

WILLIAM JAMES TODAY

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Introduction

William James remains relevant today for many reasons. Some thinkers, like Mark Johnson, see him as an essential forerunner to today's Embodiment Movement, which draws heavily on the cognitive sciences.¹ Other thinkers see James, along with Dewey, as "better guides to the end of modernity than Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger," and emphasize James's relation to, and relevance for, Continental philosophy, and to our times.² Even James's theory of truth, which has always been the brunt of a good deal of criticism from analytic philosophers, nonetheless finds important friends nowadays coming from that tradition, like Hilary Putnam.³ There is also continued interest in James's philosophy of religion, as exemplified, for instance, in the recent work of Sami Pihlström.⁴

That James is still relevant today should not be doubted; at least, I do not doubt it, and indeed it would be very difficult to give an exhaustive account of all the scholars upon whom he has had a vital impact today. What I would like accomplish in this paper, in any case, is a more modest task than giving such an account, namely to problematize at least *one* of the ways in which we might think that James continues to be relevant. I have in mind James's relevance to our existential condition of having to die. I agree with William Gavin when he claims that James in *Pragmatism* is concerned with death.⁵ However, I disagree that James's approach should be touted as a virtue.⁶ What I would

like to argue is that James's response to death is not helpful and should be rejected for relying too much on modernism and its emphasis on the individual. Today, when modernism is (rightly, in my view) on the defensive, James's continued relevance for significant questions such as how to die is too problematic. William James, I will argue, is not the best guide available to us for confronting our mortality.

I should say upfront that the basis of my criticism is that James is not a stoic, whereas I believe that Stoicism has a better answer to this question, and in maintaining this I draw on John Lachs's remarkable essay, "Stoic Pragmatism."⁷ But I would like to go further than Lachs, who recommends changing our understanding of pragmatists like James and Dewey to see them as similar to the Stoics (and changing our understanding of Stoicism to see it as similar to pragmatism).⁸ I would like to maintain that a better approach is to move to Stoic philosophy altogether, not to Lach's synthesis of the two philosophies.⁹ So, while I draw on Lach's unique referencing of Stoicism and pragmatism, I do not wish to endorse his resolution of the tension between the two, at least not in the case of James, and I would say instead that we should consider going over to the position of the Stoic, which I think is more relevant for us today than is Jamesian pragmatism or, for that matter, Stoic pragmatism.

I begin with an account of James's response to death. I then argue that it is still too modernist (or too individualistic), generating a deeply problematic expectation about life in our times. Lastly, I propose that Stoicism might be of more service to us in this regard than James.

James's Response to Death

What is James's response to the problem of death? William Gavin has rightly pointed out that this theme is at work in *Pragmatism*.¹⁰ But I would like to take a slightly different approach than Gavin, setting aside the examples of, and metaphors for, death in James's book that Gavin uncovers so well, and instead focusing solely and explicitly on James's view of truth. I would like to show that this theory is itself, in its very nature, a response to death, something which Gavin also indicates,¹¹ but which I would like to stress and to make a point of emphasizing.

That James's theory of truth emerges in a context of a deep, existential concern¹² is often missed by those who only analyze in detail the mechanics of that theory. But a surrounding look at how and when the theory of truth emerges shows that James's theory is concerned, in fact, to demonstrate that individual human beings have some power in the face of reality. They are not simply the victims of Fate, even in death, but have the power of helping to create what becomes true about themselves and the world.

When James introduces pragmatism, he embeds it in a discussion of what our fate would be like if matter alone directed events without our slightest input. James says,

For a hundred and fifty years past the progress of science has seemed to mean the enlargement of the material universe and the diminution of man's importance. The result is what one may call the growth of naturalistic or positivistic feeling. Man is no lawgiver to nature, he is an absorber. She it is who stands firm; he it is who must accommodate himself. Let him record truth, inhuman tho [sic] it be, and submit to it! The romantic spontaneity and courage are gone, the vision is materialistic and depressing.¹³

These words require little comment. The material universe is winning the day over the human self and this is depressing, because it means that man is not important. At best, we can only “submit” to what the universe does; and James finds this to be a problem.

