William James and the Birth of Modern Teaching

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By

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PROLOGUE

On Tuesday, October 27, 1891, a lecture room at Harvard University's Dane Hall was filled to capacity. Several members of the University community were present. As noon approached, the attendees talked among themselves awaiting the arrival of their lecturer. At eleven fifty-nine, he arrived, bursting into the lecture hall with an energy that surprised even those familiar with him. He stopped to exchange greetings with a few acquaintances and waved to those who were at a distance. This gave those unfamiliar with him the opportunity to take stock of him. He was nearing 50 years of age and dressed somewhat informally given his rank and reputation. His blue eyes shone with joy, but a closer observation revealed a hint of sadness lurking beneath the surface. His greetings concluded, he bounded up to the podium, took up his place, produced his notes and began speaking.

> *In the general activity and uprising of ideal interest which everyone with an eye for fact can discern all about us in American life, there is perhaps no more promising feature than the fermentation which for a dozen years or more has been going on among the teachers. In whatever sphere of education their functions may lie, there is to be seen among them a really inspiring amount of searching of the heart about the highest concerns of their profession. The renovation of nations begins always at the top, among the reflective member of the State, and spreads slowly outward and downward. The teachers of this country, one may say, have the future in their hands. The earnestness which they at present show in striving to enlighten and strengthen themselves is an index of the nation's probabilities of advance in all ideal directions. The outward organization of education which we have in our United States is perhaps, on the whole, the best organization that exists in any country (James 1899/1983, 13).*

A bundle of nervous energy, he spoke enthusiastically about his subject, his voice rising and falling as emphasis demanded. He told his audience that although psychology cannot produce teachers directly (psychology being a science, teaching an art), it can assist educators in avoiding mistakes and in understanding the minds of their students. As his audience listened or scribbled notes on what they were hearing, little did they or their speaker, Professor William James, know that they were witnessing the birth of Educational Psychology.

Would that history was so cut and dried. The above paragraphs are so fraught with conjecture and inaccuracy as to make them laughable in the eyes of any serious historian. Let us innumerate some of the problems with what we've just read.

First, there is some difficulty in determining when these lectures took place. William James gives 1892 as the year in which his talks on psychology to teachers were first given. In the preface to *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, he states that "in 1892 I was asked by the Harvard Corporation to give a few public lectures on psychology to the Cambridge teachers" (James 1983, 3), and some historians and biographers have accepted this (e.g., Pajares 2003). An examination of documentary evidence, including both published works and private letters, now indicates clearly that the first of these lectures was given in the fall of 1891. In addition, the process which brought these lectures about began some time earlier and was much more complicated than a simple request for James to prepare a few remarks.

Second, for all that William James was, he was most decidedly not an educational psychologist. He did not directly examine learners and learning. Rather, he was a medical doctor who taught physiology, psychology and philosophy at Harvard. His *Talks to Teachers*-both as lectures and in their subsequent written form-were the application of known psychological principles to education. By this time, James was becoming skeptical of psychology as a science, and, as we will see, unsure as to what a scientific approach to education might entail. While he enjoyed teaching, and seemed to have a knack for it, he felt it was an unnatural act.

Third, there is considerable evidence that James was less than enthused about having to give these talks in the first place. Several letters to friends and colleagues indicate his dissatisfaction with the talks. Yet, while the original lectures may have been given at the request of "the Harvard Corporation," there is evidence that he continued to give them over the next several years-but for financial purposes rather than pedagogical ones. Finally, there is some indication that he viewed their eventual publication as an opportunity to never have to present the lectures in public again.

Fourth, James presented and refined his early lectures to teachers several times throughout the 1890s culminating with the publication of *Talks to Teachers* in 1899. The lines quoted above are from the published version of the Talks. Whatever James said that day in 1891, it likely differed considerably from what eventually appeared in book form. Even if we proceed with the argument that James gave birth to the field, the birthing process was difficult and labor was drawn out.

Finally, as with all things, pointing to one "great man" as the founder of a movement, and indeed as a fulcrum point in history, is now generally considered to be a fallacy. In recent years, this approach to historiography has fallen from favor. Even if we are to make the argument that James was the father (or perhaps godfather) of modern Educational Psychology, there were a confluence of factors that brought him to this point. The birth of the "New Psychology" some years earlier introduced a more scientific approach to a field that had previously been philosophical in orientation. The arrival of Charles W. Eliot as President of the university led to a modernization of Harvard and helped paved the way for James's Talks. Other theorists such as G. Stanley Hall and John Dewey had already begun to struggle with the application of Psychology to education before James presented his lectures. Later, E. L. Thorndike would attempt to make the study of education more empirical and less speculative leading to his being generally considered "the main architect of […] modern educational psychology" (Mayer 2003, 114). In short, to say that it all started with a Tuesday lecture is to vastly oversimplify the matter.

Acknowledging these concerns, I will proceed with the notion, that William James, while not *the* founder of the field, at least deserves consideration as one of Educational Psychology's progenitors. As mentioned above, the followers of Thorndike, Dewey and Hall would clearly make other claims, and while their claims would have merit, James had a role to play in the process. His role is the subject of the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER ONE

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

There are a great many worthy biographies of William James, and for a fuller understanding of his life and thought one must consult those[1]. Our purpose here is to consider the factors and experiences that might have colored James' understanding of the educational process that he would eventually consider in *Talks to Teachers*. As such, we begin by considering James's own educational experiences.

