

## Teaching Guide for *William James: The Psychology of Possibility*

### RESOURCES:

1. **John J. McDermott** is University Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Humanities at Texas A&M University. He was the general editor of the Critical Edition of [The Correspondence of William James](#), published in twelve volumes by the University of Virginia Press. Additionally he has written widely on the work of John Dewey and Josiah Royce. Dr. McDermott's, [The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition](#) (1977, University of Chicago Press) is an invaluable collection of James's work.
2. We recommend two biographies of James. Robert D. Richardson's magnificent [William James in the Maelstrom of American Modernism: A Biography](#) (2006, Houghton Mifflin) places James in the intellectual currents of his times. The book won the Bancroft Prize for historical writing. Dr. Richardson is also the editor of [The Heart of William James](#) (2010, Harvard University Press), a collection of James's essays. The book is dedicated to John J. McDermott.  
Linda Simon's [Genuine Reality: A Life of William James](#) (1998, Harcourt Brace) is briefer and excellent introduction to the man and his work.
3. **The William James Society** [www.wjsociety.org](http://www.wjsociety.org) has regular meetings and its website offers many materials, including reviews of current work on James.
4. The website <http://www.des.emory.edu/mfp/james.html> is a wonderful resource for anyone interested in James. It combines biographical materials, including photographs, commentary on James and many of James's writings. It was originally put together by the late Frank Pajares, who incidentally did a parallel website for Albert Bandura <http://des.emory.edu/mfp/self-efficacy.html#bandura>.
5. The **Houghton Library at Harvard** houses the James family archives. In honor of the centennial of William James's death, it put on an exhibit, "Life is in the Transitions," whose attractive and informative website hopefully will remain available. <http://hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/houghton/exhibits/james/>
6. Louis Menand's [The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America](#) (2001 Farrar, Straus and Giroux) beautifully chronicles the connections between William James and his friends; Chauncey Wright, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

and Charles Peirce, and the later relationship with John Dewey that produced the very American philosophical stance of pragmatism.

7. Another view of the James family was captured by Jean Strouse in her Alice James: A Biography (1980.) The book makes the case that this sister was probably as brilliant as her older brothers but because of the times was never able to use her talents in a public way. She died unmarried at 42, when William was 50. Her diaries have been published to critical acclaim.
8. The two younger James brothers, Garth Wilkinson (Wilky) James and Robertson (Bob) James both served in the Civil War, unlike William or Henry. Both served in largely black regiments: Wilky served with the famous Afro-American regiment, 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts under the command of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. It is memorialized with a famous monument in the Boston Commons and the 1989 Academy Award film, *Glory*, featuring Matthew Broderick and Denzel Washington. Wilky was badly wounded at the battle of Fort Wagner, South Carolina in 1863 from which he recovered. After several unsuccessful business ventures, he died at age 42, a year after his parents' deaths.  
Bob was made a captain in his regiment at age 19 but became an alcoholic. He had several stays at sanitariums for treatment during his middle age. He died a month before William, leaving Henry as the only surviving sibling. It could be argued that both Bob and Wilkie suffered post-traumatic stress disorders that were factors in their subsequent troubled lives. And it could also be posited that some of William's suicidal depression was caused by his avoidance of participation in the Civil War.
9. Henry James, Jr. lived five and a half years after William's death, dying close to his 73 birthday in London under the care of William's widow. His novels continue to be read widely and have been adapted over the years into several films. Helena Bonham Carter won an Academy Award nomination for her part in "Wings of a Dove," for instance. Leon Edel over the course of 1953-1972 wrote a five volume biography of Henry James which won many literary awards.
10. Alice Gibbens James, William's widow, lived the longest of the family, dying in 1922. She seems to have been a quiet, stable presence in the family. There is a biography of her too: Susan Gunter's: Alice in Jamesland: The Story of Alice Howe Gibbens James (2009, University of Nebraska Press.)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