James unpacks the idea further, and apparently gives it its appropriate emotional content, when he quotes another author: ““The energies of our system will decay, the glory of the sun will be dimmed, and the earth, tideless and inert, will no longer tolerate the race which has for a moment disturbed its solitude. Man will go down into the pit, and all his thoughts will perish.””¹⁴ To which James comments:

That is the sting of it, that in the vast driftings of the cosmic weather, tho [sic] many a jeweled shore appears, and many an enchanted cloud-bank floats away, long lingering ere it be dissolved—even as our world now lingers, for our joy—yet when these transient products are gone, nothing, absolutely *nothing* remains, to represent those particular qualities, those elements of preciousness which they may have enshrined. Dead and gone are they, gone utterly from the very sphere and room of being. Without an echo; without a memory; without an influence on aught that may come after, to make it care for similar ideals.¹⁵

It seems to be a terrible thought that science leaves us with, that we are at the mercy of “the cosmic weather,”¹⁶ much like the thought that paralyzed James in his youth: “Something hitherto solid within my breast gave way entirely,” James says in the form a letter writer, but which many suspect is him,

and I became a mass of quivering fear. I awoke morning after morning with a terrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before...I remember wondering how other people could live, how I myself had ever lived, so unconscious of that pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life.¹⁷

What James is referring to is his sudden realization that he, too, could become mad like the madman he had once seen in an asylum—in other words, that he was at the mercy of matter. He was not free to prevent himself from becoming mad; his body, in effect, would

make that choice for him.¹⁸ What James feared was that we *could be* only matter going through its mechanical operations without any real human touch to it. The truth could be nothing else but “cosmic weather,”¹⁹ the utter indifference of things.

But the artist in James, the side of him that is the creator, resists the idea of being utterly determined by matter; and the philosopher in him finds a method of accommodation. The solution to this very real human predicament of how to cope with being made of matter is James’s theory of truth, a solution that is simple and direct, but also, for that reason, very powerful. What if “truth,” to borrow a phrase from Richard Rorty, “was made rather than found”?²⁰ What if truth consisted of those beliefs about reality, which reality lets us make about it? Then, as James says, the truth “not *being* reality, but only our belief *about* reality, it will contain human elements.”²¹ If truth functions in this way, as those beliefs humans are entitled to make about reality, then we really would have “a fighting chance.”²² Our account of reality, *our* truths, personal and plastic, would then be permitted, just so long as reality permits them. We could then understand reality, in effect, as being able to accommodate many of our human truths.

And here we arrive at James’s ultimate solution to the problem of life. Truth can be made, which means that, even though everything may be destroyed in the end, nonetheless we can still create our own truths about reality until the end comes. As James puts it, “Though the *ultimate* state of the universe may be its vital and psychical extinction, there is nothing in physics to interfere with the hypothesis that the penultimate state might be the millennium...In short, the last expiring pulsation of the universe’s life might be, ‘I am so happy and perfect that I can stand it no longer.’”²³ The thought here is that, until the end comes, which is not yet now, the living can always still work with

reality. Reality can be bent and shaped always still to some extent, maybe even shaped into perfection. And this crucial feature of reality, that we can still shape the truth of it to come, should give us enough courage and fortitude to press on. For precious human meanings can still always be achieved. Indeed, it may well be, as James says, that God, as some kind of ideal not yet made real, actually depends for his realization on our efforts: “God himself, in short, may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity.”²⁴ This would mean that our efforts to shape reality may actually count toward helping to realize our deeper religious truths and needs, perhaps even somehow our need for immortality, for a life after death.

For James, in short, “There belongs to mind, from its birth upward, a spontaneity, a vote.”²⁵ Not that mind can achieve everything, or even a massive amount. But it can achieve some things, “the only restriction is that the world resists some lines of attack on our part and opens herself to others, so that we must go with the grain of her willingness, to play fairly.”²⁶ We must respond to real conditions, but in our response we can alter things. We can bend them, sometimes, to our needs. And so we must try mightily to alter reality where we can in order to achieve what good we can.

