Numbered Among the Jameses: The Address at the Emerson Centenary
by Trygve Throntveit

"The pathos of death is this," remarked William James at the Centenary of Ralph Waldo Emerson in Concord on May 25, 1903: "that when the days of one's life are ended...what remains in memory should usually be so slight a thing."

It is as if the whole of a man's significance had now shrunk into the phantom of an attitude, into a mere musical note or phrase, suggestive of his singularity—happy are those whose singularity gives a note so clear as to be victorious over the inevitable pity of such a diminution and abridgement.1

Upon one's death, James suggests, singularity overcomes multiplicity in the experience of those left behind. But it is not a reconciling singularity, in which one's particular self is united with the world of larger experience. Rather, death is an abridgement in which it seems "as if the whole of a man's significance had now shrunk." Upon death, the multifarious thoughts and actions that coalesce into a self during life are distilled into what posterity perceives as their essence. While the body achieves union with nature, the soul is not dispersed but concentrated; and its ability to withstand disintegration and oblivion in future experience is a measure of its potency. The most powerful souls, then, are the most singular. In Emerson's case "the form that so lately moved on these streets and country roads...is now dust; but the soul's note, the spiritual voice, rises strong and clear above the uproar of the times," so that twenty-one years after his death "an ideal wraith like this, of Emerson's clear above the uproar of the times," so that twenty-one

4. ibid., p. 309.
5. ibid., p 309, p. 310, p. 312.
7. Ibid., p. 59.
8. William James to Henry James, Sr., September 5, 1867. All letters cited in this article are from The Correspondence of William James, vol. 4, eds. Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth Berkeley (Charlottesville: U P of Virginia, 1995), hereafter cited as Correspondence, p. 195.

In his lecture "The One and the Many" of 1907, William James described the competing claims between the monistic and pluralistic understandings of the universe as "the most central of all philosophical problems, central because so pregnant. I mean by this that if you know whether a man is a decided monist or pluralist, you perhaps know more about the rest of his opinions than if you give him any other name ending in ist."2 William had assessed his father's philosophy on this score thirty years earlier. In a letter dated September 5, 1867, he described Henry Sr.'s view of the universe as "a mere circle of the creator described within his own being and returning to the starting point."3 As far as William was concerned, his father was a monist. But William applied this term to his father in opposition to his own pluralist leanings. As such it tells us little about the content of Henry Sr.'s conception of the universe. Did Henry Sr. indeed see the universe as one, and if so, how did he see it cohere? Or if he did not see it as one, where did he see it divided?

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
It may be useful to explore this issue of universal numbering in Henry Sr.'s mid-nineteenth-century context. In the northeastern intellectual circles in which Henry Sr. moved, Transcendentalism was the regnant brand of monism between 1830 and 1860. For most Transcendentalists, including Henry Sr.'s friend and correspondent Ralph Waldo Emerson, all aspects of existence were emanations of a universal spirit; thus everything was fundamentally natural as all things were of one essence. What was traditionally considered nature was merely the least distorted of the spiritual emanations, and consequently the clearest glass through which to view the universe. Any apparent discordance of existence was due to the mode of human perception described by Emerson as Understanding—the typical marriage of empirical observation and ratiocination. In place of Understanding the Transcendentalists extolled the innate, instinctual faculty of Reason as a means of apprehending existence in its unity and harmony. By leading into communion with an Over-soul comprising all nature and the totality of human interests, this ultimate reliance on one's own faculties reconciled radical individualism with cosmic unity.

