

Jamesian View of Religion in Empiricism

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An intellect perplexed and baffled, yet a trustful sense of presence
— such is the situation of the man who is sincere with himself and with the facts,
but who remains religious still.

————— William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

INTRODUCTION

The significance of the central role of religion in the philosophy of William James cannot be overemphasized. It is noteworthy that not only a great part of his essays and lectures are devoted to religious problems but almost all his books are closed with a chapter dealing with religion, even when they are not directly concerned with religious matters.¹ His emphasis upon religion in philosophy is expressed best when he says : “[R]eligious experience ... needs ... to be carefully considered and interpreted by every one who aspires to reason out *a more complete philosophy*.” (PU, 769; my emphasis)

Several studies have been made on James’ view of religion in various ways. Among the most popular is one which focuses on his justification of its rationality. Myers carefully and informedly examines James’ way of defending religion². Another example is Suckiel who makes effort to legitimate religion in the present intellectual context using James’ argument³.

This rational/irrational dichotomy, however, is of just secondary importance, especially when one desires to go deep into the heart of Jamesian view. The apparent defensiveness of his argument comes from the two following reasons : First, in James’ day, mistrust of religion was wide spread particularly among intellectuals because of its ‘shameful irrationality’. He spoke *against* them siding with religion, which as a consequence made his discourse appear to be persuading them of its rationality. Second, he was a kind of philosopher with an open mind to talk to others, not a rigid intellectual who just offers his finished theory⁴. In consequence, his manner directly reflects his contemporary opinions, which makes it difficult for us to see the essence of his vision.

My thesis is as follows : What is important is that James insists on *religious experience*. This mirrors his deep

concern about the human condition, in which human beings are forced to live in a natural and empirical world on one hand, and cannot help desiring for a supernatural and transcendent world on the other hand, which some modern French philosophers would call 'incarnation'. I also discuss how this human limitation forces James to introduce pragmatism, showing the real essence of this notorious principle.

CHAPTER 1 DOES 'RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE' MEAN 'PURE EXPERIENCE'?

In order to clarify the James' empirical view with regard to religion, it will be helpful to distinguish first his two major terms concerning experience : 'pure experience' and 'religious experience'. The description of pure experience as 'undivided state of subject-object' seems so mystic, that quite a few critics carelessly identify it with that of the religious. But is 'pure experience' a satisfactory explanation of religious experience, or at least aimed to clarify it? And if not, what does religious experience mean in James?

The description of these two kinds of experience, with regard to this primal fusion of subject-object, indeed, sounds alike. However, a closer examination will show us that they are completely distinct notions.

Pure experience, on one hand, is introduced as "only one primal stuff in the world" (ERE, 4), or immediate state of experience which could work as anything. It is taken in specific contexts, and then it becomes interpreted as subject, object, thought, consciousness, or whatever. Pure experience, accordingly, means a strategy taken in order to explain human cognition. In this case, thus, the subject-object union is not of a *mystic* kind, but of a *neutral* kind, namely, the original state of human experience in general.

Religious experience, on the other hand, is not such a general experience as everyone could share at any time. This is not to say that it is of an esoteric nature kept to a few limited people, but that it has a specific nature as seen below:

Religion ... shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand *in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*. (VRE, 36; my emphasis)

To sum up, the key difference consists in whether 'the divine' is involved or not. The former metaphysically interprets the origin of our natural and ordinary experience, in which the divine plays no essential role; while the latter refers to a special kind of experience, which necessarily involves the relation to the divine⁵.

Now, to make his view on religious experience a bit clearer, let me consider what is meant by 'the divine' — i.e., the essence of religion. As can be seen in the following quotation, two notable features of religion can be pointed out:

[I use the word religion] in the supernaturalist sense, declaring that so-called order of nature, which constitutes this world's experience, is only one portion of the total universe, and *there stretches beyond this visible world an unseen world of which we now know nothing positive, but in its relation to which the true significance of our present mundane life consists.* (WB, 495; my emphasis)

From this passage, we realize that in James religion has to do with an unseen wider world, which remains hidden but holds real truth. To put it plainly, James considers that religion exists in a *higher, deeper and wider* region of the universe and it stretches *beyond* and is *discontinuous* with the 'natural' experiences which constitute our present mundane life.

