

## Chapter 2

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# Psychologies as ontology-making practices

## William James and the pluralities of psychological experience

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What is the contemporary relevance of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* for the study of psychology and its history? Already in James's time, the project for a unitary science of psychology, vigorously pursued from many sides, was collapsing into a chaos of ever increasing fragmentation, coupled with attempts to assert the ascendance of particular agendas for psychology through the hegemonic control of institutions. A hundred years later, this fragmentation has only increased. The disciplines of the psychology of religion and subliminal psychology which James vigorously championed collapsed and all but disappeared. Meanwhile through historical studies, the status of the terms 'psychology' on the one side and 'religion' on the other have increasingly come in for intense scrutiny, and the question has been raised as to whether these terms have any stable referents, or, on the other hand, whether their unitary designation is not designed to paper over the diversity and multiplicity of the conceptions and practices that they designate. In the light of these concerns, I would like to address the contemporary status of James's text by characterising his method of studying psychological experience, and by inquiring how this can help us comprehend the varieties of psychologies and the experiences which they generate. But first, we need to ask: *What was psychology?*<sup>1</sup>

In 1899, James remarked that the 'air has been full of rumours', and that 'we have been having something like a "boom" in psychology in this country'.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, many figures in the West sought to establish a scientific psychology that would be independent of philosophy, theology, biology, anthropology, literature, medicine and neurology, whilst taking over their traditional subject matters. The very possibility of psychology rested upon the successful negotiation of these disciplinary crossings. The larger share of the questions that psychologists took up had already been posed and elaborated in these prior disciplines. They had to prise their subjects from the preserves of other specialists. Through becoming a science, it was hoped that psychology would be able to solve questions that had vexed thinkers for centuries, and to replace superstition, folk wisdom and metaphysical speculation with the rule of universal law. The result would amount to nothing less than the completion and culmination of the scientific revolution. Several decades of work in science studies

have demonstrated that there is no singular atemporal essence to science or notions such as ‘the scientific method’, or in other words, that ‘Science’ with a capital ‘S’ does not exist. As Isabelle Stengers notes, ‘it is pointless to search for a noncontextual, general definition of the difference between science and non-science’.<sup>3</sup> However, this is not to erase all differences between disciplines classed as sciences and those that are not. Rather, as Stengers notes, it is to affirm that the question of the scientificity of a particular discipline ‘only takes on meaning in the precise context in which it is posed’.<sup>4</sup>

There has been much discussion concerning the scientific status of psychology. Given the sacramental significance of the word ‘science’, it may be fruitful to speak more generally of ontology-making practices, which would include all disciplines that aim to construct general, universal ontologies.<sup>5</sup> The value of such a term is that it may help one to avoid falling into pre-given demarcations. The task is then one of differentiating and comparing the procedures of different ontology-making practices. Much of this work is already going on in science studies today.

In 1874, Franz Brentano proclaimed that psychology was the ‘*science of the future*.’ It was to psychology that ‘more than all other theoretical sciences, the future belongs’, and which ‘more than all others will form the future’.<sup>6</sup> To make this possible,

We must strive to achieve here what mathematics, physics, chemistry and physiology have already accomplished . . . a nucleus of generally recognized truth to which, through the working together of many forces, new crystals will then soon adhere on all sides. In place of *psychologies* we must seek to place a *psychology*.<sup>7</sup>

Brentano’s imperative sums up the aspirations of the ‘new psychology’ to form a unitary scientific discipline, modelled after how it imagined sciences like physics and chemistry to function. The mode in which psychologists sought to emulate – or simulate – the form of the prestigious sciences varied. However, the basic aspiration was to form a unitary science. Embedded within this conception was a distinction between two kinds of knowledge about human beings. The first was the scientific knowledge to which psychology aspired. This was to provide a certitude equivalent to the periodic table in chemistry. The second was ‘all the rest’, ie. all other means by which human beings had sought to understand themselves – philosophies, myths, religions, literatures, arts, moral systems, and so on. At best, this was seen to amount to a few lucky guesses. Psychology was to create a fundamental general ontology which would ultimately subsume all other forms of knowing about human beings. In this regard, James wrote to Hugo Münsterberg in 1890:

The truth is that psychology is yet seeking her first principles, and is in the condition of Physics before Galileo or Newton. Nerve physiology has some

laws, even of a quasi elementary sort; but of a law connecting body and mind, or indeed of what is the elementary fact of mind, we have not at present even the beginning of an hypothesis which is valuable.<sup>8</sup>

Thus for James, psychology's will to science implied that its business was to be one of discovering and formulating universal laws, and that these had yet to be found. Two years later he concluded his *Psychology: A Briefer Course* by saying:

