William James: Hümanizmi ve Din Felsefesi

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Öz

Hümanizm düşünce tarihinin kilit kavramlarından biridir. Kavramın çeşitli dönemlerde, farklı amaçlarla kullanıldığı gözlenmektedir. Sofistlerin retorik düzeyindeki hümanizminden, orta çağın Hristiyan hümanizmine, Rönesans'ın yazınsal hümanizminden Comte'un hümanizmine kadar birbirinden farklı hümanizm türleri mevcuttur. Başka bir deyişle, yekpare bir hümanizmden bahsedilemez. Bu yaklaşım çeşitliliğinde karşımıza çıkan problemlerden biri, hümanizm ile din arasındaki ilişkidir. Kimi hümanist yorumlar din dışı ve hatta din karşıtı bir yaklaşımı ön plana çıkarmaktadır. Peki, hümanizmi din karşıtı bir öğreti olarak görmek zorunlu mudur? James'in hümanizmi bu soruyu cevaplamak bakımından önemli veriler sunmaktadır. Bir ucunda radikal bir ampirist epistemolojinin, diğer ucundaysa anti-teistik bir paradigmanın egemen olduğu James'in hümanizmi dinî inancı dışlamamaktadır. Aksine, hem dinin pratik açıdan verimli yönlerini özenle korumakta, hem de insanı merkeze alan bir din felsefesi geliştirmektedir. Başta Tanrı'nın varlığı, Tanrı-evren ilişkisi, kötülük problemi ve dinî tecrübe olmak üzere, klasik din felsefesinin çeşitli problemleri James tarafından hümanistik bir yaklaşımla ele alınmaktadır. Çalışmamız, James'in zikredilen din felsefesi problemlerine verdiği cevapları kendi özgün hümanizmi çerçevesinde irdelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *William James, Tanrı, Din Felsefesi, Hümanizm, Radikal Ampirizm.*

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William James: His Humanism and Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract

Humanism is one of the key concepts of the history of thought. It has been employed for different purposes in different eras. There are various types of it, ranging from the rhetorical humanism of Sophists to the Christian humanism of the middle ages, and from literary humanism of the Renaissance to the humanism of Comte. In other words, there is no monolithic humanism. One of the problems encountered within this diversity of approaches is the relationship between humanism and religion. Some humanistic interpretations foreground an anti-religious approach. Is it necessary to regard humanism as anti-religious? James's humanism provides important data to answer this question. His humanism, at one end of which there is a radical empiricist epistemology while at the other end there lies an anti-theistic paradigm, does not exclude religious belief. Rather, it both carefully preserves the practically productive aspects of religion and develops a philosophy of religion that puts human being in the center. Several problems of classical philosophy of religion, particularly the existence of God, his relationship with the universe, the problem of evil and religious experience, are handled with a humanistic approach by James. And this study examines James's answers to those problems of philosophy of religion within the framework of his genuine humanism.

Keywords: *William James, God, Philosophy of Religion, Humanism, Radical Empiricism.*

Introduction

This article deals with William James's idea of humanism in the context of his philosophy of religion. It deems an examination of the relationship between James's humanism and his philosophy of religion important particularly for two reasons.

First, there is a general acceptance that humanism is anti-theistic in that it takes human being as the point of departure. According to Jager, for instance, humanism is an alternative approach to the theocentric world view.[1] This argument has legitimate grounds. However, the question of whether its anti-theistic structure turns humanism into an anti-religious approach remains to be answered. Take American Humanist Association (AHA) as an example. AHA defines humanism as "a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism or other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good."[2]

Keeping in mind that AHA uses "good without a God" as an inscription, one can well claim that the definition it gives refers to an irreligious and even anti-religious form of humanism.

Second, the scholarship on the terms of transhumanism and posthumanism has become conspicuous recently. Both transhumanism, aiming to increase the rational and biological capacity of human being through scientific and high-tech applications to "free us from our biological chains,"[3] and the critical posthumanism, pursuing to "deconstruct humanism from within,"[4] are futuristic reflections of the desire to transcend humanism.

Now, it is imperative to have a *given* definition of humanism to prosecute this desire within the framework of a programmed approach. In other words, the attempts to go beyond humanism seem, in principle, to be based on the premise that humanism is an approach on the definition of which there is a universal agreement. The question, though, is whether this is the case. What is problematic here is not the existence of efforts to transcend humanism. Rather, it is the conviction, that, despite different types of humanism encountered throughout the history of thought, there is a common, defined and agreed definition of it.

Based on the preceding observations, one can ask a set of questions: Do we need to define humanism as an irreligious or anti-religious worldview? Does the anti-theistic attitude in certain humanistic approaches make it compulsory to rule out all forms of supranatural belief? Is it legitimate to argue that humanism has a given meaning, or that it has been transcended, without providing a universally agreed definition?