To live in this hope that matter can always still be shaped by us is to live in what James calls “active tension,” with an “attitude” that “involves an element...of holding my own, as it were, and trusting outward things to perform their part so as to make it a full harmony, but without any *guaranty* that they will.”²⁷ In active tension, there is supposedly a wonderful feeling, “intensely blissful,” as Linda Simon says,²⁸ a feeling of being fully in the fray, so to speak, and embracing the anxiety and stress of having to relate to a world without assurances. As Linda Simon has characterized this feeling,

drawing on the same passage from James that I have above,²⁹ active tension is “this moment of tension...this moment of thrilling aliveness.”³⁰ What is going on, it seems, is that the world acts as if it is supporting us in all of our endeavors, but we do not know for sure that it is; and we act anyway as if we should be allowed to assert ourselves in the face of the world, as if we were entitled to do so. We live in relation to reality as if our truths could be made real. James would have us live on to fight on, and has even said that for many people there can be no greater point to living than to see “one’s heel set on the tyrant’s throat.”³¹ James allows us to be the creator, even against impossible odds, and that is why he might be regarded by some as relevant to us in matters of life and death.

Is James’s View Still Relevant?

That James might still be relevant to us in matters of life and death can be seen by the influence he has had on Richard Rorty, one of the most important philosophers of recent years. Although he made the linguistic turn, Rorty nonetheless shares with James the fundamental insight that we help to make the truth; and, for Rorty, too, this insight is grounded in our response to death. Rorty maintains that “the world is out there” and that “the world may cause us” to hold beliefs, but he says that our “descriptions of the world are not” out there and that we have some creative ability in how they are applied to the world.³² He further claims that our ability to describe the world is the last small bit of “power” that we have in the face of events: “The world can blindly and inarticulately crush us,” Rorty says.³³ It can kill us; it can cause our deaths. Without our descriptions of the world, in fact, there is only “brute power and...naked pain;” but *with* our descriptions of the world, we exercise “the only sort of power over the world which we can hope to

have.”³⁴ We achieve something that, in effect, makes life worth living. We achieve our *own* truth about things and about who we are. We attain “self-creation.”³⁵ This idea is Jamesian to the core. And I would add that part of the force of Rorty’s philosophy lies in its being an antidote to our glorification of science and its vision of the world, which, in denying the truth of our human descriptions, leaves us defenseless in the face of the world, defenseless in the face of “brute power and... naked pain.”³⁶ Without a Jamesian approach, it seems, or something like it, we are only raw nerves waiting to be hurt by the overwhelming power of the universe.

However, Rorty develops his pragmatism in an important way beyond James, which helps us to begin to see the limitation of James’s approach. Whereas James believes (like any modernist) that the individual self has the power to help to create its truths, Rorty recognizes that, in fact, we must be willing to devalue the self more, that is, to have a “de-divinized” sense of self in our postmodern world.³⁷ For example, Rorty insists that nobody chose to create the new “Galilean” truth about the world when that truth was created. “Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others.”³⁸ Belief in the self’s independent creative powers is, for Rorty, still the result of the “temptation to think of the world, or the human self, as possessing an intrinsic nature, an essence.”³⁹ It is only an additional way that we are un-pragmatic and assume that there is some essence out there, or what Rorty also calls “The One Right Description.”⁴⁰ But we must go further than this today and reject granting any essence to the self just as we reject granting any essence to the world.⁴¹

As Rorty’s position suggests, someone like James, with his emphasis on the creative power of the self, cannot be said to have gone far enough in the advance beyond

modernism, with its similar insistence on the unique importance of the self. Gavin, for example, lets us see that, for James, when all is said and done, since the individual self is lost, our death can only be “inexplicable, perhaps ‘tragic.’”⁴² The loss of self would be the loss of everything. Bruce Kuklick echoes a similar point when he says that, on James’s view, “as the dark closed in on the spirit, it was left alone with its naked courage.”⁴³ The individual stands alone against the indifferent world, opposed to it with the expectation that the self should, after all, live forever. But, if Rorty is correct, this individualist stance is passé; for James has, in effect, made a minor deity out of the self,⁴⁴ giving it the expectations of the gods, to be eternal and blessed, whereas postmodernism urges us to go further and to get rid of all gods, that is, to “try to get to the point where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat *nothing* as a quasi divinity.”⁴⁵ James seems to be in the unfortunate modernist position of making too much of the self in a postmodern age.