When, then, we talk of 'psychology as a natural science' we must not assume that means a sort of psychology that stands at last on solid ground. It means just the reverse; it means a psychology particularly fragile, and into which the waters of metaphysical criticism leak at every joint . . . it is indeed strange to hear people talk triumphantly of 'the New Psychology', and write 'Histories of Psychology', when into the real elements and forces which the word covers not the first glimpse of clear insight exists. A string of raw facts, a little gossip and wrangle about opinions, a little classification and generalization on the mere descriptive level; a strong prejudice that we have states of mind, and that our brain conditions them: but not a single law in the sense in which physics shows us laws, not a single proposition from which any consequence can causally be deduced. We don't even know the terms between which the elementary laws would obtain if we had them. This is no science, it is only the hope of science . . . But at present psychology is in the condition of physics before Galileo and the laws of motion, of chemistry before Lavoisier and the notion that mass is preserved in all reactions. The Galileo and the Lavoisier of psychology will be famous men indeed when they come, as come they some day surely will.<sup>9</sup>

One might do well to ask whether there could be a better description of the state of psychology today: gossip, wrangle, prejudices, but no single generally recognized law. Nevertheless, the frequency with which psychologists were likened (or likened themselves) to Galileo, Lavoisier and Darwin increased dramatically.

James's questioning of the presumption of writing histories of psychology before psychology was successfully founded bears consideration. From early on, histories of psychologies played an important part in attempting to define and construct the discipline of psychology and to demarcate it from other fields.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, histories of psychology have continued to play this role, whether intentionally or unwittingly. But what does the history of psychology consist in, if one leaves open the question as to whether psychology was ever founded? Rather than writing the history of the foundation of a discipline, one is writing the history of attempts by individuals in different disciplines to effect certain transformations in these disciplines through evoking the rubric of psychology.<sup>11</sup>

When challenged by James Ladd in 1892 concerning his assertion in *The Principles of Psychology* that psychology was a natural science, James replied that

I have never claimed that psychology as it stands to-day, *is* a natural science, or in an exact way a science at all. Psychology, indeed, is to-day hardly more than what physics was before Galileo, what chemistry was before Lavoisier. It is a mass of phenomenal description, gossip, and myth, including, however, real material enough to justify one in the hope that with judgement and good-will on the part of those interested, its study may be so organised even now as to become worthy of the name of natural science at no very distant day ... I wished, by treating Psychology *like* a natural science, to help her become one.<sup>12</sup>

There was a fine line between hoping that psychology would turn into a science by treating it like one, and – as was more generally the case – assuming that it already was a science, simply because it was talked about in a simulation of scientific rhetoric by sufficiently many people. Nevertheless, James invoked a distinction between a rational and practical science of the mind. Representatives of the former would be those German ‘prism, pendulum, and chronograph-philosophers’ whose methods ‘could hardly have arisen in a country whose natives could be *bored*’.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, ‘what every jail-warden, every doctor, every clergyman, every asylum-superintendent, ask of psychology is practical rules’.<sup>14</sup> It was James’s increasing dissatisfaction with the meagre yield of laboratory psychology that led him to stress this distinction. It was towards a psychology that fulfilled this practical imperative that he was increasingly inclined. In conclusion, he argued that if one had to choose between the two forms of psychology, ‘The kind of psychology which could cure a case of melancholy, or charm a chronic insane delusion away, ought certainly to be preferred to the most seraphic insight into the nature of the soul’.<sup>15</sup> In effect, psychology as a ‘practical science of the mind’ represented a psychology grounded in pragmatism as opposed to the positivist epistemology of experimental psychology. The *Varieties* represents the articulation of precisely such a psychology, and it is within this context that the question of religion – which had no place within the radically self-restricted domain of experimental psychology – arose.

Psychology’s ‘will to science’ fuelled a profusion of activities. However, whilst there was no shortage of attempts to form the one general psychology, it became clear pretty soon that the sought-for unity was ever receding. The proliferation of variously styled psychologies demonstrated that there was little consensus as to what could be considered the aims and methods of psychology. In 1894, James wrote to Carl Stumpf: ‘From all the psychologies either published or about to appear, there ought to be some sedimentary deposit of truth – I devoutly hope that it may be clearly discernable by all!’<sup>16</sup> A few years later, James lamented: ‘there *is* no “new psychology” worthy of the name. There is nothing but the old psychology which began in Locke’s time, plus a little physiology of the brain and senses and theory of evolution, and a few refinements of introspective detail’.<sup>17</sup> Thus the ‘novelty’ lay in the rhetorical mode in which psychology was increasingly presented. Not for the first time, an ‘epistemological break’ was to be created simply through proclaiming that it had taken place.

In 1900, the Berlin psychologist William Stern surveyed the new psychology. Aside from an empirical tendency and the use of experimental methods, he saw little in the way of common features. There were many laboratories with researchers working on special problems, together with many textbooks, but they were all characterized by a pervasive particularism. He noted that the psychological map of the day was as colourful and checkered as that of Germany in the epoch of small states, and that psychologists

often speak different languages, and the portraits that they draw up of the psyche are painted with so many different colours and with so many differently accented special strokes that it often becomes difficult to recognize the identity of the represented object.<sup>18</sup>

Stern concluded: ‘In short: there are many new psychologies, but not yet the new psychology’.<sup>19</sup> Thus the singularity of the term ‘psychology’ should not mislead one into thinking that such a discipline was ever successfully founded. Or that there is an essence to ‘psychology’ that could encompass the various definitions, methodologies, practices, world-views and institutions that have used this designation. Rather it indicates the massive significance that psychologists gave to being seen to be talking about the same thing. Indeed, psychology has come to mean many disparate and incommensurable things precisely because it had always been made up of them.

