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From Virtue to Morality: Republicanism in the Texts and Contexts of William James

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For most of this century, William James's reputation quietly included assumptions about his political and cultural role. For example, Ralph Henry Gabriel believed that his ideas were "reminiscent of the frontier" (336), and Henry Steele Commager maintained that James's philosophy "reflected qualities in the American character" that were "wonderfully adapted to the average American" (96-97). William James was the all-American philosopher. Recently, historians have redoubled their attention to the importance of ideas in context, which has led to a highlighting of the ideological components of theoretical constructions and beliefs--including those of philosophers. As a result, James has gotten redressed and appears a bit more trendy than those early to middle twentieth-century portraits made him out to be. We have witnessed a William James renaissance, with his thought contextualized in portraits of him: critically adapting the work ethic to modern questions of vocation in James Gilbert's study of industrial alienation; crusading for a "culture of inquiry" in David Hollinger's work; displacing his artistic vocation into his psychology and becoming the great philosopher of secular modernism in Daniel Bjork's two books; pioneering a non-Freudian American psychotherapeutics in Eugene Taylor's reconstruction of his unorthodox psychology; helping to create a "via media" between scientism and traditional religion in James Kloppenberg's analysis of political ideologies; emerging as a culturally engaged "public philosopher" in George Cotkin's recent book; surviving the critical pen of Frank Lentricchia as an advocate of "committed radical pluralism" with "comedic self-deflation"; and even achieving canonization as a "culture hero" in Monroe Spears' recent literary studies (for my discussion of James's cultural role, see Croce).

In the spirit of this recent scholarship, I seek here to pour some new ideological and contextual wine into the old wineskin of James's Americanness. More specifically, I want to ask some new questions about the cultural stance of the philosopher and the cultural constructions of his theoretical formulations by looking at his relation to the founding ideology of the American nation, republicanism. The ideology

loomed large in his cultural outlook and the word appears with tantalizing frequency in his philosophy.

Republicanism has had two lives in American historiography: first and most recognizably, it was a defining characteristic of the American Revolutionary generation in the work of Caroline Robbins, Bernard Bailyn, and Gordon Wood; then, "republican ideology" became the hot topic of 1970's historiography (for an overview and thorough summary of the trends and the literature, see Shalhope, 1972; and 1982). Republicanism included political beliefs about popular sovereignty, small government, and the dangerous corruptions of power (especially wealthy, inherited, or unchecked), as well as cultural beliefs in the centrality of citizens with public-spirited virtue, the importance of equality of opportunity, the necessity of having a population of middling circumstances who could maintain virtue against both the lure of wealthy greed and the snares of poverty, and a skepticism about the social habits of deference to established authority. In the eighteenth century, it was an ideology of social outsiders, the middling sorts who, without contradiction, both advocated community-minded virtue and scorned the ranks and powers of special privilege (Kramnick). The insights of this scholarship on the founding era have stirred historians of later periods to ask an obvious question: if republicanism was so powerful during the late eighteenth century, what happened to it?

This leads to the second and less formal role that republicanism has played in American historical writing. As change inevitably came to the founding ideology, and at an especially rapid rate from the early nineteenth century, virtuous and luxury-fearing republicanism dissipated or even gave way to enterprising capitalism and self-interested individualism. The works of Joyce Appleby, Rowland Berthoff, Robert Remini, Steven Watts, and Robert Wiebe address this question of how, in Jackson Lears's economical phrase, "the eighteenth century became the nineteenth" (qtd. in Watt on dust jacket). While there are, in addition, studies of the turn from republicanism in particular spheres of life in the early nineteenth century,(Note1) we do not have a study of republicanism in philosophy. More broadly important, there is little attention to the way republicanism survived as a cultural force, at least through the end of the nineteenth century, despite the withering cultural environment of individualism and democratic capitalism, which had little room for public-spirited virtue. With most scholarship focusing on the disappearance of republicanism, Rowland Berthoff suggests that "the farther the classic ideal receded from the dynamic reality of the nineteenth-century economy, the more Americans liked to think of themselves in its terms." Those who did advocate republicanism were increasingly social insiders, but ones who retained the classic republican defiance of established authority (106).(Note 2) Beyond the identification of a cultural lag or even a deep-seated national duplicity, this analysis leaves begging a major question: how and why did republican words and ideas continue to have appeal in the new America of the middle to late nineteenth century?