Henry James Sr. and the James Family

William James the philosopher was born into a prominent New York family in 1842. His grandfather and namesake (hereafter known as William of Albany or "Old Billy")[2] was a successful businessman and perhaps one of the two or three wealthiest men in America at the time (Lewis 1991). Among his notable ventures was his investment in the building of the Erie Canal and the purchase of Syracuse, NY for $30,000. The philosopher's father, Old Billy's third son, Henry, rebelled against the James patriarch by carousing, neglecting his studies and running up enormous bills for his father to pay. The extent of his rebellion was such that when Old Billy died, Henry found himself disinherited[3]. He filed and won a suit against his father's estate and by the age of twenty-seven was living on approximately $10,000 per year (one-twelfth of the estate's equally divided assets). Such wealth enabled Henry (hereafter known as Henry Senior), to spend his time writing long treatises on theology that

[1] See A Note on the Sources

[2] The Jameses were notorious for recycling names within the family. At least four consecutive generations contained a William. I have made an effort to identify which Henry, William, etc. is being discussed at a given time by using nicknames in this chapter.

[3] Henry's older half-brother William was also disinherited seemingly for the crime of becoming a Presbyterian minister against Old Billy's wishes.

failed to attract a commercial following. His theological ideas evolved considerably over the years as we shall see.

The life of Henry Senior is punctuated by two significant events: one in boyhood the other in his early years as a parent. The first event was traumatic, sudden, and produced a radical change in his life. At the age of thirteen, he and some friends were conducting a school experiment involving hot air balloons fueled by burning turpentine. When one balloon sailed through the open window of a stable, the impulsive Henry rushed in to stamp it out lest the building erupt in flames. Unfortunately, in the course of his activity, some of the turpentine had splashed on his pants which immediately caught fire. The burns to his right leg were so severe as to require amputation. With the onset of gangrene some time later, a second amputation above the knee was performed. Henry James Senior would spend the rest of his life walking on either a wooden or cork prosthesis.[4] After four bed-ridden years of recuperation, Henry Senior enrolled in Union College, a school with mortgages held by Old Billy. His interest in gambling, drinking and free-spending, however, soon led to his separation. Following some time in Boston, he returned to Union, graduated, gained employment editing a newspaper, and continued to drink heavily (Kaplan 1992).

Shortly thereafter, Old Billy died, and it is at this point that Henry Senior found himself disinherited. In actuality, the will was a complicated document directing that the wealth be held in trust for twenty-one years. Further, each son must demonstrate to the trustees that he had abstained from immoral behavior and embarked upon a practical, suitable and gainful profession. The trustees were empowered to determine the extent to which the heirs had fulfilled these obligations. Henry Senior was granted a modest annuity, but that was no guarantee that he would eventually be judged as successfully meeting the conditions of the will (Kaplan 1992).

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[4] There is some debate over what actually happened in this incident. Richardson has suggested that the boys were playing with the balloons not taking part in a school activity. This appears to be taken from the philosopher's preface to Henry Senior's autobiography. In his memoir, *Notes of a Son and Brother*, Henry James Jr. refers to his father as being "so lamed", but is vague about what this entails. Henry Senior's autobiography sheds no further light on the subject as he refers to an arm injury. Finally, there is some inconsistency as to the number, extensiveness and timing of the amputation(s). All that is known certainly is that one such operation was performed in May 1828. Please refer to Habegger (1994) for a further discussion of the matter.

It is perhaps for the purpose of demonstrating his good intentions in this matter that the twenty-four year old Henry Senior enrolled in the Princeton Theological Seminary in 1835 and remained there for two years. All the while, his attorneys worked to challenge his father's will. (Kaplan 1992). When, in 1837, they were successful, leaving the always restless Henry Senior with roughly a $10,000 per year inheritance, he took some manner of leave from Princeton and embarked upon a lengthy trip to Ireland and England. It was in England where he discovered the work of Robert Sandeman. The Scottish theologian, who had died nearly seventy years earlier, provided the rebellious Henry Senior with encouragement. The Sandemanians rejected the rites, hierarchy and self-righteousness of the Christian church in favor of a more primitive approach, one that was anti-clerical and suspicious of pastoral authority. Henry was so impressed that upon his return to the States, he edited a published a book of Sandeman's letters at his own expense, thus initiating his foray into theological writing.[5]

Once back in America, Henry Senior's dissatisfaction with Princeton became complete. He left the seminary and moved to New York City where he met Mary Walsh, the sister of a former Princeton classmate. In July 1840, following two years of courtship, the couple was married in the parlor of the Bride's family home (the non-sectarian ceremony was presided over by New York Mayor Isaac Varian). William the Philosopher's (henceforth Willie in this chapter) birth a year and a half later, was followed in rapid succession by those of his siblings Henry (Harry) in 1843, Garth Wilkinson in 1845, Robertson in 1846, and finally Alice in 1848.