11. **Psychology** is a very wide discipline. The American Psychological Association has fifty four divisions <http://www.apa.org/about/division/index.aspx>, a large proportion of which are involved with topics that James brought up in his Principles of Psychology, available in its entirety on the Parajes/Emory website. (<http://www.des.emory.edu/mfp/james.html>)  
The twenty eight chapter headings of Principles will give students an idea of the scope of the work and hopefully some might dip into some of the chapters.
12. **Habit** as “the flywheel of society.” Flywheels which store rotational energy are very much still in use on the crankshaft of cars and even in satellites. It is characteristic of James to use a contemporary example in the midst of the 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial revolution. Elicit other examples of how habitual actions underlie current lives, both individual and societal. And how habits can interfere with life as well, for instance, too frequent checking of cell phones for messages?
13. **Plasticity** is a term very much in vogue with neuroscientists to describe the ability of certain brain systems to adapt, or not, to environmental inputs. The Davidson Films production “*Human Brain Development: Nature and Nurture*” with Helen Neville describes this variability in neuroplasticity and how it impacts development, especially of language.
14. **Routines** develop, of course, from repeated actions done together, ranging from combining morning coffee and newspaper (or internet) perusal to the sophisticated check lists involved in landing a plane. What are both the benefits and hazards of routines in a classroom environment, for instance?
15. **Habituation**, like most of James’s formulations, cannot be classified as “good” or “bad” but can be either or both at the same time. We are glad that most of us are habituated to a daily shower but also can view compulsive hand-washing, let alone compulsive drinking of alcohol, as detrimental.
16. **Stream of consciousness** is probably the best known of James’s concepts. (The stream we used to illustrate this section actually is very near James’s Chocorua home and it would be good to think it was inspirational to him in writing this section. However, he didn’t buy the Chocorua house until 1886

and wrote the basis of chapter two years before that.) Does the stream analogy resonate with students?

17. **Consciousness is personal.** We have unique histories that color all our experiencing. The recovering alcoholic relates his own story of his first attempts to become sober. Each student has his/her own tale of the first day of classes at your institution, for instance, different “takes” on basically the same experience.
18. **Consciousness has a fringe and focus.** Professor McDermott emphasizes the fringe elements of consciousness, feeling them often overlooked. Many students will have stories of hunches, coincidences, as well as the annoying search for a right word as illustrated in the film. There are also many contemporary films and television stories about on-going relationships between the dead and living. And at the time of the release of this film there was much controversy about the work of Daryl Rem’s work on ESP.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/06/science/06esp.html>
19. **Consciousness includes the apprehension of relationships.** James was quoted as saying that “we ought to say a feeling of and, a feeling of if, a feeling of by, quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold.” James afforded what he called **relations**: prepositions, conjunctions and personal associations equal importance to what he called **elements**: the nouns and adjectives we use to describe things. We cannot think of an object in a kitchen, for instance, without its relationship in space to other objects and its relationship to our individual experience. Our thoughts are always enmeshed in our own **relational fabric**. It would be interesting to have students write a paragraph describing a photograph and relating a personal association to it. Inevitably there will be examples of both relations and elements in their paragraph. There are many available images at <http://commons.wikimedia.org>
20. **Consciousness is selective.** Even (or especially?) in our multitasking environment, we are always selecting inputs for our attention and ignoring others. There are some clever visuals that make this point. For instance the gorilla at the basketball game  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo> . Our sensory perception cannot reflect what is out there, as is demonstrated in the Davidson Films production Making Sense of Sensory Perception and its consultant’s interactive website, [www.purveslab.com](http://www.purveslab.com).