The argument that Henry James, Sr. was a monist in the Transcendentalist mode is immediately undermined in the following response to William's letter:

If we believed instinctively in creation, we should have no need [for] this hypothesis of Nature. For then we should see all the various forms of sense acknowledging a unitary human substance, and would regard any brute unintelligible quantity like what we call Nature, a sheer superfluity or superstition. But while we disbelieve in creation...we must believe in Nature as the objective source or explication (instead of the subjective product or implication) of all phenomena.9

In clear contrast to Emerson and the Transcendentalists, there was a fundamental dichotomy between “Nature” and “creation” at the center of Henry Sr.'s philosophy. Furthermore, it is only the failure to believe in creation that leads to the Transcendentalist view of nature as “an objective source or explication...of all phenomena.” Henry Sr. defines the term nature in his essay “Our Sentiment of Otherness to God,” and out of this definition the nebulous “unitary human substance” of creation begins to emerge as well:

What, by the way, is nature? Popularly used, the “nature” of a thing means what the thing is in itself, or apart from everything else. Philosophically defined, it is the principle of identity in existence, forever differentiating creature from creator by stamping the one finite, subjective, conscious, the other infinite, objective, unconscious. It is in short, the principle of uncreation which is logically involved in all created existence, for man's spiritual creation...is his plenary redemption out of the death and hell he is in by nature.10

Henry Sr.'s greatest criticism of Emerson was the latter's inability to account for the basic dichotomy between nature and creation described above. Emerson's Transcendentalism led him to perceive nature as unified by a single shared spirit animating everything. It also led him to an individualistic reliance on Reason in pursuing true consciousness, or the apprehension of this unity. Henry Sr. both denied the unity of nature and abjured the highly introspective ethos of Emerson's radical individualism. In his estimation Emerson was purblind to the dialectical teleology of creation, a process which dissolved the particularities of nature and abolished the individual's consciousness of distinct identity. Because Emerson conceived of consciousness as the apprehension of an eternally unified creation, he was incapable of discerning creation's true nature as an inevitable but as of yet incomplete process. “Mr. Emerson,” he writes, “had no spiritual insight into creative order, because he had no adequate doctrine of consciousness.”11

Emerson's philosophical attitude was completely incompatible not only with Henry Sr.'s creation scheme but also his very temperament. Henry Sr. distrusted Emerson's faith, appropriated from German Romanticism, in a spiritually infused nature; he had inherited from his Presbyterian upbringing a Calvinistic belief in the division of the natural and spiritual worlds. “You don't look upon Calvinism as a fact at all,” he wrote to Emerson, “wherein you are to my mind philosophically infirm.”12 According to Henry Sr., Emerson's Romanticism allowed for moral distinctions between right and wrong, but did not allow for any essential difference between good and evil. This relegated Emerson to the role of philosophy's “vestal virgin.”13 For Henry Sr., however, “all created existence,” including both nature and the self-conscious individual, was the embodiment of particularity, or the “creature's separation from the creator”; it was thus evil itself, the very “death and hell” from which mankind needs redeeming. What is perceived by men as “all created existence” is not creation, but merely phenomena, or uncreation; the real, spiritual creation is as yet unrealized wherever the particularity of nature holds sway over men's minds. Thus Henry makes a distinction between what is normally thought of as the creation—the universe.

9. Henry James, Sr. to William James, September 27, 1867. Correspondence, p. 205.
11. Quoted in F. O. Matthiessen, The James Family (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1947), p. 428. Henry Sr. once wrote to Emerson that “being better satisfied with you than any man I ever met, I am [at the same time] worst satisfied.” He saw Emerson as in many ways exemplifying the spontaneity of thought and action necessary to surmount that great barrier to creation, the consciousness of individual identity. But while he praised the “invisible Emerson, the Emerson that thinks and feels and lives,” he grew impatient with “the Emerson that talks and bewitches one out of his serious thought.” While your life is that sort which, so far as I can detect it, lays hold of my profoundest love, ever and anon some provokingly perverse way of speech breaks forth which does not seem to me to come from the life.” These “perverse ways of speech” were Emerson's explicit expositions of his Transcendentalist philosophy, which Henry Sr. could not accept.
12. Quoted in Ibid., p. 43.
13. Ibid., p. 437.
the natural world—and a teleological creation which, as we will see, involves the spiritual redemption of mankind.