The formation of psychologies consisted in a parallel constitution of psychologies and their objects of study. The formation of an epistemological object consists in a process of purification, and fixity: taking an aspect of life and rendering it a suitable object of study, through imbuing it with the attributes of universality, ahistoricity, distinguishing between essential and non-essential attributes, and so on.<sup>20</sup> As we shall see, such aspects of this filtration of the ontology-making process were commented on by James himself.

For James at the time of the *Varieties*, psychology remained in a condition of aspiring to be a science. Hence none of its results – including those of his own psychology – had been sufficiently established to be universally binding. Thus psychologies could be considered to be optional ontologies, which had yet to join up with the general ontology which James considered science to be. The increasing gulf between the initial aspirations of the new psychology and the chaos and disunity that ensued forms one of the critical contexts of the *Varieties*. As we shall see, James’s reformulation of psychology in the *Varieties* and after can in part be seen as a response to this.

### **Does religion exist?**

One example of the dual constitution of psychologies and their objects of study is the psychology of religion. The formation of this discipline did not come about simply through applying the methods and conceptions of an existing discipline to a

new area of study, or to 'naturally given' phenomena: rather, it was through constituting religion as an epistemological object that psychology aimed to constitute itself. The ubiquity of the term 'religion' and the longevity of so-called great world religions has led to the widespread notion that religion can be considered a *sui generis* category. From this perspective, it is surprising to consider that the modern concept of religion only emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, and, furthermore, there are good grounds for dating its invention.

Contemporary scholars have questioned the status of the category 'religion', and posed questions as to whether it has any stable referent, and further, the uses which the term has served. Timothy Fitzgerald has argued that 'Religion cannot reasonably be taken to be a valid analytical category since it does not pick out any distinctive cross-cultural aspect of human life'.<sup>21</sup> Rather, he argues that the category of religion is itself a theological category, which he characterises as a liberal ecumenical theology. Thus the constitution of category of religion has led to the uncritical imposition of Judeo-Christian assumptions on non-Western data. In a similar vein, Richard King argues that the notion of religion is a 'Christian theological category' with a particular genealogy. He argues that 'the way the term has been employed results in the privileging of certain features of Christian and post-Christian Western culture and locates "other cultures" within an implicitly theological framework that transforms them as much as it attempts to make sense of them'.<sup>22</sup> Religion has generally been defined in a differential manner, that is to say, through being contrasted and set aside from the non-religious. Thus the formation of the concept of religion should not be seen as separate from the formation of a concept of the secular. Such an argument clearly has consequences for the history of the psychology of religion: the attempt to form a 'secular' science of the 'sacred' through constituting these very distinctions.

The questioning of the status of the term 'religion' thus converges with the questioning of the status of the term 'psychology'. If one can no longer assume that these terms have stable referents, one has to carefully study the uses that they serve in particular texts, practices and institutions. In reading the *Varieties* today – justly viewed as foundational in the psychology of religion – one has to consider how the text looks *after* 'religion' and *after* 'psychology'. What happens to the reading of the *Varieties* when we drop these terms, or rather, attentively track the work being done by them? If psychology never actually existed as a unitary enterprise, one has to look to its use in particular texts to determine its meaning, even in the case of a particular thinker.

I will first consider the consequences that follow from the suspension of the term 'religion' in the reading of the *Varieties*. One may commence with James's definitions of religion. In his work, one finds restricted and general conceptions of religion. In 1895, he proposed the following definition:

when from now onward I use the word [religion] I mean to use it in the supernaturalist sense, as declaring that the so-called order of nature, which

constitutes this world's experience, is only one portion of the total universe, and that there stretches beyond this visible world an unseen world of which we know nothing positive, but in its relation to which the true significance of our present mundane life consists.<sup>23</sup>

Traces of this restricted use of the term are to be found in the *Varieties*. In his chapter on 'The divided self', James writes: 'To find religion is only one out of the many ways of reaching unity; and the process of remedying inner incompleteness and reducing inner discord is a general psychological process, which may take place with any sort of mental material, and need not necessarily assume the religious form'.<sup>24</sup>

The *Varieties* begins with a generalised definition of religion: 'Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*'.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, James adds that 'we must interpret the term "divine" very broadly, as denoting any object that is *godlike*, whether it be a concrete divinity or not'.<sup>26</sup> Thus we find a tension and oscillation in James concerning the term 'religion'. The source of this may be clarified if one simply considers the consequences of dropping the category in the reading of the *Varieties*. The question that follows is, what is it then a study of? Varieties of what? *It then may be considered to be a study of states of transformation*, based on a corpus of first-hand testimonials generally utilising Christian phraseology and iconography. This may explain the oscillation between the generalised and restricted concepts of religion in the text: the study of states of transformation (placing the emphasis on the subtitle of the book, 'A Study in Human Nature') would incline him to the generalised definition, whilst the specifically Christian conceptions in the transformation narratives would incline him to the restricted definition. The question of Protestant bias is one that James is more aware of than some critics give him credit for. In his preface to Starbuck's *Psychology of Religion* (1899) he wrote: 'The Volksgeist of course dictates its special phraseology and most of its conceptions, which are almost without exception Protestant, and predominantly of the Evangelical sort'.<sup>27</sup> (However, the shaping effect of the 'Volksgeist' is a theme that remains undeveloped in James.)<sup>28</sup>

