philosophy demands to know what exactly these things *are*; science “*extrapolates*” [James’s emphasis] to what is “beyond the common-sense world” (to atoms, magnetic fields, and such).<sup>426</sup> Each of these is essential and even superior in its own domain: “Common sense is *better* for one sphere of life, science for another, philosophic criticism for a third.” But, James adds, “whether either be *true* absolutely, Heaven only knows.”<sup>427</sup> Common sense must be taken with a certain measure of “suspicion” because “its categories may after all be only a collection of extraordinarily successful hypotheses” (successful in the sense of relating us closely enough to nature to be extremely serviceable for “ordinary practical purposes”), but then philosophy and science must likewise be held in some suspicion, as *none* of these modes of understanding can “support a claim of absolute veracity.”<sup>428</sup>

The need for diverse modes of understanding the world and the limits of each serve as primary motivators for James’s pragmatic philosophizing. “Ought not the existence of the various types of thinking which we have reviewed, each so splendid for certain purposes, yet all conflicting still, and neither one of them able to support the claim of absolute veracity, to awaken a presumption favorable to the pragmatistic view that all our theories are *instrumental*, are mental modes of *adaptation* to reality, rather than revelations or gnostic

---

<sup>425</sup> Note that common sense as James describes it here—as “interpolation”—is precisely what Aristotle meant by *koine aesthesis*.

<sup>426</sup> P, 90.

<sup>427</sup> P, 92.

<sup>428</sup> P, 94.

answers to some divinely instituted world-enigma?”<sup>429</sup> It would seem that we need *all* these modes in their fullest development and in coordination to get a complete picture of the world. Pragmatism as a philosophic method is meant on the one hand to be a tool for refining meaning, for cutting away irrelevant considerations and bringing the essential facts and ideas into sharp relief, and on the other to do justice to *all* such facts and ideas, despite their emergence in such widely diverging encounters. Pragmatism in this latter mode

...lies in the midst of our theories, like a corridor in a hotel. Innumerable chambers open out of it. In one you may find a man writing an atheistic volume; in the next some one on his knees praying for faith and strength; in a third a chemist investigating a body’s properties. In a fourth a system of idealistic metaphysics is being excogitated; in a fifth the impossibility of metaphysics is being shown. But they all own the corridor, and all must pass through it if they want a practicable way of getting into or out of their respective rooms.<sup>430</sup>

The pragmatic method does its refining work and forges its paths between theories by constantly chipping concepts down to their concrete meaning and uncovering concrete connections among available facts. “The whole originality of pragmatism,” James reminds us, “the whole point in it, is its use of the concrete way of seeing. It begins with concreteness, and returns and ends with it.”<sup>431</sup> With its help, common sense, logic, and theory may be honed to maximal precision and their respective truths made cohesive and mutually serviceable.

The main point here, however, is that the common sense mode of understanding is, in James’s schema of philosophy, *foundational* in that it is the most intimately associated with the facts of experience. It is also *regulative* in that philosophy must constantly take it into account: there is something true *in* common sense, and thus it cannot be safely ignored or forgotten. In finding common sense to be both foundational and regulative of thought, James is perfectly in line with Scottish Common Sense philosophy. But James differs from

---

<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

<sup>430</sup> P, 32.

<sup>431</sup> MT, 115-16.

the leading philosophers of that tradition in understanding the intellectual forms or modes of thinking that compose common sense to be ancient habits rather than products of eternal structures implanted in the mind by the Creator. James rejects the faculty psychology of classic and Scottish Common Sense philosophy as unsubstantiated by the facts and finds the idea of common sense as a slowly evolving stage of philosophizing more plausible, given what we now know about human psychology.<sup>432</sup> We noticed above James's description of common sense concepts as having preserved themselves through known human experience. This view of them reflects James's Darwinian assumptions about human development. As Thomas Carlson observes, "In James's time...Darwin's theory of evolution through spontaneous variation and natural selection offered...a general model of the means by which knowledge itself is constructed. James's friend and mentor, Chauncy Wright, argued, 'our knowledges and rational beliefs result, *truly and literally*, from the survival of the fittest among our original and spontaneous beliefs.'"<sup>433</sup> Wright's statement captures nicely James's understanding of the status of common sense notions. These notions are not innate but inherited; they originated in response to the facts of human experience and developed over time; they survived to form a stable foundation for knowledge because experience has not discredited them; they are true enough to the facts of experience to be reliable for most purposes, even in most cases to be taken for granted. In short, they are generally fit to ground our thought and discourse because they generally fit the facts of our individual and collective experience. Common sense is not necessarily in its final shape, however, because fitter conceptions may come along with sufficient persuasive power to replace older

---

<sup>432</sup> James' own *Principles of Psychology* was, of course, pivotal in forging our contemporary understanding. Although the common sense stage of philosophizing is ever evolving, James seems to think it must of necessity always be in place in some form. James appears not to have given sufficient thought to the apparent constants of structure and movement in nature and the significance of these for human understanding.

<sup>433</sup> Wright, *Philosophical Discussions*, ed. C. E. Norton (New York: Henry Holt, 1877), 116n; quoted in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 368.

concepts and form new givens for the human community. Still, such fundamental conceptual change should not be intolerably jarring and disruptive because it merely reflects a better understanding of what were already known to be fundamental facts of human experience. The foundation of common sense in its glacial transformation is thus quite sufficiently firm and stable to support all ordinary human activity.

### **COMMON SENSE AND RADICAL EMPIRICISM**

How central is common sense to James's overall philosophy? I want to suggest that James's radical empiricism is in fact a sort of refined version of common sense. If I am right in this, common sense is quite central indeed to his larger philosophic project. My reasons for classifying radical empiricism as common sense refined are several. First, radical empiricism wishes to emulate common sense in maintaining unbroken contact with the facts of experience. Common sense "interpolates... 'things' between our intermittent sensations," allowing us to "connect all the remoter parts of experience with what lies before our eyes."<sup>434</sup> Radical empiricism as James describes it "must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced."<sup>435</sup> Like common sense, radical empiricism keeps one eye, so to speak, always on experience, on realities as they directly confront us. As a way of philosophizing, radical empiricism insists on making hard reality the test of truth. If certain facts cannot be made sense of, theory must be made to yield to these facts; facts must never be ignored for the sake of theoretic unity or elegance. Common sense predisposes to such an approach. It "contents itself with the unreconciled contradiction, laughs when it can, and weeps when it must, and makes, in short, a practical compromise, without trying a theoretic solution. This

---

<sup>434</sup> P, 90.

<sup>435</sup> ERE, 22-3.

attitude is of course respectable.”<sup>436</sup> James is not, like some latter-day pragmatists, “against theory”<sup>437</sup>—at least half the point of radical empiricism is to provide a more adequate theoretical understanding of the world<sup>438</sup>—but he *does* insist that theory be held accountable to fact. Common sense thinking is not strictly speaking theoretical, and in this it differs from radical empiricism; common sense simply takes reality as it finds it, while radical empiricism tries to uncover the deeper sources and tendencies of things. But common sense constitutes the starting point of radically empirical theorizing. If common sense is differentiating primary experience, radical empiricism merely takes this more compact level of thinking to a higher degree of differentiation. Radical empiricism is just common sense made perspicuous.

In his *Essays on Radical Empiricism* James points to several fundamental judgments shared by common sense and radical empiricism. Most significantly: both view the world pluralistically; both espouse a robust variety of realism, taking the objects in the world to have an existence independent of our thoughts about them, but taking our thoughts also to have genuine ontic status; and both assert the objective reality of relations. Take first their pluralistic outlook. James throughout his writings contrasts pluralism with monism, or Absolutism—the idea, given its classic philosophical expression by Hegel and championed in James’s day by F.H. Bradley and Josiah Royce, that the universe is absolutely one in substance and finds its unity in that all its parts are manifestations of one absolute mind. The pluralist rejects the monistic thesis as wildly speculative; the thesis *could* be true, but

---

<sup>436</sup> CER, 17.

<sup>437</sup> See Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, “Against Theory,” in *Pragmatism: A Reader*, ed. Louis Menand (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 364–80.

<sup>438</sup> I do not say the *whole* point of it, as James insists that theoretic satisfactoriness is only one of several concrete concerns that any complete philosophy should take into account. Any complete philosophy must account for satisfaction of our active and passional needs as well. See James’ “The Sentiment of Rationality,” in WB, 57–89.

nothing in common experience supports it.<sup>439</sup> Ordinary experience gives us “the common-sense world, in which we find things partly joined and partly disjoined.”<sup>440</sup> Radical empiricism takes the world as common sense does, as “a collection, some parts of which are conjunctively and others disjunctively related,” with disjoined parts hanging together “by intermediaries,” so that “the whole world eventually may hang together similarly, inasmuch as *some* path of conjunctive transition by which to pass from one of its parts to another may always be discernable.” The world on this view is thus a “*concatenated union*” rather than “the ‘through-and-through’ type of union...which monistic systems hold to obtain when things are taken in their absolute reality.”<sup>441</sup>

Common sense and radical empiricism likewise both conform to the basic thrust of traditional realism. Much confusion has surrounded the question of whether James was in fact a realist or was really something else. Ralph Barton Perry took James to be a straightforward realist, while others have read him as a subjectivist of some kind. Of these two interpretations, Perry’s is more correct, but his analysis needs refining. James clearly was a realist in the traditional sense of understanding things in the world to exist independently of what we may think about them and assuming that many things *may* exist of which we have no knowledge at all. This basic supposition of classic realism is the common-sense view, and it is James’s view. “Practically,” James says in the *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, “our minds meet in a world of objects which they share in common, which would still be there, if one or

---

<sup>439</sup> James admits in “On Some Hegelisms” (WB, 196-221) that mystical experiences seem to have left some with a sense that the universe is deeply monistic in just the way the philosophers of the Absolute suggest, and James famously takes the verdicts of mysticism seriously, but he also notes that absolute unity of being is not a unanimous suggestion of mystical experiences—whatever other points they may have in common—and that mystically inspired judgments cannot be authoritative for those not similarly inspired, for the simple reason that the uninspired have no point of reference by which to judge the validity and meaning of a mystic’s account. It *is* possible, James thinks, to determine to some extent the truth-value of a mystic’s claims by the fruits of his life and the consequences of his ideas, but the ontological unity or plurality of the universe is not the kind of claim that is likely to be verified in this way.

<sup>440</sup> P, 80.

<sup>441</sup> ERE, 52.

several of the minds were destroyed. I can see no formal objection to this supposition's being literally true."<sup>442</sup> Even more emphatically, James says of himself, Dewey, and F.C.S. Schiller in the Preface to *The Meaning of Truth*, "As I myself understand these authors, we all three absolutely agree in admitting the transcendency of the object (provided it be an experienceable object) to the subject, in the truth-relation."<sup>443</sup> He says "provided it be an experienceable object" because pragmatists *do* insist that any object, to be taken as real, must be experienceable, whether it has been already experienced or not.<sup>444</sup> Indeed, James in *Essays in Radical Empiricism* gives the following as the basic postulate of radical empiricism: "Everything real must be experienceable somewhere, and every kind of thing experienced must somewhere be real."<sup>445</sup> Some critics, he asserts, have made an unwarrantable leap from the pragmatists' typical refusal to discuss "altogether trans-experiential" objects to the assumption that pragmatists deny the independent existence of *any* things beyond our minds. This assumption is so far wrong that James is clearly annoyed at having to respond to it: "It seems incredible," he says, "that educated and apparently sincere critics should so fail to catch their adversary's point of view."<sup>446</sup>

The reason I say that Perry's interpretation of James as a straightforward realist needs refining is that it fails to recognize how much more subtle and precise and ultimately how much truer to reality as we know it is James's brand of realism than the older sort. Charlene Haddock Seigfried has aptly described James's version as a "reconstructed

---

<sup>442</sup> ERE, 39.

<sup>443</sup> MT, 9.

<sup>444</sup> James says explicitly in ERE, 125, that his radical empiricism does not "preclude the possibility of" either "something not experienced" or "action of experience upon a noumenon," but adds that he thinks it "wise not to *consider* any thing or action of that nature, and to restrict our universe of philosophic discourse to what is experienced or, at least, experienceable."

<sup>445</sup> ERE, 81.

<sup>446</sup> See James's full discussion of the independence or "transcendancy" of objects in MT, 8-10.

realism.”<sup>447</sup> It is reconstructed in that it includes subjective elements in its accounting of the real. As we noticed before, all knowledge according to James’s analysis is necessarily *both* objective *and* subjective. “Knowing” implies a real knower as well as a real something known. It also implies that the knower makes contact in some way with the known, either directly or through intermediaries. The knower, the known, the concrete tracks of mental and physical material connecting them, and the act of knowing itself (the traversing of those tracks) all are fully real, and each must receive its due weight in any adequate account of the real. This Jamesian “thick” realism seems in the final analysis *more* thoroughly realistic than the usual kind, not less.<sup>448</sup>

So far, again, radical empiricism turns out to be only a more differentiated form of common sense. This holds true once more in the matter of relations. While “both rationalism and the usual empiricism claim that [relations] are exclusively the ‘work of the mind’—the finite mind or the absolute mind, as the case may be,” “common sense and...radical empiricism stand for their being objective.”<sup>449</sup> What James means by “objective” relations is just what I mentioned in the preceding paragraph: concrete paths of some kind connecting knower and known. Common sense takes relations among things to be real and not tricks of the mind. The man of ordinary common sense would be surprised indeed to hear Kant insisting that space and time are only “pure forms of intuition” and not real-world relations. Radical empiricism, with its appreciation for the objective dimension of all experience, similarly rejects such brainy speculating in favor of the hard evidence of experience. For a radically empirical philosophy, “the relations that connect experiences

---

<sup>447</sup> See Seigfried, *William James’s Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 370-2.

<sup>448</sup> See James’s presentation of the notion of “thick” reality and his corresponding call for philosophic discussion of the world to be “thickened up” in PU, 64 and 149 respectively. See also Vincent Colapietro’s fine paper “Realism Thick and Thin,” in *Pragmatic Naturalism and Realism*, ed. John R. Shook (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2003), 107-123.

<sup>449</sup> ERE, 74.



must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relations experienced must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system.”<sup>450</sup> As it happens, experience is loaded with hard evidence of objective relations. We experience both our thoughts and the larger reality enveloping us as a continuous stream, and within this flow we feel our thoughts in relation to other thoughts and ourselves in relation to things around us. Relations are directly felt; we know them immediately, by acquaintance. “We ought to,” but from inattention usually do not, “say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*.”<sup>451</sup> Radical empiricism takes these subtle feelings at face value, as manifestations of real conjunctive and disjunctive relations within experience. James describes the basic categories of felt relations in “A World of Pure Experience”:

Relations are of different degrees of intimacy. Merely to be 'with' one another in a universe of discourse is the most external relation that terms can have, and seems to involve nothing whatever as to farther consequences. Simultaneity and time-interval come next, and then space-adjacency and distance. After them, similarity and difference, carrying the possibility of many inferences. Then relations of activity, tying terms into series involving change, tendency, resistance, and the causal order generally. Finally, the relation experienced between terms that form states of mind, and are immediately conscious of continuing each other. The organization of the Self as a system of memories, purposes, strivings, fulfillments or disappointments, is incidental to this most intimate of all relations, the terms of which seem in many cases actually to compenetrate and suffuse each other's being.<sup>452</sup>

James derived these categories of relations from his own painstaking examinations of consciousness and of the experience of being-in-the-world, the results of which are presented most prominently in *The Principles of Psychology*. The common-sense view that relations are real, then, is fully confirmed by careful empirical investigation.

Radical empiricism does part ways with common sense on one important point. Common sense is inveterately dualistic, positing an entity called the “soul” or “mind” as the

---

<sup>450</sup> ERE, 23.

<sup>451</sup> PP, 238.

<sup>452</sup> ERE, 23.

domain of mental phenomena, an entity altogether different in basic substance from material reality. Radical empiricism rejects a hard-and-fast dualism as unwarranted by the facts of experience and superfluous on an explanatory level. James concedes that believing in soul or consciousness as an entity is consistent with the facts, and suggests that one can believe in such with a good scientific or philosophical conscience.<sup>453</sup> The point for him, however, is that mental facts do not require a substantial soul back of them to be explained, that they can be explained perfectly well in terms of relations within experience. “The central point of the pure-experience theory,” James says, “is that ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ are names for two groups into which we sort experiences according to the way in which they act upon their neighbors.”<sup>454</sup> Before a retrospective sorting into categories, there is no ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ of experience but simply a *that*. At the level of pure experience—the level of reality—thoughts and things are substantively “absolutely homogenous,”<sup>455</sup> or at least, a homogeneity of substance is what experience itself, independently of our retrospective thinking about it, suggests. A truly radical empiricism, therefore, cannot take either spiritual or material substance as a fundamentum; it must be content with substantively ambiguous, mysterious pure experience for its concrete basis. From a philosophical viewpoint, taking as true the idea of consciousness as an entity would violate the pragmatic principle because consciousness is not concretely known as an entity—there are no effects manifesting a conscious entity *per se*—but only as a “function in experience,” the particular function of knowing. Looking to pure experience as the concrete phenomenon to be understood, “knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter. The relation itself is a part of pure experience;

---

<sup>453</sup> See PP, 181-2, 332.

<sup>454</sup> ERE, 70.

<sup>455</sup> ERE, 69.

one of its ‘terms’ becomes the subject or bearer of the knowledge, the knower, the other becomes the object known.”<sup>456</sup>

The difference between common sense and radical empiricism on the question of substance should not, however, be overstated. Again, commonsense dualism, while not a necessary conclusion, is fully compatible with the facts of experience, and common sense and radical empiricism are in full agreement about what these facts are. Common-sense dualizing, if indeed invalid, may be attributed to the human tendency to conceptualize prematurely, before the facts are adequately weighed, and to adopt as true any hypothesis close enough to the facts to work for ordinary practical purposes. Indeed, James pragmatically accepts such hypotheses as the two-substance theory as true *insofar* (but not farther than) they do so work; within the borders of previous experience<sup>457</sup>—before more meticulous examinations of the facts of consciousness were made—that particular interpretation of the facts of experience was true in the sense of being a closer fit to the facts than any other available. Should James’s hypothesis that consciousness does not exist as an entity be borne out fully by future experience, that understanding itself would become part of common-sense thinking.

Moreover, James, in rejecting dualism, is hardly rejecting spiritual reality. He says at the end of “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” “I greatly grieve that to many [his conclusion that consciousness does not exist as an entity] will sound materialistic,”<sup>458</sup> and, as anyone who has read James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* and his other essays and letters on the subject of spirituality will attest, this profession of grief is no mere rhetorical flourish, a polite way of respecting the religious sensibilities of his American readers, but expresses a genuine concern

---

<sup>456</sup> ERE, 4-5.

<sup>457</sup> P, 107.

<sup>458</sup> ERE, 19.

of being misunderstood. No one at the turn of the twentieth century was doing more than James to make religious belief scientifically respectable, and James clearly thought that a great many events are appropriately characterized as spiritual, in the sense of not being reducible to mere physical processes. Whether Socrates' assertion in Plato's *Apology* that belief in "spiritual things" logically necessitates a belief in spirits<sup>459</sup> is valid, and whether this verdict is enough to render James's position untenable, I leave aside for the moment. Suffice it to say for now that James's rejection of dualism is fully consistent with his pragmatic, radically empirical approach in that it leaves what "spiritual" may mean, beyond a certain peculiar quality of activity, as empirically—according to the current state of human experience, at least—an impossible question to answer.<sup>460</sup>

I think I have established now that radical empiricism is fully compatible with common sense and is itself in key respects a variety of common-sense thinking.

### **COMMON SENSE, PSYCHOLOGY, AND HUMAN NATURE**

James took the common-sense perspective as his default position in his analysis of human psychology. When in *The Principles of Psychology* he discussed the possibility that no spiritual core of consciousness exists, he presented his thoughts on the matter as "a parenthetical digression" and said that "from now to the end of the volume [he would] revert to the path of common-sense again," the path which he had traveled from the book's beginning.<sup>461</sup> But this should come as no surprise: as James clearly indicated in *Pragmatism*,

---

<sup>459</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 27b-d.

<sup>460</sup> The interesting question from James' pragmatic point of view, and perhaps indeed from any point of view, is whether any important practical consequences follow from believing or not believing in the soul. If there are, then James would concede the question of the soul's existence is an important one. He finds abundant evidence of a spiritual dimension of human experience—in fact, seems to understand "experience" as inherently spiritual in some sense—but cannot find that this fact necessitates belief in souls or that any matter of significance—philosophical, scientific, or even religious—hinges on such belief. Nonetheless, many serious philosophers have taken the existence of the soul to be both logically and practically necessary, and so I make a careful examination of the question in my review of James' account of the self, below.

<sup>461</sup> PP, 291.

common sense is the level of truth in general most directly in contact with concrete experience, and common-sense perceptions are our first perceptions of reality. Our first perceptions can be wrong<sup>462</sup> and thus may need correcting—as he admitted they might in the case just mentioned—but they are by definition and by necessity our point of departure in any initial examination of reality.

What *is* the common-sense perspective of psychology? It is, as we might say, the natural perspective—natural in the sense of being unreflective, or more precisely, *pre*-reflective—unforced, spontaneously adopted—in short, taking appearances at face-value. Its advantage over traditional philosophical or scientific perspectives on psychology is that it deals primarily in percepts, and treats concepts as secondary and derivative. It doesn't seek a conceptual framework but merely asks, who goes there? It starts from what is immediately given rather than trying to read the given through one or another theoretical lens. Common sense does not object to conceptualization and conceptual framing *per se*—as witness the previous discussion of common-sense “concepts”—but it resists any conceptual constructions that fail to acknowledge what is directly sensed.

As James saw it, modern philosophers of psychology had not answered this demand satisfactorily. Rationalist psychology, as represented most notably by Hegel, was hopelessly abstract, far removed from the actual workings of the mind. Empiricists such as Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and J.S. Mill were more concrete, but still tended to approach psychological phenomena and human experience generally in an unnatural way. Peter H. Hare explains:

As James saw it, the basic problem with traditional empiricism was that, in its own way, it departed from common sense almost as much as did rationalism... Such common-sense realities as the self, material objects, causation, and freedom of the will turned out, in the empiricist analysis, to be fictions. Although he never felt any inclination to abandon empiricism, whose reliance on fact he applauded, he sought some way to revise empiricism

---

<sup>462</sup> Although our sensations, strictly speaking, cannot—more on James' analysis of sensation and perception shortly.

to bring it into accord with common-sense beliefs... The key idea in his new or 'radical' empiricism was that empiricists had been using an artificial and impoverished notion of experience. If we recognize, James argued, that experience is much richer than empiricists have supposed hitherto and includes such common-sense realities as relatedness, tendency, and continuous transition, we will be able, as empiricists, to vindicate common-sense beliefs and will not in desperation seek the realities needed for practical activity in worlds transcending experience. The notion of experience as a continuous flux is, in short, the key to James' empiricist defense of a common-sense realism.<sup>463</sup>

I am not as sure as Hare seems to be that James directly intended "to vindicate common-sense beliefs," but it is clear that James found the going alternatives to the common-sense view inadequate.

