Religious experience, psychology, and healing in a pragmatist perspective.
Introduction to the *Focus* "Practicing William James"

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Self-consciously placing himself at the intersection of different academic fields, in the first place psychology and philosophy, which at his time were just beginning to divide and shape their own autonomous identities, William James is one of those authors whose "mixed" and overlapping interests have always both pleased and annoyed scholars, for opposite reasons. On the one hand, interpreters have praised the width and depth of his project, pointing at how it challenged and indeed still challenges the pernicious effects of keeping disciplinary borders immobile and letting them rule on how human nature itself should be subdivided and studied (Bordogna 2008); on the other hand, the ambiguities arising from his approach have often been indicated as a source of conceptual confusion, if not of persistent theoretical misunderstandings and mistakes, later perpetuated by some of his followers (Misak 2013). This dual attitude towards James, perhaps unsurprisingly, can also be seen in some of the articles composing this *Philinq Focus*, which far from simply mirroring the state of the art in the literature, show how the complexities of the Jamesian outlook are still able to stimulate rich intellectual discussions.

The idea for this *Focus*, not coincidentally, originated from a workshop on James and "philosophical connections" held at the University of Florence in May 2016, with Cheryl Misak and Paolo Tripodi as the main speakers. Their essays, partly derived from that workshop, open the Focus, and it is interesting to see how two philosophers who arguably share some general commitments – chiefly, a broadly analytical orientation and, regarding pragmatism, an opposition to its Rortyan side – can offer such divergent interpretations of some central tenets of James' thought. Both papers deal with religious experience and, in a sense, are concerned with the bearings of James' vision of religious belief upon epistemological themes. Misak's short and at once incisive and thought-provoking article, "James on Religious Experience", can be read as a sort of summary of her view on James through the lens of the relationship between a pragmatist account of religion and a pragmatist ac-

count of truth. In her view, it is perfectly legitimate to argue, as James did in "The Will to Believe" (James 1896), that any experience or "experiment" of living can count as evidence for whether or not it is good for human beings to believe in God; but is not legitimate to extend the domain of this "evidence" to what exists, that is, to let these "experiments" have a say as to the effective existence of God. According to Misak, in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 1985) James constantly swayed between keeping life experiences in their "proper" terrain, that is, life and what is important in life, and extending their significance to the territory of an account of what there is, and therefore of truth. Whereas James' insistence on "following the evidence wherever it leads" is interpreted by Misak as a form of empiricism and a healthy antidote against dogmatism and bigotry, his conviction that mystical experiences can also tell us something about the world, combined with his acknowledgment of the role of religious beliefs in satisfying our deepest needs, goes too far for her. This is because, in the end, this view mingles an empiricist concept of evidence with an idea of religious belief whose warrants seem "to be all about need" and not about empirical truth. Misak supports her view with similar criticisms levelled against James by thinkers of his time and shortly thereafter, like Charles S. Peirce, Frank P. Ramsey, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, the latter interpreted as an admirer of James on religious experience only to the extent that he appreciated James' exploration of the significance of religion for personal life, while deprecating his tendency to hypothesize a religious form of evidence.

A different point of view on the relationship between James and Wittgenstein, still in the domain of religious belief, is defended by Paolo Tripodi, who in his paper "James and Wittgenstein on Religious Belief" focuses on if and how the two thinkers' attitudes toward religion can be considered forms of relativism. He argues that they can, and in this respect he therefore suggests that Wittgenstein absorbed from James something that went well beyond the mere acknowledgment of the significance of religious belief for life, instead extending to a form of epistemic pluralism which went hand in hand with the two thinkers' anti-reductionist and anti-dogmatic attitudes.

