

# *James's Empirical Assumptions: On Materialism, Meliorism, and Eternalism*

by Henry Jackman

William James is well known for his rejection of materialism and his lifelong defense of what he referred to as, among other things, the "religious hypothesis."<sup>1</sup> Part of this defense can be understood in terms of James's frequent identification with the "sick souls" who are highly sensitive to the evils in our world, rather than the "healthy minded" who are more disposed to either ignore or downplay the significance of such features.<sup>2</sup> The sick soul feels a deep need for assurance that lies beyond the material world, and so a dissatisfaction with materialism would be understandable. However, James often gives the impression that even the "healthy minded" should be dissatisfied with materialism, and that the problems with the view go beyond the emotional needs of the sick soul. This more general critique of materialism may seem to be in tension with the often naturalistic tenor of James's writings, and those of us who are more sympathetic to the naturalistic side of James obviously hope that James's critique of "philosophical materialism" can be separated from those elements of his thinking that are essential to his pragmatism.

Such a separation is possible once we see that James's critique of materialism grows out of his views about its incompatibility with the existence of objective values. Objective values (as James understands them) are incompatible, however, not with materialism in its most general form (according to which the natural world is the only one), but rather with a materialism that understood the "material world" in terms of the sciences of the late nineteenth hundreds. In particular, one could not defend the potential objectivity of value in the way that James hoped if one endorsed the particular "pessimistic" cosmology characteristic of the sciences at the turn of the last century. Consequently, if one rejects certain "empirical assumptions" associated with the science of James's day, the possibility of a type of "melioristic materialism" opens up, and *this* sort of materialist could still understand value in the way that James proposes.

1. Most famously in *The Will to Believe and other essays in popular philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1979) [originally published in 1897], *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1985) [originally published in 1902], and *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1975) [originally published in 1907].

2. James, *Varieties*, chapters IV-VII. See *The Divided Self of William James* by Richard Gale (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 1999) for a useful discussion between the tension in James's philosophy between those aspects of his work that fit with the healthy minded perspective and those that seem to stem from James's sympathy with the sick soul.

Given the state of the sciences of the time, it may have been reasonable for James to reject any sort of thoroughgoing materialism, but if James's view that even the healthy minded should reject materialism stems partially from his *empirical* rather than from purely *philosophical* commitments (empirical commitments that a contemporary pragmatist need not share),<sup>3</sup> then one should be able to endorse materialism while keeping James's philosophical perspective intact.

James's philosophical dissatisfaction with materialism was connected to his understanding of value as ultimately resting on nothing more than our subjective practice of *valuing*. With this picture of value in place, James takes the existence of permanent and objective values to require our ultimate and eternally ongoing agreement about what to value. The real existence of objective values in the world thus requires the real endurance of a valuing community, and if all valuers disappear, the existence of objective value will have turned out to have been an illusion.

This line of thought shows up the most explicitly in James's discussion of ethical value in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," where ethical objectivity is understood as requiring an *actual* settlement about what competing preferences should be satisfied. As he puts it, "If one ideal judgment be objectively better than another, that betterness must be made flesh by being lodged concretely in someone's actual perception."<sup>4</sup> A merely *potential* settlement clearly does not seem to be enough for James, so if our valuing practices die out before any settlement is made between competing preferences, then they can never be more than just that, competing preferences with no "objective" fact about which one should have been satisfied.<sup>5</sup>

This strand of thought runs through James's writings on all normative issues. In particular, it can also be understood as affecting his views on the nature of truth and representation. Objective or "absolute" truth requires that we *actually* reach a stable consensus about various questions, and it is not enough for there to be one which we *would have* reached had we been able to investigate longer.<sup>6</sup>

3. Another empirical commitment of James's that motivated his rejection of materialism may have been his belief in the existence of telepathy (for a discussion of this, see Marcus Ford, "James's Psychological Research and its Philosophical Implications," *Transactions of the C.S. Peirce Society*, Summer 1998, Vol. XXXIV, No. 3: pp. 605-624). James's views about free will and determinism may have given him other reasons to be uncomfortable with the scientific worldview (though, once again, such concerns are less pressing on the "healthy minded").