John Lachs helps us to see a similar problem with James’s conception of the self, or something like it, in his essay, “Stoic Pragmatism,” namely that it can get carried away with its own sense of power and become unreasonable in its demands.⁴⁶ Lachs believes that “Nature checkmates us in the end, and when that becomes plain, it is unbecoming to knock over the board in anger and pointless to play out every move. At that stage, the stoic teaches us to smile, to say it was a good game and now goodnight.”⁴⁷ But this is precisely what James, as I read him, will not truly accept, insisting that a person always still has “a fighting chance.”⁴⁸ While I believe that ultimately we cannot answer for others in these matters of life and death (we can only offer suggestions), for myself at any rate I believe that James may be wrong on this point, and that Lachs may be right. When

the end comes with certainty, resistance will be in vain; instead of resisting, I should simply assent—although, of course, this must be easier said than done, and I would in no way find fault with or blame anyone else who would die differently. Alongside courage, tolerance and the acceptance of others are also important Stoic virtues.⁴⁹

So, I agree with Lachs for myself, that I should try to accept my own death when it comes, but I also do not think that Lachs goes far enough in maintaining his general point, at least not for me. Lachs wants to preserve some semblance of James’s pragmatism by combining it with Stoicism, a position that he calls “Stoic Pragmatism.”⁵⁰ The idea is that some element of choice about how to shape reality is still possible with us, save for in intractable situations; other than in these situations, we can always “seek a better life.”⁵¹ It sounds good to me as far as it goes, but underlying this conception may still be the idea that the self is a power unto itself that can control nature and transform reality, even if within prescribed limits. I worry that such a conception, if promoted excessively, might lead us to expect too much, namely that we can succeed in overpowering anything. I am afraid that retaining the conception of self that Lachs wishes to retain may train us to expect to have control over nature and reality as such, which will in turn lead us to experience the inevitable anxiety and frustration that comes when we realize we cannot, in fact, control all things, least of all the fact that we must die. In my view, Lachs’s halfway approach, granting us power over nature here and there, is not, to use Socrates’s words, the proper “training for dying.”⁵²

To be more specific, I am not sure that a life spent in seeking control over life where we can get it is the best preparation for confronting those aspects of life that we cannot control. I worry that, in this kind of life, our habits of expectation of control will

override us in the end and lead us to demand the impossible in death, and therefore lead us to be profoundly disappointed. I suspect that it is not so easy to know how to deal with those cases that are not in our control simply by acknowledging them; intense training and practice may be required, as the Stoics well understood, but the pragmatists, it seems, did not.

Turning away from the pragmatist orientation altogether, Stoicism proper may open up to us a better perspective. Marcus Aurelius, in particular, may present a better response to death, and indeed to any of life's problems, when he reminds us that:

Nature gives all and takes all back. To her the man educated into humility says: 'Give what you will; take back what you will.' And he says this in no spirit of defiance, but simply as her loyal subject.⁵³

Nature is the All in which we are embedded and to which we owe our allegiance. There is a certain trust and loyalty that we should show to nature, above all by accepting what nature commands of us. The Jamesian self, on the other hand, resents the fact that it must "submit" to reality, as we have seen.⁵⁴ In a fit of despair, James writes: "Every individual existence goes out in a lonely spasm of helpless agony."⁵⁵ And this characterizes his position: resistance to death, continued self-assertion in the face of reality. Yet, according to the Stoics, we have the ability to be rational and can, through practice and training, come to accept "willingly" what must inevitably be.⁵⁶ Or we can resist nature and become resentful, expecting more for ourselves than is possible. Stoicism teaches us that it is better not to resist and better not to be resentful; we should accept our Fate and even be happy with it. For the Stoics, we should learn to approach our own deaths, when they become inevitable, with a calm and tranquil state of mind, which is not to say that this is easy (perhaps it is the most difficult thing of all).

With so much, Lachs might agree (except that he does not say enough about how to train for death). But the problem is in believing we have the ability to *master* reality at all. We are not just speaking of giving up control over our inevitable death and other intractable situations. Every belief in the self's power over reality as such only inflates the self that much more. And an inflated self will breed resentment, for the inflated self will always eventually be disappointed. As Marcus Aurelius again says,

The soul of man harms itself, first and foremost, when it becomes (as far as it can) a separate growth, a sort of tumour on the universe: because to resent anything is to separate oneself in revolt from Nature, which holds in collective embrace the particular nature of all other things.⁵⁷

Jamesian Pragmatism (and, indeed, Lach's own selective Stoicism) may contribute to this tumour, to this spirit of revolt, by encouraging us to believe there is a great deal that we can creatively add to the world, to external reality, when, if the Stoics are correct, there actually is not. All things are locked in place and constrained.⁵⁸ What folly, then, to try to break off from what is and to become something separate. What frustration must then await you! But this is precisely the Jamesian view.

