

In Extremis: The Wildness of William James

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Abstract:

William James advocates strenuousness as the key to the moral life yet his hunger for extreme experiences sometimes leads him to risk sacrificing morality in their pursuit. This paradox is best represented by James's fascination with soldiers and warfare as exemplars of the strenuous life. This essay examines the tension between strenuousness and morality in James's ethical thought through the lens of his celebration of wildness. Wildness, I argue, names the hungry craving for meaning, lust for intense, novel, and risky experiences, and contempt for the banality of American modernity. In response to Sarin Marchetti and Trygve Throntveit's recent interpretations of James's moral thought, I argue that a fuller account of a radical empiricist approach to ethics – its originality, its contributions, its shortcomings – demands a deeper engagement with James's craving for wildness and its implications for grasping the aesthetic-affective registers of his social criticism and political thought.

Keywords:

James, William; wildness; radical empiricism; strenuous life; affect; imperialism

Ghost hunters, mental healers, mystics, telepaths: William James loved his cranks. These “erratics of the philosophical world,” as his son Henry called them, “interested him just when they were most ‘queer’” and held a special place in James's imagination (James 1920, 292). One crank he was fond of in particular was Benjamin Paul Blood. A poet and inventor on his farm in Amsterdam, NY, Blood is best remembered today, if remembered at all, for a self-published pamphlet on mysticism and anesthetics. *The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy* (1874) claims that more philosophical insight can be found in the hazy experience of coming back to consciousness from an anesthetic stupor than in all the pages of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel combined.

James maintained a decades-long correspondence with Blood and even dabbled in his own experiments with reading Hegel under the influence of nitrous oxide, but only to conclude that its inebriating effect pales in comparison to the intoxicating experience of willing.

James's infatuation with cranks like Blood, and his willingness to experiment with nitrous oxide as a path to inquiry, has proven to be something of an embarrassment to contemporary pragmatists no less than it was to his Harvard peers. The "spooky side" of James's radical empiricism is typically bracketed from discussions of his ethics, epistemology, and, more recently, political thought (cited in Westbrook 2015, 68). The two books under consideration in this symposium are no exception to this trend. Sarin Marchetti's *Ethics and Philosophical Critique in William James* asserts the "situated autonomy" of James's ethics to protect his critique of modern moral philosophy from contamination by his mysticism (2015, 17). Trygve Throntveit's *William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic* takes a wider view of James's intellectual context but likewise shies away from consideration of the stranger parts of his corpus in its argument for the coherence of James's moral philosophy. If pragmatist ethical thought can provide guidance to our contemporary moral and political problems, as they claim, it appears to need rescuing not only from its critics but from James himself.

This kind of professional boundary keeping between respectable and outlandish ideas was something James challenged wherever he encountered it. Just as pragmatism promised to unstiffen theories and break apart orthodoxies, James's trespasses beyond the boundaries of the properly scientific into the pseudoscientific were self-conscious provocations to the dogmas of empiricism. As Francesca Bordogna (2008) persuasively argues, these experiments in epistemic transgression extended pragmatism's anti-authoritarianism to the politics of knowledge production itself. More than an accidental excess or personal idiosyncrasy, then, James's fascination with what I will call *wildness* was an essential element of the ethics and politics of radical empiricism.

By wildness, I mean the hungry craving for meaning, lust for intense, novel, and extreme experiences, and contempt for the banality of American modernity. It is wildness James longs for when he argues there can be no “real moral life” without “real evil, real crises, catastrophes, and escapes” no less than a “real God,” celebrates intoxication as a truer experience of self whether due to nitrous oxide or the effort of willing, and denounces the “atrocious harmlessness of things” at Chautauqua as an ominous sign of the leveling blandness of modern civilization (James 1979, 6; 1983, 152). The moral life is a life of risk, effort, and danger in pursuit of meaning. James lodges a craving for wildness at the heart of his moral philosophy, but in doing so often risks sacrificing morality itself in its pursuit. No element of James’s ethical thought embodies this paradox more than his fascination with the soldier as an exemplar of the strenuous life.

Both books express a cautious admiration for James’s will to wildness in the face of modern moral philosophy’s will to order.¹ Marchetti celebrates James as a theorist and therapist of modern moral philosophy’s quest for certainty. This is pragmatism as an ethical method for resisting the longing for a fixed code of conduct. Throntveit defends a more substantive vision of a pragmatist ethics that similarly emphasizes the priority of procedure over program. Yet in their respective attempts to defend James from the charge of moral incoherence both move to tame this wildness where it puts the very idea of moral order at risk. Each book’s engagement with the wildness of the strenuous life betrays a certain ambivalence and invites a fuller exploration of the aesthetic-affective dimensions of James’s ethics and political thought.