Considering James in this manner has some unexpected consequences. For over a century, criticisms have been made of James's conception of religion, along the lines of: James is not Durkheim, or Weber, or Freud, or a post-colonial feminist cultural critic and so on. Such criticisms tend to counterpose other conceptions of religion or approaches to the topic.<sup>29</sup> A great number of such criticisms of James's treatment of religion dissolve as being as obsolete as the category of religion. If one accepts the legitimacy of James's attempt to study states of transformation in individuals, then the fact that he ignores institutional religion, the history of the church, dogmas and theologies, etc., appears to be simply beside the point. The text then becomes more contemporary than a number of the criticisms that have been directed towards it.

### Psychology, or how to make our ideas vague

If the *Varieties* may fruitfully be considered to be a study of states of transformation, how does James intend to study them? In other words, what is the role and status of the term ‘psychology’ in the text?

In the introduction to the *Varieties*, James notes that he had initially intended the lectures to consist in two parts, a descriptive part on ‘Man’s religious appetites’ and a metaphysical part on ‘Their satisfaction through philosophy’. The growth of the psychological matter led to the second being ‘postponed entirely’ aside from a brief statement of his philosophical conclusions. Reading this at face value has led many commentators to consider the *Varieties* as a work of ‘psychology’ (however understood), and to neglect its imbrication in his philosophy of radical empiricism. Eugene Taylor has cogently demonstrated the inseparability of James’s psychology from radical empiricism and demonstrated that far, from abandoning psychology, James’s later work in part constituted a critique of the metaphysical basis of the new psychology, so as to reformulate it.<sup>30</sup> David Lamberth has excellently shown that James’s descriptive psychology in the *Varieties* is closely connected with his unfinished philosophical project, and the manner in which this is subsequently articulated in *A Pluralistic Universe*.<sup>31</sup> Following Lamberth’s reconstruction, I would like to go further and suggest that these two projects are in several important respects inseparable. Indeed, many paragraphs in which James is developing radical empiricism seamlessly interleave the discussion of the cases he introduces. Thus the nature of the descriptive psychology which James employs in the *Varieties* warrants closer consideration.

In this regard, James’s mode of lengthy citation – which is strikingly out of temper with the predilection for paraphrase in the humanities today – is significant. In 1903, James wrote to his Italian translator, Guilo Cesare Ferrari: ‘The book was written round the documents. I got them first, and poured in my connective remarks like a sort of galantine jelly to enclose them, and I confess that I should dislike to have any of them sacrificed.’<sup>32</sup> This form of composition is not incidental for two reasons. First, the documents are presented in an evidential manner. Whilst relying on first-hand testimonials, James makes available all the documentation on which he is basing his reading. The material is made public, and is therefore fully available for other researchers to judge James’s constructions against the material he is using. This is in line with what he considered to be a necessary requirement for psychology to be a science. Second, it highlights the minimalism and secondary status of James’s connective remarks. Descriptive psychology is now deliberately set in a minor key.

In the *Varieties*, James articulates his criticism of genetic explanation.<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere, he expresses his dislike of symbolic interpretation.<sup>34</sup> By contrast, the mode of ‘descriptive psychology’ which James pursues in the *Varieties* may be characterised as an attempt to bring to formalised articulation different attitudes and possible ways of living life. The narratives that James compiles show



experiences of transformations of the self and its experience of the world. Here, his descriptive psychology simply provides comparative, formalised articulation of these and sorts them into a serial order.

In his reply to Pratt's questionnaire on the subject of religious beliefs in 1904, James spoke of his 'hospitality towards the religious testimony of others'.<sup>35</sup> This may be taken as a leitmotif of James's approach. His characterisation of the religion of the healthy-minded and the sick-minded characters is marked by this hospitality: whilst his sympathies are clear, no standpoints are dismissed.<sup>36</sup>

Two further features of James's descriptive psychology here may be highlighted. The first is the delimitation of explanation. As James puts it, psychology can describe, but not explain. For example, when discussing the shift of excitement, James notes:

Now if you ask of psychology just how the excitement shifts in a man's mental system, and *why* aims that were peripheral become at a certain moment central, psychology has to reply that although she can give a general description of what happens, she is unable in a given case to account accurately for all the given forces at work.<sup>37</sup>