On the Jamesian view, we keep resisting where we can, with the expectation that reality will give in somewhere. In fact, we never really submit; we only try different lines of attack when something does not work. In a certain sense, the Jamesian self always sees reality in opposition to the self. For James, death, for example, always defies us; and reality in general is but a malleable, plastic substance that can accept much of what we would will of it. James can never accept the natural world as it is: "To such a harlot," he says, "we owe no allegiance; with her as a whole we can establish no moral communion."⁵⁹ Such a view, however, in which the world is always opposed to the self, only encourages the spirit of simmering resentment and revolt, teaching the self to be

unhappy with what results when it goes against our efforts. For the self is still the thing, still made too much a part of the equation, more than a rational view of the universe can maintain. The Jamesian self would transcend nature if it could and become all, but since it cannot, it claims to delight in resistance for its own sake, to delight in “active tension,”⁶⁰ but in the end, because it hopes for so much and achieves so little, it becomes resentful and despairing, dying in “helpless agony,” in a state of futile resistance.⁶¹

If the Stoics are right, however, it may be better to accept Fate cheerfully, even in small particulars, than to goad the self on to demand too much from itself, and hence to become saddened and disappointed with life. The voice of Reason should calm James, gently leading him to accept the inevitable. As Epictetus says,

All things obey, and are subservient to, the world; the earth, the sea, the sun, and other stars, and the plants and animals of the earth. Our body likewise obeys it, in being sick and well, and young and old, and passing through the other changes, whenever that decrees. It is therefore reasonable that what depends on ourselves, that is, our judgment, should not be the only rebel to it. For the world is powerful, and superior, and consults the best for us, by governing us in conjunction with the whole. Further: opposition, besides that it is unreasonable, and produces nothing except a vain struggle, throws us likewise into pain and sorrows.⁶²

James’s pragmatism may be viewed as an unfortunate hold-out of the rebellious modernist self, a position that will not listen to the voice of Reason that Epictetus urges upon us above. Unreasonable, overly insistent, the Jamesian self encourages anxiety and restlessness by always resisting reality, by always trying to find a way in which reality will allow our separate meanings to occur, in defiance of Fate, in defiance of the inevitable logic of what must occur.⁶³

None of this, of course, proves the correctness of Stoicism over pragmatism. “Stoicism,” as Pierre Hadot has pointed out, “is a philosophy of self-coherence, based

upon a remarkable intuition of the essence of life,” an intuition that must get worked out at the technical level.⁶⁴ I only intend here to give expression to this competing intuition. And I add that this intuition may seem to fit better with an age like ours, which has given up on (or at least should give up on) modernism. If the anxiety of life is ever to go away, if its “active tension”⁶⁵ is ever to cease, we must learn to come to terms with life as it is, not continue to believe, with James and the modernist tradition that, as Bruce Kuklick puts it, though “bitter dregs always remained at the bottom of the cup,” nonetheless somehow through our efforts “we shall overcome.”⁶⁶ By insisting that we can still always overcome, James and modernism put too much pressure on the straining self; it is asked to achieve the impossible;⁶⁷ and we may even sense this at the collective level, since we have already begun to lose faith in the modernist credo as we pass over into postmodern times. Insofar as this is correct, in any case, and we have, in fact, lost touch with the modernist self, with its insistence on the vital power of the individual, then we should perhaps once more heed the words of Marcus Aurelius and begin to work out a new and proper understanding of life, for time is running out for each one of us (it always is):

Your death will soon be on you: and you are not yet clear-minded, or untroubled, or free from the fear of external harm, or kindly to all people, or convinced that justice of action is the only wisdom.⁶⁸

Today, when our illusions are shattered, and the modernist self is no longer tenable, we should focus on attaining a clear-head about what life is really like and what we can expect from it. Before it is too late, we should come to terms with our lives. We should stop resisting. We should rather say, with Marcus, in response to the still anxious voice of James within us: Be calm. Be happy. “Gladly surrender yourself to Clotho: let her spin your thread into whatever web she wills.”⁶⁹

References

¹ Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press 2008), 71; 86-110.