William James (1842-1910) provides an excellent case study of many of these trends, and of how republicanism shaped philosophical thinking. He does, in fact, give evidence of republican identification, but with some dramatic changes that reflect his position in the culture of his own time. James rarely made open declarations of his political views, but when he did, he usually expressed a republican political outlook, of a liberal, reformist bent: he greatly admired Abraham Lincoln, he strongly supported the politics of the *Nation* magazine, and, of course, he was a vigorous leader among anti-imperialists at the turn-of-the-century. While he was a member of a New England elite, his thought and behavior remained decidedly anti-elitist. In his personal style, he shared with the republican tradition an irreverence for authority, which he displayed in many of his personal beliefs and behaviors ranging from his adamant refusal ever to serve as department chair to his friendship with eccentrics to the anti-absolutism of his pragmatic philosophy.

James was a product of republican culture in both its enterprising and reform features. His grandfather was a fabulously wealthy land-owner and businessman in up-state New York, and an avowed booster for geographic expansion, free enterprise, and limited government. James received more than an immaterial cultural inheritance from his grandfather: the latter's wealth insured the whole family's elite cultural place in their choice of summer homes, European trips, upper-crust friendships, and Harvard University. While James's style of clothing alone does not indicate a whole cultural outlook, it does reveal that despite his sympathy for social outsiders, he himself was the picture of a social insider. His son reported that his father sported "festive neckties," that he was impatient with "those careless about appearances," and that even in the late 1860's when vocational indecision and philosophical uncertainty often pulled his spirits to melancholy, a friend reported, "He was the *cleanest*- looking chap"(*Letters of William James* I:26). James felt a part of elite intellectual culture, but not in a complacent or arrogant way. Ironically, feeling like one of the "outsiders with whom I belong" was part of his close identification with the "inner spiritual Harvard" because of "her tolerance of exceptionality and eccentricity" ("The True Harvard" [1903], *Memories and Studies* 349, 353). His strong connection to his culture surely also contributed to his lusty and sometimes provincial pride in being an American. This feeling emerged again and again throughout his life, but perhaps never with as much blunt force as in a letter written from France when he was only sixteen: "I long to get home. With all her faults, I love my country still" (James to Edgar B. Van Winkle, March 1, 1858, James papers).

James's father also contributed to his republican identification, although decidedly in the direction of reform. The elder Henry James was a spiritual seeker whose discovery of Charles Fourier and Emanuel Swedenborg shaped his hope to direct American democracy toward a less selfish and more communitarian society. James was not as optimistic about any particular redeeming scheme, but he similarly looked forward to social improvement in his liberal mugwump hopes to quell the

influence of big corporations, who "abuse ... the institution of private property," and of corrupt politicians, who think "one of the prime functions of the national government is to help the adroiter citizens to grow rich" ("The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" [1891], *The Will to Believe* 156). While his reform sentiments were moderate in his early years, as his scolding of "pathological" Haymarket Rioters in 1886 indicates, they grew more radical and intense, as Deborah Coon has argued, in his anti-imperialist fight against the annexation of the Philippines in the first decade of the twentieth century (Beisner 11, 35-82; Coon). Like his father, James felt a strong tug of civic duty, which he declared even in his teens, when he asked "what ought to be everyone's object in life?" and answered soberly, "to be [of] as much use as possible." He explained in decidedly public-spirited language by saying that "The best way to serve God is to serve your fellow man," and "We must all lead an active life and live for others not for ourselves" (James to Van Winkle). This was elitism, American style, and would motivate James for the rest of his life: "In our democracy, where everything else is so shifting," James said in clear recognition of the forces of the marketplace, "we alumni and alumnae of the colleges are the only permanent presence that corresponds to the aristocracy in older countries." Having been given much, James felt, "our motto" ought to be "*noblesse oblige*," although his outlook should more properly be called "*bourgeois oblige*," ("The Social Value of the College-Bred" [1907] 110) because it was always tinged with the republican distaste for established authority.