In this scheme, uncreation—i.e. all things created by God, but not yet unified in the teleological creation—is the fallen world of self-conscious man. In fact, the world remains uncreated because of man’s self-consciousness. Nature is only a particularistic perception of the world by men who are themselves convinced of their own particularity: “I say that the sentiment which men have of their natural otherness to God...is a strictly subjective illusion of the mind with no particle of objective reality in it.” This uncreated world will pass when all men shed their illusory egos and dissolve into the universal man, the “unitary human substance.” Henry Sr. mentions to William. “Nature has no positive function in spiritual creation,” he writes. Rather the uncreation of nature is the sign of man’s alienation from God, proceeding from the same particularistic perception that leads man to see himself as separate from God. This is not to say that nature is an entity or force separate from God; Henry Sr. is a monist in the sense that he conceived of nothing existing beyond what issued from God. But nature is not a part of the teleological creation:

Nature is always to be logically taken for granted in spiritual creation, as giving the creature subjective identity, or conscious distinction from the creator; but this logical virtue is all the merit it possesses or ever will possess. Especially it must not be thought to be itself created. For the whole and sole function of nature...is to constitute that suppositious realm of uncreation, or not-being, out of which man is logically held to be delivered by his creation.

Nature is the perceived state of the universe before the spiritual creation, as dissolution of all subjective selves, has occurred. It is a state in which man has been redeemed “from the brutes,” but not yet realized his true social nature. It is necessary to the entire process that will culminate in creation, the final dissolution of all selves into the “social or unitary form and order” which is man’s ultimate and true redemption. Ironically, it is Emerson’s assumption of unity that, in Henry Sr.’s view, makes him the worst kind of pluralist, for by exalting nature as an expression of unity and individual consciousness as a means to apprehend it, he reinforces the two main barriers to a truly unified creation.

The form of social organization that constitutes this unified creation is highly ambiguous. It is described simply as a dissolution of egos into a universal man characterized by “God’s most intimate and unstinted spiritual indwell-...ing.” What is not ambiguous is that what William perceived as his father’s monism is in fact a highly dualistic view of experience. Henry Sr. divides the universe very neatly into the natural and the spiritual, the phenomenal and the real, the uncreated and the created. In the dichotomy between the self-conscious and universal man, the dialectical nature of Henry’s dualism is best exhibited: existence is either disunion or union, the former being the necessary predicate of its opposite. Henry in this light is neither a monist nor a pluralist, but a dualist.

II

William’s difficulty with his father’s system stems from what he saw as its rationalist character: William could not accept as conclusive any explanation that interpreted direct experience according to a priori assumptions. As F.O. Matthiessen explains, William “grew to maturity in the era of Darwin and Spencer,” and his “scientific training made him feel the need of coming to grips with the physical before trusting himself in his father’s realm of the metaphysical.” Thus his difficulty with his father’s notion of the creator, for example, lay not so much with the idea of a creator itself, but with its assumption. Writing to William, Henry Sr. diagnosed his son’s difficulties with his rationalized cosmological order as arising “mainly from the purely scientific cast of your thought just at present, and the temporary blight exerted thence upon your metaphysic wit.” William’s response supports his father’s assessment. “You say that such and such must be the way in Creation, as if there were an a priori logical necessity binding on the mind,” writes William. “This I cannot see at all in the way you seem to, altho’ I may be quite ready to accept the content of your propositions as a posteriori hypotheses.” As Matthiessen suggests, this “scientific cast” of William’s mind probably had as much to do with the intellectual climate of the times as with his natural leanings. From the Civil War to 1900, James T. Kloppenberg has argued, stretched an era in which certainty itself—whether religious or scientific—“had failed to survive.” It was a time of crisis for many intellectuals, and William James was no exception. That William was suspicious of the certainty his father had attained in a bygone era, is clear in their correspondence: “For myself, I shrink from trying to imagine too exactly these things.... You know...how skeptical I am, and how little ready to assert anything about [these matters].” And yet William was envious of his father as well, lamenting his inability to “attain to any such ‘inexpugnable testimony of consciousness to my spiritual reality,’” as his father claimed to have done. Meanwhile a more wholesale rejection of certainty led many of William’s contemporaries to return to eighteenth-century thinkers for inspiration, and in particu-