² James Livingston says that James gets rid of “modern subjectivity” in his “essays on radical empiricism.” I focus on James’s pragmatism, not his radical empiricism, and argue that James’s ideas here do not sufficiently overcome the modernist self. See James Livingston, “Pragmatism, Nihilism, and Democracy: What Is Called Thinking at the End of Modernity,” in *100 Years of Pragmatism: William James’s Revolutionary Philosophy*, ed., John J. Stuhr (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2010), 144.

³ See Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 5-26.

⁴ Sami Pihlström, “*The Trail of the Human Serpent is Over Everything: Jamesian Perspectives on Mind, World, and Religion* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 2008).

⁵ William J. Gavin, “Pragmatism and Death: Method vs. Metaphor, Tragedy vs. the Will to Believe,” in *100 Years of Pragmatism: William James’s Revolutionary Philosophy*, ed., John J. Stuhr (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 81.

⁶ Gavin explains James’s resistance to death, his emphasis on the irretrievable loss of “the personal,” as preferable to Dewey’s acceptance of death, or at least “as the truly pragmatic” way of life. I take almost the exact opposite approach. See William J. Gavin, “Pragmatism and Death,” 93; 90-91.

⁷ John Lachs, “Stoic Pragmatism,” in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, New Series, Volume 19, Number 2 (2005): 102-103; 105.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 96. I believe Dewey’s thought resembles the Stoic position more than James’s thought does. Lachs discusses Dewey’s ability to give in to events in his footnote referencing a comment made by Larry Hickman. See John Lachs, “Stoic Pragmatism,” 105, n.1. But I would go further and argue that, for Dewey, not merely “acceptance,” as Lachs says, but “submission” and “being conquered” by the larger whole of the universe are crucial and essential parts of Dewey’s philosophy of religion, to draw on Dewey’s own terms here. See John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962), 16; 20. For independent confirmation of a connection between Dewey and Stoicism, see Frank McLynn’s comment that “Students of philosophy, incidentally, will be able to link Dewey’s quasi-Hegelian holism with similar ideas in Marcus’s thought,” referring the Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius. See Frank McLynn, *Marcus Aurelius: A Life* (Cambridge, M.A.: Da Capo Press, 2010), xiv.

⁹ John Lachs, “Stoic Pragmatism,” 104.

¹⁰ William J. Gavin, “Pragmatism and Death,” 81.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 81; 88-91.

¹² *Ibid.*, 81.

¹³ William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 6.

¹⁴ Arthur James Balfour as quoted by William James, *Pragmatism*, 40.

¹⁵ William James, *Pragmatism*, 40-41. Gavin also cites parts of this passage in William J. Gavin, “Pragmatism and Death,” 88-89.

¹⁶ William James, *Pragmatism*, 40.

¹⁷ John J. McDermott, ed., *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition* (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹ William James, *Pragmatism*, 40.

²⁰ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 3.

²¹ William James, *Pragmatism*, 96.

²² *Ibid.*, 112.

²³ Horace M. Kallen, ed., *The Philosophy of William James: Selected from His Chief Works* (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), 326.

²⁴ William James, “Is Life Worth Living?” in William James, *On a Certain Blindness of Human Beings, Great Ideas*, Volume 75 (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 64.