Besides their take on the relationship between James and Wittgenstein, Misak and Tripodi's articles also show other differences. The latter indeed interprets James' openness to religious forms of evidence as a sign of his pluralism, even on an epistemic level, in such a way that what for Misak is an undue extension of the religious attitude into the domain of empirical truth, for Tripodi is a legitimate and positive consequence of James' (perhaps embryonic or unexpressed) epistemic relativism. Curiously, Tripodi cites Richard Rorty (2004) as his adversary in this interpretation, and an unexpected result of this is that

Rorty and Misak, in spite of the latter's well known criticism of the former (Misak 2013: Ch. 13), appear to share a common position concerning James' *Varieties*. This may sound surprising. Yet, as readers will see, on this specific point Misak's article does echo some claims advanced by Rorty (2004), according to whom, for instance, James is unable "to make up his mind between arguing that supernaturalism might be true because it might be good for you and arguing that it is in fact true because there is ample experiential evidence for it" (86). Needless to say, this affinity remains at the surface, while the deep reasons of Rorty and Misak's criticism are utterly different.

To go back to Tripodi's contribution, his other original idea is that Rorty's attitude amounts to a form of pragmatic or pragmatist *reductionism*, in that the latter tends to reduce religious belief to non-religious terms, namely, the terms of its practical effects and its value for life, rather than acknowledging that a belief in the existence of God can effectively be connected to the claim that God exists. Tripodi uses this argument in order to sustain his idea that James was a pluralist through and through, and would accept, if not endorse, a form of epistemic relativism. One might object that interpreting a belief in terms of its value for life, once "value for life" is itself interpreted in broad terms, is *not* a form of reductionism, in spite of Rorty's (2004) own use of the term "reduction" (91, 97). In a sense, the exploration of the connection between belief and its value for life, or its bearings upon conduct – the so-called pragmatic maxim, in short – is the central theme of the pragmatist project on the whole. And it is precisely through the lens of an exploration of the pragmatic maxim, but with reference to James' *psychology*, that one can profitably read the other three contributions of our *Focus*.

Here Stephane Madelrieux's article, "Psychological Conceptions and Practical Results" provides us with the appropriate link. Without lingering over the question of whether James' pragmatism was already present in his psychological *theories* and so well before his official endorsement of Peirce's pragmatic maxim in "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results" (1898), Madelrieux takes a step back and asks whether James' *conception of psychology* as a natural science was a pragmatist one. In giving a positive answer, he claims that what makes psychology a science for James is precisely its capacity to have practical consequences in people's lives. This fosters new interpretative currents in the understanding of James' work on the whole, beyond shedding new light on some usually neglected texts written between the publication of *Principles of Psychology* in 1890 (James 1981) and the 1898 conference.

In a sense, therefore, we might read Madelrieux's essay (also) as a reflection on the kind of practical effects that pragmatism (a pragmatist psychology in this case) is interested in bringing to the fore, and perhaps, by way of this

reflection, as a response to the charge of reductionism that sometimes hovers around pragmatism (as Tripodi's article shows). Madelrieux's work highlights two kinds of practical bearings in James' approach to psychology as a science: one internal, the other external. The former concerns psychologists and researchers of psychology themselves, and affects the way in which they *practice* psychology. To consider it a science is to avoid positing transcendental or ideal agents, to escape merely intellectual theories, and to instead investigate the organic and verifiable conditions of mental phenomena, conditions that can be always experimented with. This is not only in accordance with a broadly empiricist program, but also aims to keep the connection alive between our knowledge of mental phenomena and our practical mastery over them, in such a way that effective improvements in the lives of individuals are always within the range of action of psychological research, this being a branch of study that, basically, *does* things. The external kind of practical bearing of a pragmatist psychology, indeed, lies in its promise and capacity to improve human healing and growth. According to Madelrieux, James' sensimotor psychology – with its fundamental idea that the main function of the mind is to help the subject adopt the most useful reactions in response to its sensory impressions – is in this sense also the indispensable substratum both of a pedagogy in which the pupil's reactions to stimuli and teachings assume a primary role, and of an education in a wholesome lifestyle based on a healthy and well trained body. Moreover, psychical research, including hypnosis, is also praised by James in the name of its "practical fertility" for the cure of insanity, and not least because it helps us see the continuity between illness and health, thus letting us perceive mentally ill patients in a different light.

