

Abstract

WILLIAM JAMES'S EVOLUTIONARY PRAGMATISM: A STUDY IN PHYSIOLOGY, PSYCHOLOGY, AND PHILOSOPHY AT THE CLOSE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Lucas McGranahan

American psychologist and philosopher William James (1842-1910) poses a problem for interpreters. Although James himself claims that interpretation means locating an author's "center of vision," his own writings seem to lack continuity because of his mid-career shift from psychology to philosophy and perhaps even unity at a given time because of his apparent vacillation between active and passive conceptions of human existence. As a result, despite his impressive position as the father of American scientific psychology and popularizer of the philosophical school of pragmatism, James may appear to have little to offer readers by way of a coherent worldview.

The present study argues that James's thought is much more continuous and unified than is generally thought. In particular, it locates the center of James's vision in a model of the individual that James develops in the 1880s and which remains in the background of his subsequent thought, providing the basis for his conceptions of freedom, morality, and pragmatic meaning. This interpretation is based on a reading of James's adaptation of the physiological conception of the "reflex arc" that emphasizes how the latter model is influenced by a distinct theoretical model that James gleans from Darwinian evolutionary biology. On this view, the reflex arc that

structures the Jamesian individual is itself construed as a nexus of “selectionist systems,” that is, systems that function through the interaction of variants with an environment, in processes that are structurally analogous to, if distinct from and not reducible to, Darwinian natural selection.

As a result, the Jamesian individual is shown to form the centerpiece of a broader, multi-layered, evolutionary worldview, the precise crux of which is a selective will that filters cognitive variation from “beneath” and generates variation for further systems “above.” The will on this model is free in the sense of being capable of selecting among alternative genuine possibilities for action, where the most important practical effect of such a free choice is the way in which it biases the individual’s future possibilities by way of the breaking or entrenching of embodied habits. In this sense, James’s philosophy of pragmatism, which understands meaning in terms of practical effects, can be viewed principally as a form of character ethics.

This reconstruction of James’s thought not only demonstrates the continuity of his concerns over the course of decades, but it also shows that he was not caught between active and passive conceptions of human existence but rather that he believed that freedom is generated by the very tension between activity and passivity, as represented by the will’s ability to select among genuine possibilities on the one hand and its inability to produce such possibilities in a direct fashion on the other.

Finally, this study closes by further contextualizing James’s philosophy within the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought, in particular vis-à-vis the German philosophers Nietzsche, Husserl, and Hegel.