James's key psychological insight was that "we really gain a more living understanding of the mind by keeping our attention as long as possible upon our entire conscious states as they are concretely given to us, than by the *post-mortem* study of their comminuted 'elements.' This last is the study of artificial abstractions, not of natural things."<sup>464</sup> Ironically, traditional empiricism, while staying closer to the facts, trafficked in abstractions almost as much as rationalism in its psychological accounts. "Most [psychology] books"—including books of a supposedly empirical variety—"start with sensations, as the simplest mental facts, and proceed synthetically, constructing each higher stage from those below it. But this is abandoning the empirical method of investigation."<sup>465</sup> Taking, as James suggests, "our entire conscious states as they are concretely given to us," we discover five essential characteristics of consciousness: "1) Every thought [mental state] tends to be part of a personal consciousness. 2) Within each personal consciousness thought is always changing. 3) Within each personal consciousness thought is sensibly continuous. 4) It always appears to deal with objects independent of itself. 5) It is interested in some parts of

---

<sup>463</sup> Peter H. Hare, introduction to SPP, xxiv.

<sup>464</sup> PBC, 4.

<sup>465</sup> PP, 219.

these objects to the exclusion of others, and welcomes or rejects—*chooses* from among them, in a word—all the while.”<sup>466</sup>

Each of these findings, as Hare suggested in the passage just quoted, confirms common-sense assumptions. Common sense accepts the personal dimension of consciousness as a matter of course. It does not try to escape the personal to attain some Archimedian viewpoint, but rather accepts the personal, perspectival element of knowledge as an inherent limitation of being human.<sup>467</sup> Common sense also takes constant change, continuity of experience, objectivity, and interestedness for granted. Common sense is a mode of feeling, and our lives feel like they are constantly changing, despite the corresponding feeling that we who undergo the changes are somehow, in some sense, the same. The passing objects which we engage and events in which we participate (mentally if not physically) constitute a palpable flow of experience, a flow in which we seem fully immersed: we know it *from within*. The sense of continuity derives from the continuity of thought, of consciousness. Consciousness in general, in James’ famous metaphor, is a “stream.” If we take our conscious experience as we have it, we do not find discrete thoughts of this or that object, but always of objects embedded in a seamless web of connecting relations. “The *Object* of your thought,” James says, “is really its entire content or deliverance, neither more nor less... The object of every thought...is neither more nor less than all that the thought thinks, exactly as the thought thinks it, however complicated the matter and however symbolic the manner of thinking may be.”<sup>468</sup> The object of thought should not be confused with the thought of an object. The objective deliverance of a

---

<sup>466</sup> PP, 220.

<sup>467</sup> It should be obvious by now that, for James, perspectivity is not incompatible with objectivity; the same is true for common sense, which embraces both.

<sup>468</sup> PP, 265-6.

thought contains a multitude within “one undivided state of consciousness.”<sup>469</sup> But within that wider state, we are almost always interested in and attentive to some particular features to the exclusion of others: “The mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities. Consciousness consists in the comparison of these with each other, the selection of some, and the suppression of the rest by the reinforcing and inhibiting agency of attention.”<sup>470</sup> Attention is drawn by *interest*, the excitement created by those possibilities of experience within the field of consciousness appealing most directly to the dominant active tendencies of the self. Attention leads to perception, to the apprehension of “things” within the sensual stream, and, as James indicated in *Pragmatism*, the perception of “things” is the primary function of common sense on the level of personal judgment.

It is significant that common sense does not see any incompatibility between perspectivity and objectivity. And why should it? Why indeed have philosophers so often opposed perspective to objective truth? If one is looking at reality, perspective terminates in the real and so is true to that extent. What really should be contrasted by those concerned about narrowness of perspective is not perspectivity and objectivity, but reliance on few perspectives and reliance on the wider view achieved through the imaginative synthesis of many perspectives. The common-sense outlook has the virtue of being both narrow and broad, of allowing simultaneously acuity and breadth of vision. Common sense is by definition that which enables us to connect the matter immediately before us with matters remote. It is objective in two respects: in knowing real objects as they present themselves to consciousness—and here we see that perspective in the narrow sense *is* objective—and in recognizing a larger reality not presently experienced that is the context of such knowing acts—thus assuming “perspective” in the popular sense of “putting things in perspective.”

---

<sup>469</sup> PP, 266.

<sup>470</sup> PP, 277.



These two sorts of objectivity are what make common sense a form of “realism.” Common-sense realism is precisely the position that perspectivity and objectivity are fused and inseparable.

It begins to dawn that common sense on the level of personal judgment is a kind of knowing.<sup>471</sup> James has in fact treated consciousness in general as a phenomenon of knowing, and common sense as a particular kind of knowing within the knowing stream. The stream of consciousness is, to speak more precisely, a *sciousness*, and *consciousness* a secondary event within that primal, knowing stream.<sup>472</sup> The whole stream of thought is knowing, but not yet knowing *with* until some manner of reflection takes place. Common sense’s interpolation of “things” within the stream is just such a mode of knowing-with, a proto-reflective act in that it apprehends each organized group of sensations as an entity of a particular class.<sup>473</sup> The function of common sense judgment is to classify particular, experienced objects.

The larger stream of thought is, as James presents it in the *Principles*, a stream of sensation. “Sensation,” in James’ classificatory scheme, is a mental rather than a physical phenomenon. Sensation is conscious feeling, including not only pleasures and pains but every subtlest “sense of things” we have. It is that “sciousness” of which James spoke, a kind of pure knowing. It is, in a word, “knowledge by acquaintance,” our direct awareness of what passes in the flow of experience. Of course, when we ordinarily talk of “sensation,” we do not mean our entire sensual experience but some particular feeling of some particular thing. In this sense sensation is “a function in our thought whereby we first become aware

---

<sup>471</sup> It will become evident shortly that common sense as the sense of a community is also a kind of knowing.

<sup>472</sup> PP, 290.

<sup>473</sup> Common sense judgments are said to be “unreflective” because they are not the product of reasoning and are frequently automatic, but they involve something more than simple awareness; they add to awareness a kind of synthetic judgment. My meaning here should be made plain in what follows.

of the bare immediate natures by which our several objects are distributed.”<sup>474</sup> Perception, by contrast, is a kind of “knowledge about,” which involves sensation but also interpretation.<sup>475</sup> As James explains, “Perception...differs from sensation by the consciousness of farther facts associated with the object of the sensation [—this associating of farther facts is what James in *Pragmatism* called “interpolation”]... Sensational and reproductive brain-processes combined...are what give us the content of our perceptions... Perception may then be defined, in [psychologist] Mr. Sully’s words, as that process by which the mind ‘supplements a sense-perception by an accompaniment or escort of revived sensations, the whole aggregate of actual and revived sensations being solidified or ‘integrated’ into the form of a percept, that is, an apparently immediate apprehension or cognition of an object now present in a particular locality or region of space.”<sup>476</sup> If you were shown an object which you had not only never seen, but had “never seen anything like it” and did not know where to place it categorically, you would be experiencing an essentially pure sensation, you would see but not perceive. For the most part, however, after infancy, “a pure sensation is [for us] an abstraction.”<sup>477</sup> After a few years of life, certainly by adulthood, we experience virtually everything perceptually. “Why, there’s a dog, a car, a house,” we say, taking in everything we see as things of a kind rather than as raw sensibles.

The “thing” perceived James calls a “percept.” A percept is something other than a “concept.” The class into which a perceived object is put is signified by a *concept*, but the immediate, particular perceived object itself is a *percept*. There is the concept of “cat,” and then there is the perceived cat sitting here in front of me. The distinction between concept

---

<sup>474</sup> PP, 653.

<sup>475</sup> James speaks of these “two kinds of knowledge...knowledge of acquaintance and knowledge-about,” in PP, 216.

<sup>476</sup> PP, 725.

<sup>477</sup> PP, 653.

and percept is important to James because it highlights, by reminding us of the role of percepts in our thinking, a too neglected part of philosophy. Most philosophers are conceptualists extraordinaire, and run wild among concepts, leaving percepts far behind, and sometimes treating them with sneering contempt. James' critique of those he calls "rationalist" philosophers is that they fail to stay in working contact with percepts—and more broadly, with concrete experience—and therefore run the risk of losing touch with reality. Philosophers need to be grounded in common sense to "keep them honest," to prevent their engaging in wishful thinking and ultimately presenting as "philosophy" nothing more than personal flights of fancy.

"Conception," James tells us, is "the function by which we...identify a numerically distinct and permanent subject of discourse," and "concepts" are "the thoughts which are its vehicles." This function of conception derives from our "sense of sameness," the sense that some experienced objects are of the same kind as others known before. The distinction James made before between the two kinds of knowledge, the knowledge by acquaintance and the knowledge-about, is possible because of "a fundamental psychical peculiarity which may be entitled '*the principle of constancy in the mind's meaning*,' and which may be expressed:... 'the mind can always intend, and know when it intends, to think of the Same.'" "This *sense of sameness*," James avers, "is the very keel and backbone of our thinking."<sup>478</sup> As such, it is also the basis for common sense. Common sense recognizes that *this object before me now* is of the same kind as objects previously experienced. Common sense interpolation and conception come from the same root—this sense of sameness—and remain close to that root; together they provide the foundation for all advanced thinking.

---

<sup>478</sup> PP, 434.

But unfortunately philosophers have tended to privilege concepts and degrade percepts, and have thereby violated and undermined common sense. They have tended to treat meaning as a purely conceptual matter rather than a matter of living experience. James refuses to make that mistake. “The sense of our meaning is an entirely peculiar element of [our] thought. It is one of those evanescent and ‘transitive’ facts of mind which introspection cannot turn round upon, and isolate and hold up for examination, as an entomologist passes round an insect on a pin... It pertains to the ‘fringe’ of the subjective state, and is a ‘feeling of tendency’... This [consciousness of meaning] is an absolutely positive sort of feeling, transforming what would otherwise be mere noise or vision into something understood, and determining the sequel of my thinking, the later words and images, in a perfectly definite way.”<sup>479</sup> One guesses that this view of meaning is not “perfectly definite” enough for the inveterate rationalizer, who will take this “feeling of tendency” as too insubstantial to count as something that really matters. But James stands with common sense and against the rationalists in refusing to discount the vague and dimly felt, refusing to treat “mystery” as a synonym for “unreal.” In the famous chapter on the stream of consciousness, James says he wants to see “the reinstatement of the vague and inarticulate to its proper place in our mental life.”<sup>480</sup> He wants this because the “vague and inarticulate” in our experience is empirically fully as real as what is sharply made out and easily defined, and because that hazy domain is where the meaning of life is found. It may be the case, and James in fact believes it is the case, that the most important realities are the hardest to grasp and put in words.

But the rationalist will say, “What about truth? If we have a concern for truth, we will resist the Jamesian urge to engage in wishful thinking, to hope against hope—and more

---

<sup>479</sup> PP, 446.

<sup>480</sup> PBC, 164.

to the point, against hard evidence—that somewhere in that mysterious fog of tendencies and possibilities is something exceptionally valuable, but too deep for us to grasp.” But this objection rests on both a misconstruing of the evidence and, James would say, a thin and hollow notion of truth. James’ argument on behalf of the vaguely felt is predicated on empirically verifiable fact: this radiating field of tendency is as real as anything else we sense, or we cannot trust our sensations at all. The sense of meaning this tendency gives is a sense of being intimately connected to a larger whole which is the ground of our experiences—the ground of their possibility, the necessary condition of their actualization—a larger whole to which, moreover, we make a contribution by our activity, and which seems to have a direction of its own. This sense of participating in a larger whole that grounds our possibilities is empirically indisputable, and it would seem equally certain that only in understanding the whole can we find the larger meaning of our lives, and thereby the real significance of the regularities and tensions we discover in living them. But the human situation is not to be grasped by means of concepts. Concepts, as James says, are only instruments for navigating our way across the surface of the vast existential continuum, giving us fixed points by which to steer our course. The greater meaning can only be understood by a vision of the continuum itself, a vision not merely of its surface, but of its full voluminous depth and breadth.<sup>481</sup> Despite the benefits of conceptual mapping, “the map remains superficial through abstractness, and false through the discreteness of its terms... Conceptual knowledge is forever inadequate to the fulness of the reality to be known.”<sup>482</sup> It is inadequate because “the relations of concepts are of static comparison only,

---

<sup>481</sup> On how to acquire such a vision, see James’ appreciative account of Bergson’s philosophic method in PU, 116-17. The idea is to place yourself at the center of the movement of the perceptual flux where it touches that part of reality you wish to understand, and to allow yourself to feel all the relations and connections that unfold there.

<sup>482</sup> SPP, 45.

it is impossible to substitute them for the dynamic relations with which the perceptual flux is filled.”<sup>483</sup> Concepts may “bring new values into our perceptual life, [may] reanimate our wills, and make our action turn upon new points of emphasis,”<sup>484</sup> but their worth is derivative and instrumental. The felt continuity of the stream of thought, and between that stream and the wider world, is the base of meaning, and infinitely more truth is made out through immersion in the perceptual flux than by the most refined conceptual system.

Implicit in this account is that we know outer realities, objects in the world, directly, as directly as we know our own thoughts. We know them so by sensation and perception. We do *not* know the world (nor indeed our minds) directly *by conception*. Conception, like perception, is a kind of knowledge-about, but unlike perception, does not always have direct contact with the facts of experience.<sup>485</sup> But concepts need to have such contact at some point to show their truth-value.

Conceptual systems which neither began nor left off in sensations would be like bridges without piers. Systems about fact must plunge themselves into sensation as bridges plunge their piers into the rock. Sensations are the stable rock, the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem* of thought. To find such termini is our aim with all our theories—to conceive first when and where a certain sensation may be had, and then to have it. Finding it stops discussion. Failure to find it kills the false conceit of knowledge. Only when you deduce a possible sensation for me from your theory, and give it to me when and where the theory requires, do I begin to be sure that your thought has anything to do with truth.<sup>486</sup>

A primary intent of James’ Pragmatism is to bring conceptual schemes and theories down to *common sensibles*, down to relevant percepts and ultimately to the applicable bits of sensual experience underlying them. “Sensible realities,” says James, “are...either our realities or the tests of our realities. Conceived objects must show sensible effects or else be disbelieved...

---

<sup>483</sup> SPP, 46.

<sup>484</sup> SPP, 43.

<sup>485</sup> Concepts always have contact with concrete experience *in thought*—that is, we cannot think of a concept without its being present in the stream of thought, or brought into the stream of thought when our feeling of tendency has suggested its present usefulness. We might better say, for greater precision, that concepts we employ do not always have direct contact with the *mainstream* of experience, the stream of sensation.

<sup>486</sup> PP, 658.

A conception, to prevail, must terminate in the world of orderly sensible experience.”<sup>487</sup> I say “*common* sensibles” both because common sense interpolation is involved in tracing out the perceptual basis for any theory, and because philosophy and science must proceed on the basis of publicly accessible observations (accessible at least to philosophers and scientists)—on what may be commonly sensed.

It is critically important to remember that James’ “sensation” includes the knowledge by acquaintance of anything whatever, including what may be classed as spiritual phenomena and religious experiences. The reader should bear in mind that sensation itself, as James understands it, is a kind of spiritual phenomenon. James in one place calls the sensual stream a “spiritual stream,”<sup>488</sup> as I note again below reviewing James’ account of the self. For James, sensual knowledge is neither a purely physical process (though it does require certain physical preconditions) nor is it ipso facto knowledge *of* physical objects. This is significant with regard to what I just said about common sensibles: what is commonly sensed may be something intangible, like a moral fact or an attitude, and such intangibles may themselves be interpolated. Common sensibles of this latter kind are especially important for the development of ethical and political order. But more on this anon.

Common sensibles, persistently felt, breed conviction, belief. Belief itself is a kind of “sense of reality,” which “in its inner nature...is a sort of feeling more allied to the emotions than to anything else.”<sup>489</sup> Actually, we human beings are so constructed as to believe all perceptions uncontradicted by others. “The true opposites of belief, psychologically considered, are doubt and inquiry, not disbelief.”<sup>490</sup> We sometimes receive mixed messages, and we start to wonder what’s really going on. But when we get the sense of the same again

---

<sup>487</sup> PP, 930, 929.

<sup>488</sup> PP, 322.

<sup>489</sup> PP, 913-14.

<sup>490</sup> PP, 914.

and again, conviction deepens that we are dealing with reality. Conceptual systems that account for all our common sensibles are the ones that lay greatest claim to the truth. “The conceived system, to pass for true, must at least include the reality of the sensible objects in it, by explaining them as effects on us, if nothing more. The system which includes the most of them, and definitely explains or pretends to explain the most of them, will, *ceteris paribus*, prevail.”<sup>491</sup>

Among the most interesting common sensibles, humanly speaking, are those pertaining to human inclinations, and James stresses how absolutely essential it is that we take them seriously: “That theory [of reality] will be most generally believed which, besides offering us objects able to account satisfactorily for our sensible experience, also offers those which are most interesting, those which appeal most urgently to our aesthetic, emotional, and active needs.” Our tendency to believe that the universe and human powers correspond seems natural, innate. “Certain postulates [of this kind] are given in our nature; and whatever satisfies those postulates is treated as if real.”<sup>492</sup> That we tend to treat these postulates as if real is a fact, and although this tendency to believe the universe congenial to our powers is not proof of the possibility, it may count as evidence.

Related to our sense of human inclinations and capacities, and supremely important for human flourishing, is our sense of right and wrong. In the preface to his *Psychology: Briefer Course*, James expressed his “regret” that he had not been able in the *Principles* or in this shorter “scissors and paste” textbook version of his psychology to provide a chapter on “the moral sense.”<sup>493</sup> Apparently he had thought that, while desirable, such a chapter did not *have* to be included because he understood moral awareness to be just a specific sort of

---

<sup>491</sup> PP, 939.

<sup>492</sup> PP, 945.

<sup>493</sup> Preface, *Psychology: Briefer Course*, 3; in *William James, Writings 1878-1899*.



sensation—a sense of “directly felt fitnesses between things,”<sup>494</sup> or the contrary feeling of unfitness—and so the same principles that applied in general to sensation could be safely assumed to apply in particular to moral sense: one could know moral phenomena by acquaintance (sensation), classifiable moral facts by organized sensation (perception), moral categories by abstraction and generalization (which combined result in conception), and so on. It may also be that he thought the workings of the moral sense to have been adequately described by the Scottish Common Sense philosophers. Although he faulted them for a tendency to dogmatism, James agreed with “the intuitionist school” (against the “sensationalists”) that human ideals are “not all explicable as signifying corporeal pleasures to be gained, and pains to be escaped,”<sup>495</sup> and said that “the intuitional moralists deserve credit for keeping most clearly to the psychological facts.”<sup>496</sup> Whatever the reason for the lacuna, it is beyond doubt that James assumed “the moral sense” to be of the highest importance for human life. In the *Principles* he placed “moral sensibility and conscience” at the core of human identity, locating them in man’s “innermost self.”<sup>497</sup> In addition to allowing us to sense the fitness or unfitness of relations among men or among priorities within a man, the moral sense as James conceived it supplied a “sense of an ideal spectator” who judges our values and intentions. This is a feature of natural human sociability. We seem naturally to seek the good opinion of others, especially of those we perceive to be the best of persons. We find ourselves driven “in pursuit of an ideal social self, of a self that is at least *worthy* of approving recognition by the highest possible judging companion, if such a companion there be... This judge is God.” “It is probable,” James admits, “that individuals

---

<sup>494</sup> WB, 143.

<sup>495</sup> WB, 144.

<sup>496</sup> WB, 158.

<sup>497</sup> PP, 284. One wonders if there is any significance to this dual formulation, “moral sensibility and conscience.” Could James have meant by the two terms to suggest the separate but related functions of moral sensation and moral perception?

differ a good deal in the degree in which they are haunted by [this sense of an ideal spectator], but I am sure that even those who say they are altogether without it deceive themselves, and really have it in some degree.”<sup>498</sup>

The philosophical reader will be asking, What of reason? Does not James think that reason is the highest power in man? The answer depends on what is meant by “reason.” Much of what James describes as sensation and perception were understood to be functions of “reason” by ancients such as Aristotle, in particular the intuitive grasp of intangibles.<sup>499</sup> What is clear is that “reasoning,” as James uses the term, is a secondary, higher-order process that depends on the prior activity of sensation and perception for its successful exercise. The simplest kind of thinking, James notes, is “spontaneous revery,” consisting of “trains of images suggested one by another.” Closer to “what would commonly be classed as acts of reasoning,” he says, are “those where a present sign suggests an unseen, distant, or future reality.”<sup>500</sup> James understands reasoning to be a process of analysis and abstraction. He finds the process to consist of two stages: “First, *sagacity*, or the ability to discover what part, M, lies embedded in the whole S which is before him; Second, *learning*, or the ability to recall promptly M’s consequences, concomitants, or implications.”<sup>501</sup> The process proceeds by analyzing the matter at hand, that is, breaking the whole mentally into parts; abstracting some element of interest from the matter—noticing it *as* an element that may be considered by itself, and giving it exclusive attention—and then considering it in varying relations; other instances of the same element in different contexts are thought of, and the awareness of numerous instances of the same kind gives rise to conception; a name for the kind is recalled

---

<sup>498</sup> PP, 301.

<sup>499</sup> Particular intangibles, that is: James did not believe direct intuition of universals possible. According to Jamesian terminology, one can only *conceive* of universals; perception of universals, unless there be concrete universals, is out of the question.

<sup>500</sup> PP, 952-3.

<sup>501</sup> PP, 957.

or created, and this concept provides an easy, short-hand way of handling the category just recognized; as a sharply delineated signification, meaning one thing and nothing else, the concept may now be treated logically: if item X is a member of class Y, then it must have these qualities, relations, etc.; logical relations among concepts may be mapped out; and so on. The logical relations discovered in the course of reasoning are eternally valid, says James—cannot be other than they are. Yet, these relations may not hold in the empirical world. Logic is no final test of truth. A proposition may be perfectly true logically, but utterly false as a description of reality. Fortunately, the concrete world of experience has enough regularity and order in it to make reasoning about it worthwhile: “This is, in fact, a world in which general laws obtain, in which universal propositions *are* true, and in which reasoning is therefore possible.”<sup>502</sup>

James’ description of reasoning and its place in human understanding, and more broadly in human activity, suggests that reason as he defines it is instrumental in function. Reason as analytical and logical power has as its meaningful function navigating us across the sea of experience and getting us in touch with its farther reaches, to take us from one experience to another. We know reason has achieved its purpose when we have sensation where we expected to have it, that is, when we find through sensation reality where we expected to find it. The test of rationality is concrete effect. Rationality itself, James believes, is a concrete state of being. When reasoning we are seeking rationality as an end-state, and this state is a certain mode of experience, a certain kind of sensation. It is a “feeling of the sufficiency of the present moment, of its absoluteness...[of an] absence of all

---

<sup>502</sup> PP, 963. James means that last part of his statement literally: were the world not regular, reasoning could never have developed, because we would have lacked instances of the same, and lacking these, we could not have formed concepts. In fact, as James’ analysis of discrimination and abstraction shows, we could not even have detected distinct attributes from which to make classifications, because we must see an attribute in different contexts before we see it *as* an attribute, mentally separable from the object in which it may be found.

need to explain it, account for it, or justify it,” so that the flow of thought is unobstructed. James calls this the “sentiment of rationality.”<sup>503</sup> We arrive at this sentiment when we have found the right way of conceiving the matter at hand, the right conception for the occasion. It is as if the pathway between the knower and what he seeks to know has become smooth, and a clear track of connecting points from one to the other has opened up, until finally the two come face to face, and the restlessness of the search drains away. In fact, James thinks something like this literally occurs in a successful course of reasoning, as we saw in his account of truth as a concrete track of experience between knower and known. Reasoning is one of the principal means of attaining truth.