Ethics and Philosophical Critique is the wilder book. Marchetti responds to the question of whether or not Jamesian pragmatism offers a moral philosophy by challenging its very terms. The ethical contribution of pragmatism lies singularly in its method rather than in any substantive moral claims. It emphasizes critique over content to rebuff the prejudice that morality must be a code of commands or be nothing at all. The intellectualist picture of morality as a system of

prescriptions is not simply a mistaken judgment, however. It is a symptom of a peculiar illness of the human condition Marchetti diagnoses as the craving for firm and fixed foundations. We are afflicted by a “temptation and superstition” for foundational order that drives us again and again towards a conception of morality that is ultimately stultifying (Marchetti 2015, 29). Moral philosophy is something that we cannot not want. Philosophical critique in this context takes the form of a clinical intervention. Pragmatism’s attack on foundationalism is a therapeutic exercise of learning to “free ourselves” from the hunger for order (2015, 25). “The goal of philosophical work would thus be a personal change or shift that would free us from the spell of such temptation and thus profitably re-orient our way of seeing things” (2015, 29-30). In the place of moral prescription, Marchetti finds a “hortatory” morality that calls on readers to transform themselves rather than others.

The book’s “anti-theoretical” approach is indebted to the late Ludwig Wittgenstein. Just as Wittgenstein pointed towards ordinary language to cure philosophers of their penchant for inventing problems to solve, James’s critique of moral philosophy seeks to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle by returning our attention to the hard ground of moral experience. “We are held captive by a picture of morality as a system of prescriptive rules,” Marchetti explains, “and would be much better off resisting this temptation by letting our ordinary practices speak for themselves” (2015, 80). But how did we get into the bottle in the first place? Marchetti finds the origins of this craving in human nature itself. The craving for clear and certain moral rules is “rooted in a human tendency” towards intellectualism (2015, 61). Philosophical therapy cannot root out this craving’s sources but it can guard against them by assembling a set of reminders (Wittgenstein 2001, §127).

Marchetti’s attention to the economy of felt cravings touches on an important, but often overlooked, element of James’s critique of modern philosophy. In “The Sentiment of Rationality,”

James presents the hunger for order as native to the human heart without examining its etiology any further. But as interpreters of James, we ought to step back and ask what this supposedly ahistorical longing reveals about the context of its enunciation. Might the craving be not a human tendency so much as a reaction to the destabilizing whirl of American modernity at the turn of the century? Is pragmatism not itself a reaction to these same experiences of dislocation and crisis? And if so, how might this proposed course of therapy need to be revised and amended to respond to the distorted cravings and anxieties shaping ethical life in our historical moment? Marchetti's methodological commitment to "study James's world from the inside" precludes these kinds of historicizing questions (2015, 5). But even seen from the inside, a strictly pathologizing perspective is insufficient to grasp the plurivocality of craving for James. If the sentiment of rationality involves a craving for order and identity, so too is it defined by an opposing passion for difference and disorder. Only a philosophy that satisfies both cravings can sustain the invaluable mood of seriousness or strenuousness; that is, "the willingness to live with energy, though energy bring pain" (James 1979, 73).

This wilder side of James percolates below the surface of Marchetti's book but bursts through when he considers the moral consequences of the drive for order. We must be cured of the craving for moral foundations, he explains, because it is ultimately a craving for bondage. Modern moral philosophy is a source of "alienation." It seduces us to "alienate our expressive capacities and represent their validity as derived from a normative dimension independent of them" (Marchetti 2015, 33). Alienating our "expressive capacities," which I take to mean doubting our creative capacity for agency and its role in experimentally testing, revising, and inventing moral values, leads to "a contraction of our subjectivity" and "a mortification of our interiority" (2014, 208, 33). Like Hegel says of the internally divided unhappy consciousness, the modern moral subject "can only find as a present reality the *grave* of its life" (1977, 132).