Before shifting our focus from Henry senior's life to his influence on his children, we must consider the second major event in his life. In 1844, while he, Mary, young Willie and Harry were living near Windsor, England, Henry senior suffered "a mental and spiritual collapse" (Matthiessen 1948, 6). He described it as a suddenly occurring "insane and abject terror without ostensible cause" (James, H., as cited in Matthiessen 1948, 161). This condition would last for two years. Believing it to be the result of an overtaxed mind, doctors suggested rest and water-cures to assist in recuperation. One day, after describing to a friend the symptoms that brought him to a water-cure spa, Henry Senior learned that the Danish

[5] Self-publication would be Henry Senior's primary method of publishing his works. His books were generally unwanted, un-bought and unread. This might help to explain the fact that while he was left a sizeable fortune from his father, his children would be left with no significant financial windfall from his own death in 1882.

theologian, Emmanuel Swedenborg, had described the condition as a "vastation." This event led Henry James Senior to Swedenborgian theology.

Swedenborg had been a mining expert before a mystical experience convinced him that he possessed direct heavenly knowledge. When the religion made its way to America, his form of idealism initially found favor among rationalists and religious liberals. Soon, Swedenborgianism found itself associated with other spiritual phenomena such as hypnotism. The association was mutually beneficial. The Swedenborgians found potential converts among those involved in the spiritualist movement, while the spiritualists found a theological base in the religion (Menand 2001).

Although ultimately turned off by Swedenborgianism and its connection to the hypnotism that grew out of the work of Franz Anton Mesmer, Ralph Waldo Emerson initially read the work enthusiastically. It seems obvious, therefore, that Henry Senior's initial interest in this form of idealism would draw him to Emerson's work as well as that of others in the Transcendentalist school. In fact, after hearing Emerson speak several weeks after William's birth, Henry invited the Sage of Concord to visit the family in New York and confer his blessing upon the child. Emerson graciously did so, although watching the James family rejoice over the young William so soon after the death of his own beloved son must have added some degree of melancholy to the occasion (Allen 1967). As we shall see, Emerson would be an important figure in James's life. His influence was both direct and indirect, wanted and unwanted.

Henry Senior's philosophies extended, albeit erratically, to the education of his children. While he believed that children should be raised in an environment of freedom, he also held that they should be protected from the corrupt, physical world in which they lived. Schools, of course, were manifestations of that corruption. As a result, his first two children, Willie and Harry, were taught at home by tutors until Willie was about ten years of age after which they attended no fewer than nine different schools over the next six years-with additional periods of home tutoring thrown in for good measure (Richardson 2006: Bjork 1988; Simon 1998).

The Education of the James Children

Simon (1998) has suggested that part of the James children's inconsistent educational "program" stemmed in large part from Henry Senior's inconsistent thought on how and what children should be taught. The tenure of each new tutor and school would begin optimistically. Soon, however, Henry Senior would sour on the new instructor whose sins may

have ranged from incompetence to simply not measuring up to the elder James' exacting standards. Given such events, the James children's early experiences could not help but be inconsistent. When formal schooling began, the pattern continued.

The first school attended by Willie and Harry was the Institute Vergues where they learned some French under the rigid curriculum of the headmaster. Henry Senior allowed them to attend for one year before transferring them to another school in the neighborhood. William described the headmaster of the Pullings Jenks School (none other than Richard Pullings Jenks himself) as the only one who possessed anything like a desire to arouse the interests of the pupils. As we shall see, this is a teaching characteristic about which William would have something to say years later, and it is possible that those seeds were planted at the Pulling Jenks School. But of more immediate note, it was here that Willie first began to cultivate his love and talent for art under the tutelage of the drawing instructor, one Mr. Coe. For a time, young William would spend many of his free hours drawing.

Their time at the Pullings Jenks School was also short-lived. After a year, Henry Senior withdrew the boys from that institution and sent them to that of Forrest and Quackenbos. This new school offered two tracks: Classical (in which Willie was enrolled) and Industry and Usefulness (essentially an accounting program in which the unfortunate Harry found himself). This seemingly odd choice may have had its roots in its proximity to the James family home or in the fact that several of the boys' uncles had passed through the school (Allen 1967). Neither William nor Henry was happy with the Forrest and Quackenbos School, and both were excited when their father proposed an extended family trip to Europe. Thus the next chapter in the educational lives of Willie and Harry opened.

Henry Senior's educational philosophy was in no way reflected in his attempts to educate his oldest boys. Neither, particularly in light of their courses of study during the Forrest and Quackenbos experiment, did he consider their individual needs or interests. It seems that his primary motivation was to protect the children from dangerous ideas and to derail any relationships that might lead them to such ideas. What ideas did Henry Senior consider dangerous? Primarily the ones with which he disagreed (Simon 1998).

Yet the elder James's concerns about potential corruption from the schools were not mirrored by an equal concern of other corrupting influences. In a time where many members of society looked down upon the theater, Henry Senior and his wife frequently attended performances. Willie and Harry were free to accompany them or to attend by themselves

either with or without friends. Their freedom of choice extended to church and the boys were allowed to attend services or not as they wished. Museums were also open to them with father and sons visiting the various art galleries while the boys were frequent visitors to the Barnum Museum. It's quite possible that the latter may have provided the initial spark for Willie's interest in science.