If psychology cannot explain, what then is the status of psychological language and description? He goes on to describe these shifts in terms of things being 'hot' and 'cold' to us, and how they form centres of dynamic energy. However, there is no attempt here to link this to an underlying neurophysiology – as he had attempted in certain sections of *Principles* – these centres are now simply metaphorical. He writes of his language use: 'Whether such language be rigorously exact is for the present of no importance. It is exact enough, if you recognize from your own experience the facts which I seek to designate by it'.<sup>38</sup> Thus the purpose of psychological language here is *evocation*. What is proffered by way of explanation – hot, cold, centres of dynamic energy, the 'hackneyed symbolism of a mechanical equilibrium' and so on – is not presented in an ontological sense, but in a metaphorical one. The use of language in a non-ontological manner shifts the status of psychology. It no longer sets psychology above what it sets out to study, in imitation of how sciences are imagined to function. Psychological language is not privileged in any way as a form of translation over the languages it studies – in this case, the first-hand testimonials. Richer and more articulate descriptions take the place of explanations. James makes this suspension of ontological language explicit in the following statement:

When I say 'Soul', you need not take me in the ontological sense unless you prefer to; for although ontological language is instinctive in such matters, yet Buddhists or Humians can perfectly well describe the facts in the phenomenal terms which are their favourites.<sup>39</sup>

This suspension explains how James can go on to use terms such as ‘consciousness’ in his late writings even after his banishment of consciousness in ‘Does consciousness exist?’ His later usages do not represent a contradiction or recantation, rather they represent a different form of usage.

The second aspect to which I wish to draw attention are moments where James stands outside psychology and looks at its assumptions and modes of operation. In his discussion of conversion he refers to the ‘vague and abstract language of psychology’ as constituting ‘our own symbolism’.<sup>40</sup> He then compares the views of psychology and religion:

Psychology and religion are thus in perfect harmony up to this point, since both admit that there are forces seemingly outside of the conscious individual that bring redemption to his life. Nevertheless psychology, defining these forces as ‘subconscious’, and speaking of their effects as due to ‘incubation’, or ‘cerebration’, implies that they do not transcend the individual’s personality’ and herein she diverges from Christian theology, which insists that they are direct supernatural operations of the Deity.<sup>41</sup>

Here, he suspends the ontological hypostatisations of psychology, and looks on it as a system on a par with Christian theology, without privileging either. Each can be described from the outside as a self-enclosed symbolic system with their ontological postulates.

These elements of James’s descriptive psychology are developed in ‘The energies of men’. In its quest for what makes possible the renewal of energy, this essay can be considered a continuation of the *Varieties*. James opens this essay by distinguishing between structural and functional psychology. This corresponded to the difference between the analytical and the clinical points of view in psychological observation. Clinical conceptions are vaguer and more adequate, more concrete and of more practical consequence. He champions the value of functional psychology, and in particular, the ‘vagueness’ of its language use:

The terms have to remain vague; for though every man or woman born knows what is meant by such phrases as having a good vital tone, a high tide of spirits, an elastic temper, as living energetically, working easily, deciding firmly, and the like, we should all be put to our trumps if asked to explain in terms of scientific psychology just what such expressions mean. We can draw some child-like psychophysical diagrams, and that is all. In physics the conception of ‘energy’ is perfectly defined. It is correlated with the concept of ‘work’. But mental work and moral work, although we cannot live without talking about them, are terms as yet hardly analyzed, and doubtless mean several heterogeneous elementary things . . . it is obvious that the intuitive or popular idea of mental work, fundamental and absolutely indispensable as it is in our lives, possesses no degree whatever of scientific clearness to-day.<sup>42</sup>

The ‘psychology’ already present in ‘intuitive or popular’ ideas is championed over ‘scientific clearness’. The task then would be one of making this implicit ‘psychology’ more explicit. Thus functional psychology simply renders everyday language use more articulate, rather than attempting, as does structural psychology, to translate it into the terms of an underlying fundamental ontology.

One may pose the question: have structural, ontological psychologies always actually been functional psychologies, in James’s terms, albeit impoverished ones, enabling people to transform their experiences and the languages for talking about them, despite their aspirations to form general universal ontologies? The conceptual frameworks of structural psychologies, whilst intended to have an explanatory power above that of everyday language, have been metaphorised and reabsorbed into the latter. Viewed functionally, the ‘laws’ of structural psychology become practical maxims and aphorisms. All that is left today of Mesmer’s system of animal magnetism is the metaphoric description of personalities as ‘magnetic’ and ‘mesmerising’ – linguistic fossils of a grand monistic medical physics. A similar fate is now befalling psychoanalysis.

The question that then arises is whether this characterisation of James’s procedure in the *Varieties* and after may have a wider validity in characterising the workings of psychologies. To take up this up, one needs to consider the question of the malleability of experience in James.

