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ABSTRACT

“A ‘hidden James’: on some unpublished data concerning the philosopher’s reflections in the privacy of his own study

The Houghton library at Harvard University houses an important quantity of unpublished data related to the works of William James. These various secondary sources such as James’s personal annotated library, numerous work notes, manuscripts and letters can be considered objective clues regarding the philosopher’s life-long personal preoccupations and reflections. So, when digging into this material, one is astonished, if not startled, to stumble upon a very important quantity of data related to somewhat heterodox topics from a rationalistic point of view. The Houghton reader will thus find a staggering amount of documents on the subjects of hypnosis, hallucinations or mediums in trance and the like. S/he will find many letters from “healers” or from anonymous drug-experimenters relating their private experiences. Finally, s/he will also find a huge collection of pamphlets on religious and mystical experiences. This raw material naturally leads to the question: what is at stake concerning James’s life-long attraction to such “exceptional mental states”?

Our argument is that a minute study of the Houghton material allows us to rebuild a coherent “research program” which is not *prima facie* clearly visible in James’s published writings. In this respect, the key document supporting this view is a handwritten list of a dozen booklets entitled by his wife “valuable and highly prized by WJ”. This list helps to show how, from the beginning of his scientific career, James undertook systematic experimentation on altered states of consciousness. The very reasons for such research must be connected with an issue which is at the core of James’s intellectual life: namely, the presence in his thinking of a pervading religious feeling, vague enough but intellectually worrying, which can be expressed through the simple idea that there is possibly something “out there”, beyond apparent reality. This elementary religious feeling, constantly at work, makes him follow radical lines of experimentation: that of looking, in the directions of many phenomena, for possible experimental contacts with “higher forms of experience”.

The aims of this paper would be: first, to present the main steps of James’ research program; then to question its legitimacy from the point of view of natural sciences; and, finally, to show how such a program must be considered an essential source for understanding James’s late philosophy, widely known as “radical empiricism”. To put the matter in a nutshell, this paper would try to point out what is probably one of the essential teachings in James’s thinking: how his religious elementary feeling allied with the most rigorous sense of scientific spirit led him to debunk certain “fallacies” and “twists” in what he called “ordinary scientific reasoning”. In this respect, he tried to clear the path to a more comprehensive science which he recommends to be *radically* empiricist.