At all events, it came to pass in 1855 that the family was herded off to Europe. The first long-term stop was in Geneva where in August the children, this time including brothers Wilkinson ("Wilkie") and Robertson ("Bob") were enrolled in a boarding school under the tutelage of a Mr. Roediger. Harry, still recovering from a malarial fever, and the youngest James child, Alice, were tutored at home by a Swiss governess.

The choice of this particular school for the boys was ostensibly made due to Henry Senior's desire for the children to learn languages and the fact that the Roediger school had fewer American students than others in Geneva. Only one lesson a day was conducted in English while the others were conducted in either French or German. The boys took well to the school with Willie gaining proficiency in French and progressing quite well in German. By mid-September, however, Henry Senior determined that the Swiss schools were over-rated. It also seems likely that he missed the boys. Having found no public acknowledgement of his writings, he often looked to his children for affirmation (Simon 1998). His Swedenborgian suspicion of institutions and his own desire to be the boys' intellectual mentor also pushed him to remove them from other sources of influence. By October, the family was in Paris, and one month later they arrived in London.

For purposes of completeness, it is tempting to examine in some detail each and every educational stop along the way. It is also, however, tedious to do so. London was next, followed by Paris in the spring of 1856, and for the next year and a half, the family bounced back and forth between the French capital and Boulogne-sur-Mer on the English Channel. William's interests, at this time, were split between science and art. His time in France was spent pursuing scientific interests, but after the academic term ended, his interest in art came back to the fore, and the family was once again on the move. This time, the destination was Newport, Rhode Island so that William could study art with William Morris Hunt (Menand 2001). This too would be a relatively temporary move and a year later it was back to Europe (Geneva and Bonn, this time) before returning to America and Newport in 1860. The Jameses would remain there, for all intents and purposes, until 1864. After four peripatetic years, a certain stability finally prevailed (Richardson 2006).

Thus, William's career as an artist began in earnest. And yet, in April of the following year, it was abandoned suddenly and permanently. By the fall of 1861, William had decided to enroll at Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School as a chemistry student. This seems surprising, given Henry senior's fear of the corrupting influence of educational institutions. Richardson (2006) has suggested that the elder James may have acquiesced to this son's wishes in exchange for William's promise not to enlist in the army during the early years of the Civil War. Fortunately, the Lawrence Scientific School, although affiliated with Harvard, was not connected with the College. Since Harvard College had reached a relative low point in its history, Henry Senior may have decided that the scientific school was a relatively innocuous alternative.

We might pause at this point to take stock of the early education of William James. In a sense, it seems befitting his lifelong personality. He was (mentally, of course, and often physically as well) active as evidenced by such characteristics as his love of hiking and mountain climbing as well as his impulsivity, spontaneity and his tendency to spread his energies across multiple projects. When he looked back upon those years, however, it was not without some distain. Aside from a significant exposure to and proficiency in European languages, which would ease his study of philosophy and scientific psychology, he saw little in his education that was worth the fuss. Ultimately, this would inform his attitudes toward formal education.

William James at Harvard

The Harvard of the 1860s was beginning to undergo its transformation into a modern university. This transformation would not be complete until Charles W. Eliot assumed the presidency at the end of the decade. Yet, even at this time, Harvard stood out in certain ways. Its long association with such men as Emerson, Longfellow, Hawthorne, and Lowell (to name but a few) ensured that the students were exposed to distinguished men. In a world where who you knew was often of more importance than what you learned, this was perhaps the most crucial college outcome for many young men of the time.

Yet, it was in science, and especially in the field of biological science, that Harvard was most contemporary and prophetic; and it was this emancipating influence, among all the facets of his time and place that most deeply affected William James during the years of his University study (Perry 1935, I, 205). The Lawrence Scientific School was founded in 1847 as a training ground for industrial sciences such as chemistry,

zoology, geology, and the like. Abbott Lawrence had originally donated the money to fund the school with the hope that it would provide skilled engineers for his mills. When the famous Swiss scientist, Louis Agassiz, was brought in to chair the zoology department, he brought a level of authority to the school with him. Under Agassiz's leadership, the school's intended focus shifted from the training of practical scientists to the training of researchers.

William James arrived at the Lawrence Scientific School in September 1861 and at first studied chemistry under Charles W. Eliot. Eliot's approach to teaching was that students learn by doing, not by listening to lectures, a somewhat radical notion at the time. There would be several echoes of this approach years later in *The Talks to Teachers* when James discusses the laws of habit (e.g., "don't preach too much to your students are abound in good talk in the abstract…wait for practical opportunities"-Chapter 8). Eliot would later say that William was an "interested and agreeable pupil, but…not wholly devoted to the study of chemistry" (Eliot n.d., as cited in James III 1920 I, 31-32). While Eliot said that James enjoyed experimentation, he was careful to specify that this preference was for "novel experimenting" (31-32).[6] This seems, again, to fit easily into the Jamesian persona. "He was," according to Ralph Barton Perry (1935), "eagerly but impatiently interested" (206). He lacked the capacity for prolonged, repetitious scientific activity. This was certainly exacerbated by his periods of poor health, but his physical ailments are not solely to blame. He was, constitutionally, not cut out for the sort of experimentation being conducted by the likes of Wilhelm Wundt. This weakness, and James saw it as such, however was the price he had to pay for his mental flexibility, the mind that would ultimately move between scientific psychology, philosophy and religious experience with relative ease. We have already seen his flitting mind dart back and forth between art and science. It is likely that this characteristic enabled him to be more positively affected by the peripatetic education of his youth than his brother was, in spite of William's own misgivings about it.