15. Ibid., pp. 212-213.
16. Ibid., p. 213.
17. Ibid., pp. 212 and 274.
18. Ibid., p. 212.
20. Henry James, Sr. to William James, September 27, 1867. Correspondence, p. 204.
23. William James to Henry James, Sr., October 28, 1867. Correspondence, p. 221.
lar to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Thinkers like James’ colleague and friend Josiah Royce found Kant’s vision of dichotomous noumenal and phenomenal realms compelling “in light of the cultural disjunction between the religious and scientific spheres.” Kant’s explanation of experience as necessarily impure because apprehended through categories in the structure of human consciousness appealed to a generation of philosophers who struggled with the obscurity and uncertainty of the true nature of existence.

William James, on the other hand, believed the Kantian notion of a static, structured human consciousness untenable. Instead, he saw the conditions of experience themselves as unstructured and dynamic. However, he also rejected the impossible criteria for certainty established by modern positivism, and refused to believe that experience was necessarily plural simply because disjunctions had not yet been reconciled satisfactorily. Admittedly William’s vocabulary, especially at the beginning of his career, suggested pluralistic leanings. Even as late as 1907 he would write that “Pragmatism must obviously range herself upon the pluralistic side” in the problem of the one and the many. As with his father, however, the apparently obvious label proves facile. Eschewing the “pluralist” moniker, the term William preferred was “radical empiricist,” which he set in opposition to both monism and pluralism. As a radical empiricist, William trusted neither a priori assumptions about the coherence of the universe, nor premature judgments as to its plural nature; rather he concerned himself with the valuable conclusions one could draw from observed experience. “Radical empiricism alone insists on understanding forwards...and refuses to substitute static concepts of the understanding for transitions in our moving life.” It was this radical empiricism that would become more widely known as pragmatism:

Pragmatism represents a perfectly familiar attitude in philosophy, the empiricist attitude, but it represents it, as it seems to me, both in a more radical and in a less objectionable form than it has ever yet assumed. A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power. That means the empiricist temper regnant and the rationalist temper sincerely given up.

William’s emphasis on the “concreteness” and “facts” of empiricism, as well as his rejection of the “closed systems” and “pretended absolutes” of rationalism are the typical marks of a pluralist, as he himself admits. However, the difference between empiricism and radical empiricism, or pragmatism, is that while the former concludes a pluralistic universe from the variety of facts and experience, pragmatism “does not stand for any special results” whatsoever. Pragmatism proceeds from the conviction that currently we cannot comprehend experience as unified based on what is observed. Pragmatism does not, however, exclude an absolute, a first cause, or an ultimate unity; it simply does not assume them. Pragmatism is not in this sense a philosophy, but “a method only.” It does not discover ideas, but creates ideas that have practical significance.

Thus the claim that William is a pluralist is based upon a confusion of his method with his conclusions, and it is a philosopher’s conclusions with which the problem of the one and the many is concerned. William’s conclusions, however, are difficult to determine. His very method precludes absolute conclusions about the universe, for such conclusions would become a priori assumptions and render the pragmatic method irrelevant. Therefore, we must look at the general directions in which William’s method points him. We must ask what type of universe, monistic or pluralistic, William creates in his provisional explanation of experience.

William is like his father in that he is most concerned with the question of the one and the many as it pertains to human consciousness. Echoing Henry Sr.’s categories of consciousness—consciousness of nature, self-consciousness, and a universal spiritual consciousness rejecting both nature and the self—William explores the possibility of progressively expanding boundaries of consciousness in his own work. In “The Stream of Consciousness,” William describes thought as necessarily divided in our perception into personal consciousness, “concrete particular I’s and you’s.” And yet he implies that this experience of thought may not provide a complete picture:

In this room...there are a multitude of thoughts, yours and mine, some of which cohere mutually, and some not. They are as little each-for-itself and reciprocally independent as they are all-belonging-together. They are neither: no one of them is separate, but each belongs with certain others and with none beside. My thought belongs with my other thoughts, and your thoughts with your other thoughts. Whether anywhere in the room there be a mere thought, which is nobody’s thought, we have no means of ascertaining, for we have no experience of its like.