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- ²⁵ William James, "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence," in *William James: The Essential Writings*, ed., Bruce W. Wilshire (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 24.
- ²⁶ H.S. Thayer, ed., *Pragmatism: The Classic Writings* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1982), 133. The quote is from an interview with James.
- ²⁷ Horace M. Kallen, ed., *The Philosophy of William James: Selected from His Chief Works*, 155.
- ²⁸ Linda Simon, "Active Tension," in *100 Years of Pragmatism: William James's Revolutionary Philosophy*, ed., John J. Stuhr (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 178.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 177-178. Although note the differences in James's spelling in the text referred to by both Simon and me: it could be that the editor of the volume I used has changed or corrected James's original spelling in the letter. See Horace M. Kallen, ed., *The Philosophy of William James: Selected from His Chief Works*, 155.
- ³⁰ Linda Simon, "Active Tension," 178.
- ³¹ William James, "Is Life Worth Living?" 52.
- ³² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, 5.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 40. See also 6; 21-22.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ⁴¹ If we attain self-creation, for Rorty, this is not the result of our own doing, but "is dependent on the kindness of all those strangers out there in the future," who take up our ideas, *Ibid.*, 41. Or, to put it another way, we attain self-creation only when our "idiosyncrasies...just happen to catch on with other people—happen because of the contingencies of some historical situation." *Ibid.*, 37.
- ⁴² William J. Gavin, "Pragmatism and Death," 93.
- ⁴³ Bruce Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America, 1720-2000* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 178.
- ⁴⁴ See James's strong endorsement of Papini's pragmatism, in which, according to James, as "a creative being," "man becomes a kind of god." Given this new self-image of man as a god, James asks, "Why are the most utopian programs not in order?" William James, "G. Papini and the Pragmatist Movement in Italy," in *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, Vol. III, No. 13: June 21, 1906, p. 340.
- ⁴⁵ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 22.
- ⁴⁶ John Lachs, "Stoic Pragmatism," 102-103.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.
- ⁴⁸ William James, *Pragmatism*, 112.
- ⁴⁹ See, for example, Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Martin Hammond (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 10.
- ⁵⁰ John Lachs, "Stoic Pragmatism," 96; 104.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 104.
- ⁵² Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977), 16.
- ⁵³ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 98-99.
- ⁵⁴ William James, *Pragmatism*, 6. Here James laments that we can only "submit" to nature.
- ⁵⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, ed., Martin E. Marty (Middlesex/New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), 163.
- ⁵⁶ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 101. Readers of the full passage here could perhaps find some evidence that Stoicism does not essentialize the world, for here nature is presented as what occurs, not unlike "the nonlinguistic" in Rorty's philosophy. See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 40.
- ⁵⁷ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 14-15.
- ⁵⁸ This does not mean that ethical action becomes impossible for the Stoics. On the contrary, as Lachs rightly observes, Stoicism demands ethical and socially-minded action. See John Lachs, *Stoic Pragmatism*, 99-100. The Stoics would say we are fated to be ethical or, as Marcus Aurelius puts it, "We were born for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of upper and lower teeth." Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 10.

⁵⁹ William James, "Is Life Worth Living?" 46.

⁶⁰ Horace M. Kallen, ed., *The Philosophy of William James: Selected from His Chief Works*, 155.

⁶¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 163.

⁶² Epictetus, *Moral Discourses/Enchiridion and Fragments*, trans. Elizabeth Carter (London/ New York: Everyman's Library, 1966), 296.

⁶³ For Marcus Aurelius's conception of defiance, see the passage already quoted from Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 98-99 (n. 53 of the present paper). As a Stoic, he might conceive of any refusal to accept Fate as act of opposition or defiance. For his conception of being separate, see the passage already quoted from Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 14-15 (n. 57 of the present paper).

⁶⁴ Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 75.

⁶⁵ Horace M. Kallen, ed., *The Philosophy of William James: Selected from His Chief Works*, 155.

⁶⁶ Bruce Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America, 1720-2000*, 178.

⁶⁷ Gavin recognizes this feature of un-tenability in James's philosophy, but sees it as a kind of virtue, almost a form of heroism like Nietzsche's affirmation of life. I would argue, however, that this untenable aspect of James's position overly romanticizes the struggle of opposing reality and that, of course, we all want peace of mind when it comes to life and death. As Gavin puts it, "James here seems to admit that too much is being asked." See William J. Gavin, "*Pragmatism and Death*," 91.

⁶⁸ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 30.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 30. I presented a previous version of this paper at the conference, "The Philosophy of Pragmatism Today," held at Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia, June 2010. I would like to thank Emil Vishnovsky for the suggestion of the title of this paper as part of the conference theme. I would like to thank Vincent Colapietro for helping me to problematize James's approach to death by arguing for its one-sidedness and "hyper-masculinity." I am aware that James's response to my position would be to criticize me for being "afraid of life" and seeking to "fall on our father's neck, and be absorbed into the absolute life as a drop of water melts into the river or sea." See William James, *Pragmatism*, 112-113. This would strike me as an *ad hominem* argument, though. It seems to me that such a falling on of the neck is inevitable, whether we accept it or not, and that the important thing is how we will fall; or as Epictetus reminds us in the form of a prayer:

Lead me, Zeus, and you too, Destiny,
Wherever I am assigned by you;
I'll follow and not hesitate,
But even if I do not wish to,
Because I'm bad, I'll follow anyway.

See Epictetus, *The Handbook*, trans. Nicholas P. White (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, Co., 1990), 29.

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