The intuition here is an Emersonian one despite Marchetti's predilection for Hegelisms. A life lived without self-reliance is no life at all. The conformity of mass society is a retreat from the responsibility to exercise one's own judgment and take up the challenge and burden of individuality. Better than Marchetti's Hegelian talk of expressivism and alienation is the Emersonian conception of democratic individuality as resistance to docility, as much recent writing on James's ethics and politics suggests (Albrecht 2012, 127-190; Rondel 2018, 113-135; Bush 2018). But it is right here that the ideal of a wilder freedom begins to chafe against the constraints of morality. James did worry about moral conformity and, like Emerson, associated it with a kind of spiritual death. A life without courageous action and self-reliance, and the dangerous risks they entail, is a life without zest. As James explains, "Sweat and effort, human nature strained to its uttermost on the rack, yet getting through alive, and then turning its back on its success to pursue another more rare and arduous still – this is the sort of thing the presence of which inspires us, and the reality of which it seems to be the function of all the highest forms of literature and fine art to bring home to us and suggest" (1983, 153). If these are the experiences we crave and that make life worth living, it is in no way obvious that simply fulfilling our moral obligations is satiation enough. As James continues upon escaping the "middle class paradise" at Chautauqua: "Ouf! what a relief! Now for something primordial and savage, even though it were as bad as the Armenian massacre, to set the balance right again" (1983, 152).

This torsion between freedom and morality, or the twin cravings for order and disorder, defines the strenuous life. Freedom resides in the effort to make sacrifices and risk loss in the service of a novel moral ideal. Here strenuousness is linked to morality but hardly yoked by it. Exactly what ideals are worthy of this fidelity is not for the moral philosopher to define: they can only be "relative to the lives that entertain them" (James 1983, 163). James has more to say about the freedom to invent novel values and less to say about how they limit the craving for wildness.

He was well aware of how strenuousness in the service of an ideal can all too easily justify instrumentalizing the lives of others in its pursuit, as his criticisms of Theodore Roosevelt's sabre rattling make clear, yet this was not a danger he thought could be resolved by philosophical argument alone.

Strenuousness is therefore the antithesis of what Marchetti calls "alienation." James's "everlasting testament" lies in teaching readers to resist "desiccation" and pursue "experimental attempts to live a life 'in extremis'" (Marchetti 2015, 226). Yet the life *in extremis* Marchetti celebrates is one tightly circumscribed by moral constraints. It extends strenuousness to the service of substantive liberal values of individual rights and toleration but no further. In a peculiar inversion of James's formulation about novel ideals in "What Makes Life Significant," Marchetti argues that what is most strenuous about pursuing an ideal is enduring its comparable contestability. The moral life is defined by "a willingness to acknowledge alien conducts as expressive of truths and values that [are] worth taking into consideration as well" (2015, 210). Whereas James waxed poetic about losing himself in the intoxicating experience of the sheer act of willing, Marchetti presents the experience of toleration – arguably more a feeling of grudging concession than a point of any passion – as the highest expression of the strenuous life. One cannot but wonder how this conclusion squares with James's expressed contempt for the triumph of liberal sentimentality over manly action. "No scorn, no hardness, no valor any more! Fie upon such a cattleyard of a planet," James writes of commercial society's pacification of heroism and greatness (1982, 166).

James did of course advocate tolerance but he also advocated the strenuous life as a palliative to the conformity, banality, and hollowness of modern civilization, and the two goods often pulled him in conflicting directions. This tension marks the tragic nature of action in a pluralistic universe, a minor note in both books. Indeed, their respective pragmatisms are

ultimately more comic than tragic for their portrayal of the ultimate reconciliation of strenuousness and moralism. Marchetti portrays the strenuous life as simply continuous with morality in a way that raises questions as to whether or not strong moral prescriptions have smuggled their way into his hortatory alternative. Throntveit, by contrast, makes the case for a robust conception of moral organization uniting morality and strenuousness. *William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic* proposes a more direct response to the question of the moral consequences of pragmatism. Following in the tradition of John Roth's classic study (1969), Throntveit argues that James's ethical thought aims to mediate and reconcile the supreme goods of unity and freedom. Pragmatism's moral lesson lies not in "a fixed program but an *ideal* of private and public interests converging – an ideal derived from experience, yet suggesting at every moment the terms and consequences of its own realization" (Throntveit 2014, 86). The name of this ideal is the ethical republic.