21. **Consciousness deals with inner states and external realities.** Although we cannot perceive what is out there, there is a reality that we cannot ignore. (The examples used in this film are a clay pot with too thin a lip that crumbles and mention of drunk drivers who cause accidents.) We make decisions based not just on practical realities but on feelings and hunches. And our decisions, our “willing,” have consequences. Discussion here might be about the feelings and practical issues that lead students chose to attend your institution instead of another and the effect that decision has had on their educations and wider lives.
22. **Will.** This aspect of human experience was for years somewhat overlooked by both the behaviorist and psychoanalytic strains of psychology. The work of Albert Bandura and his work on “self efficacy,” builds on Jamesian theory. (Yes, Davidson Films has a film on that too “*Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory: An Introduction.*”) In this section, the James film takes on alcoholism as an example of the role will makes in recovery from addictions.
23. **Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature.** James was always interested in the wide scope of human experience and found spirituality a good arena to explore its enormous range. Currently there are several popular books that seek to prove or disprove the existence/influence of a higher power on human lives. James’s book surprisingly is still very popular with both advocates of spiritual experience and those skeptical about it. In Varieties James states that the existence of “God” cannot be neither proven nor disproven by science or logic. But he chronicles the importance religious faith has in individual lives, especially for the “twice born.” There are numerous commentaries on Varieties on the web.

## MISCELLANEOUS OBSERVATIONS

24. Note the shift in the ships that carried James from the United States to Europe and back. We have used images of the actual ships we refer to which start as steam-aided sailing vessels and end as a quite modern liner. James lived during a time of rapid industrialization. The last manuscript shown in the film was edited by James from a typewritten document.
25. The psychological labs at Harvard that James sponsored were run by the German born **Hugo Munsterberg** (1863-1916.) There is an interesting website about this man and his science at <http://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/en/news/features/feature3>.

26. **Sigmund Freud's** (1856-1939) only trip to the United States was to Clark University in September, 1909. James was very unwell at the time but made the journey to see Freud. James was the first American to review a paper by Freud, in 1894. Accompanying James to the rail station for his return, Freud witnessed James's cardiac distress and wrote later, "I have always wished that I could be as fearless as he was in the face of approaching death."
27. The image of a hysterical patient being supported by a doctor is of **Jean-Marie Charcot** (1825-1893) who taught Freud. James disagreed with Charcot's conception of susceptibility to hypnosis as a symptom of hysteria. James saw hypnosis as having positive value for investigation of mental states and treatments.
28. **Wilhelm Wundt** (1832-1920) is commonly regarded as the founder of experimental psychology with his labs in Leipzig and later in Heidelberg. During James's depressive search for his own career, he visited Heidelberg with the intention of studying there but soon left. James, however, continued to follow Wundt's work and was inspired by it to start the Harvard psychological lab.
29. **Pierre Janet** (1859-1947) is considered by some as the true founder of psychoanalysis, instead of Freud, in that he early on linked mental illness to earlier emotional trauma. James was very taken with Janet's work, especially that describing "hidden selves."
30. **Charles Peirce** (1839-1914) is cited as the founder of the philosophical stance, "Pragmatism." A brilliant man who worked in the hard sciences and mathematics as well as philosophy, he had lifelong emotional problems that affected his ability to earn an income. James raised money for him in his later life. **Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.** (1841-1935) served from 1902 to 1932 on the Supreme Court. **Chauncey Wright** (1830-1875) was a Socrates type figure in Cambridge, MA to young thinkers. Older than James, Holmes or Peirce, his thinking had profound influences on them as members of the **Metaphysical Club** in the 1870's.
31. **Gertrude Stein**, the iconic novelist (1874-1946), was permitted by James to attend Harvard's normally all male classes. **W.E.B. Dubois**, intellectual and controversial Civil Rights figure (1868-1963), was several times invited to the James home during his Harvard years. Dubois credited James with turning him from purely academic philosophy to "realist pragmatism." James criticized

the war-mongering of **Theodore Roosevelt**, (1858-1919) that was a factor in starting the Spanish-American War.

32. **James-Lange theory of emotional arousal.** There was not room in this film to discuss this, the theory developed independently by James and **Carl Lange**. It proposes that physiological reactions to an event trigger the subsequent emotional ones. **Walter Cannon's** work refuted this. This is fully discussed in the Davidson film "*The Emotional Brain: An Introduction to Affective Neuroscience*," with Brian Knutson, Ph.D. Very recent research has given some new credibility to aspects of the James-Lange conception.