One gets, from a Jamesian angle, negative answers to these. Above all, James's humanism has an anti-theistic leaning. However, his humanism stands out as an alternative theory of

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1   Werner Wilhelm Jaeger, *Humanism and Theology*, Aquinas Lecture (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1943), 40.

2   American Humanist Association, "Definition of Humanism," American Humanist Association, February 23, 2023, https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/definition-of-humanism/.

3   Ahmet Dağ, "Hümanizmin Radikalleşmesi Olarak Transhümanizm," *Felsefi Düşün - Akademik Felsefe Dergisi* 0, no. 9 (2017): 56.

4   David Roden, *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 9.

religion, let alone being anti-religious. God undertakes a substantial role in James's humanism. Therefore, AHA's motto of "good without a God" could hardly have validity in his thought.

On the other hand, James's humanism is just one type of *humanisms*. Due to the exigencies of space, it is not possible to discuss all types of humanism in an introductory part. Still, it is useful to depict some of them briefly.

The history of humanism goes as far back as to the Sophists. F. C. S. Schiller, for example, who himself is described by A. W. Moore as "the most thorough-going and militant representative" of humanism,[5] argues that the Sophists are the leaders of the fifth-century humanistic movement.[6] Protagoras's proposition on *man as the measure* would seem to act as a pillar for Schiller's argument. I propose to characterize this sophistic type of humanism as "rhetorical humanism" in view of the Sophists' mission and the subjects they dealt with widely: speech, word, grammar, etc. This characterization is also compatible with the approach of Samuel Johnson, one of the first English lexicographers, who defines humanists as philologists or grammarians.[7]

There is also a type of humanism whose educational aspect predominates. In line with the ancient curriculum, this kind of humanism aims at raising the ideal type of man and can be characterized as "curricular humanism." The modern version of it is introduced by Niethammer who applied the concept of *Humanismus* for humanistic education in the nineteenth century considering the meaning Cicero attributed to the concept of humanitas.[8]

In addition, we have the Christian humanism of the thinkers of the Middle Ages, which conveys the reaction against the established scholastic approach[9] and attempts to interpret Christianity correctly and truthfully.[10] The literary humanism of the Renaissance and the socio-religious humanism of Auguste Comte can also be mentioned.

Even this brief address to the types of humanism shows that humanism does not constitute a monolithic set of thought.

A reading on James's writings makes it possible to give an answer to the above-mentioned questions by combining them. The issue that needs to be emphasized, he seems to think, is not whether humanism excludes religion, but rather the kind of connection that exists between religious belief and man's individual or social journeys. In other words, if we are to seek something, it should be man's *will to believe*, and this *will* cannot be separated from man's general conception of life. Religion stands there as one solid foundation for humanistic purposes.

Should we conclude these prelusive remarks with a general observation, we could say

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5   A. W. Moore, "Humanism," *The Monist* 14, no. 5 (1904): 749.

6   Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller, *Studies in Humanism* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1907), 31.

7   Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 6th ed., vol. 1 (London: J. F. and C. Rivington, 1785), 982.

8   Jens Zimmermann, "Introduction," in *Re-Envisioning Christian Humanism: Education and the Restoration of Humanity*, ed. Jens Zimmermann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4.

9   Jaeger, *Humanism and Theology*, 2–3.

10   James Hankins, "Religion and the Modernity of Renaissance Humanism," in *Interpretations of Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Angelo Mazzocco (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 144.

that James's humanism has a philosophically grounded systematic structure. At one end of the system there is his version of empiricism, and at the other end we find religion. It is anti-theistic but does not exclude practically productive aspects of religion. Moreover, one can even argue that he pushes the limits of empiricism in favor of religious belief, as religious experience undertakes a key role in his approach. And I shall start by examining the epistemological basis of James's humanism which, I believe, enables us to penetrate his humanistic philosophy of religion. Once we do this, we will be able to answer the following questions:

What is humanism for James? What kind of a connection is there between his idea of humanism and the philosophy of religion he developed? How does he interpret the issues, like the existence of God and the problem of evil, encountered in the classical philosophy of religion? On what ground does his interpretation of religion differ from traditional religious systems? What is his attitude towards classical theism, and what consequences, in terms of philosophy of religion, does he derive from this attitude? What function does religious experience have in his humanistic theory?

Radical Empiricism of Jamesian Humanism

William James lays the foundation for his philosophy on empiricist grounds. He agrees with the argument that our knowledge of things depends on experiments. However, there is a remarkable point distinguishing James's empiricism from other versions. The difference lies within the epithet of *radical*. He calls his own theory as radical empiricism. This characterization creates an assertive image for an epistemological approach. What is the point that diverges it from other types of empiricism and makes it radical? For James, "to be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced."[11] This referral to the general characteristics of radical empiricism reinforces the basic empiricist argument. Ordinary empiricists also would adopt it. Therefore, the distinctive character of radical empiricism must tell us something further. The difference between ordinary and radical empiricisms can be deduced from James's criticism of Hume.[12] Hume asserts that "upon the whole, there appears not, throughout all nature, any one instance of connexion [*sic*], which is conceivable by us. All events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another; but we never can observe any tye [*sic*] between them."[13] Thus, for James, Hume considers the disjunctive relations while disregarding the conjunctive ones. Disjunctive relations alone cannot give us the unification of things. Consequently, there can be a succession of things but not within an evidentially guaranteed way. James's radical empiricism, however, sees conjunctive relations as

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11   William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, ed. Ralph Barton Perry (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1912), 42.