But how do we possibly *experience* such region when it *goes beyond and remains discontinuous with this world's experience?* How do we know if it is something *higher?* I will discuss this matter further in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 2 EMPIRICAL RESULTS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Radically empiricist as he is, James examines religious experience by focusing on the results it brings about, what *actually* happens, in which we can discern three chief elements :

1. It entails a form of death, not that of the body, but of a certain mental process such as despair, followed by new range of life.⁶
2. This new life comes in the shape of energy.
3. The energy is of a different nature from that of the natural.

Let me make this clearer. 1. The first element, the deathlike termination leading to new life, means that the death of our own will opens the door to "the universe's deeper reaches", which otherwise remains closed⁷. What happens here is that the moment we give up striving and let go, something higher and wider begins to work for us. (PU, 769)

2. The work is done as a new level of energy given to us. The recipients become full of vitality they never expected to have. They suddenly realize that they have been only a part of something wider, and that as long as they let the wider work, inexhaustible energy is given unlimitedly⁸.

3. This energy is not only unexpected but also of an unusual kind, exceeding the conservation of energy—energy gained not by *taking* but by *giving*. Saints are good examples to illustrate this. They are not selfish, but altruistic : They do not do things for themselves, but for others. What is important here is that not *in spite of* but *because of* this altruism, they gain boundless energy. This miraculous vitalization, furthermore, has one more

significant factor: ethical value. Their passion is directed to doing *good*, which indicates the *goodness* of its origin. It would be reasonable, then, to suppose that the something working within is of a *higher* nature^{9,10}

As we have seen above, there indeed is convincing evidence to show that *we can feel some 'higher, deeper and wider' power despite the discontinuity, as a consequence of 'deathlike termination.'* This, however, raises a crucial question now: *Is what is experienced completely equivalent to what is believed to be Religion?* In other words, *is religious experience enough to make Religion?* In the next section I will discuss this question and its attendant problems.

CHAPTER 3 THE HUMAN LIMITATION AND PRAGMATISM

Unfortunately, the answer to the question I put is “No”. James confesses : “What the more characteristically divine facts are, apart from the actual inflow of energy... I know not.”(VRE, 463) But Religion *requires* more than experience can certify : “God, meaning only what enters into the religious man’s experience of union, falls short of being a [real] hypothesis.... He needs to enter into wider cosmic relations in order to justify the subject’s absolute confidence and peace.”(VRE, 462) Religion needs ‘body’, despite the lack of evidence¹¹. As James remarks, “[Religion] is something more [than personal experience], namely, *a postulator of new facts* as well.”(VRE, 462; my emphasis)

Here we face the human limitation that I mentioned at the beginning. There still remains a considerable gap between tangible facts and concrete proof in favor of the Deity, Heaven, Salvation, or whatever we might regard as components in established religion.

It deserves careful attention that James’ philosophical attitude itself, the Radical Empiricism, brings him into this difficulty. Radically empirical, on one hand, he cannot turn his blind eye to the possible existence of the unseen deeper regions, while on the other hand, his intellectual honesty never allows him to flirt with abstract concepts.

What characterizes James’ vision, however, is not just that he simply *accepts* this difficulty, but he also *confronts* it. This is life ; this is what we have to live. “Other world?” says Emerson, ‘*there is no other world, — than this one*, namely, in which our several biographies are founded.” (SPP, 1038; my emphasis)

Now we can understand why he must appeal to *pragmatism*, quite an earthly method of judging things by the result’s ‘cash–value’, even in such a celestial domain as religion. This earthliness should be interpreted as his almost ruthless intellectual honesty to think in the middle of concrete experiences and the incoherence they entail, and nowhere else.