4. James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 147 [Longmans 1897 ed., p. 193].

5. For a more extensive discussion of James's recipe for generating objective values from our subjective starting point, see Henry Jackman, "Pragmatism, Normativity and Naturalism," forthcoming in Paulo Ghiraldelelli (ed.) *What is Pragmatism?* (Londrina: South America Theology Institute, 2004). Also available at [www.jackman.org](http://www.jackman.org).

6. This is discussed, once again, in Jackman, "Pragmatism, Normativity and Naturalism."

Consequently, if our investigative practices die out, truth and meaning die out with them. If truth is tied to taking true and objectivity to agreement, then objective facts require that the consistent taking-true be understood as a permanent feature of reality, and this "taking" as a permanent part of reality is a possibility that James takes materialism to rule out.

For James, then, reality's "normative" dimension requires the existence of evaluators. In the absence of another evaluator, or group of evaluators, to pick our ideals up, the demise of our evaluative community brings with it the demise of ideals such as truth, goodness, and beauty. Further, it is not as if things really were true, good and beautiful, but stopped being so once we disappeared. Rather, it turns out that nothing ever was "really" any of these things. Life turns out, after all, to have been "meaningless." James is an "eternalist" in the sense that he requires judgments about value to be eternal for them to be objective.<sup>7</sup> For the eternalist, the ultimate passing away of our evaluative practice is thus a very "bad" thing, and James takes such a passing to be an inevitable consequence of the truth of materialism.

James's assumptions about what materialism ultimately entails for us ("the picture of the last state of the universe which evolutionary science foresees") can be seen quite clearly from this passage from Balfour's *The Foundations of Belief* which James quotes at length in his *Pragmatism*:

The energies of our systems 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. The uneasy consciousness which in this obscure corner has for a brief space broken the contented silence of the universe, will be at rest. Matter will know itself no longer. 'Imperishable monuments' and 'immortal deeds,' death itself, and love stronger than death, will be as though they had never been. Nor will anything that is, be better or be worse for all that labour, genius, devotion and suffering of man have striven through countless generations to effect.<sup>8</sup>

7. Of course "eternal" can be used to mean either *outside of time* or *everlasting (but not atemporal)*. James's view only requires that our valuing practice be eternal in the latter of these two senses. This is fortunate, since any materialist would be hard pressed to make sense of any valuing practice being eternal in the former sense. (Thanks to an anonymous referee from this publication for encouraging me to stress this.)

8. A. J. Balfour, *The Foundation of Beliefs* (London: Longmans, Green, 1895), p. 30. Quoted in James, *Pragmatism*, p. 54 [Longmans 1907 ed., p. 104]. See also the following passage from James's "Reason and Faith": "the *last* word everywhere, according to the purely naturalistic science, is the word of Death, the death-sentence passed by Nature on plant and beast, and man and tribe, and earth and sun, and everything that she has made." In *Essays in Religion and Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1982), p. 127.

If, as suggested above, James's eternalism requires that our practices endure through time for any sort of normative order to be sustained, then the materialist's claim that these practices will forever disappear strips everything of its possible meaning. By contrast, James feels that precisely such ideals can be underwritten by religious faith. As he puts it:

The notion of God...however inferior it may be in clearness to those mathematical notions so current in mechanical philosophy, has at least this practical superiority over them, that it guarantees an ideal that shall be permanently preserved. A world with God in it to say the last word, may indeed burn up or freeze, but we then think of him as still mindful of the old ideals and sure to bring them elsewhere to fruition; so that, where he is, tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution not the absolutely final things.<sup>9</sup>

God preserves precisely the evaluative practice that the normative order needs to keep up.<sup>10</sup> It is our *ideals* (rather than our *existence*) that the religious hypothesis is concerned with, and as James puts it in his Harvard lectures from 1906-07, while the "truth of materialism in any form...must mean the final defeat of ideals; the truth of mind-supremacy...must warrant the final triumph of those ideals."<sup>11</sup> Mind supremacy helps ensure the final triumph of our ideals since mind is (at least for James) an essentially valuing substance, and so mind supremacy makes valuing a permanent feature of the universe.

However, while James claims that "Materialism means simply the denial that the moral order is eternal, and the cutting off of ultimate hopes,"<sup>12</sup> what he really has in mind is the particular cosmology associated with the materialism of his contemporaries. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* James ties pessimism about our future (and how it effects the present) explicitly to the cosmology associated with current science.