12   James, *Essays*.

13   David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican (1748; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 54.

immediately given as disjunctive relations.[14] What happens, in terms of a theory of knowledge, if we concentrate on the disjunctive relations and disregard the conjunctive ones? For James, the most probable defect of this approach would be an invitation to rationalistic theories to unify things. If the conjunctive relations are ignored, with the assumption that they cannot be philosophically grounded, the door will be wide open to rationalism, which, in James's view, tries "to correct its incoherencies by the addition of trans-experiential agents of unification, substances, intellectual categories and powers, or Selves."[15] The relation of things, and the unification of the world would depend, then, on the intervention of different agents but *not* man himself. Yet, the source, limit, and value of knowledge cannot be accounted *without* man. All relations must be experienced. Moreover, they must belong to the same subject, the human being. This is the humanistic sensitivity James tries to protect via his objections to both Hume and rationalists like Hegel. One must also note that the terms of radical empiricism and humanism are *synonymous* in James's thought.[16]

Another point that makes James's empiricism radical is his widening of the field of experience. He sees religious experience at the same level with other types of experience. Religious experience is among the essential components of James's humanistic approach. Moreover, he characterizes his own humanism as a religion.[17] Given this religious quality, one may justifiably wonder how Hume would judge the humanistically grounded empiricism of James. The justification is deducible from the following harsh attitude: "If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."[18]

Hume would, probably, regard James's theory as purely radical which compromises the structure of empiricism.

On the other hand, the ideas James puts forward while discussing the concepts of religion and God reflect a similar radicalism. As the discussions evolve, God, whom James contemplates, undergoes a radical revision in terms of His attributes. This revision is the inevitable result of James's thoughts about experience emerging from a humanistic ground. It is impossible for James to experience the universe as a whole. There can be no transcendental all-knower. He finds such an existent morally unacceptable.[19] Therefore, it is natural to expect God's attribute of omniscience, which is traditionally ascribed to Him, to have its share of this unacceptability. Since God is a finite being, like men, His knowledge must also be finite. Some other attributes

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14   William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1920), 280.

15   James, *Essays*, 43.

16   Ibid., 156.

17   William James, *The Meaning of Truth a Sequel to "Pragmatism"* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), 125.

18   Hume, *An Enquiry*, 120.

19   David C Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 22.

of God also undergo a similar "pruning" in Jamesian theory.

The very meaning of being human and the place men occupy in the formation of truth is the core of James's humanism. For him, the truth is the product of human being. His analysis on the terms of religion and God are presenting the result of this premise.

Revisiting Religion and God Humanistically

There are important arguments for and against religion in James's pragmatism. God is another key concept carefully examined by him. His discourse on the terms of God and religion, decorated with humanistic references, makes his divergence from classical understandings more apparent. The anti-absolutism of his general approach keeps him away from monistic pantheism and classical theism. The inability he assumes to be inherent in these approaches, of appreciating the vital function of human beings, plays a key role at this point. The monotheistic religions, as forms of classical theism, for example, attribute a role to human beings. Thus, man is equally important in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They all emphasize man in high esteem. However, this value is hypothetical and depends, in the last analysis, on his deeds. Should man observe the will of God, he becomes the most valuable entity of the creation. Otherwise, the wrath of God comes upon him. The lower esteem for man and the pressure on his freedom are in contrast with the humanistic basis of James's philosophy.

James uses the phrase "religion of humanity" and argues that it "affords a basis for ethics as well as theism does."[20] Yet, the exact scope and purpose of this phrase in James's mind is difficult to predict. He does not provide any further discussions on the subject. In fact, before James, the phrase is used by Auguste Comte in his *The Catechism of Positive Religion*.[21] In the preface, Comte introduces himself as the "founder of the religion of humanity." The traditional God, informs us Comte, is superseded by humanity.[22] His newly instituted religion denotes an anti-theistic religion which literally deifies humanity. One can hardly make a guess as to whether James is meeting on a common ground with Comte. Although there are some similarities within their theories of religion, the difference seems to be more conspicuous. For instance, both have anti-theistic tendencies. Unlike Comte's humanism, however, one cannot talk about deification of man in Jamesian pragmatism. God is approached, in his theory, to humane, in terms of His qualities. It falls short of humanization of God: "Having an environment, being in time, and working out a history just like ourselves, he escapes from the foreignness from all that is human, of the static timeless perfect absolute."[23] Due to these restructred attributes, God can no more be the absolute reference point. James's humanism exhibits an unorthodox approach not only to the attributes of God. It also differs greatly from the classical proofs regarding the

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20   William James, *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1897), 198.