### James and contemporary mind-cure

Given the multiplicity of disciplines and practices that have gone under the name of psychology, it is hazardous to attempt general statements and characterisations of ‘psychology’. Thus in the following I am principally, though not exclusively, concerned with the psychotherapies: those contemporary mind-curers who form the modern-day analogue and indeed the heirs of the mind-curers studied by James in the *Varieties* under the rubric of the religion of the healthy-minded.<sup>43</sup>

From the outset of his interest in hypnosis, James was struck by the variability of trance states and the difficulty of constructing theories identifying the essential characteristics of the trance. He concluded his 1886 ‘Report on hypnotism’ (written with Gouverneur Carnochan) by noting:

Our experience has impressed upon us the variability of the same subject’s trance from one day to another. It may occur that a phenomenon met with one day, but not repeated, and therefore accounted a mere coincidence, is really due to a particular phase of the trance, realized on that occasion, but never again when sought for.<sup>44</sup>

Thus any attempt to make an epistemological object out of the trance was beset by its variability. The following year, he concluded ‘Reaction-time in the hypnotic trance’, by writing: ‘The only lesson of the facts I report seems to be that we should beware of making rash generalizations from few cases about the hypnotic

state. That name probably covers a very great number of different neural conditions'.<sup>45</sup> If the hypnotic state was actually a name for different conditions, its use would serve to conceal the fact that these conditions might call for distinct explanations – which was James's critique of the concept of the unconscious.

In *Principles*, James discussed the conflict between the late nineteenth century hypnotic schools, which constituted the genesis of modern psychotherapy. Concerning differing theories of the trance state, he wrote:

The three states of Charcot, the strange reflexes of Heidenhain, and all the other bodily phenomena which have been called direct consequences of the trance-state itself, are not such. They are products of suggestion, the trance-state having no particular outward symptoms of its own; but without the trance-state there, those particular suggestions could never have been successfully made.<sup>46</sup>

Whilst conceived in a realist mode, psychological theories actually created new forms of experience, due to the impressionability of the trance state. This enabled any theory to be 'realised'. James trenchantly points out the pitfalls that this held for the possibility of developing an objective account of hypnosis:

Any sort of personal peculiarity, any trick accidentally fallen into in the first instance by some one subject, may, by attracting attention, become stereotyped, serve as a pattern for imitation, and figure as the type of a school. The first subject trains the operator trains the succeeding subjects, all of them in perfect good faith conspiring together to evolve a perfectly arbitrary result.

With the extraordinary perspicacity and subtlety of perception which subjects often display for all that concerns the operator with whom they are en rapport, it has hard to keep them ignorant of anything he expects. Thus it happens that one easily verifies on new subjects what one has already seen on old ones, or any desired symptom of which one may have heard or read.<sup>47</sup>

His discussions of theories of trance are not solely concerned with one phenomenon, but with the malleability of experience to conceptual reframing in general. This malleability explains the endless generation of multiple psychological and psychotherapeutic systems producing 'perfectly arbitrary results' – a history of psychotherapy in a nutshell. It explains the inevitable failure of such systems to form a universal psychology and general ontology. For James, the hypnotic schools had led to a potentially limitless proliferation of contradictory systems, each appealing to individual testimony as their proof.<sup>48</sup> His critique focused on their means for verification. There was no theory that could not be 'verified' by the procedures being used.

It is important to note that James's conception of the malleability of experience and its receptivity to conceptual remodelling is not part of a human-natural

science division. Rather, it is an aspect of a more generalised modelling. As early as 1881, he wrote:

While I talk and the flies buzz, a sea-gull catches a fish at the mouth of the Amazon, a tree falls in the Adirondack wilderness, a man sneezes in Germany, a horse dies in Tartary, and twins are born in France. What does that mean? Does the contemporaneity of these events with one another and with a million others as disjointed, form a rational bond between them, and unite them into anything that means for a world?

Yet such collateral contemporaneity, and nothing else, is the real order of the world. It is an order with which we have nothing to do to get away from it as fast as possible . . . we break it into histories, and we break it into arts, and we break it into sciences; and then we begin to feel at home. We make ten thousand separate serial orders of it, and on any one of these we react as though the others did not exist. We discover among its various parts relations that were never given to sense at all (mathematical relations, tangents, squares, and roots and logarithmic functions), and out of an infinite number of these we call certain ones essential and lawgiving and ignore the rest. Essential these relations are, but only for our purpose, the other relations being just as real and present as they . . . the miracle of miracles, a miracle not yet exhaustively cleared up by any philosophy, is that the given order lends itself to the remodelling. It shows itself plastic to many of our scientific, to many of our aesthetic, to many of our practical purposes and ends.<sup>49</sup>

Psychologies have shown themselves remarkably successful at remodelling the chaos of the collateral contemporaneity of experience into serial orders. There are few aspects of experience that have not been multiply traversed by the encompassing arcs of rival psychological systems. Yet what is one to make of the collateral contemporaneity of psychologies, and what is the status of the appeal to individual testimony as their evidential support?

