

**William J. Gavin**

*William James in Focus.*

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*William James in Focus* offers a short and challenging interpretation of James's philosophy as seen through a particularly focused lens. Gavin's project is to mine James's work in order to uncover the prescriptive or 'directive' message behind the descriptive meaning of the texts. The importance of such a project, aside from getting at the heart of James's philosophy, is ostensibly to find the 'living' ideas behind James's work—ideas which 'call on us to bear a heavy burden, to give up the security of certainty, to act heroically by embracing the finitude of our remarks' (xii). Gavin largely succeeds at this project, creating a secondary resource that addresses fairly diverse groups: both those interested in a unified reading of James's philosophy and those interested in a prophetic outlook that embraces the dynamic and living aspects of philosophy.

The intended audience for this volume is advanced graduate students and scholars already familiar with most of James's work. Gavin moves fairly quickly through a large swath of James's canon, and it would be extremely difficult to read the text critically without some familiarity with most of James's philosophy. The text could function as a suitable secondary resource for a graduate level course on William James, pragmatism, or American philosophy, but would be an extremely difficult fit with any undergraduate curriculum.

Gavin's guiding narrative commitment is a distinction between what he calls the 'manifest' and 'latent' content of James's work. The manifest content is found in the descriptive, static meaning of the texts, while the latent content functions as a kind of larger, living meaning behind James's works. Gavin argues the latent aspect of James's thought is embodied by three core ideas: that fundamental concerns over free will cannot be reduced to mere abstract problems; that our method for dealing with such uncertainty turns on a continual process of affirming and re-affirming our living philosophical commitments; and that such issues are a constant struggle (for James as well as ourselves). The strategy throughout is to give a fairly straightforward reading of the manifest content of James's text, while keeping an eye on the latent ideas floating beneath the surface. While some might dismiss the more directive aspects of James's thinking, Gavin embraces this dimension as the most valuable part of James's thought. What we take away from this is that the challenge presented in 'The Will to Believe'—that in the face of indeterminate questions we must continuously re-affirm our intellectual commitments and choices—is applicable not only to seemingly subjective domains of inquiry (e.g., ethics, aesthetics, religion), but 'that there are no areas to which it is forbidden access, only the requirement that the option be forced, living, and momentous' (15).

Such a strong emphasis on the will to believe raises the classic objection that James's version of pragmatism bottoms-out in subjectivism. Cheryl Misak has recently revived this line of thinking, arguing that James places too heavy an emphasis on the personal and subjective in matters concerning truth, an emphasis that leads to a kind of Rortyan dismissal of certainty and objectivity. Gavin attempts to deflate these concerns in two different places (chapters 5 & 8), constructing an interpretation of James's position that settles on a kind of middle-ground between unrestrained subjectivism and scientism. The idea is that old truths can be sustained if we think of

an idea as true ‘if it copes with the present moment, while preserving as much of the past as possible’ (43).

The fundamental problem comes down to the issue of when the will to believe is applicable in our decision-making. One finds a more positivist-friendly James in the idea that most truths are determinate, that subjective views only come into play when alternative theoretical choices are compatible with recognized truths. This interpretation of James would allow for the applicability of the will to believe to all domains of inquiry, but would significantly constrain exactly when choosing for ‘sentimental reasons’ is an acceptable theoretical move. Gavin embraces this line of reasoning, arguing that the latent content found in ‘The Will to Believe’ and the *Pragmatism* lectures consistently reinforces the idea that sentimental reasons are always on the table, yet limited to competing hypotheses that are live, forced, and momentous.

This interpretation of James does not fully address objections to James’s employment of sentimentality within *all* domains of inquiry. Even if a defender of James can extend the applicability of ‘sentimental reasons’ into all domains, it’s still unclear when hypotheses competing over factual issues are live, forced, and *momentous*. Different interpretations of quantum mechanics might provide us with competing live hypotheses which, because of a particular line of inquiry, we are forced to choose between. Is such a choice momentous? It seems we are stuck: either ‘The Will to Believe’ style reasoning is applicable in all domains (but often fails to meet James’s own applicability criteria, leaving the inclusion of such reasoning as trivial in most cases) or it is relegated to seemingly indeterminate domains (i.e., ethics, aesthetics, etc...). Gavin does not ease this particular concern.

An important commitment motivating Gavin’s account is that such issues are a constant struggle. Although certainty may find its place in some outcomes of the sciences, experience consistently leads us to confrontation with anything held too close. The value in examining James’s philosophy is precisely the ‘back and forth’ between the tough and tender-minded dimensions of our nature. This is part of the extremely refreshing aspect of Gavin’s reading. James’s philosophy is presented as a ‘spur’ that allows us ‘to return to the tissue of experience’, instead of one more primary source to be considered when worrying about one or another abstract problem.

Although Gavin’s interpretation of James is quite good, I am somewhat skeptical of his construction of a Jamesian theory of language (chapter 7). While Gavin admits that James had ‘no complete theory of language’, he argues that James’s conception of pure experience necessitates accounting for the relationship between language and experience. The ‘positive’ account of language to be found in James’s texts stress the contextual dependence of meaning and the directive dimension of speech. Because of its incomplete and vague nature, language is directive in the sense that it always leads us beyond itself, pushing us back towards the richness of experience. Although language can serve an important expressive function (one of which James was keenly aware), it should not be thought of as the locus of specifically human activity.

One might note that James’s philosophy emerged just before or during the linguistic turn that defines contemporary philosophy. Such an observation need not detract from the value of James’s philosophy—there are no definitive reasons to think our current fascination with seeing everything through the linguistic turn is the right starting point for philosophy. One could argue that James’s conception of pure experience, as well as his insistence on the always becoming, leading aspects of language, argue against such a starting point. Gavin seems to admit this, but nonetheless constructs a minimal theory of language out of James’s texts. Why not simply deny the

need for a linguistic starting point as unresponsive to the demands of experience? Given James's commitment to the idea that language is always an incomplete capturing of experience, a positive theory of language seemingly runs contrary to Jamesian conception of philosophy. Gavin's overall goals would be better served by situating James *against* the contemporary commitment to language as fully, *ceteris paribus*, capturing human experience. If the multifaceted and messy nature of human experience takes precedence, then language categorically fails to capture the important nuances which refuse neat and tidy linguistic categorization.

There are some minor explanatory problems present, but they are not frequent enough to detract from the overall value of the book. As one example, when explaining the notion of a 'living, forced, and momentous' hypothesis, Gavin explains the difference between a 'live' and 'dead' hypothesis, but does not elucidate 'forced' or 'momentous'. These kinds of minor problems are not an issue for those already familiar with James's work, but represent a significant stumbling block for those only vaguely familiar. Although Gavin's explanations are generally good throughout, readers could benefit from more even explanation of James's nuanced use of terminology.

Gavin's book presents an impressively live take on James's philosophy. Slight interpretive objections aside, I highly recommend this book for those interested in William James, classical pragmatism, or American philosophy. It is challenging and thought-provoking in its interpretational commitments and manages to capture the 'latent' spirit of James's thinking in refreshing fashion. Gavin urges us to continue exploring James's thought as one way to uncover the kind of pure experience that makes life worth living, the kind that pushes us beyond simply looking for what makes life understandable. Admittedly a formidable task, it is surely one worth embracing.

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