21   Auguste Comte, *The Catechism of Positive Religion*, trans. Richard Congreve (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd., 1891).

22   Auguste Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, trans. John Henry Bridges (London: Trübner and Co., 1865), 349.

23   James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 318.

existence of God. Religious experience emerges as a cornerstone in this respect.

Religious Experience and the Existence of God

Unlike the monotheist thinkers, James does not try to produce logical arguments to prove God's existence. For instance, he emphasizes his distrust against these evidence by saying that some of them are already confuted by Darwinism.[24] James does not regard the scientific endeavors as ways of knowledge without error. Still, he has a strong trust for science. Therefore, the scientific knowledge and its possible reflections on religious issues are important for him. Despite all references he makes to scientific knowledge, however, it is interesting to see him writing that "our whole physical life may lie soaking in a spiritual atmosphere, a dimension of being that we at present have no organ for apprehending."[25]

Although man lacks such an organ, experience, as the basic parameter, can carry this spiritual atmosphere into a meaningful point. It will do its part through its own religious form. If we should talk about the existence of God, it is proper to do so via personal experiences, religious in kind, but not on scientific basis.

Jamesian religious experience is totally different from the one used to prove God's existence. It has such a function for mystics. Islamic Sufis, for example, do not regard the implications of religious experience as just something probable. Those implications represent the truth and the image of the ultimate reality. James, on the other hand, thinks that the implied thing is equally likely to be true *or* false. His religious experience is an extended version of the experiment as the basic pragmatic parameter. The "religious" quality adds nothing more to it and does not make it exceptionally true. Moreover, it is not the unique basis on which people generate belief in what they see as divine. Even if people could not comprehend God on religious experience, nothing would have changed, and they would continue to believe that a divine being exists.[26] Regardless of its object, the fact that it is an experience is valuable on its own.

Belief in the existence of God represents a subjective quality just like in the possibility of salvation. This is why James adopts a melioristic, a *via media* approach, instead of being a pessimist or an optimist regarding the salvation of the world. Both pessimistic and optimistic approaches reach a definite point for that matter. To do this, one needs to know everything. However, this is impossible in terms of the nature of experience. Since no subject can consume the whole world of experience on his own. Therefore, it seems that reinforcement of the religious experience with an additional element is a reasonable option for James. Hope, at this point, has a special role. Belief in the existence of God can be strengthened through hope. This is why James collocates numerous examples of the religious experience of God's existence, particularly in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In order to ground religious experience, he seeks support from as many personal narratives as possible, and tries to preserve the hope given rise by this multiplicity of experiences. This is not a hope insisting on the existence of

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24   William James, *Pragmatism, and Other Essays* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), 34.

25   James, *The Will to Believe*, 57.

26   Ibid., 213.

something unimaginable, but an empirically grounded hope which strengthens religious belief.

God, Finitude and Pantheism

James characterizes his philosophy as religious and formulates his humanism as an alternate religion. Pointing to the differences between his own view and classical religious understandings, he says that "pragmatism can be called religious, if you allow that religion can be pluralistic or merely melioristic in type."[27] Meliorism is an optional attitude regarding the salvation of the world, along with optimism and pessimism. A meliorist does not take the salvation for granted, nor disregards it on pessimistic terms.[28] This attitude invites the divine to cooperate, or to share the authority, so to speak, with man, in which case the divine shall have limited power. The cooperation between man and God reveals the finite nature of the latter.[29] Accordingly, James must deny the infinity of God. It is a theistic attribute of God implying that its bearer cuts its relationship with what is actual, namely the experience. The infinite being is transcendent. It either continues to exist without depending on experience or precedes it. However, there is no place for a notion which is indifferent to experience. Therefore, if God is going to be integrated into the system, He must be correlated with experience, and must be finite. As Türer puts it, finitude, attributed by James to God, does not constitute a deficiency in His nature, rather makes it possible for God to make positive contributions to different aspects of human life, including ethical one.[30] One can also add that finitude does not necessarily mean extinction at a certain point of time. It is, rather, behaving within certain limits with respect to attributes. Consequently, James argues that God "is finite, either in power or in knowledge, or in both at once."[31]

In James's theory, God is a being whom men need. Yet, the contrary is also valid. God has demands on us and we have demands from him. These demands are reciprocally strengthening each other.[32] It means, as Allen perfectly points out, that "God needs us as much as we need Him."[33] In classical theism, however, God is the very reference point of the relationship between Him and men. The relation is unilateral, and it prioritizes God's undividable authority. This, in turn, creates an absolutist and monistic form of religion which is rejected by James.