The lustre of the present hour is always borrowed from the background of possibilities it goes with. Let our common experience be enveloped in an *eternal* moral order... let faith and hope be the atmosphere which man breathes in;—and his days pass with zest; they stir with prospects, they thrill with remoter values. Place around them on the contrary the curdling cold and gloom *and absence of all permanent meaning* which for pure naturalism and the popular science evolutionism of our time are all that is

9. James, *Pragmatism*, p. 55 [Longmans ed., p. 106]. An almost identical passage shows up in James, *Varieties*, p. 407 [Longmans 1902 ed., p. 517].

10. As James makes clear in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (in *The Will to Believe*), God also underwrites our hope that we will eventually reach the convergence of our ideals required to make values objective.

11. William James, from *Manuscript Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: 1988), p. 398.

12. James, *Pragmatism*, p. 55 [Longmans ed., p. 107].

visible ultimately, and the thrill stops short, or turns rather to anxious trembling.

For naturalism, *fed on recent cosmological speculation*, mankind is in a position similar to that of a set of people living on a frozen lake, surrounded by cliffs over which there is no escape, yet knowing that little by little the ice is melting, and the inevitable day drawing near when the last film of it will disappear, and to be drowned ignominiously will be the human creature's portion. The merrier the skating, the warmer and more sparkling the sun by day, and the ruddier the bonfires at night, the more poignant the sadness with which one must take in the meaning of the total situation.<sup>13</sup>

There is, however, nothing *essential* to materialism that suggests that our practices, and thus our ideals, would have to die out.

We could, after all, adopt a more optimistic cosmology where an enduring community would survive eternally and preserve our individual ideals. Our sun may die out, but we may have moved on by then. We may be on a frozen lake, but the cliffs can be escaped. The sort of optimism embedded by the space program and much science fiction points to a "melioristic materialism" according to which humanity will certainly die out if we refuse to act, but can continue to thrive and flourish elsewhere if we have the will to do so.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, even the hope for personal immortality no longer seems out of reach for the materialist, who can soon hope that one could, through a succession of new bodies, live forever.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, James's feelings about personal immortality were never of "the keenest order" and he considered it "a secondary point", since if "our ideals are cared for in 'eternity'," he did not see why "we might not be willing to resign their care to other hands than ours."<sup>16</sup> So even if materialism were ill placed to underwrite our hopes for immortality (and so would be pessimistic on a *personal* level), it would still be in a position to allow for the eternal care of our ideals, and that seems to be all that James needs. After all, James only requires of God that he be "mindful of the old ideals and sure to bring them elsewhere to fruition,"<sup>17</sup> and, provided that we do not ultimately die out, future generations of ourselves could do precisely that.

James famously rejected both the optimism he asso-

ciated with absolute idealism and the pessimism he associated with materialism, favoring instead a type of meliorism where success was possible, but only if we worked towards it. However, there is good reason to think that, if anything, a materialistic framework is the one best suited for such a melioristic position. It has been argued above that James's eternalism is compatible with materialism, but it should also be noted that spiritualism typically involves more than the mere "letting loose of hope"<sup>18</sup> that James envisions.

Indeed, spiritualism most commonly underwrites the optimistic position, and James is no exception to this. James contrasts the optimistic view of the future that comes with religion and the pessimism associated with materialism in the following passage from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: "God's existence is the *guarantee* of an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved. This world may indeed, as science assures us, some day burn up or freeze; but if it is part of his order, the old ideals are sure to be brought elsewhere to fruition."<sup>19</sup> However, if meliorism is what we want, we should not embrace such a conception of God. Rather than merely letting loose hope, it is bound to encourage a type of complacency stemming from the confidence that our ideals will finally triumph whether we try to promote them or not.<sup>20</sup> If God's existence guarantees that "an ideal order that shall be permanently be preserved," then we need not strive to maintain it. The sick soul may need such an optimistic picture to prop it up, but the healthy minded seem able to make do with the more starkly melioristic alternative.

This is not to deny that there are versions of spiritualism that are friendlier to meliorism and pessimism. A pessimist could certainly have a conception of a higher power that was indifferent (or actively hostile) to our hopes and goals while we exist, and quite willing to forget us once we have gone. However, it is noteworthy that James is one of the few thinkers who defends a melioristic conception of the divine, and even he often seems to slide to a more optimistic conception of religious faith.