So it should come as no surprise to learn that, as had often been the case before, he soon switched his focus, this time to Natural Science, and began his studies with Agassiz. He remained a student of natural science until 1864 when he switched to the Medical School (Menand 2001). Yet it seems that Agassiz also used the pedagogical approach favored by Eliot,

[6] As for James's opinion of Eliot at that time: "Eliot I have not seen much more of, I don't believe he is a very accomplished chemist, but can't tell yet" (James, 1861a, p42).

and that this is what initially drew James to Agassiz. In a letter to his family on Christmas Day 1861, he wrote:

> I had a long talk with one of his students the other night and saw for the first time how a naturalist could feel about his trade in the same way that an artist does about his. For instance, Agassiz would rather take wholly uninstructed people 'for he has to unteach them all that they have learnt.' He does not let them look into a book for a long while, what they learn they must learn for themselves, and be masters of it all. The consequence is he makes naturalists of them, he does not merely cram them, and this student (he had been there 2 years) said he felt ready to go any where (sic) in the world now with nothing but his note book and study out anything quite alone. He must be a great teacher. (James 1861b, 63).[7]

By 1864, James was enrolled in the medical school at Harvard, although he had not decided on a particular course of study (Letters of WJ, 53). He clearly had no interest in practicing medicine, writing that "there is much humbug therein" (Perry 1935, 216). Yet, he continued to be impressed by Agassiz, so much so that when Agassiz put together an expedition to Brazil in 1865, William signed on to accompany him.

But if Agassiz was an inspirational figure to the young William, his specific passions were not passed on to the student. The trip to Brazil got off to a bad start when William came down with a mild case of smallpox. Writing to his family soon afterwards, he said "my coming was a mistake…I find that by staying, I shall learn next to nothing of Natural History as I care about learning it. My whole work will be mechanical, finding objects & packing them…" (James 1865, 106). In other words, he was doing precisely the sort of work that bored William James out of his wits.

If this were the case, however, the trip taught him something about himself:

> I am certain that my forte is not to go on exploring expeditions. I have no inward spur goading me forwards on that line, as I have on several speculating lines. I am convinced now, for good, that I am cut out for a speculative rather than an active life (James 1865a, 107).

Upon his return trip, he wrote his parents that "If there is anything I hate, it is collecting. I don't think it is suited to my genius at all" (James

[7] Interestingly, in the same letter, James writes "Chemistry comes on tolerably, but not as fast as I expected. I am pretty slow with my substances, having done but 12 since Thanksgiving and have 38 more to do before the end of the term" (p. 63-64).

1865b, 128). But all was not lost. For William James was growing up. As such, he considered himself to be all the better for having given the expedition a try. "I am getting to be very practical, orderly, and businesslike" he wrote his parents (James 1865b, 128). In this simple quote about being forced to do a non-preferred task, we see the spark of an idea. That idea will reach its fullest fruition decades later when James, in discussing the laws of habit writes that we should "do every day or two something for no other reason than its difficulty, so that, when the hour of dire need draws nigh, it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test" (James 1899/1983, 52).

Medical school training continued upon his return from Brazil, but his enthusiasm waned. James had initially entered medical school as a fallback to his career as a naturalist. With that dream faded, he lost direction once again. Following a bout of depression and a back injury, 1867 saw him once again in Europe. During his year and a half there, he concluded that he must finally complete something that he had begun. In 1868 he returned to Harvard armed with a desire to once and for all complete his medical degree as well as with a budding interest in the new science of psychology (Richardson 2006).

June of the following year saw James's completion of his medical exam (one of his examiners, Oliver Wendel Holmes, Sr., a Harvard Medical School professor, father of the future Supreme Court Justice, and long-time friend of the James family reportedly asked James a few questions and spent the remainder of the time inquiring after his family). Although he would never practice medicine, at long last he was William James, M.D. He had professional training if not yet a professional career. If this seemed to signal stability, however, his problems were far from over. Another back ailment struck him on his twenty-eighth birthday. His beloved cousin, Minnie Temple[8], died in early March. And the spring brought with it a monumental mental collapse.

The most detailed description of this event is found in William James's 1902 book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Initially, James attributed the event to an anonymous person, but later admitted that it was his own experience. When James begins his description by saying "there fell upon

[8] The relationship between Minnie Temple and William James is as enigmatic as it is fascinating, but beyond the scope of this book. The possibility exists that they were romantically attracted to one another in spite of William's concerns about marriage between first cousins. This, however, must remain speculative. No letters from William to Minnie exist and her letters to him are often missing or heavily censured or edited. The interested reader is advised to read Robert Richardson's (2006) biography of James for more information.

me without any warning…a horrible fear of my own existence" James 1902/1985, 134), it sounds much like a panic attack to modern ears. Recalling a patient he had seen in a mental hospital whom he described as a "sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human", James sees himself in the figure. "That shape am I, I felt potentially...there was such a horror of him…I became a mass of quivering fear" (134). This was no momentary experience of angst. James's world was ripped asunder, and he "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" (134). It was some time before he was able to walk alone, and in all he writes "I dreaded to be left alone" (135).