According to James, religion should be freed from all kinds of elements which means alienation from man. He derives the essence of religion directly from human experience. If an act of revealing is to be mentioned, it can only be a revelation of human desires, demands, expectations, and potentials.

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27   James, *Pragmatism*, 132.

28   Ibid., 125.

29   Frederick S. J. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 8 (New York: Image Books, 1994), 344.

30   Celal Türer, *William James'in Ahlak Anlayışı* (Ankara: Elis, 2005), 223.

31   James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 311.

32   William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, ed. Eugene Taylor and Jeremy Carrette (1902; repr., London: Routledge, 2002), 258.

33   Gay Wilson Allen, *William James* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970), 37.

The contrast with monistic pantheism is clarified at this point. The *absolute* of monistic pantheism cannot be in any practical contact with experience and man. On the other hand, in monotheistic religions, God reveals his will due to the position he holds in the hierarchical order. Without this revelation, it is improbable to achieve an interaction between God and men to make individual salvation the case. It is unthinkable to reduce religion or revelation, the expressions of God's intervention in history, to an equal level with human demands and expectations. For instance, things that are called ethical or that require men's obedience are things commanded by God. Ethical life is intimately connected with religion. Viewed from this perspective, ethics presents two-sided quality. While the individual continues his daily life in terms of ethical rules, he relates himself to God based on his ability of reviving the ethical life. It is hard to find a similar situation in James's philosophy. For, God of monotheistic religions turns out to be another being with different qualities once again: "God is not the absolute, but is himself a part when the system is conceived pluralistically, his functions can be taken as not wholly dissimilar to those of the other smaller parts, —as similar to our functions consequently."[34]

Non-absolutization of God, and reduction of the hierarchical relationship between God and man to a more intimate level will, of course, have some consequences in terms of God's deeds. James's approach to the problem of evil reveals these consequences in a clearer way within the context of God's attributes.

The Problem of Evil

One can find support for James's theory in classical philosophy of religion's discussions on the problem of evil. Monistic pantheism poses several deadlocks, including the problem of evil, by its unification of God and the universe. If the pantheistic approach is true, then "evil, like everything else, must have its foundation in God."[35] Obviously, it is not an acceptable result. Therefore, it is necessary to expect James to derive a different result based on his pluralistic and melioristic approach. The result is the re-characterization of God as a being with some limited attributes, and, more importantly, bringing him closer to what is humane.

Natural and moral evils are problems for classical theism as well. For, it conceives God as wholly good. If God is an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good being, how can evil exist in the universe? When it comes to a reconciliation between God and the evils, James, unlike monotheistic thinkers, has no interest in different interpretations of evil. He does not attempt to evaluate evil to make it meaningless in the face of the goodness of God. He echoes, contrarily, the idea that evil and God's existence cannot be reconciled. It is legitimate, for James, to question the reason why God creates evil or why He permits it to exist in the universe despite His goodness.[36] To overcome the contradiction, it is necessary to limit God's attributes. This is a common ground between James and some of the process theologians. Whitehead, for

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34 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 318.

35 James, *The Varieties*, 106.

36 James, *The Will to Believe*, 167.

instance, rejects the idea that God is infinite in *all* of His attributes. He uses the problem of evil as a point of departure, like James, when adopting the idea that God is finite in some respects. "It is not true," says Whitehead, "that God is in all respects infinite. If He were, He would be evil as well as good. Also this unlimited fusion of evil with good would mean mere nothingness. He is something decided and is thereby limited."[37]

Some of James's thoughts are adopted and developed further by some of the adherents of process theologians. Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, for instance, discuss James's thoughts under the title of *limited panentheism*. They argue that "many of James's ideas are retained and given greater strength and clarity in the system of Whitehead."[38] For Whitehead, the world has not completed its formation yet. It submits us a view of system which is in a process of formation. The world develops itself in *the* process. It is partly in human beings' hands to make sense of it. It is man who makes it valuable by attributing a moral goodness to it. He can do this via cooperation with God. This is the idea of open future.[39] Now, if one reads this reasoning together with the concept of meliorism, the alliance between Whitehead and James becomes more apparent. However, the concept of panentheism is never used in James's works. Therefore, it is unclear whether he would qualify himself as a panentheist. Still, his influence on the process theology deserves an emphasis.

Beyond all these, to inground his humanistic perspective on the problems of philosophy of religion, including the problem of evil, within the framework of his humanistic teaching, James revives some key concepts of philosophy. The concept of "truth" particularly stands out in this context. The interpretation of truth is essential for a comprehension of the humanistic elements in his theory of religion.

Religion and Truth

James analyzes the concepts of religion and God on their benefit and usefulness. One needs to look at the practical results they produce. His theory depends on the premise that things must bring out positive differences if they are to bear a meaning. It is a general pragmatic principle, and a pragmatist must apply it, as a kind of argument in discussions about the existence of God as well. It is experience that shows the truth of something through the conclusions it produces as to whether that thing is useful. If something is useful, then it is true, if it is true, then it is useful.[40] The test of probable truth, for James, is to see "what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience's demands, nothing being omitted. If theological ideas should do this, if the notion of God, in particular, should prove to do it, how could pragmatism possibly deny God's existence? She could see no

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37 Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), 138.