But it is not the only way. Sometimes the truth just comes to us, the path to the real just suddenly discloses itself, in the absence of any reasoning process. Indeed, this may be the more usual way of finding truth. In this case, reasoning begins, if it begins at all, as a response—as an effect rather than a cause of the truth disclosed—and its work is to “make sense” of the newly seen truth by analyzing it, finding a way to adequately conceive it and whatever elements it may consist of, tracing out relations to other concepts, etc. By further reasoning, we quite literally make more truth. Remember, for James “truth” is a relation between knower and known, so that when we relate ourselves in new ways to old objects, we “create” truths. The idea of making or creating truth is not so startling when you recall that James understood “truth” always to apply to ideas rather than to objects. What we are really after in the “search for truth” is reality, and a truth is a way to it. Thus, strictly speaking we *make* truth by our creation or recognition of a path, and what we *discover* is reality. What happens when truth “just comes to us”? The causes may be mysterious and varied, but

---

<sup>503</sup> WB, 58.

according to James' understanding of the mind's workings, the means of disclosure are sensation and perception, what reasoning must in any case come back to in its quest.

By far the larger share of our truths are common-sense truths. All the time we are perceiving and interpolating, and every case of perception and interpolation involves truth, in that in it our thoughts find a direct correspondence or commerce with some reality. Comparatively speaking, a much smaller percentage of our truths are attained rationally—that is, through a process of reasoning. But that common-sense truth is not attained through reasoning does not make it somehow irrational. The same “sentiment of rationality” that comes with the right conception also comes with each interpolation, with each this-is-a-kind. The reasoning way is the abstract way, the common-sense way is the concrete way, and reasoning needs common sense as a foundation—as an anchor to reality as well as a starting point. Moreover, if I read James correctly, his position is that reasoning must frequently touch down at strategic points to common-sense (interpolated) percepts to *keep it on the path* of truth (where truth is a matter of more than merely logical relations). Once a concept has been anchored to reality by a common-sense percept, the common-sense percept itself may be evaluated for its accuracy in interpreting the underlying sensation by comparing the common-sense percept to other, possibly conflicting percepts. James' analysis of truth, taken altogether, clearly implies that common sense is the stable basis of rationality.<sup>504</sup>

## **THE SELF**

All these mental functions we have noticed—who or what activates and directs them? This question takes us to the heart of what man is, and the answer hinges on the nature and status of the self. James gives a richly textured account of the self in *The Principles*

---

<sup>504</sup> Sensation, as James understands sensation, is the ultimate basis of rationality, but common-sense percepts are what enable us to get a firm grip on objects in the sensational flux. This is why I say that common sense, rather than sensation, is the “stable” basis of rationality.

*of Psychology*. There he describes it as consisting of at least three, possibly four parts: a “material Self,” a “social Self,” a “spiritual Self,” and, perhaps—something difficult or impossible to determine on the level of psychological analysis—what has been called the “soul” or the “pure Ego.” The material Self includes the body as its “innermost part,” but also clothes, immediate family, home and outer possessions—all the tangibles one takes to be his own.<sup>505</sup> A man’s social Self is composed of the images of him others carry in their minds. “To wound any of these images,” James says, “is to wound him.” James is not speaking here of man’s sociability, his desire for human company (which he recognizes to be natural), but of his “innate propensity” to seek the favorable attention of others, to be well regarded for who he is and what he does.<sup>506</sup> The spiritual Self, empirically considered, is “a man’s inner and subjective being, his psychic faculties or dispositions, taken concretely,” including reasoning ability, “moral sensibility and conscience,” strength of will, and the like. “These psychic dispositions are the most enduring and intimate part of the self, that which we most verily seem to be.” If we take “a concrete view,” James says, “the spiritual self in us will be either the entire stream of our personal consciousness, or the present ‘segment’ or ‘section’ of that stream, according as we take a broader or narrower view.”<sup>507</sup> The “spiritual stream”<sup>508</sup> of consciousness, broadly speaking, *is* the spiritual Self, and the core of this self, our “innermost self,” is the present thinking thought. This last is

the *active* element in all consciousness...a spiritual something in [a man] which seems to *go out* to meet...qualities and contents, whilst they seem to *come in* to be received by it. It is what welcomes or rejects. It presides over the perception of sensations, and by giving or withholding assent it influences the movements they tend to arouse. It is the home of interest,—not the pleasant or the painful, not even pleasure or pain, as such, but that within

---

<sup>505</sup> PP, 280.

<sup>506</sup> PP, 281-2.

<sup>507</sup> PP, 284.

<sup>508</sup> James uses the term “spiritual stream” in PP, 322.

us to which pleasure and pain, the pleasant and the painful, speak. It is the source of effort and attention, and the place from which appear to emanate the fiat of the will.<sup>509</sup>

This innermost self, James says, is definitely *felt*. “It is something with which we...have direct sensible acquaintance.” What exactly *is* it that is felt? James is cautious here and says he can only describe his own experience. When he is most self-aware, he experiences this innermost self as something that spontaneously reacts to the “play” of his stream of thought, “welcoming or opposing, appropriating or disowning, striving with or against, saying yes or no.” When he tries to be as concrete as possible and “grapple with particulars,” he finds that “it is difficult for me to detect in the activity any purely spiritual element at all. Whenever my introspective glance succeeds in turning round quickly enough to catch one of these manifestations of spontaneity in the act, all it can ever feel distinctly is some bodily process, for the most part taking place within the head.”<sup>510</sup> James is not sure what to make of this. All he can discover through introspection of the innermost self from which these central acts break forth are these “cephalic motions.”<sup>511</sup> But what of this “introspective glance” itself that manages to notice these motions? Is it not at that moment something deeper, more inner than, or at least something *other than* the motions? Is this “glance” a physical or a spiritual activity, and what manner of thing is it that causes the glance? Can we really, after all, learn anything about the innermost self through introspection, or has James only demonstrated the limits of introspective analysis? Perhaps trying to observe the innermost self is like the eye turning in its socket to examine its own features—a natural impossibility, doomed from the beginning. Is there then some other, non-introspective approach by which we may understand this “self of selves”? These questions and more come crowding in.

---

<sup>509</sup> PP, 285.

<sup>510</sup> PP, 286-8.

<sup>511</sup> PP, 288.

James seriously considers in the *Principles* the possibility, and the implications of the possibility, that the innermost self is after all only a particularly subtle “feeling of bodily activities,”<sup>512</sup> the feeling of the bodily motions accompanying those mental acts that seem most inward. But ultimately he rejects the theory as too much at odds with common sense and common philosophic assumptions in general to be adopted without further substantiation: such “speculations...traverse common-sense [and] contradict the fundamental assumption of every philosophic school [that] our thoughts [are] the one sort of existent which skepticism cannot touch... I will therefore treat the last few pages [discussing these speculations] as a parenthetical digression, and from now to the end of the volume revert to the path of common-sense again. I mean by this that I will continue to assume (as I have assumed all along...) a direct awareness of the process of our thinking as such, simply insisting on the fact that it is an even more inward and subtle phenomenon than most of us suppose.”<sup>513</sup> The common sense understanding, that is, and that of most of the Western philosophic tradition, is that we know directly the activities of the innermost spiritual self—our reasoning, our willing, and so forth—and know them as spiritual, and not physical, phenomena. The only conclusion to which James can come on the sole basis of introspection is that “(in some persons at least) the part of the innermost Self which is most vividly felt turns out to consist for the most part of a collection of cephalic movements of ‘adjustments’ [in reaction to objects in the stream of consciousness] which, for want of attention and reflection, usually fail to be perceived and classed as what they are; that over and above these there is an obscurer feeling of something more; but whether it be of fainter

---

<sup>512</sup> Ibid.

<sup>513</sup> PP, 291.



physiological processes, or of nothing objective at all, but rather of subjectivity as such, of thought become ‘its own object,’ must at present remain an open question.”<sup>514</sup>

James himself thought that the innermost self is “something more” than physical. One of his earliest observations in the *Principles* is that psychology must presuppose a dualism at least of mental states and brain-states, as the former can by no means—on our present level of knowledge, or any we are likely to have in future—be reduced to the latter; at most, certain mental states and certain brain-states may be shown to correlate. It must further presuppose a dualism of subject and object, of “mind knowing and thing known,” so that “Neither gets out of itself or into the other, neither in any way *is* the other, neither *makes* the other.”<sup>515</sup> The whole stream of consciousness is spiritual, the reader will recall, and what James calls the “innermost self,” taken at face-value, is just the present section of the spiritual stream. To understand what James means by the “present section of the stream,” it helps to realize that James (in agreement with other psychologists) found the span of consciousness to last at least a few seconds, shading out into vagueness and then darkness at each end, dropping away into past thought on one side and trending into futurity on the other. The sense that the present thought is continuous with past and future is what gives consciousness its streaming quality. James seems to understand the innermost self as identical with that whole section of consciousness between the dark outer edges. The innermost self, on this reading, is constantly changing. If there is anything behind this present, dynamic section of thought, James thinks, we can only be aware of it “in an abstract, hypothetic or conceptual way.”<sup>516</sup> We cannot, apparently, perceive it directly. We can at most sense it on the periphery of thought.

---

<sup>514</sup> PP, 291-2.

<sup>515</sup> PP, 214.

<sup>516</sup> PP, 291.

The common sense belief is that there definitely *is* something behind the present thought, and indeed behind all the various phenomenal selves, that there is a Thinker of the thought and an Owner of the selves: “common-sense insists that the unity of all the selves is not a mere appearance of similarity or continuity, ascertained after the fact. She is sure that it involves a real belonging to a real Owner, to a pure spiritual entity of some kind. Relation to this entity is what makes the self’s constituents stick together as they do for thought.” James believes he can account for the unity of the selves without postulating such a substantial Owner. It may be that the selves are unified by “something [other than a soul or “pure Ego”] not among the things collected, but superior to them all, namely, the real, present onlooking, remembering, ‘judging thought’ or identifying ‘section’ of the stream.” This is in fact James’ position: the innermost self, the spiritual center of man is his present thought, which is felt to be continuous with the wider stream of consciousness, including those parts within it recognized in varying ways as “my Self,” and which appropriates to itself the thoughts and selves gone before. “Who owns the last self,” says James, “owns the self before the last, for what possesses the possessor possesses the possessed.” James thinks it “impossible to discover any verifiable features in personal identity which this sketch does not contain.”

But this assumption, though it yields much, still does not yield all that common-sense demands... The essence of the matter to common-sense is that the past thoughts...were always owned. The [aforementioned present] Thought does not capture them, but as soon as it comes into existence it finds them already its own. How is this possible unless the Thought have a *substantial* identity with a former owner,—not a mere continuity or resemblance, as in [James’] account, but a *real unity*? The ‘Soul’ of Metaphysics and the ‘Transcendental Ego’ of the Kantian Philosophy, are...but attempts to satisfy this urgent demand of common-sense.”<sup>517</sup>

The commonsensical embrace of the substantial soul did not, of course, derive from common-sense perception. The soul never was a percept—or at least it was certainly never

---

<sup>517</sup> PP, 321-2.

perceived *as an entity*. No, the common-sense adoption of the soul-concept emerged over time as 1) a hypothesis that worked for all practical purposes (and one, furthermore, that could not be disproved), and 2) a tradition in philosophy, theology, and civilization. That is, the notion of the soul was commonsensical in the secondary sense of being a common conviction tested over time and never successfully contradicted. The idea was empirically based in that it was a hypothesis based on hard evidence: we witness these acts emanating from our inmost selves, and we reason that *something* causes these acts, and that they come from *somewhere*. “Soul” became a name for this cause and/or site. But, as James points out, the mere naming of this unknown cause or site does not count either as a description or an explanation. No doubt part of what made the soul-hypothesis into a conviction is that the soul’s existence was thought to guarantee goods of the most precious kind—in particular, immortality, responsibility, and individuality. It was thought that only a permanent inner substance could guarantee them. But James thinks he shows that the theory of the soul does not, in fact, guarantee any of these. He concludes: the soul “explains nothing and guarantees nothing.”<sup>518</sup>

Still, neither here in the *Principles* nor in his later essay, “Does Consciousness Exist?”—where he publicly declares his judgment that, as an entity, it does not—is James dogmatic in his rejection of the soul-hypothesis. In the *Principles* he is careful to say, “The reader who finds any comfort in the idea of the Soul, is, however, perfectly free to continue to believe in it; for our reasonings have not established the non-existence of the Soul; they have only proved its superfluity for scientific purposes.”<sup>519</sup> Moreover, James seems to have developed his own hypothesis about the central self only after carefully considering the

---

<sup>518</sup> PP, 331. I leave aside James’ fascinating analyses of associationist and transcendentalist (Kantian) theories on the question of a substantial, pure self as not directly relevant to understanding the common-sense view and its relation to James’ own position.

<sup>519</sup> PP, 332.

common sense view. He seems to have taken very seriously the commonsense “demand” that the ownership of thoughts and of the various selves be accounted for, and it seems likely that had he not found a way to understand the present thought as exercising such ownership, he would have taken the common-sense view over the available alternatives. Associationist theories and transcendentalist theories alike failed to recognize the concrete continuities between thoughts *in conscious experience*: Hume and his followers made thought consist of “bundles” or series of discrete sensations, “associated” but not continuous; the school of Kant essentially accepted that sensations come to us in a bundle or “manifold,” and brought in a transcendental Ego to make them into a unified thought.<sup>520</sup> As he did on other occasions, James appears to have taken the common sense understanding as his starting point for thinking about the innermost self. Whatever the shortcomings of the common sense perspective here, it at least adhered to the concrete facts as presented.

One thing more needs to be said about the inmost self. James mentioned (as we have noticed) reason, conscience, and will as being associated with this most intimate self. But in the *Principles* James gave special attention to, and found a special significance in, will. He seemed to see will as the deepest, most central or inner of human powers. After all, will seems to be necessary to engage reason and act on conscience, indeed to make all the other central human powers fully active. But will was important to James not only as being fundamental, the prerequisite of man’s engagement of his own capacities and with the world around him. James found the question of *free will* to be especially *urgent*, both personally and philosophically. The question preoccupied and haunted him in an unusual way, in a way rather uncharacteristic of modern writers. His scientific learning had made him feel the full force of determinism, and this contributed in his early career to a profound personal crisis.

---

<sup>520</sup> PP, 349.

His own account of this crisis has become well known among readers of James, but it is well worth reexamining, for it sheds much light not only on the centrality of the question of will for him, but also on his own philosophic motivations and on the general cast of his philosophy. I submit here passages from two sources. The first was published in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* under a false personage—James attributed the account to “a Frenchman,” but later admitted it to be autobiographical.

Whilst in [a] state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospects, I went one evening into a dressing-room in the twilight to procure some article that was there; when suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, or rather shelves against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over them inclosing his entire figure. He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human. This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. *That shape am I*, I felt, potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him. There was such a horror of him, that it was as if something hitherto solid within my breast gave way entirely, and I became a mass of quivering fear. After this the universe was changed for me altogether. I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since. It was like a revelation; and although the immediate feelings passed away, the experience has made me sympathetic with the morbid feelings of others ever since. It gradually faded, but for months I was unable to go out into the dark alone. In general I dreaded to be left alone. I remember wondering how other people could live, how I myself had ever lived, so unconscious of that pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life.

James went on to say that he had “always thought that this experience of melancholia of mine had a religious bearing.”<sup>521</sup> I will consider its religious aspects and implications later; for now I want to point out the palpable feeling of helplessness against catastrophe suggested in the experience, and the crushing of personal willpower implied. The incident must have powerfully reinforced James’ growing appreciation, thanks to his medical and

---

<sup>521</sup> VRE, 134-5.

scientific work, of the limits of the will, and more generally of the limits of human nature.

The other passage comes from James' personal diary, dated April 30, 1870:

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's second 'Essais' and see no reason why his definition of Free Will—"the sustaining of a thought *because I choose to* when I might have other thoughts"—need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present...that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will... Hitherto, when I have felt like taking a free initiative, like daring to act originally, without carefully waiting for contemplation of the external world to determine all for me, suicide seemed the most manly form to put my daring into; now, I will go a step further with my will, not only act with it, but believe as well; believe in my individual reality and creative power. My belief, to be sure, *can't* be optimistic—but I will posit life (the real, the good) in the self-governing *resistance* of the ego to the world. Life shall [be built in] doing and suffering and creating.<sup>522</sup>

If the previous selection showed the hard limits of the will, this one points to its potential and possibility within those limits. The dynamic tension between man's creative possibilities and his need of something beyond himself—his need to harmonize his powers with a larger reality not of his making—is a theme that runs throughout James' writings. In maintaining this tension, James demonstrates again the balance of common sense, the equipoise of "on the one hand, and on the other hand."

Of course, common sense takes free will for granted, as it also takes for granted that we can't do just whatever we might wish to do. We certainly *seem* to choose freely in many cases. It certainly *feels* as if sometimes we made things happen by fiat, as if we did one thing when we could just as well have done another. On the other hand, we cannot simply choose to be rich, or to be happy, or to be wise. We may choose to do things that will contribute to making us rich, happy, or wise, but there are definite limits to the power of sheer will. To common sense, this is all quite obvious, and the man of common sense will tend to laugh at persons who trouble themselves about such matters. "You think too much," he will say. And perhaps in some measure he is right. But if his common sense is well-rounded, he can

---

<sup>522</sup> *Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 7-8.

probably be brought around to appreciate that there *is* a time to think more on these things, just as there is a time to leave them alone.

The problem of will that confronted James, and challenged his common sense, was (as the selected passages above suggest) twofold: first, the latitude of will that the Western world had long taken for granted seemed to be more and more in question in light of modern science—deterministic forces seemed to account for more and more of what happens in the world, and the free space within which the will might maneuver seemed on the verge of disappearing altogether, or rather, seemed about to be exposed as having always been an illusion; second, even if free will was veridical, and the will had its domain, it might be rendered powerless by greater forces. The first part of the problem provoked James' affirmations of will; the second turned him to religion. What modern psychology was beginning to show by James' day was the very significant extent to which the body acts on stimuli of its own accord. "The first point to understand in the psychology of Volition," James says, is that "voluntary movements must be secondary, not primary functions of our organism... Reflex, instinctive, and emotional movements are all primary performances."<sup>523</sup> The will does not act *ex nihilo*; it can only choose to perform movements already experienced in some way. "We learn all our possibilities by the way of experience. When a particular movement, having once occurred in a random, reflex, or involuntary way, has left an image of itself in the memory, then the movement can be desired again, proposed as an end, and deliberately willed... A supply of ideas of the various movements that are possible, left in the memory by experiences of their involuntary performance, is thus the first prerequisite of the voluntary life."<sup>524</sup> Our bodies, moreover, would be set in motion even without this reduplicative action of the will: "Consciousness is *in its very nature impulsive*. We do not have

---

<sup>523</sup> PP, 1099.

<sup>524</sup> PP, 1099-1100.

a sensation or a thought, and then have to *add* something dynamic to it to get a movement. Every pulse of feeling which we have is the correlate of some neural activity that is already on its way to instigate a movement.”<sup>525</sup> Where, then, does something dynamic get added *by our own fiat*, apart from any automatic movement? Or is it perhaps the case that nothing ever *does* get added in this way—that we are, in fact, highly complicated automatons? The clearest evidence that we are not, James observes, is the peculiar “feeling of effort”<sup>526</sup> we experience when performing some act against resistance. Effort comes in “whenever a rarer and more ideal impulse is called upon to neutralize others of a more instinctive and habitual kind...whenever strongly explosive tendencies are checked, or strongly obstructive conditions overcome.” Effort is a kind of prevailing in “the line of greater resistance.” James’ account of this effort on behalf of such “ideal impulses” takes us, I believe, to the very core of his philosophy, to the very center of his philosophic vision, and therefore I ask the reader to mark carefully the following lines: “The ideal impulse appears [as] a still small voice which must be artificially reinforced to prevail. Effort is what reinforces it, making things seem as if, while the force of propensity were essentially a fixed quantity, the ideal force might be of various amount.”<sup>527</sup> The “still small voice” may in some cases be religious in nature,<sup>528</sup> or it may be merely the voice of our better judgment. In any case, it certainly

---

<sup>525</sup> PP, 1134.

<sup>526</sup> PP, 1141.

<sup>527</sup> PP, 1154-5.

<sup>528</sup> The phrase, “still small voice,” comes from I Kings 19: 11-13, where Yahweh tells Elijah, “Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a *still small voice* [italics added]. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?...And the Lord said unto him, Go...” (KJV). The suggestion of the story is that God often speaks not with earth-shattering voice but quietly, softly, so that one must listen attentively and attune one’s soul to more subtle intimations. There is a parallel in Greek philosophy with Plato’s image in the *Laws* of the golden cord of reason which pulls gently heavenward while the steely cords of passion tug violently toward baser interests; one must learn to yield to the former and counterpull



looks as if we have the ability—from somewhere deep down, from some spiritual reserve all our own—to make a response, even where this response goes against powerful contrary tendencies within us. This is the common sense view of the matter, and James himself holds fast to it.

The spiritual makeup of man is not quite exhausted by the stream of consciousness and its vital center. Beyond the “margin” of consciousness lies the subconscious, and this, too, is—at least in part—spiritual territory. “The most important step forward that has occurred in psychology since I have been a student of that science,” says James, “is the discovery...that, in certain subjects at least, there is not only the consciousness of the ordinary field, with its usual centre and margin, but an addition thereto in the shape of memories, thoughts, and feelings which are extra-marginal and outside of the primary consciousness altogether, but yet must be classed as conscious facts of some sort, able to reveal their presence by unmistakable signs.”<sup>529</sup> The empirical evidence shows, James thinks, that the mind’s subconscious region is (among other things) a kind of gateway to deeper spiritual experience. He even speaks of the conscious region of the psyche as the “lower” region in comparison with the subconscious.<sup>530</sup> From the higher district, in some individuals, come transformative “invasions” of mysterious forces.<sup>531</sup> The evidence that this is so, James believes, is overwhelming. The origin of these invasions is open to question—whether spiritual or neurological, divine or sometimes perhaps diabolic—but their effects cannot reasonably be denied. The discovery of the subconscious, and of the fact that this

---

against the latter (644e-645c). James, incidentally, describes the essence of religion in *Varieties* as “appeal and response” (VRE, 36).

<sup>529</sup> VRE, 190.

<sup>530</sup> VRE, 173.

<sup>531</sup> VRE, 432.

region is the locus of “religious” experiences, helps explain the commonsense understanding of religion, as we shall see.

The subtitle of James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* was “A Study in Human Nature,” and James thought religious experiences revealed the full range of human possibilities in a way nothing else could. Hundreds of cases—both classic and little known—show these experiences to produce striking effects: expanded “vision” or “synoptic insight into the significance of life as a whole,”<sup>532</sup> or more frequently, vastly augmented supplies of energy—especially increased moral power. The religious life like no other “lets loose the strenuous mood” that drives men to serious moral action; “in a merely human world without a God, the appeal to our moral energy falls short of its maximal stimulating power.”<sup>533</sup> Both intellectually and morally, then, man’s capacities are enhanced by “saving experiences” that “flow in” from the subconscious region.<sup>534</sup> The common sense conviction that prayer and religious devotion have significant, real-world effects seems empirically well founded.

### **PHYSIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS**

I have laid special stress on James’ understanding of the spiritual dimension of human psychology. It is important, however, in order to appreciate how much James’ psychology owes to common sense, to observe some of what he has to say about the physical preconditions of thought. One of the striking features of James’ *Principles of Psychology* is *how much* attention he gives therein to physiological phenomena. Common sense, so immersed as it is in sensation, so attuned to every feeling, so “down to earth,” has a keen sensitivity to bodily experience. It cannot very well forget the body’s needs, demands, and

---

<sup>532</sup> Smith’s introduction to VRE, xlv.