This event has been documented by many James biographers over the years, and its long-term effects on his personality need not concern us. Its ultimate resolution, however, may be seen as having implications for his eventual educational writing. Several weeks afterward, he recorded in his journal a revelation he had while reading the works of Charles Renouvier: "I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life," he wrote,

> I finished the first part of Renouvier's second "Essai" 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-until next year-that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will (James 1870 as cited in McDermott 1977, 7).

The significance of this event is clear when one considers how important the topic of will is for James in his writings. He would devote approximately eight percent of his masterwork, the *Principles of Psychology*, to this topic, and it would play a prominent role in *Talks to Teachers* as well. Perry (1935) considers this emotional crisis as a turning point in James's life-not immediately, of course, but it marked a slow upward turn from the man he was to the man he would become in the next two decades.

His will to believe in will was an action, and this is important to understand. For James, the philosopher was never content to be shackled to mere theoretical speculation. He could easily have said, "free will exists" and left matters at that, but this would neither have pulled him from his emotional crisis nor fitted his personal tendencies. By saying instead "my first act of free will shall be to believe in free will," he roused himself out of his despair in a way more befitting a man of action. This too, would surface later in his educational talks. "No reception without reaction, no impression without correlative expression-this is the great maxim" (James

1899/1983, 30). In *The Talks*, he speaks specifically about physical actions and their relationship to learning, but one must not be put off by this. To believe in free will is to act on that belief, to live one's life as a free agent. Once that has been accomplished, there comes a further benefit, namely, "the impression of what we have done" (32). We receive feedback through which we can determine the effect that action has upon us. "Concrete experiences," James wrote, "must prevail over psychological deduction" (32). For that reason, speculation of free will would never have been sufficient for James. Speculation must lead to action.

Professor William James

The second event was his embarkation on a teaching career in 1872. With the resignation of Jeffries Wyman, President Charles Eliot appointed James instructor of physiology that August. The following January, James taught his first course, Comparative Anatomy and Physiology of Vertebrates. In taking this post, James was now "at the forefront of the all-important emerging field of physiology just when physiology and medicine (and even Harvard) were poised for the sudden jump to modernity" (Richardson 2006, 141). This modernization will have significant implications for his later talks to teachers as we shall see. James took well to teaching, describing it as "interesting and stimulating" to his brother Henry (James 1870/1920, 167), and suggesting that it might suit him well as a career. The effect was noticeable to others as well. Henry James Sr., writing to Henry Jr., reported that William's disposition had changed much for the better (James, Sr. 1873 as cited in Perry 1935, 339).

There were times when he would become frustrated with his students (Richardson 2006) and, as we shall later see, when it came to presenting the *Talks to Teachers* (both in oral and written form) James seemed at best ambivalent and at worst hostile toward educators. In a letter to W.T. Harris, the former U.S. Commissioner of Education, he denigrated his own pedagogical skill and the application of psychology to education by saying "I have absolutely nothing to say about education that every teacher born of woman doesn't already know a great deal better than I do" (James 1891a, 220). Likewise, when first asked by Paul Hanus to give the talks at Harvard, he replied the he didn't know "just what pedagogic psychology means" (James 1891b, 148).

Yet we know that James was a gifted teacher well-loved by many of his students. We know, for instance, that his liveliness and humor endeared him to his students (Pajares 2003). The recollections of his students seem to bear this out. Edwin Starbuck (1943/1996) a Harvard

student during the mid-1880s remembers that "[h]is lectures were always vitalizing. No studied rhetoric. Always happy turns of intriguing phrases, a glow of warmth and meaning. Never a moment wasted on shop-made humor. We were always thinking together" (Starbuck 1943, as cited in Simon 1996, 168). Starbuck also indicates that James was student-oriented in his teaching "[he] began, not lecturing to us or at us, but discussing with us, some of the men and movements in psychology" (168). In a manner that would likely please advocates of student-centered learning, James asked the students whether they wanted to use a textbook, and if so to decide which one to use. Years later, Carl Rogers (1951) would develop this idea even further. The Jamesian spirit lingers over Rogers's attempts to not only have his students select the textbook, but to actively devise their own course curriculum:

> The writer has sometimes started a course with as simple a statement as this: "This is a course labeled Dynamics of Personality (or whatever course is being taught). I suspect each of us had some sort of purpose in enrolling, even if that purpose was only to gain another credit. If we could begin telling what our purposes were, perhaps we can, together, build the course in such a way as to meet them." As purposes are stated (often hesitatingly and haltingly), they are simply accepted, or the attitudes connected with them are clarified. Gradually issues arise out of these purposes, and the class is embarked upon its own curriculum construction (Rogers 1951, 393).