Where Marchetti's anti-theoretical reading leans towards the wilder moments of James's thought, Throntveit's ethical republic emphasizes its competing will to order. The book, at once capacious and concise, surveys the evolution of James's struggle to reconcile strenuous freedom and moral unity from his early criticisms of his father's monism to his later political writings on empire. Freedom is a great good yet it can only be enjoyed in a moral framework that coordinates the freedom of the one with the freedom of the many. It therefore entails a responsibility to limit one's own excesses and tolerate the conflicting goods valued by others. Hence no freedom without unity; no unity without freedom. In epistemology as well as in politics, what unites these two goods is a willingness to tolerate, compromise, and listen to the other side. Radical empiricism, in short, entails a "democratic sensibility" (2014, 6). "Expanding our freedom to pursue our goals requires closing the experiential gap between ourselves and others," Throntveit writes, with the implication "that democracy is not merely private in [James's] view, but implies a positive commitment to

intersubjective inquiry” (2014, 99). The ethical republic names an ideal of “deliberative ethics” as the guiding light to our moral and political lives (2014, 102).

At the core of this “deliberative democratic ideal for organizing the ethical republic” stands an ethical ethos rather than a moral code (2014, 101). Throntveit operationalizes this democratic sensibility in terms of a set of everyday virtues: experimentation, historical wisdom, and empathy. There is no place for strenuousness as an ecstatic transcendence of self on this account. Like Marchetti, Throntveit finds strenuousness in the ethical republican’s fidelity to these pragmatic virtues in the face of value pluralism and political disagreement: “Strenuousness demanded commitment to ongoing reflection, deliberation, and reconciliation of conflicting values. But it also demanded the acceptance that all moral choices entailed sacrificing some ideal to realize others. Faced with that reality, the strenuous ethical republican chose ideals that satisfied the most universally compelling demands, fostered deliberation and formulation of common interests, and expanded the deliberative process to include the maximum number of people and interests” (Throntveit 2014, 3). In a rich and suggestive exploration of the political implications of James’s ethics, Throntveit proposes a pragmatist polity defined by democratic institutions that cultivate these virtues of republican citizenship, and sustain spaces of common deliberative inquiry and participation. Well before John Dewey, James, it seems, laid the groundwork for a robust theory of deliberative democracy in the pragmatist tradition.

Throntveit makes a compelling case for James as a theorist of deliberative order and his influence in the subsequent development of American progressivism. Strenuousness and morality can be mutually supportive when both become folded into a broader vision of deliberative democracy as an ongoing experiment in coordinating our complex moral and political lives. At the same time, Marchetti’s attention to the wilder psychic life of strenuousness invites the question of what goes missing on Thontveit’s deliberative account. The book’s discussion of James’s anti-

imperialism is telling in this regard. James faulted President Grover Cleveland for betraying “deliberative principles” in the Venezuela Crisis (2014, 114). He lashed out at Roosevelt’s jingoist rhetoric for “stifling the public debate by which democracies clarify the concrete objects and consequences of policy” (2014, 116). And he mourned public enthusiasm for the nation’s imperial project as a failure of deliberative “empathy” (2014, 124). Imperialism may be instrumentally rational but is morally unreasonable in John Rawls’s sense of the term. The ethical republican mounts the barricades of public reason to stem unreason’s disastrous onslaught.

James was not one to pay great attention to the material or structural forces driving American imperialism, and therefore this talk of better talk comes across as just that.² This singular emphasis on reason-giving and empathy raise questions about Throntveit’s insistence that James was more attentive to “the pervasiveness of power” than pragmatism’s critics charge (2014, 166). But there are moments where Throntveit considers James’s psychic and affective explanations of the origins of empire and a more complex picture begins to emerge. Beyond the margins of deliberative rationality lies a psychic life of power driving the nation’s rush to overseas empire that Throntveit describes as “narcissism” and “idolatry” (2014, 117, 118). Just as moral philosophy is an affliction we cannot not want, so too might the drive towards imperium be entangled with a craving for sovereign mastery that cannot be resolved through deliberative virtues alone. When Throntveit writes that James faulted Roosevelt’s rhetoric for “allowing the strenuous mood to be perverted,” he at once names and elides the fact that the very aggression and domination he denounces are not perversions of the strenuous mood but rather its truth (2014, 116).