James's identification with republicanism is noticeable even before he began publishing. In his twenties, he circulated with a group of young intellectuals who readily assumed pride in American republicanism, especially in contrast to European aristocracies and monarchies, but who also very carefully avoided the more radical applications of republicanism. His friend Chauncey Wright enthused over "our Revolutionary politics" in contrast to the "irrationality of [the] political creeds of Europe," but the only kinds of "radical change" he supported were those that came through "our very organization." By contrast, he fretted over "the disturbances [of] the socialist element" (Wright to Charles Eliot Norton, August 10, 1870 and to Jane Norton, February 15, 1869, in *The Letters of Chauncey Wright* 192 and 144). Similarly, his friend Charles Sanders Peirce said of the British that "they are ruled almost solely by a class of people educated to govern, which certainly is contrary to our republican notions of the conditions of good government." While this much seems very "liberal," Peirce also harbored a great fear of radicals. He praised the American system of justified revolution followed by orderly representative democracy, but, he noted scoldingly, such is not unfortunately "the common course of Revolutionaries: They begin with noble aspirations, [but] they end in reckless violence." And despite his later distaste for the corporate culture, the young Peirce, whom James met with frequently in philosophical discussions, even had words of praise for the spirit of enterprise, calling his fellow "Yankees ... ever on the alert," and paraphrasing a Reformation maxim into a motto for capitalist businessmen: "Every Man the Maker of his own Fortune" ("Harvard Composition," c. 1859, Peirce papers). In the same way, in a

diary entry from his young adulthood, James himself spoke vehemently in critique of monarchical forms of government: "I confess I don't see ... why the person of the King need be an essential part of ... constitutional gov[ernmen]t founded on acknowledged 'rights.'" In irreverent American fashion, James felt a "quarrel with" monarchy's "hereditariness" and thought of the king as "an expensive ornament" who was "sooner or later in danger of losing favor with his people and being thrown overboard" (Diary, April 1, 1868, William James papers). James and his friends readily thought of the United States in terms of the classical republican opposition to monarchical and aristocratic polities.

In his early years, James was less likely to comment on American politics than on his general identification with his native culture, especially by contrast with the national traits of European countries, where he frequently travelled. With characteristic overstatement, he said that Paris "turned my plain Yankee stomach," and that despite its charms to American tourists and expatriates, Rome was just not "my country" and would never be the "city of my soul." In general, his travels in Europe did not make him hunger for the "hoary eld" of European history, but in fact, in his words, "reconciled me to what belongs to the present hour, business, factories, etc., etc., than anything I ever experienced" (James to Alice James, October 29 [1873] and to December 17, 1873, in *The Letters of William James* I:175, 177, 178). In one of his first published writings, he reviewed "A German-American Novel" by Hermann Grimm. James reports with genuine republican pride that "the hero is led to cast off the trammels of his aristocratic birth and breeding," and goes to America where "He feels himself rapidly loosened from his old moorings by the strong breath of action exhaled from American life." James points out the differences between Europe and America in classic republican terms: the old world is full of "examples of the inhumanity which may result from aristocratic convictions," while in the new world, "A living man is free owner of the world" ("A German-American Novel" 432-433).

When James did begin writing philosophy and psychology in the 1870's, he did not abandon his earlier assumptions about republican politics and American culture. In fact, they crop up as metaphors and points of illustration for his theoretical positions. In the early 1870's, he made a political parallel with a central tenet of his philosophical outlook when he declared that "Republicanism is of course the political corollary of free will in philosophy" (untitled note in *Nation* 94). He used this political label because it well suited his disgust for the forms of determinism that would deny a role for individual initiative. His first act of free will was to function as a self-starter in defiance of the tyranny of expecting the world to be pre-determined. He could declare so vehemently that he was for free will because he firmly believed that "there belongs to mind, from its birth upward, a spontaneity, a vote" ("Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence" [1878], *Collected Essays and Reviews* 67). This sentiment sometimes took on anti-establishment overtones, as shown, for example, in his interest in non-traditional psychologies and medical therapies: of them, he said there should no more be "an

aristocracy of remedies than of physicians." Much to the chagrin of his professional peers, he used the popular language of republicanism to equate expertise with aristocracy and to call for openness to a range of unorthodox approaches to physical ailments, spiritual phenomena, and psychological mysteries (James 1868).(Note 3)

The republican aspects of James's philosophical outlook came to full fruition toward the end of his life in his formulations of pragmatism and pluralism. A key element of his philosophy is its contrast with absolutism, whether determinist, idealist, or rationalist. They all suggested a dreaded "block universe" of restricted freedom and already completed activity (*A Pluralistic Universe* 140, 147, 148), while he emphasized the importance of openness to new experience. With pragmatism, James explained, "Teachers of the ultra-rationalist type would be frozen out, much as the courtier type is frozen out in republics" (*Pragmatism* 31). Paralleling his descriptions of pragmatism, James characterized his metaphysics of pluralism as "more like a federal republic than like [the] empire or kingdom" of monistic or absolutist systems (*A Pluralistic Universe* 145).