Taken in context, the suggestion of a mere thought, impossible to experience through normal self-consciousness, is strikingly reminiscent of Henry Sr.’s doctrine of spirit in the uncreated realm. William’s The Varieties of Religious Experience puts the issue in a theological context and offers a more direct comparison with his father’s thinking:

28. Ibid., p. 27.
29. Ibid., p. 27.
The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely “understandable” world.... We belong to it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world, for we belong in the most intimate sense wherever our ideals belong. Yet the unseen region in question is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world. When we commune with it, work is actually done upon our finite personality, for we are turned into new men, and consequences in the way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change.31

The echoes of William’s father here are striking. There is a dichotomy between the world of self-consciousness and that of a broader consciousness beyond; this broader consciousness is the more intimately real because it is the seat of our ideals; and the accession of ideals from this “unseen region” works a redemptive change. “Each of us is in reality an abiding physical entity far more extensive than he knows,” claims William, and thus “the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come...is literally and objectively true as far as it goes.”32 Just as Henry Sr. contrasted the objectivity of God with the subjectivity of men, William asserts that “the world of our experience consists at all times of two parts, an objective and a subjective part.”33

William thus divides all human experience in two, and he extends this dichotomy from human consciousness to the entire universe of experience. In “The One and the Many,” William asserts that the true goal of the intellect is neither unity nor variety, but totality.34 Monism and pluralism both are attempts to arrive at this totality by assuming its nature prematurely. However, looking at the world in its totality one has to recognize that all things are connected in as many ways as they are disconnected, and vice versa. “Everything that exists is influenced in some way by something else, if you can pick the way out rightly.” However, “there is no species of connection which will not fall, if, instead of choosing conductors for it you choose non-conductors.” Union and disunion are equally inherent in the universe, “just as with space, whose separating of things seems exactly on a par with its uniting of them.”35 We create connections or disconnections based on our subjective perception of the total. Though he approaches the subject from the opposite direction and is more wary of conclusions, William suggests essentially what his father insists: experience is a dialectic of union and disunion. The intellectual “family resemblance” is clear: Henry Sr.’s monism and William’s pluralism both collapse into a fundamentally dialectical view of experience as both “one” and “many.”36

32 Ibid., pp. 512 and 515.
33 Ibid., p. 498.
36 However, unlike his father, William does not see plurality as arising from any fundamental distinction between God and the world, or between the mind of God and the mind of man. Hence the term dualist, which I believe is appropriate for Henry Sr., is not appropriate for William, due primarily to its connotative associations with both Classical Greek and Cartesian philosophy. Thus it is not a dualistic attitude that William has inherited from his father, but a dialectical conception of plurality and unity as logically compatible and interdependent (rather than mutually exclusive) aspects of the universe.
37 Henry James, Notes of a Son and Brother (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1914), p. 1.
38 Quoted in Matthiessen, The James Family, p. 132.
40 Ibid., p. 308 and pp. 308-309.
41 Ibid., p. 309.
42 William James, “Pragmatism and Humanism,” Pragmatism, p. 113.
forest, sedulously waiting every morning for the news concerning the structure of the universe which the good Spirit will give me.  

But as the invocation of “Spirit” implies, Emerson’s radical individualism and empirical attitude follow directly from idealist assumptions. “Through the individual fact,” writes James, “there ever shone for him the effulgence of the Universal Reason. The great Cosmic Intellect terminates and houses itself in mortal men and passing hours.” It is because individuals “open thus directly into the Absolute” that we “ought not to consent to borrowing traditions and living at second hand.” This direct experience of the Absolute balances Emerson’s “type,” that of perceiver, with his “mission,” that of “the reporter in worthy form of each perception.” It is not enough merely to perceive, for the Spirit has chosen the individual as a means of expression. The individual must report his experience if he would “be adequate to the vocation for which the Spirit of the world has called him into being.” It is not the subjective individual that Emerson idealizes, but rather the authentic individual, “the man who rests in his appointed…character.” In fact James sees Emerson reconciling the universal and the particular in his own person. Emerson strove to be both empiricist and idealist, perceiving all the facts of experience while reporting them according to the dictates of a character “appointed” by the Spirit that “called him into being.”