<sup>533</sup> WB, 160.

<sup>534</sup> PU, 139.

limitations. Our own bodies are, after all, our most frequent percept; from the standpoint of common sense our bodies are, literally, the anchors of our existence. James expresses the common sense view when he says, “By an inscrutable necessity, each human mind’s appearance on this earth is conditioned upon the integrity of the body with which it belongs, upon the treatment that body gets from others, and upon the spiritual dispositions which use it as their tool, and lead it either towards longevity or to destruction.”<sup>535</sup> Obviously, the body is the home of the sense organs, the receptors of the outer stimulations that give rise to sensations. Indeed, as James tries to show, the body is a more sensitive instrument than we give it credit for: it is a sensorium of the most subtle and delicate motions—even, James seems to think, purely spiritual movements. Modern psychology has shown just how dependent the mind’s activity is on the well functioning of the brain. Mental states are not reducible to brain-states, but they certainly need them; it is as if our thoughts need that soft gray matter to take form. All our habits and associations of thought are neurologically based: “An acquired habit, from the physiological point of view, is nothing but a new pathway of discharge formed in the brain, by which certain incoming currents ever after tend to escape.”<sup>536</sup> Thanks to the plasticity of human brain matter, after every thought of two things together there is at least a slight tendency to think them together in future. Our capacity for memory owes much, perhaps everything, to the forging of neural pathways in the brain. Another class of acquired habit, motor habits, are essential for making decisions “stick,” and this is especially important with respect to moral decisions, and more generally, to character-formation. “No matter how full a reservoir of *maxims* one may possess, and no matter how good one’s *sentiments* may be, if one have not taken advantage of every opportunity to *act* [and thus made the moral principle or feeling a motor habit], one’s

---

<sup>535</sup> PP, 307.

<sup>536</sup> PBC, 137.

character may remain entirely unaffected for the better. With mere good intentions, hell is proverbially paved.”<sup>537</sup>

It so happens that those sentiments James just mentioned, or more generally our emotions, are also physiologically based. In fact, James believes our emotions are entirely physical events. “Our natural way of thinking about [especially our] coarser emotions [“grief, fear, rage, love”] is that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression. My theory, to the contrary, is that the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur *is* the emotion.”<sup>538</sup> The body, again, is an exquisitely sensitive register of excitements. “Objects...excite bodily changes by a preorganized mechanism [and] the changes are so indefinitely numerous and subtle that the entire organism may be called a sounding-board, which every change of consciousness, however slight, may make reverberate.”<sup>539</sup> The body is a “sounding-board” not just for the aforementioned “coarser” emotions, but even for our “subtler” ones, for our “moral, intellectual, and aesthetic feelings.”<sup>540</sup> Our bodies, then, are the *sine qua non* of our emotional lives.

Of special interest for the purposes of the present work, observe that, between habit and sentiment, our bodies play a crucial role in our moral development, personally and socially. Our moral character just is the sum of our habits—intellectual, emotional, and

---

<sup>537</sup> PP, 129.

<sup>538</sup> PP, 1065. This theory became known as the James-Lange theory because C. Lange presented a similar theory within a year after James first introduced it in 1884. James’ theory is based on the observation that, “If we fancy some strong emotion, and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its bodily symptoms, we find we have nothing left behind...and that a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception is all that remains” (PP, 1067). Note: given that perception is made up of organized sensation, it is clear that sensation includes our purely intellectual sense of things, as well as our sense of all physical feeling. “Sensation” is not to be confused with “emotion.”

<sup>539</sup> PP, 1066.

<sup>540</sup> PP, 1082.

active—and even our intellectual habits must be physiologically established: at the very least, pathways must be forged in the brain, and very often (always?) intellectual habits are formed with the aid of physical signs and movements (imagistic, ritualistic, linguistic). The fact that our intellectual lives require the body's service to take root and take form points to another way common sense is foundational for human well-being. We need common sense interpolation to bind our world together, make it coherent, make it a place where we can act intelligently, a place fit “for all practical purposes.” But in addition to simple common sense perception of this sort we need common sense perception in the larger sense, in the sense of the community's perception of relevant moral facts *as a community*. To perceive and *know* that we perceive the relevant moral facts *as a community*, we must be able to communicate our thoughts with each other, and to do this, we must make our thoughts incarnate: we must make physical signs (notably, with our mouths and by our hands) by which to publish our moral perceptions—our perceptions of, practically, what is needed and what is required. Rational speech is the lifeblood of the community, of its common sense, and speech requires the joining of body and mind.

This matter of language raises yet another advantage of common sense over much of modern philosophy and science: its predilection for simplicity of expression. James had little patience for the elaborate school-jargon employed by so many leading philosophers and scientists of his day and of the preceding decades. The Germans, of course, were the worst offenders. Lovers of concision and clarity cannot help but be secretly delighted when James says, “The whole lesson of Kantian and post-Kantian speculation is, it seems to me, the lesson of simplicity. With Kant, complication both of thought and statement was an inborn infirmity, enhanced by the musty academicism of his Königsberg existence. With Hegel it was a raging fever. Terribly, therefore, do the sour grapes which these fathers of philosophy

have eaten set our teeth on edge.”<sup>541</sup> No one can read James’ own elegant prose and fail to be impressed by the simplicity and clarity of his words. His linguistic style is much in keeping with his affection and respect for the common sense way. But, as James surely understood, “complication of thought and statement” is not merely annoying; it can be debilitating and even destructive of human purposes—in particular, of moral and political judgment and action. Even where real complexities require complex terminological constructions for technical precision, these linguistic complications must be translated to common language to be made socially comprehensible and useful, and amenable to practical application by ordinary men. That is, they must be put into common sense terms. No social consensus, and therefore no community, can arise without frequent appeals to common sense perceptions in the common language of the people. I do not mean by the “appeal to common sense” what Kant mistakenly took Thomas Reid to mean by it—“an appeal to the opinion of the multitude”<sup>542</sup>—but (what Reid *did* mean by it) an appeal to the people’s common moral *perceptions*, to their effective grasp of certain self-evident moral truths. In this sense, even the philosopher must make regular appeal to common sense, for his truth-claims stand or fall according to how well they uncover the nature and meaning of things perceived. Such appeals, as James continually endeavors to show in his own way, are not only justifiable but absolutely essential, for common understanding as much as for consolidated action.

---

<sup>541</sup> PP, 346.

<sup>542</sup> Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, 4.

## THE COMMON SENSE BASIS OF JAMES' ETHICAL AND SOCIAL THEORY

### COMMON SENSE AND ETHICS

James grounded his moral theory, as he did all truth, in percepts—specifically, in moral percepts. Our most stable moral percepts, as our most stable percepts generally, are of the common sense variety. Concepts that terminate in common sense moral percepts and theories that make the most sense out of moral common sensibles, taken collectively, together constitute our stock of common sense moral truths. (The percepts themselves are true at least in some measure, and the concepts and theories based on them are true in the same degree.) Our overall stock of moral truths will contain some that, while potentially realized by all, are in fact not commonly sensed. But if and when these uncommon truths become widely recognized, they become common sense truths in their own right. Although James does not say so explicitly, it is clear on close examination that his reflections on morality and ethics are founded on common sense experience—that of the individual and of the larger community.

James never worked out a full-blown ethical theory, but he did leave a detailed outline for how he would approach ethics systematically in his penetrating and highly suggestive essay, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” I propose to examine this essay very closely, almost to the point of making a gloss of it,<sup>543</sup> and then to round out the picture of James’ moral vision by looking to his moral observations in other sources. I should say that in doing so, I am reversing the order in which James himself proceeded in his investigation of moral foundations. His sketch in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” of how to do ethical theory was an end-product of a long period of immersion in the

---

<sup>543</sup> The essay is so dense and so foundational in its content for James’ moral understanding that I quote it extensively in what follows.

stream of moral experience, acquainting himself directly with the fundamental moral facts and tracing out their relations and implications. He says pointedly in the first sentence of “Moral Life” that “there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance.”<sup>544</sup> Any viable ethical theory must be built up on observable moral “facts”<sup>545</sup>—that is, on moral percepts.

The proper “aim” of ethical philosophy, says James, is “an account of the moral relations that obtain among things, which will weave them into the unity of a stable system, and make of the world what one may call a genuine universe from the ethical point of view.” The “subject-matter” for the ethical philosopher is “the ideals he finds existing in the world.”<sup>546</sup> The most prevalent ideals actually “existing in the world,” of course, are common ideals, common opinions about what is best. In any case, actually existing ideals are the matter on which the ethical philosopher should work. A careful examination of these, James thinks, will give him a handle on man’s moral situation and reveal the network of “moral relations that obtain among things.” The basic procedure, initially at least, is the same as that of Plato and Aristotle, who began with common opinions about what is right and good, thinking that in them they would find indications of a deeper basis of rightness and goodness in nature. This assumption stems from a sense that people’s opinions on the subject are opinions *about something real*, that, however they might differ, they refer to things experienced by all—to *common sensibles*. If we can penetrate to these underlying realities about which people opine, we should be able to test the varying opinions against them and determine their relative adequacy.<sup>547</sup>

---

<sup>544</sup> WB, 141.

<sup>545</sup> WB, 158.

<sup>546</sup> WB, 141-2.

<sup>547</sup> You will recall James’ claim in P, 90, that Aristotelian philosophy is essentially a technical elaboration of common sense categories.



“There are three questions in ethics that must be kept apart,” James says; he names them “the *psychological* question, the *metaphysical* question, and the *casuistic* question.” “The psychological question asks after the historical *origin* of our moral ideas and judgments; the metaphysical question asks what the very *meaning* of the words ‘good,’ ‘ill,’ and ‘obligation’ are; the casuistic question asks what is the *measure* of the various goods and ills which men recognize, so that the philosopher may settle the true order of human obligations.” James thinks that too often ethical thinkers confuse these questions, or fail to give full consideration to all of them, and in consequence end up with deeply flawed ethical theories. Most, indeed, never get beyond “the psychological question.”<sup>548</sup>

The psychological question concerns the raw materials of moral experience—“our moral ideas and judgments.” As such, it is foundational. How are we to understand these moral ideas and judgments? There are two basic theories. One is that they derive from an innate human faculty called “conscience;” the other is that they come from “the association with acts of simple bodily pleasures and reliefs from pain”—that is, that whatever is associated with pleasure or the diminishing of pain will seem good to us, and what with pain, evil. James finds that many of our ideals have arisen the second way, but not all—that some simply *cannot* be explained that way. Among those that cannot be so explained are “a vast number of our moral perceptions.” For example: “The feeling of the inward dignity of certain spiritual attitudes, as peace, serenity, simplicity, veracity; and of the essential vulgarity of others, as querulousness, anxiety, egoistic fussiness, etc.—are quite inexplicable except by an innate preference of a more ideal attitude for its own sake. The nobler thing *tastes* better, and that is all that we can say. ‘Experience’ of consequences may truly teach us what things are wicked, but what have consequences to do with what is *mean* and *vulgar*?” Our moral

---

<sup>548</sup> WB, 142.

perceptions “deal with directly felt fitnesses between things, and often fly in the teeth of all the prepossessions of habit and presumptions of utility.” So, while the associationists (like Bentham, the Mills, and Bain) deserve credit for showing that many of our ideals originate in response to pleasures and pains, “the intuitionist school”—prominent among them, the Scottish Common Sense philosophers—have been more accurate on this point of moral perception.<sup>549</sup>

Let me linger a moment over this matter of conscience and moral perception. As I suggested earlier, given that James understands “sensation” broadly as “knowledge by acquaintance,” and in the absence of any suggestion in his writings to the contrary, it is reasonable to assume that the “moral sense” for James involves simply a specific kind of sensation, a sense of fitness or unfitness. Moral perception, then, assuming James is using the term “perception” in the same way he used it in the *Principles*, would be a grasp of particular given moral sensations as composing a coherent moral fact—as, for example, a perception that a certain business mogul’s motives and actions bespeak an attitude that may be classified as “greed.” In this example, the instanced attitude is the perceived moral fact, and the nature of the perception is that the mogul’s motives and actions together constitute an existential orientation out of joint with human warmth and comity, and therefore an unfit disposition. Now, the perception might be wrong—the perceiver may misinterpret either the tycoon’s motives or actions or both—but such a mistaken perception is correctible by a closer look at the facts of the case, provided they are available for scrutiny. The point is that *if* the motives and actions are correctly perceived, the judgment that this individual is guilty of greed is valid and true.

---

<sup>549</sup> WB, 142-4, 158.

The metaphysical ethical question concerns the existential meaning of “good,” “ill,” and “obligation.” It concerns, in other words, the significance of the realities to which such words apply. The first thing to notice here, James says, is that the “status” or site “for good and evil [and obligation] to exist in” is sentience or “conscious sensibility.” “Goodness, badness, and obligation must be *realized* somewhere in order really to exist; and the first step in ethical philosophy is to see that no merely inorganic ‘nature of things’ can realize them. Neither moral relations nor the moral law can swing *in vacuo*. Their only habitat can be a mind which feels them; and no world composed merely of physical facts can possibly be a world to which ethical propositions apply.”<sup>550</sup> The basis of good, evil, and obligation, then, must be the *concrete* moral relations that obtain in and among *sentient beings*. The prerequisite of moral truth, James holds, is a concrete standard outside the thinker. “Truth [in general] supposes a standard outside of the thinker to which he must conform.” If only one sentient being exists, there can be no moral truth, only the moral fact of feeling things to be good or ill. In such a situation, there could be “no outward obligation.” The only moral problem in this case would be finding an internal consistency of personal ideals. With the existence of two or more sentient beings, the moral situation remains the same as long as each ignores or is “indifferent to what the other may feel or do.”<sup>551</sup> Where does obligation come in? It must arise in a context in which someone, at least, is *not* indifferent about what the others feel or do; it must arise with the concrete demand of a concrete person.

Like the positive attributes good and bad, the comparative ones of better and worse must be *realized* in order to be real. If one ideal judgment be objectively better than another, that betterness must be made flesh by being lodged concretely in someone’s actual perception. It cannot float in the atmosphere, for it is not a sort of meteorological phenomenon, like the aurora borealis or the zodiacal light. Its *esse* is *per se*, like the *esse* of the ideals themselves between which it obtains. The philosopher, therefore, who seeks to know which ideal ought to have supreme weight and which one ought to be subordinated, must trace the *ought* itself

---

<sup>550</sup> WB, 145.

<sup>551</sup> WB, 146.

to the *de facto* constitution of some existing consciousness, behind which, as one of the data of the universe, he as a purely ethical philosopher is unable to go. This consciousness must make the one ideal right by feeling it to be right, the other wrong by feeling it to be wrong.<sup>552</sup>

Notice that James attributes *being* to ideals: ideals have ontological status and weight, they have substance; they are bits of reality to be taken into account.

If no one else makes the demand for taking some ideals to be better than others, and therefore obligatory, the ethical philosopher, at least, will make it. In that situation where multiple sentient beings exist but are indifferent to the feelings and actions of others, where they live in moral isolation, there appears at first glance<sup>553</sup> to be no obligation to favor any of the existing ideals against others. But the ethical philosopher finds this state of affairs intolerable. In the imagined scene, “we find realized for us in the ethical sphere something like that world which the antique sceptics conceived of—in which individual minds are the measures of all things, and in which no one ‘objective’ truth, but only a multitude of ‘subjective’ opinions can be found. But this is the kind of world with which the philosopher, so long as he holds to the hope of philosophy, will not put up. Among the various ideals represented, there must be, he thinks, some which have the more truth and authority; and to these the others ought to yield, so that system and subordination may reign.”<sup>554</sup> He wants that “genuine universe” of moral relations, and beholding this multiverse of ideals offends his sense of order and possibility, for the dissonance is jarring and the lack of coordination strikes him as a terrible waste: how much more good could there be, he wonders, if all these solitary beings joined their energies and pursued certain of the ideals together? He also is inclined to believe that some ideals are *inherently* better than others, even for an individual in moral isolation. James noted at the beginning of the essay that the ethical philosopher *cannot*

---

<sup>552</sup> WB, 147.

<sup>553</sup> This turns out to be a misleading appearance, as James later shows that genuine obligation exists even in a moral solitude; see WB, 159.

<sup>554</sup> WB, 147.

be a skeptic. “He *will* not be a sceptic...so far from ethical scepticism being one possible fruit of ethical philosophizing, it can only be regarded as that residual alternative to all philosophy which from the outset menaces every would-be philosopher who may give up the quest discouraged, and renounce his original aim,” his aim in this case being again that “stable system,” that “genuine universe” of moral relations.<sup>555</sup> This is the ethical philosopher’s ideal,<sup>556</sup> and he is not content to leave the constellation of sentients to their lonely pursuits.

But why should anyone care about the philosopher’s ideal? Like other ideals, it has ontological status, but does his ideal really matter any more than the others? Is anyone obliged to take it seriously, or to even take notice of it? It’s not clear on the face of it that anyone should. If the *ought* must be traced, as James suggested, to “some existing consciousness,” it does not seem that the consciousness to which it must be traced is the philosopher’s. “But now what particular consciousness in the universe *can* enjoy this prerogative of obliging others to conform to a rule which it lays down?”<sup>557</sup> The answer can only be: God’s. If obligation is to come in anywhere, it must come in with the demand, the claim, of a thinker whose demands are more authoritative, more weighty than those of others, and the only thinker who obviously and necessarily matches that description would be God. By the sheer size of his claim, he would have the advantage. But this observation raises a host of difficult questions. The first and most obvious in this day (and already, for a growing number, in James’) is, why should we believe that God exists? A secondary, but still fundamental, and very challenging, question is, supposing God exists, is our obligation to him based on anything more than his advantage of power? This second is a version of

---

<sup>555</sup> WB, 141.

<sup>556</sup> WB, 142.

<sup>557</sup> WB, 147.

the old question over which the Christian theologians wrangled for so many years: Is it right because God wills it so, or does he will it because it's right? There was not space in this short essay for James to take up these thorny problems directly, but he addressed the first in other places (most famously, in "The Will to Believe," but in other places as well), and he does address directly in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" the ground of our obligation to God.

I will take up the first question in the next section, on religion, but it is relevant here to recall that James finds among the sensations associated with our innermost selves a "sense of an ideal spectator." James might not have gone as far as Coleridge in saying that the notion of God is "essential to the human mind" and is "called forth into distinct consciousness principally by the conscience," that "the one great and binding ground of the belief of God and a hereafter is the law of conscience,"<sup>558</sup> but his comments in the *Principles* suggest that he found this sense of an ideal spectator to be an important bit of evidence for God's existence and presence among men. To the extent we experience this sensation as not merely a general feeling of obligation but as an awareness of a judging "spectator," God may be spoken of in the event as a percept. James' handling of the second question, of the ground of our obligation to God, is startling in its freshness and simplicity. If, on the basis of what James has already said, we fixate on God's greater claim on us, we are tempted to think that the basis of the claim is power, that his wishes are more powerful than ours and that he has the power to enforce them, so that our acceding to his demands is a matter of facing the futility of opposing him. But any such conclusion comes from looking in the wrong place. If, as James has suggested, every ideal has existential weight, then *every* one constitutes a legitimate claim. "The moment we take a steady look at the question" of

---

<sup>558</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *Omniana*, in *The Table Talk and Omniana*, ed. T. Ashe (London, 1896), 418, 429-30; quoted in *Essays on Henry Sidgwick*, ed. Bart Schultz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

obligation, says James, “we see not only that without a claim actually made by some concrete person there can be no obligation, but that there is some obligation wherever there is a claim.” James’ suggestion is that every claim of every thinker, divine or otherwise, should be taken seriously as having genuine ontic status. Every claim is part of what is, has existential validity *de facto*, as existing; every claim *stakes* a claim on reality. Every claim thus entails an obligation. “Claim and obligation are, in fact, coextensive terms; they cover each other exactly.” To understand obligation, we have to understand the nature of an ideal. An ideal, existentially, is a *desire*, a desire that reality go a certain way. But it is more than that. It is a contribution *to* reality. The desire is itself a part of reality, and *pushes* reality a certain way through the actions it induces. Such desire is the basis of any obligation. “The only possible reason there can be why any phenomenon ought to exist is that such a phenomenon actually is desired. Any desire is imperative to the extent of its amount; it makes itself valid by the fact that it exists at all.” The only plausible reason that *anything* exists is that God *wanted* it to exist; the only reason that anything *should* exist that he or we or *some* conscious being first desires it, holds it out as an ideal. Every such desire, every ideal, is a claim, and every claim creates an obligation against others. The ground of our obligation to anyone, then, is his desire, and the ground of our greater obligation to God is the greater amount of *his* desire. “If there be [“a universal or divine consciousness”], then its demands carry the most obligation simply because they are greatest in amount. But it is even then not *abstractly* right that we should respect them. It is only *concretely* right—or right after the fact, and by virtue of the fact, that they are actually made.”<sup>559</sup> So then, our obligation to God is not predicated on his greater power, but on his greater desire (its extensity as well as its intensity). Understanding our obligation to him is therefore not a matter of coming to terms with his

---

<sup>559</sup> WB, 148-9.

greater power, but of recognizing that he has desires as we do, and that his more extensive and intensive desires constitute a greater claim on reality than ours do. When we realize that he is desiring as we are, we see that we have no better right to things desired than he does; when we realize how much vaster (not to mention nobler) his desires are, we see how unreasonable it is for us to treat ours as of equal importance. Acknowledging our obligation to God is really a matter of fairness, and respect for life. “It is life answering to life,” and “a claim thus livingly acknowledged is acknowledged with a solidity and fulness which no thought of an ‘ideal’ backing [James here refers to the support of “an abstract ideal order”] can render more complete.”<sup>560</sup> “Wrongness” in this context is “disappointment” of a concrete divine person, and we must be judged by the extent to which we are concretely “responsive” or “not responsive” to his wishes.<sup>561</sup>

Two features of the foregoing account of obligation demand comment. Several times James explicitly or implicitly contrasts concrete and abstract obligation, and suggests that the concrete variety is fundamental. Whatever legitimate obligation we have to abstract claims, he implies, may be traced back to some concrete obligation to some concrete person or persons. Remember James’ initial observation that the *status* for good, evil, and obligation is conscious sensibility. There can be no obligation in a world in which there are no sentient beings making demands. There *would* be an obligation, on the basis of life itself, to acknowledge and respect the desires of other thinkers, even if no God existed.<sup>562</sup> But the sense of God’s existence gives greater weight to some claims—*his* claims—as against others. James drives home the point that our higher obligations are concretely grounded with a pair of poignant, probing rhetorical questions: “In what way is [the] fact of wrongness made

---

<sup>560</sup> WB, 149-50.

<sup>561</sup> WB, 149.

<sup>562</sup> WB, 150.



more acceptable or intelligible when we imagine it to consist rather in the laceration of an *a priori* ideal order than in the disappointment of a living personal God? Do we, perhaps, think that we cover God and protect him and make his impotence over us less ultimate, when we back him up with this *a priori* blanket from which he may draw some warmth of further appeal?<sup>563</sup> Secondly, and crucially, though desire is on James' account the basis of obligation, one can yet desire wrongly, and indeed wrong desiring is the root of all evil. How can both be true? How can desire be the basis of obligation and also be the source of evil and wrong? The answer, again, is strangely simple. It is never desire in itself that is wrong. Desire *becomes* wrong when it takes the lesser over the greater good—the satisfaction of the lower at the expense of the higher self, the good of self generally over the good of many, or merely human goods over divine goods. To be more precise: if the intelligent agent allows the normal desire for lesser goods to eclipse the desire for greater goods, the form of desire is warped, and the agent is defiled. At the deepest level, moral perceptions are perceptions of the fitness or unfitness of particular desires to particular objects in the larger scheme of things. Actions are right or wrong in a moral sense according to the particular aims of the desires that produce them. This is essentially the Augustinian account, and James' handling of “the casuistic question” suggests that it is, in general form, his own. But how do we distinguish the lesser from the greater good, so as to give priority to our desires for the greater? Two considerations emerge: *quantity* and *quality* of goodness. All else being equal, we should aim at the greatest quantity of good. But some goods are qualitatively superior to others—as James said, some just “*taste* better.” And no right thinking person would take a great quantity of mediocrity over a small share of excellence.