If "republicanism" is well-suited to James's philosophical formulations, then what place did "virtue" hold in his outlook? Although he almost never mentions the term, he does make frequent reference to the related word "morality"--in fact, it is central to his philosophical agenda. After his upbringing in a spiritually intense household and his education in the wake of the Darwinian Revolution, James struggled to reconcile religion and science. In particular, he puzzled over the question of how to achieve the hopes and convictions of religion along with the naturalistic accuracy of science. Sufficiently radical to accept the new learning, yet sufficiently conservative to wish to preserve traditional values, he did not abandon either side, but instead formulated a compromise position, based on an exalted role for morality, which included what he regarded as the best of religious and scientific perspectives.

Like religion, morality could serve as a guide to life; as in science, morality referred to action in this natural world; and socially, morality, like republican virtue, could direct citizen behavior responsibly. At this point, James ran into an age-old problem: how could merely human-derived morality command on-going respect and inspire continuous enthusiasm without a transcendent, divine sanction? On the American scene, the burgeoning strength of evangelical religion provided just a such divine authority for the hopes of revolutionary-era republicanism: in effect, the evangelical God was a *deus ex machina* for republican virtue, providing transcendent authority to persuade citizens and sustain them in virtuous behavior (Gribben and Hicks). However, the rising authority of science made James skeptical about orthodox churches and their traditional views of the divine. Instead, he hoped to sustain interest in morality through "the full and successful exercise of our moral energy. The life we then feel tingling through us vouches sufficiently for itself, and nothing tempts us to refer it to a higher source." This outlook, generated

by the dilemmas of science and religion, explains the passion of his life-long commitment to morality: as a young man, he called it the religion of "Mankind [creating] its own God or Providence," and later, it encouraged him to call pragmatism "humanism." His final metaphysical position, which he named "pluralism," was in the same moralistic line of thought because, as he said, "Any absolute moralism is a pluralism" (James to Thomas W. Ward, January 1868, in *The Letters of William James* I:132; James, "Introduction" 118). With moralistic pluralism, the world's story is neither fore-ordained to easy victory, nor doomed, but instead enlists everyone's efforts in the "world-drama." James felt optimistic that this moral focus would grow in influence, and he readily equated it with his scientific and political beliefs: "The vaster vistas which scientific evolutionism has opened, and the rising tide of social democratic ideals, have changed the type of our imagination, and the older monarchical theism is obsolete or obsolescent" (*A Pluralistic Universe* 27, 18). Earlier, in 1896, James urged students at Harvard's YMCA to adopt moralism, because, with it, the world "*feels* like a real fight," and "For such a half-wild, half-saved universe our nature is adapted" (*The Will to Believe* 55).

Despite the non-transcendental shortcomings of moralism, James had great hopes for his outlook, because it would not depress people with the inaccessibility of a distant God, and yet would allow them to tackle worldly evils as manageable on a human scale. Between his earliest attractions to moralism and his final philosophical formulations, James devoted most of his writing to a moralistic preaching about the conduct of life and everyday concerns. Even his *Principles of Psychology* is chock full of didactic advice about ways to apply the new field of scientific psychology personally and socially. So, for example, the chapter on habit tells of the personal and social benefits of good habits, and warns about the conservative constraints that such routines can impose on our lives. The chapter on emotions tells of how fears and depression can be dissipated with optimistic behavior.

In his books and essays, James was always popularly appealing in his style and in the content of his messages. He pitched his writings and lecturing to average middle-class people and their moral concerns, and his spirited commitment to his topics showed a hope to foster morality in the character of the average citizen. In parallel with the classic republican reliance on citizen virtue as the bedrock of republican society, James urged that morality become the core of his readers' and listeners' adoption of what he so frequently referred to as his "republican" (non-absolutist, non-idealist) approaches to philosophy. However, even with those similarities, James's moralism did not replicate republican virtue exactly. Whereas the older outlook emphasized the public role of virtuous citizenry, James emphasized the private behavior and beliefs of personal morality.

The privatized individualism of James's preaching for morality raises the question: is his philosophy of a piece with the cultural transformation of republicanism