38 Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 352.

39 Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 344.

40 James, *Pragmatism*, 90.

meaning in treating as 'not true' a notion that was pragmatically so successful."[41]

Keeping in mind the pragmatic value James attributes to religion, one cannot help asking the question of whether he regards it as a conveyer of truth. Is there a truth, for him, within the arguments of religions? A loud reluctance resonates in his works. James makes it obvious that he has a negative attitude towards institutionalized religions. He tells us about his "inability to accept either popular Christianity or scholastic theism."[42] Yet, it is important that he makes a room for religious experience as one of the main pillars of his theory of religion. He cannot do this if he confines the experience, like a rigid positivist, to mere concrete reality. There are, of course, some scholars who treat James as a positivist. Kilbourne[43] is one of them. But it is hard to see a holistic defense of positivism, at least in Comtean sense, as a theory of existence and knowledge in James's works. He sees the will to believe as a truth inherent in man's self. He also thinks that it *may* eventually have us witness to an extrinsic truth. His discourse on the truth of religion is indicated with a knife-edge delicacy. One may well also witness that it has no truth at all. Take the Christian doctrine of salvation for instance. "The World," he says, "may be saved, on condition that its parts shall do their best. But shipwreck in detail, or even on the whole, is among the open possibilities."[44] To stay in limbo as to whether salvation will occur, in other words, whether the doctrine corresponds to a truth, is one of the distinguishing features of meliorism. The fact that it is "neither optimistic nor pessimistic" contrasts with Christianity. He indicates that there are plenty of "pessimistic theological elements" in it.[45] The pessimistic character of Christianity can be seen as the result of its approach to human nature. The salvation of the fallen man, for Christianity, is possible not because of his own efforts, but only through divine grace. James, on the other hand, is aiming to open a space for man in salvation. There must be a cooperation between man and God accordingly. Man can be saved in this case of cooperation only, otherwise, an absolute defeat may arise, let alone salvation. In terms of the fulfillment of his own responsibilities, the cooperation between man and God should be reevaluated by man. James endows man with the duty of becoming the co-essential component of salvation. All religious issues are inevitably linked to man with the humanistic core being consistently observed. Therefore, the meaning of religion *for* man must be taken into consideration when tackling with its truth. Meaning cannot be independent of the advantageous return produced. Religious teachings can correspond to truth to the extent that they produce practical values meeting human demands. This applies to both religion and faith. For James, faith derives its verification from itself, and verification is the advantage the

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41   Ibid., 38.

42   James, *The Varieties*, 402.

43   Benjamin Kilborne, "Positivism and Its Vicissitudes: The Role of Faith in the Social Sciences," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 28, no. 4 (1992): 352–70, https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6696(199210)28:4<352::AID-JHBS2300280404>3.0.CO;2-2

44   William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1921), 142.

45   James, *The Varieties*, 76.

individual gains through faith.[46] The advantage here is what man derives from the conviction that salvation is possible. The expectation towards an advantage can also be interpreted as urging God to do something. There is a multitude of possibilities in the universe. When we choose one of them, we build a strong support for the realization of our choice. God may leave things as they are if we do nothing. But when we make a choice, God may take action to realize it. It also reminds us of the role of prayer which is an important element in James's theory of religion. Man should do his part and seek support and cooperation from God through prayer. The problem, however, is that God faces with a manifold of men making choices among the possibilities. There would be no problem should those possibilities be completely compatible. But they bring along contradiction. There is no way of predicting which of these situations will come to the fore, or which of them will be preferred by God. The possibility pointed out here is not something that can be accepted in terms of scholastic theism. But it is obviously expressed within its discourse. The signified here is the *one* God who makes a choice in a cooperation with man.

Well, is it beyond doubt? Is the claim, that there is only *one* God, indisputable? Admittedly, the last part of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where polytheism is discussed, brings along a lot of discussion in conjunction with this question. One can get from the text an impression that James suggests the idea that the attributes traditionally ascribed to God may belong to multiple divine elements. He argues, for example, that religious experience does not imply union with one, single, and infinite being. The only thing religious experience indicates is that the person meets a force greater than himself. This power does not need to be single and infinite. It can be "only a larger and more godlike self, of which the present self would then be but the mutilated expression, and the universe might conceivably be a collection of such selves, of different degrees of inclusiveness, with no absolute unity realized in it at all."[47]

The argument sounds polytheistic. However, we have no sufficient ground to make a precise characterization regarding its final form. Considering the facts that James does not adopt any specific institutional religious creed and that he values the pluralistic structure of experience, it can be said that it is difficult for him to categorically reject the pragmatic return of the religious experience behind polytheism. Moreover, the difficulty is compounded by his portrayal of polytheism as "the real religion of common people."[48] On the other hand, it is noteworthy that he concludes his discussion of polytheism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by saying that he would not "on this occasion defend"[49] polytheism. There is not, in my view, an outright rejection or adoption of polytheism here, but rather a choice of postponement of a detailed discussion on it. This choice opens the way for the question of whether polytheism can be seen as an option in James's thought. For this reason, some scholars, such as Richard Rorty,[50]

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46   James, *The Will to Believe*, 97.