The twofold range of practical consequences in James' conception of psychology highlighted by Madelrieux – on the development of its research program as a science, and on its practical uses for education and healing – are somewhat mirrored in the two articles that close the *Focus*.

Harry Heft's "William James' Psychology, Radical Empiricism, and Field Theory: Recent Developments" contributes to the clarification of the first point, although Heft's main focus is neither on the *Principles of Psychology*, nor the other texts examined by Madelrieux, but rather on James' radical empiricism. Besides underlining that mainstream psychology in the US commonly cites James as one of its founding fathers but at the same time misunderstands and misconstrues his main tenets, Heft argues that it is in radical empiricism that one can read the full development of James' psychology, a development which, far from marking a shift from psychology to philosophy in James' intellectual path (as is often claimed in the literature), remains anchored in the scientific domain and chiefly in what was going on in the phys-

ics and biology of the time. Indeed, while a Newtonian physics had found its psychological counterpart in John Locke – with the emphasis on ideas meant as particle-like entities bound by extrinsic forces, such as association – what started to be developed in physics in the 1830's by Michael Faraday and later by Maxwell, was an approach focussed on fields and continuity, and it was this approach that James had in mind, according to Heft, as early as 1884, when he wrote the first version of the Stream of Thought chapter of the *Principles* (James 1884). This same outlook, evident in his insistence on relations being intrinsic and experienced elements in the stream of thought rather than extrinsic forces, came to have a prominent role in his later work, culminating in radical empiricism.

Although in this description it may seem that the practical side of psychology is neglected in favour of a more theoretical stance, Heft actually allows us to see and appreciate the scientific and experimental dimension of radical empiricism when its connection to field physics is acknowledged. In this perspective, radical empiricism is itself a development of psychology as a science – and a development that also has an import today, in the contemporary ecological psychology inspired by James Gibson, whose Jamesian legacy Heft himself (2001) brought to light.

Shannon Sullivan's paper, "Toward a Jamesian Account of Trauma and Healing" finally shows the therapeutic side of James' practical conception of psychology, by means of an examination of his theory of emotion and its implications for trauma and recovery. On the basis of James' account of emotion as felt bodily change, she goes somewhat against common interpretations in considering James' psychology, even in the *Principles*, *non-dualistic*, insofar as it is irreducibly psychophysiological. As she puts it, "James' most *biologically* based work is the best resource in his corpus for understanding the *psychological* complexities of trauma and healing". On these grounds, she argues that since trauma is emotional, it is always (also) physiological, even when it does not seem to leave any physical traces (in fact, research on brain damage in post-traumatic stress disorder confirms that physical effects are always involved in trauma). On the side of healing, this means that recovery from trauma too needs to involve bodily change, a vision that supports, for instance, the use of movement therapies. Here one sees that Sullivan's article can be read as an exemplification of the pragmatic uses of James' conception of psychology as a science, one in which the coexistence of bodily and mental aspects in emotion is essentially "practicable" for a successful healing strategy. Even more interesting is Sullivan's extension of this perspective to collective and trans-generational trauma, in which James' conception of the fringe helps to read traumas caused by rape or war for example as transmittable from

person to person and from generation to generation. This again has a counterpart in therapy, where collective exercises involving bodily movements can significantly aid patients in regaining attunement with the other, trust, and ultimately achieving recovery.

To conclude, I am convinced that the articles composing this *Focus* represent various ways of "practicing" William James' thought and showing the fruitfulness – and sometimes the ambiguities – of his cross-boundary project. Wholly in the spirit of the pragmatist accent on philosophy (and religion, and psychology) having practical bearings upon our lives and conduct as well as on society overall, they testify to the enduring interest and discussion that this thinker is able to foster in multiple fields of research and practice.

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