toward marketplace capitalism, with its self-interest and individualism? Despite his well-known references to the "cash value" of truth claims (Cotkin 37-46), I answer this question with a qualified "no." The main source of my answer is, ironically, the very elitism that seemed to make James so much a part of mainstream nineteenth-century culture. Because the social elite that William James spoke to or wrote for was generally a well-educated and middle-class audience, he could talk about the pursuit of private morality while assuming a duty about the public welfare. These were people who felt a proprietary responsibility for the fate of the nation. His own elite "*bourgeois oblige*" was matched by a similar sense of social duty in a significant portion of his audience (Haber). In addition, when that audience, being generally of the same race, class and gender, pursued their own private moral education or personal interests, their disagreements would not probe an extensive realm of unspoken consensus. As he said in 1896 when delivering his "Will to Believe" essay to the Philosophical Clubs of two ivy league schools, "Here in this room, we all of us believe in molecules and the conservation of energy, in democracy and necessary progress, in Protestant Christianity and the duty of fighting for 'the doctrine of the immortal Monroe'" (*The Will to Believe* 18). As an elite intellectual addressing elites, James could assume unspoken boundaries that kept his audiences focused on the public welfare (at least for their own group). With so much simply understood, James could concentrate on the more market-style therapeutic job of preaching to persuade, to move people to act with greater and more improved morality.(Note 4) If he could convince his listeners and if they would adopt moral behavior, then the republic as a whole would function better in its public and private lives. Psychologically healthy individuals would be prepared to sacrifice short-term selfish and aggrandizing goals for long-term public benefits, and the public would gain the wisdom to reject such collective immoralities as corporate greed, social prejudice, political corruption and national imperialism.

Seeking an answer to why William James used the term "republicanism" with such frequency and zest takes us to the heart of his philosophical purposes and cultural roles. A background to his republican identification comprises his unabashed patriotism, his very representative distaste for aristocratic forms, and his keen sense of belonging to an intellectual elite. As a label, "republicanism" offered a clear metaphor for describing the passionate anti-absolutism and anti-determinism that permeated his theoretical formulations. However, his republicanism goes deeper still: in establishing morality as the element of personal character that would replace public-spirited virtue in a large, modern, and market-oriented society, James was at once very conservative and very radical. With Victorian severity, he asked his audiences to take moralism seriously, but he did so to such an extent that he hoped it would transform or even replace traditional religion. His position is not only between science and religion; it is also a compromise between the public spirit and social responsibility of Revolutionary-era classical republicanism, and the individual self-interestedness of modern marketplace approaches. In preaching the gospel of moralism, and in hoping to persuade people to live their personal and cultural lives with more moral concern, he used marketplace forms to achieve

classic republican ends. James's republicanism was not the eighteenth-century ideology unadorned, and similarly, his moralism was not republican virtue, but it was, to paraphrase the subtitle of *Pragmatism*, a new (and more liberal) use for some old (republican) ways of thinking.

Notes

1

On the comparison of the American republic with ancient models, see Rahe; and Sellers; on the rise of the Republican Party and republicanism, see Foner; on the material environment and republicanism, see Kasson; and Seelye; on changing social habits and republicanism, see Rorrabaugh; on women and republicanism, see Kerber; on workers and republicanism, see Wilentz; on the South and republicanism, see Oakes. Rodgers is skeptical about these applications of the term .

2

There have been two streams of scholarship on the changes in republicanism from the late eighteenth through the middle of the nineteenth century. Investigations of social and economic changes have emphasized the growth of the marketplace, which transformed or undercut republican principles: see Doerflinger; Sellers; Rothenberg; and Tagg who reinforces this theme of the emergence of an entrepreneurial republicanism. Similarly, cultural and intellectual historians have put a renewed emphasis on the liberal philosophy of John Locke in the ideas and practices of the early republic, thus producing a picture of republicanism in cultural contest with liberalism (Pangle; Dworetz; Brooke; Zuckert). Diggins argues that republicanism gradually disappeared by the progressive era. By contrast, Wood argues for the enduring significance of republicanism, in spite of changes. Kelley finds traces of republicanism constantly reappearing in persistent "cultural patterns." Rodgers, despite his later article, talks about the way republicanism has been, throughout American history, "an extraordinarily versatile tool for those outside the structures of power" (43).

3

In the 1890's, James took his unorthodox views of expertise to the Massachusetts legislature. He protested a bill that would have required the licensing of all medical standards, thus outlawing the practices of Christian Scientists and psychological healers. In 1898, he testified on the same issue and contributed to the defeat of a licensing bill. James's position shocked medical professionals, but he decided to "face their disapproval" and make a stand for the "civic virtue" of tolerance for non-elite approaches to medicine. See letter to John Jay Chapman in Perry; also see *The Letters of William James* (67-72) and Myers (430-431).

4

James even said of his *Will to Believe* essays that "it is just on this matter of the market-place that I think the utility of such essays as mine may turn." He proceeded to describe his hope for a Darwinian free market in religion with "the freest competition of the various faiths with one another" and "vying with each other" for our endorsing belief (8).

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