### **Revelation and validation**

To take up these questions, one may consider James's discussion of mysticism in the *Varieties*. For a number of contemporary scholars, the status of the term 'mysticism' is as problematic as the term 'religion'.<sup>50</sup> Again, one can bracket out the problems surrounding the generic category of mysticism, and consider the types of experiences that James is studying: namely, experiences that are authoritative over the individuals who have them. In other words, James is concerned with experiences that are considered to be self-authenticating, such as states of transformation. Of such experiences, James writes: 'No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically'.<sup>51</sup> James's attitude towards such experiences is twofold: on the one hand, he affirms the reality of the experiences

in question, but on the other, refrains from taking the conclusions drawn from them as legislative. He adds that those who don't have revelations must decide that as the various revelations corroborate incompatible theological doctrines, 'they neutralise each other and leave no fixed result'.<sup>52</sup> Thus if we embrace any one of them 'we do so in the exercise of our individual freedom'.<sup>53</sup> James here seems to sharply distinguish between what should be regarded as constituting general ontology – and hence recognised by all – and the optional ontologies (or 'overbeliefs', in James's expression) wherein everyone should be left free to make one's own choices.

The theories of the various schools of psychotherapy provide a set of narratives concerning the cause of illness or distress and how its resolution may be effected, with plot templates in the form of case histories. These transformation narratives are in turn linked to what are claimed to be universal models of human functioning. The self-authenticating nature of the transformative experiences undergone by individuals is taken as the proof of the ontologies in question. Thus we are faced with the transformations of experience generated by the psychotherapies on the one hand, and, on the other, by the positing of ontologies (forces, mechanisms, structures of the chronically overpopulated inner world) in the continued pursuit of a unitary science. This has led to the efflorescence of multiple optional ontologies, which have been embraced by large-scale social groupings. However, in the main, these tend to the monistic form, akin to the absolute idealism critiqued in *A Pluralistic Universe*. As James suggests, those who have not had such experiences should be under no obligation to accept the legislative universalism of such revelations.

For James, evaluation is by way of pragmatism. In the *Varieties*, this features as the judgement of the validity of religious experiences. Pragmatism is often understood in an individual sense. However, it is important to note that the judgement of validity in the *Varieties* is not by the subjects themselves (which is not James's primary concern) but by others. Valuation concerns what *we* should make of their experiences. It is important to stress this social dimension of pragmatism. As James states in *Pragmatism*:

The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its veri-fication. Its validity is the process of its valid-ation.<sup>54</sup>

A process of validation or verification is a way of describing how *practices* establish their truths. In his discussion of pragmatism's conception of truth, James stresses that truth in science requires 'consistency with previous truth and novel fact'. Theories that work are those that 'mediate between all previous truths and certain new experiences'.<sup>55</sup> Thus the degree of rigour of the verification process of a particular ontology-making practice would consist in the extent to which it successfully enables this consistency and mediation.

As we have seen, James's critique of the hypnotic schools – which formed the template of modern psychotherapeutic schools – focused on the failings of their means of verification. The inability to provide any check or comparative framework, would, from this perspective, constitute a lack of rigour. However, viewed from a functional perspective, the multiplicity of systematised articulations of experience offered by psychologies is to be welcomed. James suggests as much in the *Varieties* in his consideration of the multiplicity of religious formations:

Is the existence of so many religious types and sects and creeds regrettable? To these questions I answer 'No' emphatically. And my reason is that I do not see how it is possible that creatures in such different positions and with such different powers as human individuals are, should have exactly the same functions and the same duties. No two of us have identical difficulties, nor should we be expected to work out identical solutions.<sup>56</sup>

The same would then apply for the varieties of psychologies, understood in functional terms. They may be understood as vehicles which have provided systematised articulations of experience. Paradoxically, it is the very failure of psychologies to establish a general ontology, in a structural sense, that has given such functional utility to the efflorescence of optional ontologies which the self-same psychologies have generated.

## Notes

1. Parts of this section were elaborated in the context of a work in progress with Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen on the historiography of psychoanalysis, whom I would like to thank. On the formation of modern psychology, see my *Jung and the Making of Modern Psychology: The Dream of a Science* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003).
2. William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 14. References to James's work are given to the Harvard edition, with the exception of the *Varieties*, where references have been given to *The Varieties of Religious Experience: Centenary Edition*, with a foreword by Micky James and new introductions by Eugene Taylor and Jeremy Carrette (London, Routledge, 2002).
3. Isabelle Stengers, *Power and Invention: Situating Modern Science*, trans. P. Bains (Chicago, University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 81.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
5. The stress on *practices* of ontology-making is linked to what Andrew Pickering describes as the shift from a representational to a performative tense in science studies (*The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency and Science*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1995).
6. Franz Brentano, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt* (Leipzig, Felix Meiner, 1925), p. 36.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
8. 27 August, ed. Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth Berkeley, *The Correspondence of William James, Volume 7, 1890–1894* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 89.