47   James, *The Varieties*, 405.

48   Ibid.

49   Ibid.

50   Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27–42.

Jacques Barzun,[51] Amos Funkenstein,[52] and Richard A. S. Hall[53] claim that James is a polytheist. Leaving aside the question of whether he was a polytheist or not, one can observe that there is religious experience also behind polytheism, and it is highly likely that James would consider it natural for such an experience to have a function in man's individual or social being. Ultimately, experience, including religious one, is evaluated not by its conformity to an external criterion, but by its practical function in terms of man's general conception of life.

There is one more point I would like to indicate, before concluding the discussions on James's humanistic philosophy of religion, which is his "personal" views on the issue. His analysis, on which the preceding discussions are based, do not, as it were, belong to him individually, but to the *common human nature* that wills to believe. The necessity of observing such a common nature may inevitably lead to submerging some private opinions. Therefore, it might be aidant to look at his personal convictions on religion.

Philosophical vs. Personal Views?

James's comprehension of the truth of the basic religious arguments can be deduced from the personal responses he gives to a questionnaire sent to him by James B. Pratt. The questionnaire is published within the book edited by his son, Henry James.[54] The answers he sent to Pratt are not detailed. However, they offer not only some clues on, but also sufficient ground for a clear understanding of his personal views about religion. Although I have no intention to go into their details, it is still useful to touch upon some of them briefly because of their relevance to our discussions on James's humanism.

His response to the question of why he believes in God points to a consistent use of the pragmatic principle of benefit: "*I need it so that it 'must' be true.*"[55] His belief in God is not proof based, since he negatively responds the question whether he depends on some evidence. He adds that he believes in God "*only for the social reasons.*"[56] This is the very core of his humanistic approach. Undoubtedly, a reference is made here to the vital function religion has at individual and social levels.

He informs the recipient that he never experienced the presence of God.[57] This is crucial. His lack of religious experience leads us to an important point. One will have to either accept Jamesian religious experience as a *pure theory* or rely on the narratives of those who report religious experience to justify it. Religious experience as a pure theory cannot derive cash value. Any idea that has no practical return would make no sense in terms of pragmatism. The

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51   Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll with William James* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 250.

52   Amos Funkenstein, "The Polytheism of William James," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55, no. 1 (1994): 99–111, https://doi.org/10.2307/2709955

53   Richard A. S. Hall, "The Polytheism of William James," *The Pluralist* 4, no. 1 (2009): 18–32, https://doi.org/10.1353/plu.0.0009

54   Henry James, ed., *The Letters of William James*, vol. 2 (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 212–15.

55   Ibid., 213.

56   Ibid.

57   Ibid., 214.

problem becomes even more complicated when it comes to relying on the testimony of those who have religious experience. Thus, religious experience is already subjective enough, and one will have to make a subjective interpretation of a subjective narration. Yet, James relies on the experiences of *men* from different religious traditions, including their claims on the existence of God. It is interesting, though, to read him not considering the Bible to be a divine revelation: "*It is so human a book that I don't see how belief in its divine authorship can survive the reading of it.*"[58] Why should one not rely on the narratives of those who argue that the Bible consists of the words of God? Would not it be fair, in terms of James's humanism, to recognize the claim of a divine revelation as part of religious experience? And the same question can very well be asked regarding all other scriptures.

Finally, a general observation on his personal correspondences indicates that James's philosophy of religion cannot be considered independent of the democratic ideals he has adopted. In its pluralistic nature, his humanism gives the impression that it supports a democratic theory of religion. He attempts to soften the autocratic tendencies of religious teachings, which are likely to arise from their *sensu proprio* interpretation of the sacred texts through an alternative theory of pluralistic religion. The experiential knowledge we adopt as truth must be consistent with the experiential knowledge of others. A conception of truth one derives from his or her personal experience may well be in a conflict with its alternatives. The resulting social environment would not coincide with a democratic ideal. Only the humanistic interpretation of religion can comply with that.

Conclusions

William James is one of the founding figures of modern psychology. The impact he created in the history of ideas depends on his multi-dimensional reflections. The philosophical legacy he left behind draws attention with its epistemological and ontological implications. The framework of his pragmatic ethical theory also brings forth important debates. Besides, James's philosophy has epoch-making effects on the area of philosophy of religion.