In James’ reading, Emerson sees this dialectic of the individual and universal reflected in all experience. “This same indefeasible right to be exactly what one is, provided one only be authentic, spreads itself, in Emerson’s way of thinking, from persons to things and to times and places. No date, no position is insignificant, if the life that fills it out one only be authentic.” In Emerson’s view, according to James, Universal Reason did not radiate from every fact of experience; instead, it inhabited only the “authentic,” the “genuine.” “For Emerson,” writes James, “the individual fact and moment were indeed suffused with absolute radiance, but it was upon a condition that saved the situation—they must be worthy specimens.” Significantly, this dichotomy of the authentic and inauthentic is analogous to that between creation and uncreation in the thought of Henry James, Sr. For both thinkers, experience is divided between the “created” / “authentic” manifestations of God (“the Cosmic Intellect”) and those “uncreated” / “inauthentic” elements of experience inhabiting a realm of existence that is somehow less real, less “genuine.” William also characterizes Emerson’s view of experience in language echoing his own dichotomy of union and disunion. Just as truth is a grafting process for James, in which one creates connections between past and present experiences, Emerson’s “sincere, authentic, archetypal” facts “must have made connection with the Moral Sentiment.” Knowing “just which thing does act in this way, and which thing fails to make the true connection” was Emerson’s gift, his “secret…of seership.” Finally, in William’s view Emerson shares with both him and his father a belief in the potential triumph of unity over the present—or apparent—incongruence of experience. In this, too, Emerson “was a real seer. He could perceive the full squalor of the individual fact, but he could also see the transfiguration.” The three philosophers would doubtless disagree as to the exact nature of this transfiguration. Yet one can hardly imagine any of the three denying what William describes as “Emerson’s revelation”: “The point of any pen can be an epitome of reality; the commonest person’s act, if genuinely actuated, can lay hold on eternity.”

It is strange, somehow, that the “Address at the Emerson Centenary” is the only extended treatment of Emerson in William James’ published works. Certainly there are pieces in which James offers an opinion on Emerson; often he is used as an idealist foil for pragmatism, while at other times one or another of his oracular pronouncements frame a sheet or two from James’ philosophical sketchbook. This essay has not taken these brief allusions to Emerson into account. Instead I have attempted to examine the text as James most likely wrote it—unmolested by ghosts of past assessments or classifications. In place of these ghosts, however, another wrath hangs over the text—not Emerson’s, but Henry James, Sr.’s. Henry Sr. introduced William to Emerson, both the person and the books. He wrote prolifically himself, and his son read almost every word while compiling his literary remains. In the correspondence between father and son the major philosophical questions that would vex William throughout his career—the problem of the one and the many, the existence and exercise of free will, the role of the intellectual in society—are addressed, and William’s conclusions largely prefigured. Far too little scholarly attention is given to the intellectual influence of Henry Sr. on his son, and it is high time that the father be numbered again among the philosopher Jameses. In this case two is certainly better than one.

—Trygve Throntveit is a second-year graduate student in history at Harvard University. Portions of this essay were originally submitted as part of his Senior Thesis to the Committee on Degrees in History and Literature at Harvard College in the Spring of 2001. The present essay, incorporating this earlier material, was composed for submission to the 2002-03 William James Society Student Essay Contest. The author would like to thank John O’Keefe and Professor James Kloppenberg of Harvard University, as well as his father, Professor Mark Throntveit of Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, MN, for reading drafts and offering criticism. E-mail = throntv@fas.harvard.edu

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43. William James, “Address at the Centenary of Emerson,” p. 308.
44. Ibid., p. 309.
45. Ibid., p. 307.
46. Ibid., p. 310.
47. Ibid., p. 311.
48. Ibid., p. 312.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid., p. 313.