---

<sup>563</sup> WB, 149.

James' is a moral metaphysics of desire. The moral order, correspondingly—if there is one—is existential, formed by desires and their concomitants. The philosopher looks at the vast thicket of desires the world presents and adds to it his own desire, “his own peculiar ideal...that over all these individual opinions there is a *system of truth* which he can discover if he only takes sufficient pains.” Moral truth—as all truth by James' lights—is itself existential: “Truth cannot be a self-proclaiming set of laws, or an abstract ‘moral reason,’ but can only exist in act, or in the shape of an opinion held by some thinker really to be found.”<sup>564</sup> *Concrete moral relations among existing persons constitute the moral order, and moral truths are thoughts or ideas that help the thinker come to terms with those real relations.* The philosopher tries to think about human moral experience in such a way that the relations become transparent to him, and to express those thoughts and describe or symbolize those relations in a way that allows others to see the relations for themselves and test the adequacy of his formulations concerning them. What he initially finds on examining moral experience is a tangled, mutating chaos of competing desires, the very antithesis of order. At this point he can only hope that underneath all the confusion lies a deeper order that can serve as a standard according to which the madding crowd of desires may be brought into harmonious, ordered relations. How does the philosopher proceed from here? The problem that confronts him as he surveys the chaos is that “there is...no visible thinker invested with authority.” And the philosopher, if he is to maintain objectivity, cannot at the outset take himself as an authority, but “must throw [his] own spontaneous ideals, even the dearest, impartially in with that total mass of ideals which are fairly to be judged.” What he needs is an “impartial test” by which to judge. But in accordance with what James has already said, any such test “must be incarnated in the demand of some actually existent person.” Once the philosopher

---

<sup>564</sup> WB, 151.

realizes this, he is faced with a new difficulty: “how can he pick out the person save by an act in which his own sympathies and prepossessions are implied?”<sup>565</sup> God may seem an obvious choice, and God’s desires the standard by which to judge, but how can God and his desires be found out, and how does the philosopher avoid making God in his own image?

“The more serious ethical schools,” James says, have found a promising “method” of acquiring the needed impartial test. It is to look for “a common essence” shared by all goods. James briefly surveys the “various essences of good [that] have...been found and proposed as bases of the ethical system” and concludes that “the best, on the whole, of these marks and measures of goodness seems to be the capacity to bring happiness.” “But,” he continues, “in order not to break down fatally, this test must be taken to cover innumerable acts and impulses that never *aim* at happiness; so that, after all, in seeking for a universal principle we inevitably are carried onward to the most universal principle—that *the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand.*”<sup>566</sup> The basic moral problem is that not all demands *can* be satisfied. Necessity constrains, and as a practical matter some demands must yield to others. “The actually possible in this world is vastly narrower than all that is demanded; and there is always a *pinch* between the ideal and the actual which can only be got through by leaving part of the ideal behind. There is hardly a good which we can imagine except as competing for the possession of the same bit of space and time with some other imagined good. Every end of desire that presents itself appears exclusive of some other end of desire... So...the ethical philosopher’s demand for the right scale of subordination in ideals is the fruit of an altogether practical need. Some part of the ideal must be butchered, and he needs to know which part. It is a tragic situation, and no mere speculative conundrum, with which he has to deal.” But if he is self-aware and appropriately humble, the philosopher realizes that he

---

<sup>565</sup> WB, 151-2.

<sup>566</sup> WB, 152-3.

cannot rightly look to “his own intuitive preferences” for guidance on which ideals to sacrifice; he sees that “the very best of men must not only be insensible, but be ludicrously and peculiarly insensible, to many goods,” so that, were he rely on his own personal inclinations, the result would be “a mutilation of the fulness of the truth.”<sup>567</sup> What, then, to do?

Before grappling with this question, let’s step back for a moment and look at the whole picture. All the features of man’s moral situation are beginning to come clear. Psychologically, our moral perceptions reveal the fitness or unfitness of certain relations in and among thinkers—the appropriateness of certain attitudes, the internal consistency of personal ideals and the harmony between our own ideals and those of others. Metaphysically, “good,” “bad,” and “obligation” emerge as “objects of feeling and desire” in an “ethical world” of “actually living minds” making “judgments of good and ill, and demands upon one another.”<sup>568</sup> Casuistic considerations emerge from a series of practical problems. The first practical problem is that of negotiating competing claims—because there *is* a conflict of claims. Because not all demands can be satisfied, it becomes necessary to choose some goods over others. The philosopher, confronting this situation, faces a second practical problem: he finds goods already ranked in society, some ideals already sacrificed, but he cannot assume that the goods actually on top are really the greater goods or that the ideals honored are better than the ones forfeited. Conventional rankings may blind us to certain goods. “If we follow the ideal which is conventionally highest, the others which we butcher either die and do not return to haunt us; or if they come back and accuse us of murder, everyone applauds us for turning to them a deaf ear. In other words, our environment encourages us not to be philosophers but partisans. The philosopher,

---

<sup>567</sup> WB, 153-4.

<sup>568</sup> WB, 150.

however, cannot, so long as he clings to his own ideal of objectivity, rule out any ideal from being heard.”<sup>569</sup> The basic dimensions of man’s moral position, then, are psychological, metaphysical, and practical (casuistry turns out to be a practical, rather than a “theoretical,” concern), and the dominant practical reality with which every man has to come to terms is the moral constitution of the society in which he lives. There is one more feature of the human moral situation, symbiotically bound up with personal experience and social mores: our “metaphysical and theological beliefs.”<sup>570</sup> Man is not a passive element in the universe but an active participant; he cannot merely exist in the world, but must interpret it, make sense of it, to live comfortably therein. And his understanding of the universe of which he is part decisively conditions his perceptions of moral qualities and of the obligations he bears to others. Perceptions, the reader will recall, are organized sensations, including both sensations immediately given and remembered sensations called up by expectations about what a given object might be. Metaphysical and theological beliefs involve expectations about what the universe will show and do, and thus inform perception. To know the world as it is requires at the least some circumspection about our expectations and caution about making empirical judgments. To understand our obligations we must give due consideration both to our moral perceptions and to the beliefs that inform them, scrutinizing our beliefs, testing them against sensible experience, and correcting our beliefs and perceptions as necessary.

Returning to our question: how to know which ideals to uphold and which to sacrifice? Well, the first thing is to sacrifice as few as possible, to try to do justice to as many as possible. “The guiding principle for ethical philosophy,” James says, “(since all demands conjointly cannot be satisfied in this poor world) [must] be simply to satisfy at all times *as*

---

<sup>569</sup> WB, 154.

<sup>570</sup> WB, 159.

*many demands as we can.*” “That act must be the best act, accordingly, which makes for the best whole, in the sense of awakening the least sum of dissatisfactions. In the casuistic scale, therefore, those ideals must be written highest which *prevail at the least cost*, or by whose realization the least possible number of other ideals are destroyed. Since victory and defeat there must be, the victory to be philosophically prayed for is that of the more inclusive side—of the side which even in the hour of triumph will to some degree do justice to the ideals in which the vanquished party’s interests lay.” Adopting this principle, James suggests, is the only viable alternative—in light of the complexity of the moral situation—to giving up and resigning oneself to moral skepticism.<sup>571</sup>

It is also the common sense alternative. The other side of the common sense attitude of taking life as it is is a resistance to leaving out of account anything that manifestly contributes to life, no matter how relatively small or how hard to reconcile with other goods. James said in an early essay that, “‘Mind,’ as we actually find it, contains all sorts of laws—those of logic, of fancy, of wit, of taste, decorum, beauty, morals, and so forth, as well as of perception of fact. Common sense estimates mental excellence by a combination of all these standards.”<sup>572</sup> Common sense estimates moral excellence and human excellence generally in the same way—not fixating on one kind of good to the exclusion of others but recognizing them all. It is not enough for common sense to preserve only the highest ideals; all claims should be heard, and all goods should be saved that can be saved.

The question remains, however, of which goods should be on top—which must be preserved at all costs, which should be fought for but not made all-important, and which can be let go without unacceptable loss. The answer hinges on metaphysical and theological considerations, and these in turn on psychology—or more precisely, on experience, in which

---

<sup>571</sup> WB, 155.

<sup>572</sup> “Spencer’s Definition of Mind,” in *Writings, 1878-1899*, 894.

the psyche apprehends realities beyond itself. James says at the beginning of the final section of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” that, “The chief of all the reasons why concrete ethics cannot be final is that they have to wait on metaphysical and theological beliefs.”<sup>573</sup> I observed earlier that beliefs inform perceptions. The most fundamental beliefs, and the most morally significant ones, are beliefs about the larger scheme of things. How one “reads” the moral facts will be most decisively influenced by just this kind of belief. Of all metaphysical questions, the most momentous for ethics is the question of God, his existence and his nature. Take the world first without reference to God. James repeats that “real ethical relations” would exist “in a purely human world,” and even in a “moral solitude,” where a person had no relations with others. In the latter case, the individual would still find that he cannot satisfy all his desires/ideals/demands at once and would have to choose among them. The case of moral solitude is especially useful to consider, because the moral relations here are relatively simple. What should the individual in moral isolation do when he finds himself conflicted about which desires to favor? In light of our guiding principle that we should always try to satisfy as many demands as possible, “awakening the least sum of dissatisfactions,” the answer seems clear: in cases of conflict, he should cater to those demands which, if not satisfied, will come back to “plague [him] with interminable crops of consequential damages, compunctions, and regrets.” James calls such demands “imperatives.”<sup>574</sup> Such imperatives are clearly recognizable in experience, if not always before the moment of moral decision, then certainly after choosing to ignore them. At some point, we perceive the quality of imperativeness in these demands and realize the damage to us or to others that will come of ignoring them. This perception of imperativeness is the experiential criterion by which to rank our goods. By this perception we see that some

---

<sup>573</sup> WB, 159.

<sup>574</sup> WB, 159.

goods are more essential, more important than others. Now we who live in society manifestly do not live in moral solitude, and we must factor into our moral calculations a vast range of ideals besides our own. But the same rule applies. The socially most imperative goods must be on top. Who should determine which goods are socially most imperative? James suggests that they ought in general to be determined by the long run of collective experience—by the common sense of the community—rather than by any one man or group of men. The philosopher, remembering his limitations, his “insensibility” to many goods, will not be quick to dismiss the order of goods in place in his own society. He will recognize that more ideals have been preserved and more good deposited in the funded experience of civilized tradition than he knows or can ever fully appreciate. James’ explanation of this attitude is worth quoting at length:

The course of history is nothing but the story of men’s struggles from generation to generation to find the more and more inclusive order. Invent some manner of realizing your own ideals which will also satisfy the alien demands—that and that only is the path of peace! Following this path, society has shaken itself into one sort of relative equilibrium after another by a series of social discoveries quite analogous to those of science. Polyandry and polygamy and slavery, private warfare and liberty to kill, judicial torture and arbitrary royal power have slowly succumbed to actually aroused complaints; and though someone’s ideals are unquestionably the worse off for each improvement, yet a vastly greater total number of them find shelter in our civilized society than in the older savage ways. So far then, and up to date, the casuistic scale is made for the philosopher already far better than he can ever make it for himself. An experiment of the most searching kind has proved that the laws and usages of the land are what yield the maximum of satisfaction to the thinkers taken all together. The presumption in cases of conflict must always be in favor of the conventionally recognized good. The philosopher must be a conservative, and in the construction of his casuistic scale must put the things most in accordance with the customs of the community on top.<sup>575</sup>

The affinity of James’ notion of social progress to Burke’s is evident.

But this is not the whole story. James goes on: “And yet if he be a true philosopher he must see that there is nothing final in any actually given equilibrium of human ideals, but that, as our present laws and customs have fought and conquered other past ones, so they

---

<sup>575</sup> WB, 155-6.



will in their turn be overthrown by any newly discovered order which will hush up the complaints that they still give rise to, without producing others louder still.”<sup>576</sup> So, while the presumption in disputed cases should favor the conventional order, this presumption must not be allowed to harden into rigid inflexibility. “The presumption [in “ethical science” as in “physical science”] always is that the vulgarly accepted opinions are true, and the right casuistic order that which public opinion believes in; and surely it would be folly quite as great, in most of us, to strike out independently and to aim at originality in ethics as in physics. *Every now and then, however,* someone is born with the right to be original, and his revolutionary thought or action may bear prosperous fruit. [My emphasis.] He may replace old ‘laws of nature’ by better ones; he may, by breaking old moral rules in a certain place, bring in a total condition of things more ideal than would have followed had the rules been kept.”<sup>577</sup> So, “although a man always risks much when he breaks away from established rules and strives to realize a larger ideal whole than they permit, yet the philosopher must allow that it is at all times open to anyone to make the experiment, provided he fear not to stake his life and character upon the throw.”<sup>578</sup> Such men, it might be added, were Confucius, Socrates, and Jesus.

Civilization, James suggests, is the maximal realization of ideals through a balancing of heroic new beginnings (on the basis of new insight) and conservation (preserving and consolidating the good of successful experiments). It is the product of “relative equilibrium” between “conservative” and “revolutionary” forces. “The anarchists, nihilists, and free-lovers; the free-silverites, socialists, and single-tax men; the free-traders and civil-service reformers; the prohibitionists and anti-vivisectionists; the radical darwinians with their idea

---

<sup>576</sup> WB, 156.

<sup>577</sup> WB, 157-8.

<sup>578</sup> WB, 156.

of the suppression of the weak—these and all the conservative sentiments of society arrayed against them, are simply deciding through actual experiment by what sort of conduct the maximum amount of good can be gained and kept in this world.”<sup>579</sup> It is clear enough that James in his view of social development adopts the perspective of common sense. In general he identifies with “the conservative sentiments of society” as against the revolutionary passions. But while common sense resists radical change, it is capable of embracing revolutionary ideas and approaches when they prove their worth experimentally. It is safe to say that James is an adversary of total revolution, but it is equally apparent that he welcomed *partial* revolutions that, by improving life dramatically in some respects without sacrificing larger civilizational acquisitions, create a more ideal situation *on the whole*. He could even be open to a *total transformation* of the culture, provided the change was sufficiently continuous with the old order and sufficiently gradual and above all manifestly *better* all around than what came before. This attitude is the essence of common sense. Unless deeply offended by them, common sense does not respond to new ideas with “no!” but “wait and see.” Its posture is like that of Gamaliel, that wise Pharisee who advised, “Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”<sup>580</sup>

Earlier I noted James’ suggestion that the most momentous ethically-relevant beliefs are precisely those about God. In point of fact, it looks as if every civilization had its origins in religion, as if the various civilizational mores emerged out of religious belief and practice. Arguably, the moral power of Confucius and Socrates as well as of Jesus, to return to my three examples of successful revolutionaries, stemmed from their attitudes toward what must

---

<sup>579</sup> WB, 156-7.

<sup>580</sup> Acts 6:38-9 (NIV).

be taken as divine. Their respective views of right order hinged on a sense of a higher order laid out in or by heaven. Their imperatives were more piercing than the usual imperatives because they were seen as having a source beyond self and beyond the societies in which they lived, even beyond mankind in general and beyond nature itself, and this sense of higher obligation generated in them extraordinary moral energy. “The deepest difference, practically,” says James, “in the moral life of man is the difference between the easy-going and the strenuous mood. When in the easy-going mood the shrinking from present ill is our ruling consideration. The strenuous mood, on the contrary, makes us quite indifferent to present ill, if only the greater ideal be attained.”<sup>581</sup> Nothing awakens the strenuous mood, James observes, like the sense of divine appeal, a challenge from on high.

In a merely human world without a God, the appeal to our moral energy falls short of its maximal stimulating power. Life, to be sure, is even in such a world a genuinely ethical symphony; but it is played in the compass of a couple of poor octaves, and the infinite scale of values fails to open up. Many of us, indeed—like Sir James Stephen in those eloquent *Essays by a Barrister*—would openly laugh at the very idea of the strenuous mood being awakened in us by those claims of remote posterity which constitute the last appeal of the religion of humanity. We do not love these men of the future keenly enough; and we love them perhaps the less the more we hear of their evolutionized perfection, their high average longevity and education, their freedom from war and crime, their relative immunity from pain and zymotic disease, and all their other negative superiorities. This is all too finite, we say; we see too well the vacuum beyond. It lacks the note of infinitude and mystery, and may all be dealt with in the don’t-care mood. No need of agonizing ourselves or making others agonize for these good creatures just at present.

When, however, we believe that a God is there, and that he is one of the claimants, the infinite perspective opens out. The scale of the symphony is incalculably prolonged. The more imperative ideals now begin to speak with an altogether new objectivity and significance, and to utter the penetrating, shattering, tragically challenging note of appeal. They ring out like the call of Victor Hugo’s alpine eagle, ‘qui parle au précipice et que le gouffre entend,’ and the strenuous mood awakens at the sound... Its blood is up; and cruelty to the lesser claims, so far from being a deterrent element, does but add to the stern joy with which it leaps to answer the greater. All through history, in the periodical conflicts of Puritanism with the don’t-care temper, we see the antagonism of the strenuous and genial moods, and the contrast between the ethics of infinite and mysterious obligation from on high, and those of prudence and the satisfaction of merely finite need... The strenuous type

---

<sup>581</sup> WB, 159-60.

of character will on the battlefield of human history always outwear the easy-going type, and religion will drive irreligion to the wall.<sup>582</sup>

Of course, the practical superiority morally of the religious attitude does not prove that God exists or that his nature is such as believed. But his existence and his good will toward man is the only possible basis for the kind of stable system of moral relations the philosopher seeks.

It would seem...and this is my final conclusion—that the stable and systematic moral universe for which the ethical philosopher asks is fully possible only in a world where there is a divine thinker with all-enveloping demands. If such a thinker existed, his way of subordinating the demands to one another would be the finally valid casuistic scale; his claims would be the most appealing; his ideal universe would be the most inclusive realizable whole. If he now exist, then actualized in his thought already must be that ethical philosophy which we seek as the pattern which our own must evermore approach. In the interests of our own ideal of systematically unified moral truth, therefore, we, as would-be philosophers, must postulate a divine thinker, and pray for the victory of the religious cause.<sup>583</sup>

But supposing such a “divine thinker with all-enveloping demands” exists, how do we know what his demands *are*? How can this divine “pattern” of values be discovered?<sup>584</sup> James’ answer, in light of his larger corpus, is that the ethical philosopher must look to *religious experience* to discover what can be discovered of any “finally valid casuistic scale.” Thus, James’ ethical and religious investigations are, and must be, inseparably connected, at least with respect to the quest for an “eternal moral order,” a scale of ideals permanently guaranteed.<sup>585</sup> Indeed, James’ primary interest in religious experience is to find such an order. His pragmatic conception of God is of the Agent that guarantees “an eternal moral order,” reinforces conscience, and gives inner strength to live well. This is what, pragmatically speaking—and short of some kind of deeper mystical revelation—can be known of God, what he is known-as.

---

<sup>582</sup> WB, 160-1.

<sup>583</sup> WB, 161.

<sup>584</sup> Note the similarity of James’ language here of divine “pattern” and that of Plato in the *Republic*, 592b.

<sup>585</sup> See “Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered,” in P, 50-62.

James considers the moral upshot of religious experience in the chapters in *Varieties* on “Saintliness.” The meaning of religious experience (as for the pragmatist the meaning of any experience) is in its “fruits,” and the fruits of religious experience must be sought in the concrete differences of character and action such experience makes in the lives of believers.<sup>586</sup> “The collective name for the ripe fruits of religion in a character,” James says, “is Saintliness. The saintly character is the character for which spiritual emotions are the habitual centre of the personal energy; and there is a certain composite photograph of universal saintliness, the same in all religions.” James discerns four basic features of this universal saintliness: 1) “a feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world’s selfish little interests; and a conviction, not merely intellectual, but as it were sensible, of the existence of an Ideal Power;” 2) “a sense of friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control;” 3) “an immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down;” and 4) “a shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections, towards ‘yes, yes,’ and away from ‘no, no,’ where the claims of the non-ego are concerned.” James lists as “characteristic practical consequences” of these “fundamental inner conditions”: 1) “asceticism”—a deliberate foregoing of lower-level desires for the sake of higher goods; 2) “strength of soul,” making old, powerful “motives and inhibitions” insignificant; 3) “purity”—keeping “unspotted from the world” for the sake of deepening “spiritual consistency;” and 4) “charity”—an active love of one’s fellow man.<sup>587</sup> It is easy to see how these characteristics would augment tremendously the strenuous mood. The sense of higher purpose and divine empowerment and the corresponding ascetic discipline, single-mindedness, and energetic surge of love for others make the saintly personality a center of moral power that—all other things equal—

---

<sup>586</sup> VRE, 210.

<sup>587</sup> VRE, 219-21.

cannot be matched. The phenomenon of saintly moral power is perhaps nowhere more poignantly described than in Bergson's *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*:

[The mystic is taken beyond contemplation to] identification of the human will with the divine will... The soul is...passing from the static to the dynamic, from the closed to the open, from everyday life to mystic life... The mystic soul yearns to become [God's] instrument. It throws off anything in its substance that is not pure enough, not flexible and strong enough, to be turned to some use by God. Already it had sensed the presence of God, it had thought it beheld God in a symbolic vision, it had even been united to Him in its ecstasy; but none of this rapture was lasting, because it was mere contemplation... *Now* it is God who is acting through the soul, in the soul; the union is total, therefore final... Henceforth for the soul there is a superabundance of life. There is a boundless impetus. There is an irresistible impulse which hurls it into vast enterprises... The great mystic...has felt truth flowing into his soul from its fountainhead like an active force. He can no more help spreading it abroad than the sun can help diffusing its light. Only, it is not by mere words that he will spread it. For the love which consumes him is no longer simply the love of man for God, it is the love of God for all men.<sup>588</sup>

This is a variety of the strenuous life of which ordinary persons are simply incapable. And yet, James observes, their magnetic examples inspire imitation by more regular folk, so that saints become a “creative social force” like no other.<sup>589</sup>

Now Bergson's description above applies historically, as Bergson says, in particular to *Christian* mystics,<sup>590</sup> and this fact points again to the importance of metaphysical and theological beliefs for the moral life. In the *Varieties*, James calls these “over-beliefs,” and despite his concentration through most of that study on the sensible inner experience of religion, he suggests near the end that over-beliefs (provided they are existentially grounded—are “live,” as James put it in “The Will to Believe”) have enormous power to work good or ill because of their regulation of perceptions and actions. Over-beliefs turn

---

<sup>588</sup> Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 229-33.

<sup>589</sup> VRE, 285.