The religious character of Jamesian humanism constitutes the most important difference secerning it from other types of humanism. As pointed out earlier in the study, there are many different humanistic approaches. There exist some common qualities between these approaches and James's humanism. Prioritizing man in all intellectual issues is a manifestation of a theme common in all types of humanism. However, the differences are more apparent. James neither adopts a purely rhetorical humanism like that of the sophists, nor limits himself to a positivistic framework like Comte, nor pursues an ideal of literary humanism similar to the one prevailed during the time of the Renaissance. The difference with medieval Christian humanism is even more striking. For, James's humanism is anti-theistic in character, whereas the medieval Christian humanists ultimately remained loyal to the theistic framework of religious thought, despite their reaction against the scholastic interpretations of the Bible and the official teachings of the church. Furthermore, James is far from the anti-religious approaches

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58   Ibid., 215.

of organizations such as the AHA, which have recently sought to confine humanism to an ideological framework and build an irreligious theory of ethics or a general conception of life devoid of religion. Admittedly, Jamesian humanism stands out as a full-fledged theory of religion.

One can make a general depiction of James's humanism by indicating that there is man at the center of it, with a theory of knowledge at one end, while a theory of religion at the other. It deems meeting human demands as essential and it is a philosophical system built on experience. This system has both an expanding and balancing function in favor of man. Rather than attaching human thought to a pre-given criterion, it considers the world as plastic and prioritizes a vision of truth that is constantly moving, developing, and expanding with human experience. It pushes the limits of empiricist epistemology, on the one hand, through religious experience, and expands the boundaries of institutionalized religious understandings, on the other, by emphasizing one of the basic principles of pragmatism, which is "usefulness," in a way that gives men wider space. In terms of the relation between God and human beings, though, it exhibits a balancing approach. It removes the vertical character of the hierarchy that traditionally determines the nature of this relation and turns it into horizontal one to make it possible for both parties, that is God and men, to come closer and thus act in a cooperation.

There is no doubt that the effort of expanding and balancing has a positive meaning for man. The foundation of religion is in man. It seems fair to argue, from Jamesian angle, that, man is not for religion, but religion is for man. The same can be argued for the relation between experience and religion. Religion does not determine the nature of experience, but experience sets the ground for religion. Yet, it does not seem possible to say that the above-mentioned positive meaning also exists for God. For, in James's humanism, the concept of God is restructured by considering men's expectations and benefits. Some of the attributes that institutionalized religions ascribe to God with a theistic approach are either restricted or truncated by James, considering humanly factors. For example, unlike scholastic theism, which sees God as an infinite, omniscient and omnipotent being, Jamesian humanism treats God as a being who exists in time, who has a history, and who is limited either in knowledge, or in power, or in both. The reason for all these seems to lie in the principle of experience. It is inevitable to admit that God, as the absolute being with infinite existence, power, and knowledge, cuts off His relationship with experience. For James, however, God must have a contact with experience. When approached from a Jamesian point of view, religious experience is almost a phenomenon created, so to speak, jointly by God and man. The idea of God referring to a subject who is completely transcendent and absolute, having no contact with experience, is dysfunctional in terms of human demands. The relationship between God and man must be closer and more cooperative in nature. Accordingly, James tends towards a non-absolutized conception of God.

The existence of God, as one of the issues of the classical philosophy of religion, cannot be examined, in Jamesian approach, independently of experience. His existence cannot be proved by the evidence that rationalists deduce from some abstract principles. As a matter of fact, James is of the opinion that such evidence has been refuted on scientific basis. The existence of God, James seems to think, can only be proved via religious experience by man.

The distinctive character of James's humanistic philosophy of religion is that it sets two elements, the religious belief and humanly demands, which have traditionally been reconciled constrainedly, as natural allies. One can observe that scholastic theism does not ignore man's need to believe. But the object of the need often erases human autonomy, in which case man must constantly sacrifice something to achieve what he demands, e.g., salvation. Homilies by the adherents of traditional religious teachings, intending to suppress the human desires and reduce man's demands to the lowest level, are typical examples on this issue. James seems to adopt a naturalistic theory of religion by decreasing the difference of character between human being as a sentimental existent and what constitutes the object of his will to believe. Human being wills to believe. He makes sacrifices, if need be, to satisfy this will. Same tendency must be observed in the object. Although God is, like man, an agent within the universe of experiences, He is also an object of man's will to believe. As a matter of fact, the traditional religious teachings remind us of the ultimate role Plato provides for man: Being as much like God as possible. It is an ideal bound to generate anti-humanistic consequences. For, it requires, not necessarily though, an indifference to desires or being freed from them. James, on the other hand, takes man as the measure echoing the representatives of the sophistic movement. He introduces the humanly demands as irrefutable components of truth. The only way to determine whether an epistemological, ethical, or religious theory corresponds to truth is to see if it produces a positive result in terms of these demands. And the whole Jamesian humanistic philosophy of religion is a constant struggle to show that man cannot and must not be ignored in terms of religious ideals.

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