Added to this, another important feature of pragmatism clarifies Jamesian view more : namely, pragmatism as process of life created by our testing and verifying our own belief, i.e., *acting*. In real life, there always is a gap between what we believe and its proof given to us. We must throw our belief into the gap by acting along it, even in such cases

as religious beliefs to which we can *never* receive the final answer. “For practical life at least,” James says closing *The Varieties*, “the *chance* of salvation is enough. No fact in human nature is more characteristic than is willingness to live on a chance. The existence of the chance makes the *difference* ... between a life of which the keynote is resignation and a life of which the keynote is hope.”(VRE, 469; my emphasis) This is real religious life led in this earthly round, and this is James’ Pragmatism in its literal sense of the word. To live means to create our own life amidst the human limitation, venturing ourselves into the gap on what we earnestly believe. The very belief that our act of believing might actually help God ¹²makes our life religious and worthy to live.¹³

CONCLUSION

It should be no exaggeration now to say that James’ work dealing with religious experience expresses his vision of the universe itself. This vision is itself his philosophy, a striking combination of radical empiricism, pragmatism and strong religious tendency. We find a man’s lifelong struggle for “a more complete philosophy” in his work—a struggle which never ends because the riddle of the whole universe would never fully be solved in this world. In this sense, his vision is far from static : It is, on the contrary, the dynamism itself. Jamesian philosophy is his testing his own belief, namely, his application of pragmatism to his own vision.

In conclusion, I would like to state the following: Jamesian view of religion is neither a simple defense of its rationality as some scholars discuss, nor just a detailed description of its living specimens as is commonly considered. I would say it is a world view, of highly *ethical* nature, which portrays how human beings, living in the lower empirical world on one hand, and in need of the transcendent religious world on the other hand, should *act*. The most noteworthy point in James is that he is always keenly aware of the sheer impossibility of obtaining enough evidence to support our religious belief. He is always aware, thus, of its irrationality, i.e., its being without *ratio* (ground). The heart of Jamesian view of religion in empiricism is, thus, the way he faces this irrationality inherent in human life.

¹ Cf. *Some Problems of Philosophy, Pragmatism, or A Pluralistic Universe, etc.*

² Myers, Gerald E. *William James, His Life and Thought*. New Haven : Yale University Press, 1986.

³ Suckiel, Ellen Kappy. *Heaven’s Champion*. Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1996.

⁴ Stephen C. Rowe is well aware of this. Rowe, C. Stephen. *The Vision of James*. Rockport : Element Books, Inc., 1996.

⁵ Although I laid emphasis on their difference here, yet of course in wider context in examining Jamesian view, they have some close relation. This relation, however, is too complicated to be discussed in detail in this paper. To put briefly, the term ‘feeling’ will intermediate between them.

⁶ [The religious experience is] ... described as experience of an unexpected life succeeding upon death... The phenomenon is that of new ranges of life succeeding on our most despairing moments. (VRE, 768–769)

⁷ “Sincerely to give up one’s conceit or hope of being good in one’s own right is the only door to the universe’s deeper reaches.” (PU, 769)

⁸ This is why James emphasizes the importance of relaxation. cf. James, “The Gospel of Relaxation,” in *Talks to Teachers and to Students*, 1983.

⁹ As you can see, this inference itself is based on pragmatism, thus leaves room for discussion.

¹⁰ It is important to examine religious experience in precise detail, but as space is limited, I will not take it up more. Further research on energy, subconsciousness, pure experience, would clarify his view more.

¹¹ “[Common man] have been interpolated divine miracles into the field of nature, they have built a heaven out beyond the grave.” (VRE, 463)

¹² “Who knows whether the faithfulness of individuals here below to their own poor over-beliefs may not actually help God in turn to be more effectively faithful to his own greater tasks?” (VRE, 463)

¹³ I discussed the crucial role that belief plays in his philosophy in more detail : Tsutsui Fumio, “Faith and James’ World Vision” in *Studies in The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. by Kyoto Society for The Philosophy of Religion, No.20, 2003.