<sup>590</sup> See *Two Sources*, 227.

out to be “absolutely indispensable” practically, so that “the most interesting and valuable things about a man are usually his over-beliefs.”<sup>591</sup>

Significantly, James presents as the basic “test” of religious experience and belief *common sense*. In a chapter called “The Value of Saintliness,” he endeavors “to judge the absolute value of what religion adds to human life.” “What I propose to do,” he says, “is...to test saintliness by common sense, to use human standards to help us decide how far the religious life commends itself as an ideal kind of human activity,” and adds, “no religion has ever in the long run established or proved itself in any other way.”<sup>592</sup> Actually, the common sense test *just is* the test of the “long run” of experience: how does the religious life look in light of the common perceptions and standards that have withstood the ravages of time? John E. Smith summarizes James’ view nicely: he thought that “religions prove themselves by ministering to the human needs dominant at the time. James saw these needs as providing us with working principles for judging religion, principles that serve to eliminate the ‘humanly unfit’ and promote the survival of the ‘humanly fittest’ of religious beliefs. Testing religion, however, cannot be a matter of absolute precision and certainty... In insisting on the fallibility of human judgment, James was hoping to steer a middle course between certainty and ‘wanton doubt.’” This is the posture, as Smith notes, of common sense.<sup>593</sup> The “working principles” by which to judge religion are common sense principles, and they are to be applied in a commonsensical, all-things-considered way. As James put it in the *Varieties*, each religion must be evaluated—as for James *every* matter must be evaluated—“on the whole” rather than by reference to some pre-selected, *a priori* standard.<sup>594</sup>

---

<sup>591</sup> VRE, 405.

<sup>592</sup> VRE, 262, 266.

<sup>593</sup> John E. Smith, Introduction to VRE, xxxviii.

<sup>594</sup> VRE, 263.

The common sense test of the value of saintliness—saintly experience, belief, character, and action—is what effects it brings on the whole.

James is convinced that its overall effects are very good for mankind. Gauging as comprehensively as he can the practical consequences of saintliness (as described above), he concludes: “In a general way...and ‘on the whole,’ our abandonment of theological criteria, and our testing of religion by practical common sense and the empirical method, leave it in possession of its towering place in history.”<sup>595</sup> He admits that great wrongs have been done in the name of religion, but finds that, “The basenesses so commonly charged to religion’s account are...almost all of them, not chargeable at all to religion proper, but rather to religion’s wicked practical partner, the spirit of corporate dominion. And the bigotries are most of them chargeable to religion’s wicked intellectual partner, the spirit of dogmatic dominion, the passion for laying down the law in the form of a closed-in theoretic system.”<sup>596</sup> The real life of religion, he insists, is to be found in those dynamic individuals who yield to and are energized by that Ideal Power they perceive in and above them. To those who might tend to attribute the corrupting forms mentioned just before to religion itself, he says that

The fruits of religion...are, like all human products, liable to corruption by excess. Common sense must judge them... We find that error by excess is exemplified by every saintly virtue. Excess, in human faculties, means usually one-sidedness or want of balance... In the life of saints, technically so called, the spiritual faculties are strong, but what gives the impression of extravagance proves usually on examination to be a relative deficiency of intellect. Spiritual excitement takes pathological forms whenever other interests are too few and the intellect too narrow.<sup>597</sup>

---

<sup>595</sup> VRE, 299.

<sup>596</sup> VRE, 271.

<sup>597</sup> VRE, 273.



James considers corruptions of saintly virtues in some detail, but finds that, on balance, “the saintly group of qualities is indispensable to the world’s welfare.”<sup>598</sup> He summarizes their source and salutary influence as follows:

[The] group of [saintly attributes] forms a combination which...seems to flow from the sense of the divine as from its psychological centre. Whoever possesses strongly this sense comes naturally to think that the smallest details of this world derive infinite significance from their relation to an unseen divine order. The thought of this order yields him a superior denomination of happiness, and a steadfastness of soul with which no other can compare. In social relations his serviceability is exemplary; he abounds in impulses to help. His help is inward as well as outward, for his sympathy reaches souls as well as bodies, and kindles unsuspected faculties therein. Instead of placing happiness where common men place it, in comfort, he places it in a higher kind of inner excitement, which converts discomforts into sources of cheer and annuls unhappiness. So he turns his back upon no duty, however thankless; and when we are in need of assistance, we can count upon the saint lending his hand with more certainty than we can count upon any other person. Finally, his humble-mindedness and his ascetic tendencies save him from the petty personal pretensions which so obstruct our ordinary social intercourse, and his purity gives us in him a clean man for a companion. Felicity, purity, charity, patience, self-severity,—these are splendid excellencies, and the saint of all men shows them in the completest possible measure.<sup>599</sup>

All in all, the moral tone of the saint’s life is richer and profounder than any other. But mark well: the saint’s moral importance extends far beyond the immediate impact of his actions. He becomes a model and a source of inspiration for those of us who have not been vouchsafed comparably deep religious encounters. “Genuine saints,” James notices, “find in the elevated excitement with which their faith endows them an authority and impressiveness which makes them irresistible.”<sup>600</sup> This is the secret of their social significance: they lead by attraction rather than coercion, and others follow from aspiration rather than mere duty.<sup>601</sup> The power of their appeal—or perhaps, the appeal of the divine through them—makes ordinary moralists of the utilitarian stripe no match for them. The desire they awaken in

---

<sup>598</sup> VRE, 299.

<sup>599</sup> VRE, 294.

<sup>600</sup> VRE, 286.

<sup>601</sup> As Bergson recognized, the two most fundamental moral forces are “pressure” and “attraction” (*Two Sources*, 49).

others gives rise to the strenuous mood and unleashes a moral force against which the easy-going temper cannot muster a viable defense.

In the end, however, the religious life does not result in any clear-cut, final ethical system. The reason for this is that the mix of ideals present in the world at any given moment is never what it was, or will be moments hence. The general moral relations may hold permanently, but the particular moral relations are continually shifting, changing with each new desire and each new interaction of persons. Religious experience may sharpen our sense of the deeper order of nature, may clarify a good bit our view and understanding of the permanently higher goods, but we cannot derive from it any ethical rules that will show us exactly what to do in any genuine moral dilemma. Morally speaking, faith “after all serves only to let loose in us the strenuous mood,”<sup>602</sup> making us willing to pursue moral insight and discernment more doggedly.<sup>603</sup> In the concrete moment of moral conflict, “it is simply our total character and personal genius that are on trial; and if we invoke any so-called philosophy, our choice and use of that also are but revelations of our personal aptitude or incapacity for moral life. From this unsparing practical ordeal no professor’s lectures and no array of books can save us. The solving word, for the learned and the unlearned man alike, lies in the last resort in the dumb willingnesses and unwillingnesses of their interior characters, and nowhere else.”<sup>604</sup>

We see, then, that James understands right order to be an achievement, the concrete fulfillment of a process in experience aiming at maximization of satisfactions. It is an achievement, moreover, that requires constant maintenance: continual adjustments must be

---

<sup>602</sup> WB, 161.

<sup>603</sup> Hunter Brown describes the effects of the strenuous mood in these terms in *William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 107ff. His chapter on “The Strenuous Mood” is generally excellent.

<sup>604</sup> WB, 162.

made if the concrete order is to remain adequate to the rich and dynamic range of existing ideals. In a letter, James described his philosophy as one “which represents order as being gradually won and always in the making.”<sup>605</sup> While it may be possible to sketch out a permanently valid right ordering of goods, James believes any such sketch must be too abstract to be of much practical value. That it may be useful for ordinary moral situations he readily concedes. But for any genuine moral dilemma it will prove inadequate. “Abstract rules indeed can help,” says James, “but they help the less in proportion as our intuitions are more piercing, and our vocation is stronger for the moral life. For every real dilemma is in literal strictness a unique situation; and the exact combination of ideals realized and ideals disappointed which each decision creates is always a universe without a precedent, and for which no adequate previous rule exists.” “There is,” James says, “but one unconditional commandment, which is that we should seek incessantly, with fear and trembling, so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which we can see.”<sup>606</sup>

So much, then, for James’ basic ethical schema. Let me now fill it out a bit with some of the more important moral insights in his larger corpus. Ethics has, as implied in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” both a personal and a social dimension: the moral individual must look after both his own desires and those of others, including, significantly, whatever he can make out of God’s. Ethics, then, is concerned most basically with the well-being of self and of other selves. Practically, however, a man is no good to others until he has first put himself in order. The first concern of ethics, therefore, is the formation of personal character, which amounts to construction of a certain kind of self.

Initially, this construction of the self is not managed by the individual himself, but by parents or guardians, by schools and churches, and by society at large, with all its social

---

<sup>605</sup> Quoted in Peter H. Hare’s introduction to SPP, xxviii.

<sup>606</sup> WB, 158.

pressures and incentives. The self indeed is in some measure *constituted by* its relations to others. Ethics must accordingly consider the social dimension even when concentrating on personal character formation. At some point, however, the individual comes to a maturity of powers sufficient to make him primarily responsible for his own moral development. In either case—dependency or independency—the goal is the same: construction of a certain kind of self. Now this self is not constructed *ex nihilo*: the materials are given by nature. But the moral individual is confronted with a variety of potential selves, and must choose among them which to make actual. The context for personal character formation is a “rivalry and conflict of the different selves.” You will remember that James found the empirical self to be divisible into a material self, a social self, and a spiritual self. Bear in mind that these “selves” are conceptual cuts of a continuous field-self. Nonetheless, the divisions correspond roughly to real tensions within the field, and some potentialities in the field must inevitably give way to others. “With most objects of desire, physical nature restricts our choice to but one of many represented goods, and even so it is here. I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical selves and relinquishing the rest.” As a practical matter, “to make any one of them actual, the rest must more or less be suppressed. So the seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully, and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation.”<sup>607</sup> On the deepest level, the practical need to rank goods becomes a question of how to rank potential selves.

The broad outline of how we should rank them is clear enough on the level of common sense. “A tolerably unanimous opinion ranges the different selves...in an hierarchical scale, with the bodily Self at bottom, the spiritual Self at top, and the extracorporeal material selves and the various social selves between.” We are motivated or

---

<sup>607</sup> PP, 295-6.

directed to rank this way partly by necessity, partly by the judgments of our moral sense, and partly by social expectations. “Our merely natural [morally neutral] self-seeking would lead us to aggrandize all these selves; we give up deliberately only those among them which we cannot keep. Our unselfishness is thus apt to be a ‘virtue of necessity’... Of course this is not the only way in which we learn to subordinate our lower selves to our higher. A direct ethical judgment unquestionably also plays a part, and last, not least, we apply to our own persons judgments originally called forth by the acts of others.” Regarding this last, James adds that, “By having constantly to pass judgment on my associates, I come ere long to see, as Herr Horwicz says, my own lusts in the mirror of the lusts of others, and to think about them in a very different way from that in which I simply feel. Of course, the moral generalities which from childhood have been instilled into me accelerate enormously the advent of this reflective judgment of myself.”<sup>608</sup>

As James tends—erroneously, I think—to be thought of as having a quintessentially individualistic philosophy and view of man, what he says next in this passage is worth special notice:

In each kind of self, material, social, and spiritual, men distinguish between the immediate and the actual, and the remote and the potential, between the narrower and the wider view, to the detriment of the former and advantage of the latter... Of all these wider, more potential selves, *the potential social self* is the most interesting, by reason of certain apparent paradoxes to which it leads in conduct, and by reason of its connection with our moral and religious life... When for motives of honor and conscience I brave the condemnation of my own family, club, and ‘set’...I am always inwardly strengthened in my course and steeled against the loss of my actual social self by the thought of other and better *possible* social judges than those whose verdict goes against me now. [Even if no human companion’s approval is expected,] the emotion that beckons me on is indubitably the pursuit of an ideal social self, of a self that is at least *worthy* of approving recognition by the highest *possible* judging companion, if such companion there be. This self is the true, the intimate, the ultimate, the permanent Me which I seek. This judge is God... The impulse to pray is a

---

<sup>608</sup> PP, 299. Compare Horwicz’s comment to Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* III.1.3, where Smith describes conscience—his “impartial spectator”—as a “mirror” of the approvals and disapprovals of others, and of the natural sentiments which gave rise to them.

necessary consequence of the fact that whilst the innermost of the empirical selves of a man is a Self of the *social* sort, it yet can find its only adequate Socius in an ideal world.<sup>609</sup>

If James has it that “the innermost of the empirical selves of a man is a Self of the *social* sort,” the view of him as the ultimate individualist is at best a gross caricature, and in all likelihood simply a false impression.<sup>610</sup> Be that as it may, the “sense” of this “ideal spectator,”<sup>611</sup> as James goes on to call him, is of the highest significance for the moral life, as we have already seen.

Now that little matter of “natural self-seeking” that James mentioned above in passing turns out to be the central moral problem for human beings, because we cannot in fact do as we would and “aggrandize all the selves.” Consideration of this leads James into a discussion of “self love.” What kind of love of self is appropriate? James approaches the issue with a more narrowly focused question: “What self is loved in ‘self love?’” There are three key facts to consider here about normal human nature. The first is that “each of us is animated by a *direct feeling of regard for his own pure principle of individual existence*, whatever that may be, taken merely as such.” The second is that all the internal movements of the Self broadly conceived “are but results of the fact that certain *things* appeal to primitive and instinctive impulses of our nature, and that we follow their destinies with an excitement that owes nothing to a reflective source.”<sup>612</sup> The third fact is that our different selves excite or interest us in differing ways. “The most palpable selfishness of a man is his bodily selfishness, and his most palpable self is the body to which that selfishness relates.” What

---

<sup>609</sup> PP, 300-1.

<sup>610</sup> In my view, that misleading or false impression was created by the fact that James is preoccupied in most of his writings with epistemological matters, and these inevitably, as James himself says, are matters of personal perspective. As a kind of realist, he thought that we know the world directly, and through communication supported by imagination can know that we know this in some measure, but as an empiricist he thought that all knowledge is by its nature personal knowledge, that no one literally—at least not in the normal course of things—knows another’s thoughts as the other knows them, and that each one knows the real world from a slightly different angle.

<sup>611</sup> PP, 301.

<sup>612</sup> PP, 303-4.

happens to our bodies “excites in us emotions and tendencies to action more energetic and habitual than any which are excited by other portions of the ‘field’ [of consciousness].” Our social self-love and spiritual self-love also are excited by objective factors, objects in the field of consciousness—social self-love relates to “the images other men have framed of me” and spiritual self-love to “my more phenomenal and perishable powers, my loves and hates, willingnesses and sensibilities, and the like.”<sup>613</sup> All the foregoing are normal and involuntary tendencies, and as such are morally neutral. And because all the self-loves are objective, James finds that “the dictum of the old-fashioned sensationalist psychology, that altruistic passions and interests are contradictory to the nature of things, and that if they appear anywhere to exist, it must be as secondary products, resolvable at bottom into cases of selfishness,” is empirically false. “There is no reason why any object whatever might not arouse and interest as primitively and instinctively as any other, whether connected or not with the interests of the me” (the objective self).<sup>614</sup> We may, then, have normal altruistic tendencies as well as self-interested ones. The moral difficulty, again, enters the picture when there is a conflict—immediately, a conflict of excitements and desires, and more remotely, a conflict of potential selves. Of course, one of the most important factors to consider in deciding which desire to favor and which self to become is how indulging or pursuing a given desire will affect others, and this consideration raises the question of *justice*. What is my obligation to others—what is right for me to do in light of *their* desires, what claim do *they* have on my attention and action? “The *just* man,” James says, “is the one who can weigh himself impartially. Impartial weighing presupposes a rare faculty of abstraction from the vividness with which, as Herr Horwicz has pointed out, things known as intimately as our own possessions and performances appeal to our imagination; and an equally rare

---

<sup>613</sup> PP, 304-5.

<sup>614</sup> PP, 309.

power of vividly representing the affairs of others. But, granting these rare powers, there is no reason why a man should not pass judgment on himself quite as objectively and well as anyone else. No matter how he *feels* about himself, unduly elated or unduly depressed, he may still truly *know* his own worth by measuring it by the outward standard he applies to other men, and counteract the injustice of the feeling he cannot wholly escape.”<sup>615</sup>

Note that, according to James’ analysis, principles of justice emerge *from experience*, and that justice itself is an *existential* matter, an inner disposition of impartiality in weighing interests and claims that leads to appropriate action. As Bernard P. Brennan has observed, James shows “the possibility of having objective standards which grow up in our experience.”<sup>616</sup> Part of the way James does this is by showing the relation between moral concepts and moral percepts. Brennan explains:

Without concepts we could not have a single rule of conduct or a single moral ideal. As James notes, ‘life’s values deepen when we translate percepts into ideas! The translation appears as far more than the original’s equivalent.’ For example, when we ‘translate’ our perception of a heroic act into its conceptual equivalent, we transform and enrich our perception. The concept of heroism complements the thickness of the perception with a luminousness and depth peculiar to conception.

On the other hand, once we are equipped with concepts, we find that we have guides to steer us through the labyrinth of life with its confusing mazes of sensations. As useful teleological instruments, concepts help us to survive and prosper in this world. Moreover, by means of concepts, we are able to make a re-evaluation of life, a task certainly of great importance for our moral development.<sup>617</sup>

Our moral development depends above all, as James sees it, on our *attention* to the right kinds of thoughts. James understands our intellectual and active capacities to be intimately linked. We are naturally impulsive creatures, and our thoughts are so bound up with our active tendencies that *every* thought we have produces an impulse to act. Only the presence of conflicting thoughts prevents us from acting on any given one. Listening

---

<sup>615</sup> PP, 311-12.

<sup>616</sup> Brennan, *The Ethics of William James* (New Haven: College and University Press, 1961), 120.

<sup>617</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-100. Brennan cites James’ SPP (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1948), 71, 73.



intently to “the still small voice” of wisdom, of “reasonable ideas,” will banish our unwise and ignoble thoughts, so that the latter can gain no purchase on us. The good man hears that still small voice “unflinchingly...and holds it fast, in spite of the host of exciting mental images which rise in revolt against it and would expel it from the mind. Sustained in this way by a resolute effort of attention, the difficult object ere long begins to call up its own congeners and associates and ends by changing the disposition of the man’s consciousness altogether. And with his consciousness, his action changes, for the new object, once stably in possession of the field of his thoughts, infallibly produces its own effects.”<sup>618</sup> If we can just keep the right kinds of thoughts steadily before our minds, and not let the wrong kinds seize the field, we *will* act rightly in due course.

We begin to see the proper relation between what we call “reason” and “will.” The quality of our moral lives depends on our strength of will. But will is essentially “effort of attention,”<sup>619</sup> and what we attend to matters. Thus, prior to having a good will we must have good thoughts, and this means directing our minds to good objects. The mental work to be done here is partly perceptual—*observing* what is good—and partly conceptual—naming and classifying the various goods and the appropriate ways to achieve them. The goods for man are desirable or worthy ends, or what James called in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” *ideals*. “The wise man,” says James, “is he who succeeds in finding the name which suits the needs of the particular occasion best. The ‘reasonable’ character is one who has a store of stable and worthy ends, and who does not decide about an action till he has calmly ascertained whether it be ministerial or detrimental to any one of these.”<sup>620</sup> But this seeing and conceiving of good ends has no good effect unless by firmness of will one keeps them

---

<sup>618</sup> PP, 1168.

<sup>619</sup> PP, 1167-8.

<sup>620</sup> PP, 1139.

steadily in mind: no sustained attention to good ends, no right action. Of course, none of the higher human ends are attainable in a single act, and it is not obvious from the outset just what series of actions will achieve them. We must discover appropriate means for attaining our ends, and this requires deliberation. The dynamic between reason and will is the same here, however. Deliberation as James describes it involves holding alternative possibilities before the mind until, for present purposes, one is selected. Selection may be based on immediate or remote considerations.<sup>621</sup> It is characteristic of the wise man that he takes the long view into account in his decisions, that he makes his present purpose fall in line with his longer term purposes, and so he selects means that will most conduce to his highest ends.

The essential moral act, then, is to hold the right thought before the mind until our natural impulses make us act on it, and the basic pattern of the moral life is repeatedly to attend to the right kinds of thoughts until doing so becomes habitual. All of this presupposes *finding* right thoughts, and *knowing* right thoughts when you see them. How is the mind led to such thoughts? This is the question of education. In a 1907 speech at Radcliffe College, James described what he thought to be the appropriate aim of a college education, and I think we can take what he said there to hold for his view of humane education generally. He says in that address that, “The best claim that a college education can possibly make on your respect, the best thing it can aspire to accomplish for you, is this: that it should *help you to know a good man when you see him.*”<sup>622</sup> Plato’s Socrates emphasized, when he and his companions were imaginatively establishing their ideal city in the *Republic*, the importance in early education of telling stories of heroes who were truly heroic, who really were the best of men and deserved to be emulated, and Socrates went on in the course of the dialogue to suggest the value to society at large of noble myth-making, creating

---

<sup>621</sup> PP, 1137ff.

<sup>622</sup> William James, *Writings 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Library of America, 1987), 1242.

literature that, in capturing the popular imagination, inspires people to noble lives. James has similar ideas. “What our colleges should teach,” he says, “is...biographical history, that not of politics merely, but of anything and everything so far as human efforts and conquests are factors that have played their part. Studying in this way, we learn what types of activity have stood the test of time; we acquire standards of the excellent and durable. All our arts and sciences and institutions are but so many quests of perfection on the part of men; and when we see how diverse the types of excellence may be, how various the tests, how flexible the adaptations, we gain a richer sense of what the terms ‘better’ and ‘worse’ may signify in general.”<sup>623</sup> James is recommending study of the “humanities,” and by this he means the study of human “masterpieces” of all kinds. “You can give humanistic value to almost anything by teaching it historically. Geology, economics, mechanics, are humanities when taught with reference to the successive achievements of the geniuses to which these sciences owe their being.” The purpose of teaching this broad-based “biographical history” is to provide examples for instruction and emulation: “Mankind does nothing save through initiatives on the part of inventors, great or small, and imitation by the rest of us—these are the sole factors active in human progress. Individuals of genius show the way, and set the patterns, which common people then adopt and follow. *The rivalry of the patterns is the history of the world.*” What is to be cultivated by this examination of great human creations is, first, a “critical sense” for “ideal values,” and second, “a lasting relish for the better kind of man.”<sup>624</sup> The point of helping people to know a good man when they see him, after all, is to make them want to be like such men, as much as possible.

Readers unfamiliar with James might conclude from that description of education that he holds the “common people” to be of little account. Nothing could be further from

---

<sup>623</sup> Ibid., 1244.

<sup>624</sup> Ibid., 1243-6.

the truth. In fact, James recommended educating ourselves about “the little guy” as well as the “geniuses.” But we study the former and the latter for different purposes: we study the great ones to inspire us, to set a standard for us; we study the least to understand the tremendous intrinsic value of every life. In either case, however, the role of imagination is crucial. James’ most developed direct statement on appreciating ordinary folks was a little lecture in *Talks for Teachers* entitled “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings.” We are peculiarly blind, he observes there, “in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves,”<sup>625</sup> and so we have to work at cultivating an imaginative sympathy with them. Whenever we get a “gleam of insight” into the inner lives of others, there is potential for a great moral breakthrough. We realize in such moments that the deep significance we feel our peculiar lives to have, others feel in a similar way about their own, often quite different lives. If we let this insight germinate, it “makes an epoch in our history.” There is a depth “in those moments that constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences;” “the whole scheme of our customary values gets confounded [and] a new centre and a new perspective must be found.”<sup>626</sup> “The stupidity and injustice of our opinions” concerning “the significance of alien lives,” “the falsity of our judgments, so far as they presume to decide in an absolute way on the value of other persons’ conditions or ideals,”<sup>627</sup> then become clear to us. The moral significance of our own lives, we begin to see, depends in large measure on attending carefully to the insight and seeking further glimpses into those inner lives, and a deeper understanding of them. But this will require effort and perseverance. We will need to put aside some of our ordinary

---

<sup>625</sup> *Writings of William James* (McDermott), 629.