It should be noted, however, that the claim that materialists are better placed to be meliorists than most spiritualists need not entail that James should have, after all, been a materialist. There is, to say the least, no compelling evidence for the belief that our community will persevere through eternity. Consequently, our faith in such a possibility should be understood as, in James's terms, a "will to believe" case, and such cases require that there not be a preponderance of evidence going against the

13. James, *Varieties*, pp. 119-120, italics mine [Longmans ed., pp. 141-142].

14. This is not to deny that there are science fiction inspired versions of the future that are also quite pessimistic, but what both the optimistic and pessimistic views of the future share is the idea that, for good or ill, our future is open-ended, and is not necessarily bounded by the life of our planet.

15. Of course, such hopes rely on non-trivial assumptions about personal identity, but this is also the case with those views that we could survive through, say, the preservation of a non-material soul.

16. James, *Varieties*, p. 412 [Longmans ed., pp. 524].

17. James, *Pragmatism*, p. 55 [Longmans ed., p. 106].

18. James, *Pragmatism*, p. 55 [Longmans ed., p. 107].

19. James *Varieties*, p. 407 [Longmans ed., p. 517], italics mine, as noted above, almost the identical passage occurs in *Pragmatism*, p. 55 [Longmans ed., p. 107].

20. Unless we are also meliorists about God's existence. However, while James is certainly open to this idea at times (see James, "Is Life Worth Living?" in *The Will to Believe*, p. 55 [Longmans ed., p. 61]), this seems to be during his more 'healthy minded' moments, since such a conception of God would not give the sort of assurance he discusses in these passages.

belief in question.<sup>21</sup> The unsettled nature of current cosmology leaves our long, long, long-term future undecided in just the way required for our having the right to believe in our survival. Nevertheless, such melioristic materialism might have run too strongly against the received scientific wisdom of James's day for the option to be 'live' enough to be a will to believe case. If the sciences of the time seemed to conclusively rule out the possibility of a melioristic materialism, then moving the melioristic faith in the eternal preservation of our ideals to a less naturalistic context might have seemed the more reasonable option.

However, this raises the question of just how seriously James should have taken the cosmological speculation of 19<sup>th</sup> century science. If James really was an instrumentalist, and did not take the sciences of his day to be really tracking the underlying structure of the reality we experience, why did he take so seriously science's prediction that life would ultimately die out?

One suggestion might be that such cosmological speculation took place on a macroscopic level, and that James' instrumentalism applied only to theories that dealt with microscopic or otherwise 'unobservable' phenomena. Scientific theories about the things we actually do 'experience' must, on such a view, be understood realistically. However, James's "instrumentalism" should not be understood as stemming from such a positivistic prudishness about "unobservables" (so that if we had a single coherent theory of the world, we should still refuse to commit ourselves to the existence of the theoretical entities postulated in it). Rather, it is better understood as deriving from a recognition that we had a number of indispensable yet incompatible models of the world, no single one of which is adequate for all of our purposes, and no two of which could be 'absolutely true' together.<sup>22</sup> Our scientific models are useful instruments to cope with experience but their theoretical incompatibility prevents them from being viewed as absolutely true descriptions of reality. As James famously put it "Common sense is *better* for one sphere of life, science for another, philosophic criticism for a third; but whether either be *truer* absolutely, Heaven only knows."<sup>23</sup> All of the competing theories presented in the passage just quoted deal with the world on a macroscopic level, so there is no reason to trust cosmology more than atomic physics simply because it deals with the universe at the macroscopic level. However, if the presence of conflict is what justifies adopting an instrumentalistic attitude towards a science,

then widespread agreement about cosmological questions in James's time would legitimate a realistic attitude towards the sciences in question. It may have thus been the level of disagreement that distinguished scientific discussions of cosmological questions from similar discussions of, say, the world's underlying microstructure.