It is therefore puzzling that while both books dedicate a chapter to James’s political thought neither attends to how his broader psychological sensibility inform his remarks on politics, power, and modernity. Consider James’s writings on lynching. Lynch mobs represent a “social disease” calling out for “heroic remedies” (James 1987, 170). James considers multiple drivers of these

rituals of white terrorism, from the yellow press to the legal system's reluctance to punish participants, in order to point to the deeper wellsprings of violence these sociological factors set loose. Mob violence is an explosion of "the deeper currents of human nature" he characterizes as humanity's "aboriginal capacity for murderous excitement" (1987, 171). All ordinary moral constraints fall by the wayside as the thrill of killing bursts through the torpid crust of civilization. James offers two ways of interpreting this claim. From a narrowly evolutionary perspective, the lust of aggression names a primal drive inherited from an earlier stage of the species' development. This is Marchetti's notion of a natural, existential craving with a Darwinian twist. In other moments, however, James nests this biological claim in a broader historical argument about the nature of modernity. The drive for murderous excitement is incited and intensified by the collapse of traditional markers of meaning, authority, and value. In a revealing and troubling passage, James names the real horror of mob violence in the fact that some citizens are willing to sacrifice the lives of others not solely for material gain or ideological purposes or even as social control; rather, it is sadism for the sake of relief from the mundane boredom of conformity and mass society: "Dog fights, prize fights, bull fights, what are they to a man hunt and a negro burning? The illiterate whites everywhere, always fretting in their monotonous lives for some drastic excitement, are feeding their imagination in advance on this new possibility" (1987, 172). This is the economy of craving seen from the historicizing perspective Marchetti's interpretive approach closes off and Throntveit's deliberative focus deflects. The white mob longs for wildness and is willing to sacrifice the very lives of African Americans in its pursuit. James's proposed response to this murderous "appetite for excitement" is not calmer deliberation (1987, 175). He calls instead for police and courts to actually enforce the law and break the mob spirit. Only the living fear of seeing themselves hang from the state's gallows can tame the mob's hunger for excitement.

James finds the same reactive lust for mastery and wildness in the more organized mass violence of militarism. War, as Roosevelt rightly claims, is life truly *in extremis*. “Man lives by habits, indeed, but what he lives for is thrills and excitements,” James tells a banquet of pacifists in 1904. “A deadly listlessness would come over most men’s imagination of the future if they could seriously be brought to believe that never again *in saecula saeculorum* would a war trouble human history. In such a stagnant summer afternoon of a world, where would be the zest or interest?” (1982, 122). This is the line of reasoning framing James’s most celebrated intervention into political thought, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” and its repudiation of any narrowly moralizing response to the problem of war. James opens the essay by claiming that pacifism’s “reflective criticisms” are no match for the romance of war (1982, 164). War, despite its destruction, is a moral good as the preeminent theater of the strenuous life. Its advocates cannot be argued out of this craving. The clash between pacifists and militarists is one played out “on imaginative and sentimental grounds” rather than through the exchange of reasons alone (1982, 165). It is not a lack of historical wisdom or empathy that drives the war party. It is rather their correct appraisal, on James’s view, that if warfare ever ended humanity would need to reinvent it in some form “to redeem life from flat degeneration” (1982, 165). A moral equivalent of war proposes to do just this, to reinvent warfare, and redirect these cravings for courage, risk, and excitement in a war “against *nature*” that could put “the manly virtues” of warfare to the purposes of peace (1982, 171).

Marchetti and Throntveit both struggle to frame the “Moral Equivalent of War” within the terms of their more orderly pragmatisms. For Marchetti, James’s proposal exemplifies his preference for hortatory self-transformation and individualist self-reliance despite the authority it gives coercive institutions to conscript “the whole youthful population” of the nation into an army of public service (James 1982, 171). Throntveit foregrounds the role of institutions, by contrast, to

illustrate the need for democratic education in a pragmatist polity. War, however, is reduced to simply one possible source of excitement amongst others rather than, as James puts it, the fruit of a pugnacity bred “into our bones and marrow, and thousands of years of peace won’t breed it out of us” (1982, 164). “The experience of struggle and desire for comradeship precede war psychologically,” Throntveit explains, and whether or not it sparks a dangerous longing for gory excitement in the human heart depends on the outcome of public deliberation (2014, 135). James did see the war against war as being won or lost through a struggle over public opinion. However, this struggle was never simply a deliberative one nor a question of empathy alone. It is a struggle over how the public imagines the cravings for a wildness it cannot not want. More politically consequential than James’s utopian proposal in “The Moral Equivalent of War” is the performative act of the essay itself. As he explains in his peace banquet address, democratic accountability, international law, and prudence are critical barriers against war, but all of these are insufficient if the craving for excitement is not satiated. “We must go in for preventative medicine, not for radical cure,” James argues. “We must cheat our foe, politically circumvent his action, not try to change his nature” (1982, 122). It is therefore imperative that pacifists bolster institutional reforms by fostering “rival excitements and invent new outlets for heroic energy” (1982, 123). The antidote for martial wildness is the invention of a counterbalancing pacifist wildness more amenable to mutual toleration and democratic life.