Likewise, Delabarre (1943/1996) remarked how James involved his students in his lectures. "He […incited] us to think out his problems with him. We appreciated fully his remarkable genius for felicitous, clear and picturesque expression" (Delbarre 1943, as cited in Simon 1996, 113). James also encouraged his students in extracurricular endeavors Delabarre recalled that in response to "certain criticisms of the atmosphere of Harvard," James "induced me to form a committee of graduate students who had come from other colleges to compare, by means of a questionnaire conditions at Harvard with those at their other colleges" (114).

His colleagues concurred. Neilson (1907) writing on the occasion of James's retirement from the Harvard Philosophy department, remarked that James once said of a colleague: "'the man enjoys the act of teaching' as if such an attitude were almost beyond comprehension" (98). Yet Neilson suggests that while James may have found such a point of view difficult to comprehend, he did not teach "as if he hated the task" (98).

He was also kind to his students, getting to know them personally. Delebarre and Starbuck both recalled being invited to dine at the James

home in Cambridge. When Mary Whiton Calkins, later one of the first female psychologists, applied for acceptance to Harvard, James and Josiah Royce lobbied strongly on her behalf. When, however, she was finally allowed to join the psychology seminars, she found that the other seminar students had dropped out under mysterious circumstances. So it came to pass that Calkins and James sat by a fireplace reading and discussing the newly-printed *Principles of Psychology* together (Fancher 1990).

To say he was a "gifted" teacher, however, does not mean that he adopted a particular approach to his craft that somehow set him apart from everyone else. It was, in fact, his personality that made him great. He was disorganized, to be sure, but while this characteristic may have reflected incompetence in others, it was part of James's charm. Indeed, we read in Starbuck's (1943) remembrances that on the first day of class, James

> Appeared, almost late, moved smoothly and unobtrusively up the middle aisle to the slightly elevated platform, placed a small bundle of books from his arm on the desk, paused, gave the class a split second of a friendly glance, lifted the index finger of his right hand above the forehead as if it were the symbol of a new idea and remarked, "Oh, excuse me, I forgot something" (128).

Thus, what might have been a classic example of the absent-minded professor, was viewed as characteristic of whimsical charm.

Still the Jamesian wanderings continued. He would soon become bored with whatever he was teaching, but once he gave it up, he would miss it and yearn to resume it (Perry 1935, 326). He had, originally, accepted a physiology professorship, but he longed to teach philosophy. This placed him at the horns of a dilemma: to re-up with physiology or to turn down such a position, and hold out for philosophy position? The former choice might preclude his taking a job in the philosophy department should one arise. In the latter case, such a position might not be immediately forthcoming, if it came at all. Indeed, his first inclination was to decline Eliot's re-appointment, but the desire for stability ultimately won the day.

That desire for stability should not be overlooked. For the first time in his life, he had an occupation that stimulated him. He wrote to his brother, Henry

> I find the work very interesting and stimulating. It presents two problems, the intellectual one-how best to state your matter to them; and the practical one-how to govern them, stir them up, not bore them, yet make them work, etc. I should think it not unpleasant as a permanent thing. The authority is at first rather flattering to one. So far, I seem to have

> succeeded in interesting them, for they are admirably attentive, and I hear expressions of satisfaction on their part (Perry 1935, 336).

In 1875, James began his move to psychology. That fall, James taught a course in entitled The Relations Between Physiology and Psychology (Pajeres, n.d.). In December, he wrote to Eliot to suggest a new class in psychology referring to it as "mental science," it would involve courses in logic, the history of philosophy, metaphysics and psychology:

> A real science of man is now being built up and out of the theory of evolution and the facts of archeology, the nervous system and the senses…the question is shall the student be left to the magazines on the one hand & to what languid attention professors educated in an exclusively literary way can pay to the subject? or shall the college employ a man whose scientific training fits him fully to realize the force of all the natural history assignments (James 1875, 527-528).

James, of course, was lobbying for the job himself and suggested that whosoever was to teach the course must have a background both in philosophy and in psychology as it was currently being taught. The union of these two fields in one instructor was crucial. The course, while overlapping with the existing courses, would diverge from them by "subordinating the literary or historical aspect" (528). Later that month, James was offered the job, a promotion and a raise in pay. The new course he had proposed, Natural History 2: Physiological Psychology, became a reality during the 1876-1877 school year (Pajares, n.d.).

Three years later, James was approached by publisher Henry Holt to write a psychology textbook for his American Science Series. James accepted the job with the caveat that it would likely take him two years to complete the task. Holt, while somewhat put off by such a length of time, agreed to have James write the book. Ultimately, it would take twelve years before the massive two-volume work, entitled *Principles of Psychology*, was completed. We may speculate as to whether or not Holt thought that the finished product was worth the wait, but the book was a massive success. It was read not only by philosophers and psychologists, but by lay people as well. Indeed, Barzun (1983) suggested that it should be read cover to cover by all educated Americans. In it, James predicted several psychological schools that would become prominent in the years to come. If some members of the scientific community, notably G. Stanley Hall, had their reservations about it, they seemed powerless to stop its momentum.