9. James, *Psychology: Briefer Course* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 400–1.
10. See for instance, Max Dessoir, *Outlines of the History of Psychology* (New York, Macmillan, 1912); James Mark Baldwin, *History of Psychology: A Sketch and an Interpretation*, 2 vols (London, Watts & Co., 1913).
11. On this question see Roger Smith, ‘Does the history of psychology have a subject?’ *History of the Human Sciences* 1, 1988, pp. 147–77; on the historiography of psychotherapy, see my review of Stanley Jackson, *Care of Psyche: A History of Psychological Healing, Medical History*, forthcoming.
12. James, ‘A plea for psychology as a “natural science”’, *Essays in Psychology* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 270.
13. James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 92.
14. James, ‘A plea for psychology as a “natural science”’, p. 272.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 277.
16. 24 January, *The Correspondence of William James, Volume 7, 1890–1894*, pp. 485–6.
17. James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, p. 15.
18. William Stern, ‘Die psychologische Arbeit des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts, insbesondere in Deutschland’, *Zeitschrift für pädagogische Psychologie und Pathologie*, 2, 1900, p. 415.
19. *Ibid.*
20. On the denial of historicity to material objects and entities, see Bruno Latour, ‘The historicity of things’, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 145–73.
21. Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 4.
22. Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-colonial Theory, India and ‘The Mystic East’*, (London, Routledge, 1999), p. 60.
23. James, ‘Is life worth living?’, *The Will to Believe* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 48.
24. James, *Varieties*, p. 139.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
27. James, *Essays in Morality and Religion* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 103.
28. On the relation of the *Varieties* to contemporary ‘religious-like’ movements, see Clifford Geertz, ‘The pinch of destiny: religion as experience, meaning, identity, power’, in *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 167–86; and Ramón del Castillo, ‘Varieties of American Ecstasy’, in *Streams of William James*, 5, 2, European Perspectives on ‘The Varieties of Religious Experience’, Guest editor Felicitas Kraemer, pp. 1–4, forthcoming. This volume also contains papers presented at the centenary conference.
29. On criticisms of James, see Carol Zaleski, ‘Speaking of William James to the cultured among his despisers,’ in Donald Capps and Janet Jacobs, (eds) *The Struggle for Life: A Companion to William James’s ‘The Varieties of Religious Experience’* (Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Monograph Series 9, 1995) pp. 40–60.
30. Eugene Taylor, *William James on Consciousness beyond the Margin* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996). See also his contribution to this volume.
31. David Lamberth, *William James and Metaphysics of Experience* (Cambridge,



- Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 97–145. See also his contribution to this volume.
32. 25 February. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1985), appendix, p. 553.
  33. *Varieties*, pp. 13ff. On this question, see Jeremy Carrette, ‘The return to James: psychology, religion and the amnesia of neuroscience’, introduction to the centenary edition of the *Varieties*.
  34. (Apropos of Freud.) James to Flournoy, 28 September 1909, Robert Le Clair (ed.), *The Letters of William James and Théodore Flournoy*, (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), p. 224.
  35. Reproduced in Donald Capps, ‘“That shape am I”: The bearing of melancholy on James’s struggle with religion’, Donald Capps and Janet Jacobs (eds), *The Struggle for Life: A Companion to William James’s ‘The Varieties of Religious Experience’*, pp. 105–6.
  36. It is important to note that James’s concept of character in the *Varieties* is not purely subjective, as subsequent psychologies would conceive it. Character here stands for a particular outlook on life, a particular philosophy.
  37. James, *Varieties*, p. 155.
  38. *Ibid.*
  39. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
  40. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
  41. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
  42. James, ‘The energies of men’, *Essays in Religion and Morality* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 144.
  43. On the significance of late nineteenth-century mind-cure in the genesis of modern psychotherapy see Eric Caplan, *Mind Games: American Culture and the Birth of Psychotherapy*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001).
  44. James, *Essays in Psychology*, p. 197.
  45. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
  46. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 1201.
  47. *Ibid.*, pp. 1201–2.
  48. At the same time, James valued the therapeutic utility of hypnotism. On 26 November 1890, he wrote to his sister Alice James, ‘If I were you, I would seriously try *hypnotism*, which might do you good.’ *The Correspondence of William James, Volume 7, 1890–1894*, p. 114. In his review of Pierre Janet’s work, James contended that the ‘possible application to the relief of human misery’ was the ‘really important part of these investigations.’ (‘The hidden self,’ p. 265). In the *Varieties*, James criticised the over-extension of the word ‘suggestion’: ‘the word “suggestion”, having acquired official status, is unfortunately beginning to play in many quarters the part of a wet blanket upon investigation, being used to fend off all inquiry into the varying susceptibilities of individual cases. “Suggestion” is only another name for the power of ideas, *so far as they prove efficacious over belief and conduct*’ (p. 91). In ‘The energies of men’ James offered the following definition of the action of suggestion: ‘It throws into gear energies of imagination, of will, and of mental influence over physiological processes, that usually lie dormant’ (p. 139).
  49. James, ‘Reflex action and theism’, *The Will to Believe*, pp. 95–6. This generalised notion of the plasticity of experience is not grounded in ontological distinctions, such as the distinction proposed by Ian Hacking between ‘interactive kinds’ and ‘indifferent kinds’, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1999), which risks falling back into a classical dichotomy

between the 'human' and 'natural' sciences, and one might add, into the dualisms which James sought to overthrow with radical empiricism.

50. See Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-colonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'*, p. 60.
51. James, *Varieties*, p. 327.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 396.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 397.
54. James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 97.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
56. James, *Varieties*, p. 376.