Which brings us back to cranks. Richard Gale (1999) argues that James’s radical empiricism is marked by an unreconciled division between, on the one hand, the Promethean naturalism celebrated by Marchetti and Throntveit, and a mystical predilection for the occult, limit experiences, and consciousness beyond the margin. I want to suggest that these books’ experiments in reconstructing a Jamesian ethics suggest the need for a more capacious view of the fraught but unavoidable interdependence of these two sides of William James. James’s celebration of cranks

like *Blood* was in no small part an exploration of possibilities for wildness in the midst of modernity not reducible to the blood-thirsty lust for war that the American public so eagerly seemed to crave. George Kateb observes how “aestheticism” can lead us towards immorality in seemingly innocent and unconscious ways. By aestheticism, he means the demand that life offers an experience of beauty and meaning typically reserved for art. Kateb sees this craving in fantasies of wholeness and belonging, no less than in peons to assertive individualism like James’s. But rather than cleanse morality of affect’s heteronomy, Kateb proposes that writers like Emerson and Whitman proffered forms of self-conscious and deliberative aestheticism as sources of self-control. He calls this conscious alternative democratic aestheticism. “Democratic aestheticism is receptive and responsive to as much of world as possible – its persons, its events and situations, its conditions, its patterns and sequences.... Nearly everyone and everything is worthy of aesthetic attitudes and feelings” (Kateb 2008, 144). Radical empiricism might be profitably considered a continuation of this poetic-philosophical tradition that seeks to pacify the craving for the strenuous life not by suppressing it but by pluralizing it. James does not order the strenuous life so much as experiment with expanding the public’s imagination of lives worth living beyond the battlefield: experiences like the ecstasy of escaping the boundaries of the self through dreams or drugs, the effort of acting on one’s convictions in the face of resistance, and the joy of losing oneself in the excitement of action in common that he found in the aftermath of the San Francisco earthquake. If James remains our contemporary it is for how he prods us to continue to wrestle with the affective registers of belief, ethics, and politics circulating in our historical moment in order to better confront the ways our ruling imaginaries stifle the free and equal enjoyment of lives worth living today.

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¹ I borrow this distinction between the “will to order” and “will to wildness” from Bennett (2002, 5). See also the discussion of American wildness in Kateb (2008, 245–271).

² This is not to deny that James does, at times, offer a more nuanced account of the imbrication of the psychic, political, and material forces driving the expansion of American state power overseas. See Livingston (2016, 53-64, 153-163).

William James, American philosopher and psychologist, a leader of the philosophical movement of pragmatism and a founder of the psychological movement of functionalism. His *Principles of Psychology* (1890) anticipated or inspired much 20th-century research in the field. He was the brother of the novelist Henry James. Author of the introduction to *The Philosophy of William James, Drawn from His Own Works*. See *Article History*. William James, (born January 11, 1842, New York, New York, U.S.—died August 26, 1910, Chocorua, New Hampshire), American philosopher and psychologist, a leader of the philosophical movement of pragmatism and a founder of the psychological movement of functionalism. Top Questions. When was William James born? William James was an original thinker in and between the disciplines of physiology, psychology and philosophy. His twelve-hundred page masterwork, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), is a rich blend of physiology, psychology, philosophy, and personal reflection that has given us such ideas as “the stream of thought” and the baby’s impression of the world “as one great blooming, buzzing confusion” (PP 462). James hints at his religious concerns in his earliest essays and in *The Principles*, but they become more explicit in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897), *Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine* (1898), *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909). In *Extremis: The Wildness of William James*. William James advocates strenuousness as the key to the moral life yet his hunger for extreme experiences sometimes leads him to risk sacrificing morality in their pursuit. This paradox is best represented by James’s fascination with war. William James advocates strenuousness as the key to the moral life yet his hunger for extreme experiences sometimes leads him to risk sacrificing morality in their pursuit. This paradox is best represented by James’s fascination with soldiers and warfare as exemplars of the strenuous life. This essay examines th