It's not as if James's book was the first psychology text ever written. Evans (1990) reported that psychology books have been used in American

schools for at least sixty years prior to the *Principles*' publication. Nor was it the only major book on the subject. James McCash, Bordon P. Brown, and John Dewey had all published books by 1889, and Holt had to be concerned that the market was being flooded with psychology texts. Such fears were unfounded, for James's book would soon render these earlier works obsolete and help to initiate psychology's final emancipation from philosophy. Within a generation, John B. Watson (1913/1967) could declare that "psychology is a purely objective, experimental branch of natural science" (5)[9].

That the book has endured is a testament to many things. It paved the way for experimental psychology to blossom in America despite James's personal aversion to laboratory work. That many of the ideas expounded in the text were later supported by experimental research testifies to this fact. James would later famously disparage both the book and the science calling the former a "loathsome, distended, tumefied, bloated dropsical mass" (James 1890, as cited in Perry 1936, 2, 46) and stating that the latter was "no science, it is only the hope of a science" (James, 1892, 334-335).

But oh, what a hope it was! For indeed, that might be the *Principles*' greatest contribution to modern psychology. In it, James suggested what psychology could be: not a slave to metaphysical speculation, but rather a science all its own. It could be a science with testable hypotheses and with empirically verifiable phenomena. It was to be a science that was befitting the post-industrial revolution world. If James found Wundt's work to be distasteful and tedious, so be it. He helped to open a door for those who would follow. G. Stanley Hall, himself a student of both James and Wundt, would later use Wundt's methods, it is true, but he used them to answer very Jamesian questions. The possibilities of psychology seemed limitless. And it was just at this moment that the possibility of applying its principles to the field of education was being considered in earnest.

[9] Within just over a century of its publication, I, myself, would be discouraged from taking a philosophy course as an elective in graduate school program.

CHAPTER TWO

HARVARD 1891

The Rise of Charles W. Eliot

"The University (Harvard) has always nurtured teachers" (Holmes 1930, 518). This may be so, but it was a somewhat disinterested nurturing. In the early part of the nineteenth century, teacher education was primarily the responsibility of the normal schools, which were institutions developed for the express purpose of training teachers (Seeley 1904).[10] However, early attempts to provide specialized teacher training at the nation's colleges and universities were largely met with resistance if not outright hostility (Powell 1965).

As the number of high schools increased following the Civil War, the normal schools tried to meet the demand for more teachers. It soon became clear that elementary school teachers with normal school training were superior to those without such training. As a result, many normal schools tried to expand their scope to include secondary teachers as well. As the normals expanded, there was concern among university presidents, particularly in the Midwest, that these schools might siphon off public funding from the universities. As a result, the 1870s saw the advent of education courses at these institutions (Powell 1965).

However, in Massachusetts things were different. There the normal schools were overshadowed by the larger, older, and richer colleges that surrounded them. Still, with the growth of high schools in the Commonwealth, the need for trained teachers became as great as that of the Midwestern states. By the start of the 1890s, the Board of Education admitted that "teachers in the secondary schools are coming rapidly to perceive that something more than learning and scholarly abilities is requisite to the successful discharge of the duties of their office" (Powell 1965, 225).

At the 1889 meeting of the New England Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools, the headmaster of Thayer Academy, J.B. Sewell, suggested that Harvard lead the way in providing the teacher training that

[10] They were, in fact, the precursors to modern teachers colleges.

was sorely needed. However, Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard, opposed this view. Eliot's position was that colleges and universities could best serve prospective teachers by teaching them the subjects needed in the schools (Powell 1965).

From a distance of over a century, Eliot's opposition seems a bit surprising to those who view him as an educational reformer. He was inaugurated president of Harvard University on October 19, 1869. His address that day at the First Church Unitarians has been called "one of the greatest addresses in modern educational history" (Morison 1936, 329). Eliot wasted no time in demonstrating his vision that would propel Harvard into the twentieth century:

> The endless controversies whether language, philosophy, mathematics, or social science applies the best mental training, whether general education should be chiefly literary or chiefly scientific have no practical lesson for us today. The university recognizes no real antagonism between literature and science, and consents to no such narrow alternatives as mathematics or classics, science or metaphysics. We would have them all, and at their best (Morison 1930, LIX).

It was a remarkable moment in the intellectual history of Harvard and the country. It is made even more remarkable in light of the fact that Eliot was not, initially, an overwhelming choice for the presidency. The previous president, Thomas Hill, had resigned in September 1868. A search for a successor began the following February[11]. In the interim, there were many clusters of opinion regarding who the next president should be as the appointment would directly influence the future direction of the college (James III 1930).

Some, particularly in the sciences, pushed for innovation by offering more elective courses thus enlarging the curriculum-particularly in the sciences, and following the model laid out by several foreign universities.[12]

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[11] The Corporation, consisting of the President, Treasurer and several Fellows, is the primary governing board of Harvard. However, it is subordinate to the Board of Overseers for most of its decisions. The Overseers in 1869 consisted of 30 members of those holding Harvard degrees. As such, James III (1930) reported that the Board of overseers had to grant permission for the Corporation to begin its search. He theorized that the delay of five months (during which the Board of Overseers met four times) was due to their "sense of impending change and a feeling of uncertainty" (185).

[12] Indeed, by the early 1860s, science had achieved a level of respect at many European and American schools. This, however, was due primarily to the economic needs that had emerged from the Industrial Revolution (Mulhern, 1946).