<sup>626</sup> *Ibid.*, 634-5.

<sup>627</sup> *Ibid.*, 629-30.

practical concerns<sup>628</sup> to make imaginative explorations of these foreign matters, both through literature<sup>629</sup> and through immersion in “pure sensorial perception” in which we match what we can discover of these foreign experiences with what we have seen and felt in our own.<sup>630</sup>

The study of human excellence helps us develop our own inner capacities; the study of the inner significance of ordinary lives helps make us just. But of course, for our powers ever to mature fully and for us ever really to be just, we must give ourselves over to visions of excellence and of inner meaning until they drive us to action, and we must persist in exploring such visions and acting on them until personal virtue and justice toward others becomes engrained habit. Habit, as James points out in one of the best known chapters of his *Principles*, is a physical concern. “The moment one tries to define what habit is,” he says there, “one is led to the fundamental properties of matter.” Habit specifically involves the forming of neural pathways in the brain. The human brain is marked by an unusual degree of plasticity, so that nervous “currents pouring in from the sense-organs make with extreme facility paths which do not easily disappear... A simple habit, like every other nervous event...is, mechanically, nothing but a reflex discharge; and its anatomical substratum must be a path in the [nervous] system. The complex habits...are, from the same point of view, nothing but *concatenated* discharges in the nerve-centres, due to the presence there of systems of reflex paths, so organized as to wake each other up successively—the impression produced by one muscular contraction serving as a stimulus to provoke the next, until a final impression inhibits the process and closes the chain.”<sup>631</sup> James’ language here about the mechanical “point of view” is meant to remind his readers that the mechanical process

---

<sup>628</sup> Ibid., 637.

<sup>629</sup> Ibid., 634ff.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid., 642-3.

<sup>631</sup> PP, 109, 112.

described is probably only one dimension of habit—an essential dimension, to be sure, but one that does not necessarily exhaust the meaning of habituation. James, in fact, is certain that consciousness, and probably will, play part in the process. Speaking strictly as a scientist, James says that, in habitual movements, “the will, if any will be present, limits itself to a *permission* that they exert their motor effects... But if not distinct acts of will, [the] immediate antecedents of each movement of the chain are at any rate accompanied by consciousness of some kind. They are *sensations* to which we are *usually inattentive*, but which immediately call our attention if they go *wrong*.”<sup>632</sup> If we put this statement together with what James said above about our thoughts producing impulses that *will* lead to action of some kind if they keep our attention long enough and are not obstructed by contrary thoughts and impulses, it is easy to see that moral habituation will involve willfully training the mind on appropriate moral objects, deliberating about the best actions to attain those objects, and then willing that our active impulses be turned to the specific actions indicated by the verdicts of our deliberations.

I confidently assert the role of will here despite James’ tentativeness about will in the *Principles* because James famously willed to believe in free will. Freedom of will is one of those matters that to James justified unsubstantiated belief. He was convinced that the question of free will was irresolvable, that the facts relevant to resolving it could never be conclusively established, but also that the question of free will was too live, forced, and momentous to wait for an answer even if an answer might be discoverable.<sup>633</sup> He says in the *Principles* that, “My own belief is that the question of free-will is insoluble on strictly psychologic grounds... The grounds of [my] opinion are ethical rather than

---

<sup>632</sup> PP, 122-3.

<sup>633</sup> See James’ “The Will to Believe,” WB, 14.

psychological.”<sup>634</sup> The reader will recall the personal “crisis” of James’ young life in 1870 when he resolved that, “My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.”<sup>635</sup> The context of the crisis was that his study of science had called free will into question for him; he had begun to wonder whether everything is in fact determined for us by physical processes set in motion long ago. You can begin to understand James’ anxiety over this if you call to mind the scientific studies occasionally put forth in our own day claiming that the gene for some variety of criminal behavior or for believing in God has been “discovered.”<sup>636</sup> The question of free will, of course, is not whether we may be merely *predisposed* toward certain behaviors by genetics or environment or some other condition beyond our choice, but whether we are *determined* by them. The scientific trend in James’ day toward materialistic and therefore deterministic interpretations of human life is what drove James to revisit and reaffirm the common sense belief in free will.

The reason the question mattered was that belief or disbelief in free will has momentous, objective consequences in our actions and experience. James examines these most searchingly in an essay titled “The Dilemma of Determinism.” Belief that all our actions are determined for us by processes beyond our control naturally results in a “don’t care” attitude toward events. The feeling of regret—that a brutal murder occurred, for example—becomes meaningless, as does any notion of “right” or “wrong” acts. The “dilemma” to which James refers in the title is this: if all our acts are determined in this way, either (1) “Both [acts like “murder and treachery,” on the one hand, and regret, on the other] are supposed to have been foredoomed; so something must be fatally unreasonable, absurd,

---

<sup>634</sup> P, 1176.

<sup>635</sup> *Writings* (McDermott), 7.

<sup>636</sup> This latter claim was made only last year in Dean Hamer, *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes* (DoubleDay, 2004).

and wrong in the world”<sup>637</sup> (i.e., *acts* are not wrong—it’s *the world itself* that’s wrong, in being a place where such acts are “normal”), or (2) “The world must not be regarded as a machine whose final purpose is the making real of any outward good, but rather as a contrivance for deepening the theoretic consciousness of what goodness and evil in their intrinsic natures are. Not the doing either of good or of evil is what nature cares for, but the knowing of them. Life is one long eating of the fruit of the tree of *knowledge*.”<sup>638</sup> James calls the former view “pessimism” (an outlook epitomized by Schopenhauer) and the latter “subjectivism,” or (the term James personally prefers) “gnosticism.”<sup>639</sup> As pessimism has few takers, James concentrates his analysis on the subjective or gnostic stance. “If we practically take up subjectivism in a sincere and radical manner and follow its consequences, we meet with some that make us pause.” For example:

In theology, subjectivism develops as its ‘left wing’ antinomianism. In literature, its left wing is romanticism. And in practical life it is either a nerveless sentimentality or a sensualism without bounds. Everywhere it fosters the fatalistic mood of mind. It makes those who are already too inert more passive still; it renders wholly reckless those whose energy is already in excess. All through history we find how subjectivism, as soon as it has a free career, exhausts itself in every sort of spiritual, moral, and practical license. Its optimism turns to an ethical indifference, which infallibly brings dissolution in its train... After the pure and classic truths, the exciting and rancid ones must be explored.<sup>640</sup>

Fortunately, there is another option besides pessimism and subjectivism. It is “the objective philosophy of things” to which James holds, with its “recognition of limits, foreign and opaque to our understanding” and its “willingness, after bringing about some external good, to feel at peace,” leaving “the burden of the rest [to] higher powers.” This objective way James calls “pluralism”—the way he elsewhere calls the way of *common sense*.<sup>641</sup> It views the

---

<sup>637</sup> WB, 127.

<sup>638</sup> WB, 129.

<sup>639</sup> Ibid.

<sup>640</sup> WB, 132. Eric Voegelin describes even more disturbing varieties of gnosticism in Chapter 6 of his *New Science of Politics*. See vol. 5 of *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Manfred Henningsen (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000).

<sup>641</sup> In ERE. See pp. 160ff above.



universe as “a plurality of semi-independent forces, each one of which may help or hinder, and be helped or hindered by, the operations of the rest.” It makes sense of the apparently bad things in the universe and the sense of regret we feel about them, and it provides a motive for acting. “For my own part,” James says, “whatever difficulties may beset the philosophy of objective right and wrong, and the indeterminism it seems to imply, determinism, with its alternative of pessimism or romanticism, contains difficulties that are greater still.”<sup>642</sup> And so James embraces “affection” for his fellow inhabitants of the universe and “an unsophisticated moral sense,” taking the risk of being duped in doing so as a risk well worth it.<sup>643</sup>

This question of will is, I think, the key to James’ moral and religious theory, and by implication, his social theory. The possibility of human spirituality and of real human significance, to James, hung on the existence of genuinely free will. In the *Principles*, he says that,

‘Will you or won’t you have it so?’ is the most probing question we are ever asked; we are asked it every hour of the day, and about the largest as well as the smallest, the most theoretical as well as the most practical, things. We answer by *consents or non-consents* and not by words. What wonder that these dumb responses should seem our deepest organs of communication with the nature of things! What wonder if the effort demanded by them be the measure of our worth as men! What wonder if the amount which we accord of it be the one strictly underived and original contribution we make to the world!<sup>644</sup>

We begin to see how James could say that “the solving word” in moral dilemmas, “for the learned and the unlearned man alike, lies in the last resort in the dumb willingnesses and unwillingnesses of their interior characters, and nowhere else. It is not in heaven, neither is it beyond the sea; but the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart, that

---

<sup>642</sup> WB, 134-5.

<sup>643</sup> WB, 137.

<sup>644</sup> PP, 1182.

thou mayest do it.”<sup>645</sup> In the end, if we are to live nobly we must risk *extending ourselves* on behalf of a larger good that we may in the end fail to bring about. Notice, too, the religious language of this last statement of James’, which in fact is literally the last word in his “Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” The will was not only for James the center of moral action, but the locus of faith as well. Indeed, morality and faith ultimately merge for James: religious experience, in his thinking, completes morality, and morality cannot be complete without it.

### COMMON SENSE AND RELIGION

I have already said most of what needs to be said here about James’ religious outlook, and I can therefore keep my comments in this section relatively brief. We just saw James’ comment in that essay on “The Dilemma of Determinism” that the “objective,” “pluralistic,” *common sense* approach to life entailed “bringing about some external good” in the world, as we are able, and leaving “the burden of the rest [to] higher powers.” James in fact seems to have identified his religious outlook as the common sense view. In “Reflex Action and Theism,” James rejected radical monism for destroying the distinction between man and God,<sup>646</sup> agnosticism for denying we know anything about the nature of Being “and how it asks us to behave,” and gnosticism for claiming to know (not merely to believe) just “how Being made itself or us.”<sup>647</sup> This left ordinary, common-sense theism, which James embraced. “In co-operation with [God’s] purposes, not in any chimerical speculative conquest of him, not in any theoretic drinking of him up, must lie the real meaning of our destiny.” “In the silence of our theories,” in “those rare moments when the soul sobers herself, and leaves off her chattering and protesting about this formula or that,” “we...seem

---

<sup>645</sup> WB, 162.

<sup>646</sup> WB, 106.

<sup>647</sup> WB, 111.

to listen, to hear something like the pulse of Being beat; and it is borne in upon us that the mere turning of the character, the dumb willingness to suffer and to serve this universe, is more than all theories about it put together.” “Between agnosticism and gnosticism, theism stands midway, and holds to what is true in each. With agnosticism, it goes so far as to confess that we cannot know how Being made itself or us. With gnosticism, it goes so far as to insist that we can know Being’s character when made, and how it asks us to behave.”<sup>648</sup> The old, common-sense middle way, it seemed to James, was the most reasonable approach to matters of faith.

In Lecture XIV of the *Varieties*, you will recall James’ proposing to “test saintliness by common sense, to use human standards to help us decide how far the religious life commends itself as an ideal kind of human activity,” adding that “no religion has ever in the long run established or proved itself in any other way.” Anticipating the objection of some of the faithful that “in following this sort of an empirical method we are handing ourselves over to systematic skepticism,” he says that, “Skepticism cannot...be ruled out...as a possibility against which our conclusions are secure” because “it would be absurd to affirm that one’s own age of the world can be beyond correction by the next age.” Holding to the middle way, however, he then says, “But to admit one’s liability to correction is one thing, and to embark upon a sea of wanton doubt is another... When larger ranges of truth open, it is surely best to be able to open ourselves to their reception, unfettered by our previous pretensions.” James concludes: “He who acknowledges the imperfections of his instrument, and makes allowance for it in discussing his observations, is in a much better position for gaining truth than if he claimed his instrument to be infallible. Or is dogmatic and scholastic theology less doubted in point of fact for claiming, as it does, to be in point of

---

<sup>648</sup> Ibid.

right undoubtable?”<sup>649</sup> This balance, this openness, this acknowledgement of limitations and willingness to trust to the “long run” of human experience—this is precisely the common sense attitude.

### COMMON SENSE AND SOCIETY

James did not write much of a directly political nature, but we have already seen in his account of morality and ethics features of a well-considered social vision. It remains, then, only for me to draw together the essential elements of that vision and supplement them with a few Jamesian observations about human social life that I haven’t mentioned. James said in that 1907 speech at Radcliffe College that, “Mankind does nothing save through initiatives on the part of inventors, great or small, and imitation by the rest of us—these are the sole factors active in human progress. Individuals of genius show the way, and set the patterns, which common people then adopt and follow. *The rivalry of the patterns is the history of the world.*”<sup>650</sup> The high value James placed on the heroic virtues are evident here: “*The sole factors active in human progress*” are “initiatives on the part of inventors...and imitation by the rest of us.” This conviction was a common refrain in James’ writings. In an essay called “Great Men and Their Environment,” he asserts that, “The mutations of societies...are in the main due directly or indirectly to the acts or the example of individuals whose genius was so adapted to the receptivities of the moment, or whose accidental position of authority was so critical that they became ferments, initiators of movement, setters of precedent or fashion, centres of corruption, or destroyers of other persons, whose gifts, had they had free play, would have led society in another direction.”<sup>651</sup> Again, in *Some Problems of Philosophy*, he said, “The progress of society is due to the fact that individuals vary

---

<sup>649</sup> VRE, 266-7.

<sup>650</sup> “The Social Value of the College-Bred,” 1246.

<sup>651</sup> EP, 170.

from the human average in all sorts of directions, and that the originality which they show is often so attractive or useful, that they are recognized by their tribe as leaders, and become setters of new ideals and objects of envy or imitation.”<sup>652</sup> To James, the observation was self-evident, a simple matter of common sense. But he was well aware that the view was meeting increasing resistance in the Western world, and so he felt it necessary to say the obvious, and repeat it now and then to make sure his readers or listeners marked it well and gave thought to it. He thought the matter important, I think, for the same reason he thought free will to be so important: it is essential to the meaning and significance of our lives that we can make a difference in the world—that we can engage, participate, and contribute our mite to the whole. His conviction about the significance of individuals was deeply grounded in experience, in his sense of how great men had impacted his own life, through books and through acquaintance, and in his profound sense of history. It was not, again, that he discounted the significance of ordinary people—quite the contrary: he was convinced that ordinary people’s lives were decisively shaped for good or ill, degraded or ennobled, devastated or enriched by the actions of “great men.” This was the way of the world, like it or not, and he wanted people to understand that it was part of their responsibility to try and ensure that men of great capacity served, rather than undermined, the common good.

In an essay on “The Importance of Individuals,” James expressed his view of the inadequacy of the sociological outlook from a human and moral point of view. “I for my part cannot but consider the talk of the contemporary sociological school about averages and general laws and predetermined tendencies, with its obligatory undervaluing of the

---

<sup>652</sup> SPP, 9.

importance of individual differences, as the most pernicious and immoral of fatalisms.”<sup>653</sup>

This dry, “scientific” way of looking at human affairs was, he thought, illiberal and reductionistic. It abstracted away from everything interesting and meaningful in human life. It discounted the geniuses and made the common man smaller. Ultimately, it represented a thinning out of humanity, and professionally, perhaps more than anything else James wanted to restore to the human sciences an appreciation for the *richness* of human experience.

Perhaps in part because of the fierceness of this desire and the force of his personality, along with his defense of the “will to believe,”<sup>654</sup> James has often been portrayed as a wishful thinker or a sunny optimist. This, it seems to me, is a serious mistake. We must remember that James was, though impressively energetic, an emotionally melancholy man who identified with the “sick souls” he described in the *Varieties*, one who had been gripped by “panic fear” as he stared into the abyss, “that pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life.”<sup>655</sup> Nor did he respond to that insecurity by escaping into gnostic visions or sentimentality. Rather, he opted for the “strenuous life” of one who risks all for an uncertain prize. One kind of “attractive or useful” trendsetters James described in that passage above in *Some Problems of Philosophy* were the “philosophers,”<sup>656</sup> and—although of course he didn’t say so in the book—James counted himself among them. He was an ambitious man—ambitious, I think, in the wholesome sense of not merely hoping but really trying “so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which [he could] see.”<sup>657</sup> He knew that he was one of the geniuses, one of the trendsetters, and he

---

<sup>653</sup> EP, 195.

<sup>654</sup> See Hunter Brown’s convincing account of James’ essay by that title from *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* and how it has been widely misinterpreted by his critics in Chapter 2 of *William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion*.

<sup>655</sup> See p. 192, above.

<sup>656</sup> SPP, 9-10.

<sup>657</sup> WB, 158.

wanted to make the most of the opportunity. His call to his countrymen was to face the very real evils of their world and wage the “moral equivalent of war” against them.<sup>658</sup>

At the same time, as we have seen, he was not a radical, and indeed, resisted radicalism as one of those social forces that is liable to evil. What radical would ever have observed, as he did, “how dependent all human social elevation is upon the prevalence of chastity,” saying that “hardly any factor measures more than this the difference between civilization and barbarism;” or pointed to a natural “hierarchy” of persons based on the ability to make decisions accounting for more and more remote considerations, from “the tramp” to “the philosopher and saint”?<sup>659</sup> His only criterion for judgment in human affairs was the verdict of experience, was common sense rightly conceived. He would support revolutionary forces if experience seemed to show their time had come; he sympathized with conservative sentiments, but not at the expense of foregoing some great new good that experience suggested was now within reach.<sup>660</sup> He was ready to fight to the last breath to meliorate human devastation, and wait on higher powers for a final remedy, according to the possibilities experience revealed to be open to him.

This was James’ general common sense attitude. The more directly practical form of James’ common sense vision for society may be seen in his account of the civic purpose of education. The title of that Radcliffe College address I have referenced was “The Social Value of the College-Bred.” James had in mind in the speech to impress on his young listeners not only the value of a humane education to themselves, but also how such an education could fit them to serve their country. Shortly following his claim that human progress is a matter of great initiative and imitation, he challenges his auditors: We

---

<sup>658</sup> See James’ famous essay by that title in *Writings, 1901-1910*, 1281-1293.

<sup>659</sup> PBC, 107.

<sup>660</sup> See above 220-1.

Americans ought to consider soberly the “democratic problem” and try to meet it. Critics say that democracy results in “vulgarity enthroned and institutionalized,” and we should take their critique seriously. “Democracy is on its trial, and no one knows how well it will stand the ordeal.” “Our democratic problem,” to be more precise, is just this: “Who are the kind of men from whom our majorities shall take their cue? Whom shall they treat as rightful leaders?” It is incumbent upon us, James suggests—“the educated class...the only permanent presence [in our democracy] that corresponds to the aristocracy in older countries,” who “with all their iniquities, did at least preserve some taste for higher human quality and honor certain forms of refinement by their enduring traditions”—it is incumbent on us to take moral leadership, so that our majorities take their cue from leaders with the capacity, training, wisdom, and virtue to direct others toward the common good.<sup>661</sup> James is calling for those John Adams and Thomas Jefferson called the “natural aristoi.”<sup>662</sup> How should we provide such leadership? James suggests two ways: First, broadening the culture by providing “a wider vision of what our colleges themselves should aim at.” This relates to the concern I mentioned just now about the human sciences. Second, deepening the culture by setting the right moral and spiritual “tone.” There are some

who stand for culture in the sense of exclusiveness...feeble caricatures of mankind, unable to know any good thing when they see it, incapable of enjoyment unless a printed label gives them leave...But every good college makes its students immune against this malady, of which the microbe haunts the neighborhood-printed pages. It does so by its general tone being too hearty for the microbe’s life. Real culture lives by sympathies and admirations, not by dislikes and disdains—under all misleading wrappings it pounces unerringly upon the human core... “Tone,” to be sure, is a terribly vague word to use, but there is no other, and this whole meditation is over questions of tone. If democracy is to be saved it must catch the higher, the healthier tone. If we are to impress it with our preferences, we ourselves must use the proper tone, which we, in turn, must have caught from our own teachers. It all reverts in the end to the action of innumerable imitative individuals upon each other and to the question of whose tone has the highest spreading power. As a class, we college

---

<sup>661</sup> “Social Value of the College-Bred,” 1245-6.

<sup>662</sup> See Jefferson’s letter To John Adams, October 28, 1813, in *Life and Selected Writings of Jefferson*, 579.



graduates should look to it that *ours* has spreading power. It ought to have the highest spreading power.<sup>663</sup>

In addition to spiritual qualities like vision and tone, however, James knew that even the most high-minded of us will be rendered ineffective if we neglect the simpler things. For someone so deeply spiritual,<sup>664</sup> James was always mindful of how much our lives are conditioned by our bodies. Above all, he well knew, the shape of man's life personally and socially is forged by his habits.

"Habit," James said, "is...the enormous flywheel of society, its most precious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance... It is well for the world that in most of us, by the age of thirty, the character has set like plaster, and will never soften again."<sup>665</sup> This is "well" for two reasons, at least: 1) "Habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, makes them more accurate and diminishes fatigue;"<sup>666</sup> and 2) "Habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed."<sup>667</sup> These facts have great importance for education. "The great thing...in all education," James says, "is to *make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy*. It is to fund and capitalize our acquisitions, and live at ease upon the interest of the fund. *For this we must make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can*, and guard against the growing into ways that are likely to be disadvantageous to us, as we should guard against the plague. The more of the details of our early life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automatism, the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their own

---

<sup>663</sup> Ibid., 1247-8.

<sup>664</sup> James once said that, "Religion is the greatest interest of my life." Quoted in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James; As Revealed in Unpublished Correspondence and Notes, together with His Published Writings*, vol. I (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1936) 165.

<sup>665</sup> PP, 125-26.

<sup>666</sup> PP, 117.

<sup>667</sup> PP, 119.

proper work.”<sup>668</sup> Habit wedded to common sense perception (interpolation) gives us a fund of common sense instincts and impressions to draw upon and keeps our thoughts from going far astray from reality—keeps us, in other words, living in truth. Indeed, James’ common sense in its broadest meaning is simply *funded experience*. The individual may fund his experience through faithful, habitual adherence to perceptual experience, and a community or society may fund experience in a similar way, sharing observations and safeguarding time-tested ideas and practices. To do this is to develop a “common sense tradition.”

What sets James’ notion of common sense apart from Witherspoon’s and McCosh’s, and the Scottish Common Sense philosophers generally, is its organically *dynamic* quality. We noticed before that James described common sense concepts as “intellectual forms” inherited from our ancient ancestors that “have been able to preserve themselves throughout the experience of all subsequent time.”<sup>669</sup> This understanding of common sense concepts is rather different than McCosh’s “self-evident, necessary, and universal truths,” but only in the specific sense that on James’ understanding *today’s* common sense concepts—which have indeed been self-evident, necessary, and universal on the basis of the facts that have been available—may some day be superceded on the basis of new facts that throw the old ones into a new light. The old concepts then become, strictly speaking, false, but not in that they bore no relation to the facts—certainly they fit the facts as we once knew them—rather in that they did not fit the facts we would come to discover. To illustrate: It was once “common sense” knowledge that the sun revolved around the earth. This was commonsensical in that, in our perceptual experience, we witnessed the sun rise in the east (on one side of us) and set in the west (on the other side). But while this common sense

---

<sup>668</sup> PP, 126.