Nevertheless, given the nature of the topic (what will happen to the world billions of years into the future), one might have thought that no theory, whether it had competitors or not, could have been epistemologically secure enough to rule out all types of melioristic materialism. The cold version of the future that James presents may have had a good deal of support, but not so much that the warmer version could not still be a live option for us. Still, the liveliness of this option for us may be from our being brought up on science fiction and the Apollo missions, and this possibility may have been dead for James in precisely the way that, say, Islam was. He could have recognized it as a coherent possibility, but that would not be enough to make the option "live" for him.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that melioristic materialism, in spite of being a type of materialism, may still be compatible with James's "religious hypothesis." James's religious hypothesis was comparatively abstract, and involved no commitment to the details of any particular religious faith. Rather it involved the affirmations that (1) "the best things are the more eternal things" and that (2) "we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true."<sup>25</sup> While the religious hypothesis is incompatible with the pessimistic materialism of James's day (since the "best things" will not survive humanity's passing),<sup>26</sup> there is no compelling reason to think that a melioristic materialist could not endorse it. The materialist thus need not even argue that one should dispense with James's religious hypothesis. Rather, he can argue that James could keep his religious hypothesis and still be a materialist.<sup>27</sup>

21. For a more extended discussion of James's position in "The Will to Believe", see Henry Jackman, "Prudential Arguments, Naturalized Epistemology, and the Will to Believe" in *Transactions of the C.S Peirce Society*, Winter 1999, Vol. XXXV, No. 1: pp. 1-37.

22. This view of James's instrumentalism is defended in more detail in Henry Jackman, "James' Naturalistic Account of Concepts and his 'Rejection of Logic,'" Presentation at Meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, February 1999. Available at [www.jackman.org](http://www.jackman.org).

23. James, *Pragmatism*, p. 93 [Longmans ed., p. 190].

24. See James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 14 [Longmans ed., p. 3]. As he puts it elsewhere, "In general whether a given idea be a live idea, depends more on the person into whose mind it is injected than on the idea itself." (James, *Essays in Religion and Morality*, p. 157). Indeed, whether the possibilities embodied by melioristic materialism are live for one or not may be one of the features that distinguishes the "healthy minded" from the "sick soul."

25. James, *The Will to Believe*, pp. 29-30 [Longmans ed., pp. 25-26].

26. As he puts it in his *Pragmatism*, at the end of the materialist story:

"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. This utter final wreck and tragedy is of the essence of scientific materialism as at present understood. *The lower and not the higher forces are the eternal forces*, or the last surviving forces of the only cycle of evolution which we can definitely see." (James, *Pragmatism*, p. 54 [Longmans ed., p. 105], first set of italics James; second set of italics mine)

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James's opposition to materialism, and even his conviction that materialism was not compatible with his "religious hypothesis," thus seems to rest on his assumptions about what empirical claims about the future materialism commits us to, and once such assumptions are given up, one can endorse a type of materialism that does not conflict with any of the particularly *philosophical* commitments that a healthy minded pragmatist should have. Whether such a view would satisfy a pragmatist who was also a "sick soul" is, of course, another story.<sup>28</sup>

That said, one might think that some of James *philosophical* commitments *should* be given up, and that he would be better off without his eternalism. If he were not an eternalist, one could be a Jamesian about value and a materialist even if one thought that humanity would eventually die out. Charity might thus seem to dictate trying to avoid attributing eternalism to James, since his purported eternalism seems much more counterintuitive than his empirical views about the future of the universe. However, while giving up eternalism would, ultimately, make for a more defensible position, it would serve less well as a reading of James's philosophy. In particular, implausible

as his eternalism might seem, giving it up would require some fairly drastic changes to his overall view. For instance, it would involve taking a more realistic attitude towards counterfactuals about "the agreements we would reach" in inquiries that may never actually come to a conclusion. Peirce, of course, famously adopted this approach and took it to be one of the main differences between his pragmatism and James's more "nominalistic" pragmatism. Perhaps James would be better off without these nominalistic inclinations, but they were dear to him, and his eternalism is the price he pays to keep them.

In conclusion, then, it is far from obvious that a pragmatist, simply in virtue of being a pragmatist, must give up on materialism. Of course, James (and many pragmatists) might still find a melioristic materialism far less satisfying than more traditionally religious views. That said, it is important to see that this is a fact about James, not one about his pragmatism itself.

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<sup>27</sup>. This "could" here being understood in the "logical" sense that materialism was compatible with James's other philosophical views. It may still be the case that James couldn't (in a more purely psychological sense) hold on to both materialism and the religious hypothesis.

<sup>28</sup>. See, for instance, James's worry that materialism could never satisfy those who feel the need for a being "who will inwardly recognize them and judge them sympathetically" in *The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1975), p. 103 [Longmans 1909 ed., pp. 189-190].