<sup>669</sup> P, 83; see p. 154 above.

view was true to the facts as we once knew them, it was ultimately false, as our increasing astronomical knowledge revealed. The old view was reasonable, but was rendered obsolete by the newly gathered information. James, in conceiving common sense as evolving organically over time, dropping old conceptualizations that were no longer adequate to experience and incorporating new ones, gave the Anglo-American common sense tradition a historical dimension it had been lacking, and did so with a philosophic sophistication perhaps not matched in the larger Western common sense tradition since Vico.

In *Pragmatism*, James describes the evolution of common sense truth memorably, first on the individual, and then on the social, level.

The process here is always the same. The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives. So he tries to change first this opinion, and then that (for they resist change very variously), until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter, some idea that mediates between the stock and the new experience and runs them into one another most felicitously and expediently.

This new idea is then adopted as the true one. It preserves the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification, stretching them just enough to make them admit the novelty, but conceiving that in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible. An *outrée* explanation, violating all our preconceptions, would never pass for a true account of a novelty. We should scratch round industriously till we found something less excentric. The most violent revolutions in an individuals beliefs leave most of his old order standing. Time and space, cause and effect, nature and history, and one's own biography remain untouched. New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity. We hold a theory true just in proportion to its success in solving this 'problem of maxima and minima.' But success in solving this problem is eminently a matter of approximation. We say this theory solves it on the whole more satisfactorily than that theory; but that means more satisfactorily to ourselves, and individuals will emphasize their points of satisfaction differently. To a certain degree, therefore, everything here is plastic.

The point I now urge you to observe particularly is the part played by the older truths. Failure to take account of it is the source of much of the unjust criticism leveled against pragmatism. Their influence is absolutely controlling. Loyalty to them is the first principle—in most cases it is the only principle; for by far the most usual way of handling

phenomena so novel that they would make for a serious rearrangement of our preconception is to ignore them altogether, or to abuse those who bear witness to them.<sup>670</sup>

Pragmatism means to emulate this common sense process of grafting new onto old truth. In doing so, “It only follows...the example of the sister-sciences, interpreting the unobserved by the observed. It brings old and new harmoniously together. It converts the absolutely empty notion of a static relation of ‘correspondence’...between our minds and reality, into that of a rich and active commerce (that any one may follow in detail and understand) between particular thoughts of ours, and the great universe of other experiences in which they play their parts and have their uses.”<sup>671</sup> Like common sense, “Pragmatism is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses and to count the humblest and most personal experiences. She will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences. She will take a God who lives in the very dirt of private fact—if that should seem a likely place to find him. Her only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience’s demands, nothing being omitted.”<sup>672</sup>

It seems fair to conclude that Jamesian pragmatism is common sense reconceived, a philosophical methodizing of the common sense attitude and an energizing and “limbering up,” as James might say, of common sense concepts. James’ larger, radically empiricist philosophic vision seems, likewise, to be a systematic working out of this newly energized common sense outlook. A “rich and active commerce” with the particulars of human experience, not myopically with present experiences only but with the “long run of experience,” adapting creatively to new challenges while preserving civilizational achievements, is, I think I may safely say, James’ vision for social health and progress. On

---

<sup>670</sup> P, 34-5.

<sup>671</sup> P, 39.

<sup>672</sup> P, 44.

the basis of the material presented here, I would argue that James should be classed as a new variety of common sense philosopher, and one of the first rank.

## CONCLUSION

The foregoing survey allows me now to suggest an extended definition of “common sense” as developed philosophically up to date:

- Immediate sensorial experience, unreflective consciousness—James’ “pure experience.”
- Our belief-forming faculties in general (Thomas Reid, et al).
- The power of perception in particular—Aristotle’s *koine aesthesis*, James’ “interpolation.”
- Intuition of self-evident, necessary, and universal truths (Vico, Reid, McCosh).
- Primordial formation of concepts—*Denkmittel*.
- Realization that others sense things in the same way we do, that things are commonly sensed, and usage of generally accepted concepts to communicate about regular experiences generally and practical needs and utilities in particular (Plato, Aristotle, Vico, Reid).
- Fundamental ways of thinking inherited from our ancestors (James).
- Handling new experiences and ideas by grafting them on to the old stock of experiences and ideas (James and the Pragmatists).
- Funding of experience and concept (James).
- Common convictions, shared understandings of the good or the right, elemental sense of justice of a community (Vico, Reid, McCosh).
- Judgments made in accordance with the foregoing.
- Concept of good, sound judgment based on accumulated experience—“common sense” judgment.

From this cluster of meanings I draw the following conclusions. First, physical sensation and trust of the five (or more) senses (provided the sense organs are healthy and functioning normally) are foundational to common sense and largely responsible for the “well-grounded” quality of common sense understanding. Witherspoon’s statement, echoing Reid’s basic claim in his *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, that “our senses are to be trusted in the information they give us,” and that their deliverances “are the foundation of all our after reasonings”<sup>673</sup> makes the basic point. Second, and correspondingly, the common sense attitude tends to emphasize the rootedness of our spiritual selves in the body and our intimate acquaintance with the solid realities of the physical world. Third, the man of common sense for this reason has a keen sense of material possibilities and limitations. Fourth, he trusts the deliverances of his senses and the

---

<sup>673</sup> LMP, 73.

judgments of his mental faculties unless he has reason to doubt them. When doubt arises, the hard test of common sense opinions is concrete experience. Fifth, these deliverances and judgments provide a rather large mass of givens—impressions and perceptions that can be taken for granted in the ordinary course of things. Sixth, these givens provide a solid foundation for making conceptualizations of the world and of human experience. Seventh, communication about perceptions and the conceptions that arise from them is essential for objectivity. We know things to be real and ideas to be truths because others tell us their experiences tally with ours. Eighth, when such communication pervades a community, community givens emerge that provide a basis for associated action. Ninth, among these givens are convictions and conceptions of morality and justice. Tenth, concepts and practices based on these communal givens provide the basis for a common sense tradition. Such a tradition is strengthened by habit and legal and institutional norms.

The value of such a common sense tradition is best seen in its resistance to destructive ideologies. Ideas or theories that cut against the grain of so much funded experience will seem unreasonable, if not absurd, to the community or society in which such a tradition obtains. This is why Eric Voegelin was encouraged by the Anglo-American tradition of common sense: it seemed, compared to Germany and other Continental nations, impervious to movements like Nazism and fascism and communism. Voegelin's political project, inspired in part by his discovery that the "common sense attitude" preserved in Anglo-American culture was a historical embodiment of the classical philosophic attitude as reformed and developed by the Christian intellectual tradition, was to refashion political science so as to preserve and promote such cultural and civilizational achievements. In "What is Political Reality?"—the last essay of his *Anamnesis*—Voegelin said that the fundamentals of political science are "commonsense insights into correct

modes of action concerning man's existence in society—ranging from insights concerning the organization of government, to insights into the requirements of domestic and foreign policy, finance and military policy, all the way down to decision-making in concrete cases. We know, for instance, the tendency of those who wield power to abuse it, and we consider it expedient, in the interest of order, to place those who are in power under the review of competent advisory, controlling, or vetoing authorities.” His concluding remarks in that essay are so apposite to the present study that I quote it at length:

The term common sense...must be understood in the sense of the Scottish School, especially of Thomas Reid. For Reid, man is, in Cicero's sense, *rationis particeps*; and common sense is a compact type of rationality. “There is a certain degree of it which is necessary to our being subjects of law and government, capable of managing our own affairs, and answerable to our conduct towards others: this is called common sense, because it is common to all men with whom we can transact business, or call to account for their conduct.’ Common sense means the same as ‘a branch or degree of *ratio*’ for which a separate name is justifiable in ‘that in the greatest part of mankind no other degree of reason is to be found. It is this degree that entitles them to the denomination of reasonable creatures.’ Common sense, therefore, does not connote a social ballast of vulgar ideas, nor some set of *idées reçues* nor a ‘relatively natural world-view.’ On the contrary, it is the habit of judgment and conduct of a man formed by *ratio*; one could say it is the habit of an Aristotelian *spoudaios* without the luminosity of the knowledge concerning the *ratio* as the source of his rational judgment and conduct. Common sense is a civilizational habit that presupposes noetic experience, without the man of this habit himself possessing differentiated knowledge of noesis. The civilized *homo politicus* need not be a philosopher, but he must have common sense.

The reference to common sense is meant to make clear once more that, and also why, there can be no ‘theory of politics’ in terms of fundamental propositions or principles rising above the propositions of an ‘empirical’ science of politics. For the so-called *empeiria* of politics is the habit of common sense that, although compact, is formed by the *ratio* as the structure [*Sachstruktur*] of consciousness. Just as we characterized this habit as that of the *spoudaios* without the luminosity of consciousness, we also could reverse the statement and say that Aristotle's *Politics*, insofar as it does not deal with the logos of consciousness itself, is a common-sense study of typical situations that arise in society and history when man attempts to order his entire existence. Not without reason did Aristotle identify *episteme politike* with the virtue of *phronesis*.

The reflections about the close relation between common sense and classical politics were meant to call attention to the limits of common sense as well as to its importance. As far as its importance is concerned, the phenomenon of common sense as a refuge of *ratio* in the modern crisis of order can hardly be overestimated. Commonsense philosophy arose in the eighteenth century as resistance against both theologico-metaphysical dogmatism and scepticism—just in time to avoid destruction by ideological dogmatism. Commonsense philosophy is not a secondary ideology like the ‘traditions’ but a genuine residue of noesis.



The remarkable strength of the Anglo-American culture sphere in resisting the ideologies could be traced to the strong social field of common sense, even though, admittedly, in this sphere too the ideologies gain foothold, but have not up to now seriously endangered the order of the *res publica*. As far as its limitations are concerned, they are given by the noetic compactness of common sense. We are living in the time of ideological dogmatomachy. The ideologies, in spite of their dogmatic derailments, are in explicit contention with the order of consciousness. Common sense can rest assured of its ability ‘to judge of things self-evident,’ but it cannot oppose the ideologies on their level of differentiated argumentation, since common sense has at its command no explicit noesis. The remarkable power of resistance of the Anglo-American social field against the above-mentioned ideologies must not obscure the equally remarkable sterility of the philosophical struggle against the ideologies. Thus, if common sense is a pragmatic factor of the highest importance for the stability of Western society, it still is no substitute in our historical situation for a differentiated noesis. The search for ‘principles’ of political science, on the other hand, which was identified above as a potential source of social disorder, seems to me to express at the same time a genuine desire to go beyond the relative inadequacy of common sense and to attain once more the luminosity of noetic consciousness.<sup>674</sup>

What Voegelin means by “the luminosity of noetic consciousness” is the awareness of the right order of things that comes to one who has experienced the ultimate Ground of existence—traditionally called “God.” This points us to the importance of the religious dimension of the thought of Witherspoon and McCosh and James.

All three of our common sense thinkers recognized a sense of divine presence that comes to us most clearly in the form of conscience. Witherspoon said that conscience intimates “a natural sense of dependence” and “belief of a Divine Being” who is “not only . . . our Maker, preserver and benefactor, but . . . our righteous governor and supreme judge.”<sup>675</sup> McCosh described conscience as including a “fear of a supernatural power, and of coming judgments,” and added that, “It is this sentiment which, more than anything else, has retained the idea of God—in some cases very vaguely—among all nations.”<sup>676</sup> In describing our “moral sensibility,” James was led to the conception of conscience as involving most fundamentally the notion of a “highest possible judging companion,” and concluded that,

---

<sup>674</sup> *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, trans. M.J. Hanak, ed. David Walsh, in *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 410-12.

<sup>675</sup> *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, 91-2.

<sup>676</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

“This judge is God.”<sup>677</sup> In the *Varieties* James mentioned as a common religious experience “a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call ‘something there,’ more deep and more general than any of the special and particular ‘senses’ by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed,”<sup>678</sup> and later described the fundamental religious experience as follows:

There is a certain uniform deliverance in which religions all appear to meet. It consists of two parts:

1. An uneasiness; and
2. Its solution.
  1. The uneasiness, reduced to its simplest terms, is a sense that there is *something wrong about us* as we naturally stand.
  2. The solution is a sense that we are saved from the wrongness by making proper connexion with the higher powers.

In those more developed minds which alone we are studying, the wrongness takes a moral character, and the salvation takes a mystical tinge. I think we shall keep well within the limits of what is common to all such minds if we formulate the essence of their religious experience in terms like these:

The individual, so far as he suffers from his wrongness and criticizes it, is to that extent consciously beyond it, and in at least possible touch with something higher, if anything higher exist. Along with the wrong part there is thus a better part of him, even though it may be but a most helpless germ. With which part he should identify his real being is by no means obvious at this stage; but when stage 2 (the stage of solution or salvation) arrives, the man identifies his real being with the germinal higher part of himself; and does so in the following way. He becomes conscious that this higher part is conterminous and continuous with a more of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck.<sup>679</sup>

This essentially is the breakthrough that leads to what Voegelin calls “the luminosity of noetic consciousness”—the awakening of *nous* (the Greek term for “reason”), that “higher” part of the self to which James refers, and the awareness coming with it of a deeper Ground of human existence. Discovery of this Ground becomes a source of order in revealing to the man who has experienced it what is the highest Good and thereby how he should rank

---

<sup>677</sup> PP, 301.

<sup>678</sup> VRE, 55.

<sup>679</sup> VRE, 400.

his other goods. He becomes quite literally a new man. Others may experience an “echo” effect encountering such a man, and be drawn to an awakening to the Ground themselves. In this way, the experience of the divine Ground is, as Bergson puts it in *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, imparted “to a tiny handful of privileged souls which together form a spiritual society; societies of this kind might multiply; each one, through such of its members as might be exceptionally gifted, would give birth to one or several others; thus the impetus would be preserved and continued until such time as a profound change in the material conditions imposed on humanity by nature should permit, in spiritual matters, of a radical transformation. Such is the method followed by the great mystics.” Bergson warns, as James does in the *Varieties*, and as Voegelin does in various places in his writings, that “mysticism means nothing, absolutely nothing, to the man who has no experience of it, however slight.” Nevertheless, Bergson continues, “grant this fierce glow [of the originary experience], and the molten matter will easily run into the mould of a doctrine, or even become that doctrine as it solidifies. We represent religion, then, as the crystallization, brought about by a scientific process of cooling, of what mysticism had poured, while hot, into the soul of man. Through religion all men get a little of what a few privileged souls possessed in full.”<sup>680</sup> In this way, the experience of the divine Ground of being becomes a source of social order. Religious experience gives way to a morality of keeping the forms of faith, which in their comparatively weak but important way, preserves the new order. New breakthroughs and new extensions of order may follow in time, and there is no sure way to know how it all will end. But the social order and cohesion they leave behind are at least semi-permanent. If Voegelin’s thesis is right, the Anglo-American common sense tradition, of which Witherspoon, McCosh, and James are primary American representatives, is a legacy

---

<sup>680</sup> *Two Sources*, 236-8.

of such religious experiences, and James' hunch that a deep order underlying the flux of immediate experience is discoverable through religious experience is sound. In any case, historically, common sense informed by religious experience seems to be the basis of the Western tradition of natural right and natural law.

## REFERENCES

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Martin Ostwald. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1962.
- Barzun, Jacques. *A Stroll With William James*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983.
- Bergson, Henri. *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. Trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1977.
- Berry, Christopher J. *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.
- Brandom, Robert B., ed. *Rorty and His Critics*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2000.
- Brennan, Bernard P. *The Ethics of William James*. New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press, 1961.
- Brown, Hunter. *William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000.
- Butler, Joseph. *The Works of Joseph Butler, D.C.L., Sometime Lord Bishop of Durham*. Ed. W. E. Gladstone. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897.
- Collins, Varnum Lansing. *President Witherspoon*. 2 vols. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1925; reprinted New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969.
- Cotkin, George. *William James, Public Philosopher*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990.
- Cuneo, Terence, and Rene van Woudenberg, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Dewey, John. *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Moral Writings of John Dewey*. Ed. James Gouinlock. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Public and Its Problems*. Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1954.
- Ede, James M. *William James and Phenomenology*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Fontinell, Eugene. *Self, God, and Immortality: A Jamesian Investigation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986.

Gale, Richard M. *The Divided Self of William James*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Hall, Mark David. *The Political and Legal Philosophy of James Wilson, 1742-1798*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997.

Hamilton, Alexander, James Madison, and John Jay. *The Federalist Papers*. Ed. Clinton Rossiter. New York: Mentor, 1961.

Hoeveler, J. David. *James McCosh and the Scottish Intellectual Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

Holthoon, Frits van and David R. Olson. *Common Sense: The Foundations for Social Science*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987.

Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Ed. P. H. Nidditch. Oxford, Clarendon press, 1975.

Holthoon, Fritz van, and David R. Olson, eds. *Common Sense: The Foundations for Social Science*. Vol. VI in Sources in Semiotics. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987.

Hutcheson, Francis. *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense*. Ed. Aaron Garrett. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002.

\_\_\_\_\_. *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*. Ed. Wolfgang Leidhold. Indianapolis: Liberty Funds, 2004.

James, William. *Essays in Philosophy*. In *The Works of William James*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Essays in Psychological Research*. In *The Works of William James*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. In *The Works of William James*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Essays in Religion and Morality*. In *The Works of William James*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Meaning of Truth*. In *The Works of William James*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.

\_\_\_\_\_. *A Pluralistic Universe*. In *The Works of William James*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Pragmatism*. In *The Works of William James*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Principles of Psychology*. In *The Works of William James*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Some Problems of Philosophy*. In *The Works of William James*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. In *The Works of William James*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. In *The Works of William James*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*. Ed. John J. McDermott. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Writings, 1878-1899*. Ed. Gerald E. Myers. New York: Library of America, 1992.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Writings, 1902-1910*. Ed. Bruce Kuklick. New York: Library of America, 1987.

Haakonssen, Knud. *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Hoeveler, J. David, Jr. *James McCosh and the Scottish Intellectual Tradition, from Glasgow to Princeton*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Eds. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; reprinted 2004.

Kallen, Horace M. *William James and Henri Bergson: A Study in Contrasting Theories of Life*, and Responses and Reviews. In *Early Defenders of Pragmatism*, vol. 4. Ed. John R. Shook. Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 2001.

Kant, Immanuel. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Trans. James W. Ellington. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1977.

Krois, John Michael. "Vico and Peirce's 'Sensus Communis.'" In *Vico: Past and Present*. Ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981.

Lamberth, David C. *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Levinson, Henry S. *Science, Metaphysics, and the Chance of Salvation: An Interpretation of the Thought of William James*. Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1978.

Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

McCosh, James. *An Examination of Mr. J. S. Mill's Philosophy, Being a Defense of Fundamental Truth*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1866.

\_\_\_\_\_. *First and Fundamental Truths, Being a Treatise on Metaphysics*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1889.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Intuitions of the Mind, Inductively Investigated*. London: John Murray, 1860.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Method of the Divine Government, Physical and Moral*. New York: Robert Carter and Bros., 1869.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Realistic Philosophy, Defended in a Philosophic Series*. 2 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Religious Aspect of Evolution*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Scottish Philosophy: Biographical, Expository, Critical, from Hutcheson to Hamilton*. Hildesheim, Germany: Goerg Olms Verlagsbuchhanlung, 1875.

Menand, Louis, ed. *Pragmatism: A Reader*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.

Mill, J. S. *John Stuart Mill's Philosophy of Scientific Methods*. Ed. Ernest Nagel. New York: Hafner Press, 1950.

Miller, Thomas, ed. *The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon*. Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990.

Myers, Gerald E. *William James: His Life and Thought*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.

Norton, David Fate, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. Ed. Justus Buchler. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955.

Perry, Ralph Barton. *The Thought and Character of William James, As Revealed in Unpublished Correspondence and Notes, together with His Published Writings*. 2 vols. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1936.



Plato. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*. Eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.

Putnam, Ruth Anna. *Cambridge Companion to William James*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Reid, Thomas. *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*. Ed. Derek R. Brookes. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002.

\_\_\_\_\_. *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*. Ed. Derek R. Brookes. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Inquiry and Essays*. Eds. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1983.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Works of Thomas Reid*. 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. Ed. Sir William Hamilton. Edinburgh: MacLachlan and Stewart. Reprint Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994.

Rorty, Richard. *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books, 1999.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

Roth, Robert J. *British Empiricism and American Pragmatism: New Directions and Neglected Arguments*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1993.

Sandoz, Ellis. *A Government of Laws: Political Theory, Religion, and the American Founding*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990.

Schaeffer, John D. *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1990.

Seigfried, Charlene Haddock. *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1990.

Schultz, Bart, ed. *Essays on Henry Sidgwick*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Seth, Andrew. *Scottish Philosophy: A Comparison of the Scottish and German Answers to Hume*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York: Burt Franklin, 1885.

Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper), *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. Ed. Lawrence E. Klein. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Sheldon, Garrett Ward. *The Political Philosophy of James Madison*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

Sher, Richard B. and Jeffrey R. Smitten. *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Shook, John R. *Pragmatic Naturalism and Realism*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2003.

Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982.

Taves, Ann. *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Taylor, Charles. *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Vico, Giambattista. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*. Eds. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.

\_\_\_\_\_. *On the Study Methods of Our Time*. Trans. Elio Gianturco. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Voegelin, Eric. *On the Form of the American Mind. The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 1. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995.

Voegelin, Eric. *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics. The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 6. Trans. M. J. Hanak. Ed. David Walsh. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Autobiographical Reflections*. Ed. Ellis Sandoz. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The New Science of Politics*. In *Modernity Without Restraint*, vol. 5 of *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Ed. Manfred Henningsen. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_. *On the Form of the American Mind. The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 1. Trans. Ruth Hein. Eds. Jürgen Gebhardt and Barry Cooper. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995.

Welchman, Jennifer. *Dewey's Ethical Thought*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995.

Wild, John. *The Radical Empiricism of William James*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1969.

Witherspoon, John. *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy by John Witherspoon*. Ed. Jack Scott. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon*. Ed. Thomas Miller. Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Works of Rev. John Witherspoon*. Ed. John Rodgers. 4 vols. Philadelphia : W.W. Woodward, 1800-1801.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

## APPENDIX: ABBREVIATIONS OF JAMES' WORKS

ERE	<i>Essays in Radical Empiricism</i>
EP	<i>Essays in Philosophy</i>
MT	<i>The Meaning of Truth</i>
PP	<i>The Principles of Psychology</i>
PBC	<i>Psychology: Briefer Course</i>
PU	<i>A Pluralistic Universe</i>
P	<i>Pragmatism</i>
SPP	<i>Some Problems of Philosophy</i>
VRE	<i>The Varieties of Religious Experience</i>
WB	<i>The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy</i>

## VITA

Scott Segrest earned a bachelor of arts degree in history at Baylor University and a master of arts degree in politics at the University of Dallas. He was born in Portland, Oregon, but raised in Texas, near Waco. He brings to his scholarly pursuits a lifelong interest in American politics, having interned briefly for Doug Besharov at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., and then during a more extended period for Harold “Tex” Lezar in Dallas when the latter was president of the Texas Public Policy Foundation (headquartered in San Antonio), and later serving on the staff of the unfortunately doomed Jay Mathis for Congress campaign. He wrote his master’s thesis at the University of Dallas on “Christian Political Thought and Liberty at the American Founding.” In the course of his thesis research he discovered Ellis Sandoz’s rich and learned *A Government of Laws: Political Theory, Religion, and the American Founding*, the book that first showed him political philosophy as he imagined it should be and convinced him that he should try to study under Sandoz at Louisiana State University. He has not regretted doing so. At the December 2005 Louisiana State University commencement he receives his doctor of philosophy degree in political science.