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“Knowledge about a thing is not the thing itself,” claims William James in his book *Varieties of Religious Experience* and in doing so captures succinctly his empirical approach to the study of religion (James 369). He begins his book, which was given in the form of twenty lectures at the University in Edinburgh in 1901 and 1902, by setting up two orders of possible inquiry to assess religion. Arthur Kleinman in his article “‘Everything That Really Matters’: Social Suffering, Subjectivity, and the Remaking of Human Experience in a Disordering World,” alludes to these two approaches, in his own words, as the opposing thrusts of experience and meaning-making. James says the first is an existential judgement, i.e. what are the religious propensities and what is the nature of it, while the second is a spiritual judgement, i.e. what is their philosophic significance (James 8). James assuages his audience that his use of existential judgement, which will involve biological and psychological recourse, does not immediately retract from religion’s spiritual significance.[[1]](#footnote-0) Experience forms the basis of James’ work and yet, by the end of his lectures he seems to tend towards, or explicitly call upon, philosophic reflection. One of his ultimate goals, as he states in Lecture 18, is to search for what methods we can use to measure if a religious experience involves the perception of something true. He will fall back on pragmatism to this aim, but this goal itself- of the truth of the “more”- seems to me to seek a spiritual judgement. Kleinman also claims to turn towards experience to explore the place of suffering in human life, yet meaning-making as well is found in his subjects own words and in his analysis of them.

I think the question turns towards what the risks are in meaning-making and concurrently how one avoids getting lost in the individual nature of experience. This issue is raised by James in his discussion of Philosophy. Although he hopes his work will contribute to a Science of Religions, he sees science alone as too abstract and hollow to speak to the texture of lived religion. In each of our experience of consciousness, he notes, there is both the subjective and objective. A study of religion must contend with both. Ultimately, the hypothesis he puts forth for “an impartial science of religion” might offer a common body of doctrine by establishing a nucleus of inquiry and then letting the individual experiences unfold as unique, legitimate truths. Both James and Kleinman are fearful of the sterilising and hegemonic effects of science and capitalism on the rich experience of religious life. James acknowledges the vulnerability of his approach to fault and criticism yet he fears science has no such awareness. Kleinman fears that the medical and capitalist projects have lost the ability to validate suffering and to recognize that it may be a source of remoralization. I wonder what the delicate balance of privileging experience and yet employing scientific methods in its study might look like and whether those are the best tools at our disposal.

In studying religious experience, James first lays the groundwork for what the breadth of such a project could entail. Religion is a loose term for James and one that he is interested in both defining and expanding. The first delineation is between institutional religion and personal religious experience. He is not interested in religion in so far as it is comprised of rituals, worship and organization. This, he believes, is the dry evolution of the original divine communion of its founder. He will define religion in this context as “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” (James 27). However, the majority, if not all, of James examples are of people who frame themselves and their experience within an institutional religious context. This is something that James doesn’t address as much as I would like since he seems to want to transcend or find precedent for experience over institution. Yet, all of his subjects are situated within specific institutional contexts which surely shape not only their experience but also their subconscious from which James claims such experiences arise.

The mind-cure movement is the one salient example that James brings of the usefulness of certain mental states, primarily happiness or healthy-mindedness, which can be utilized outside of a specific religious context. James brings this movement to primarily show the empirical good, the usefulness, of positive thinking and self-nullification before a higher power. A point he raises throughout the book is that religion is to be judged by its “fruits”, meaning plainly how the religious experience changes the subject. He enumerates common results such as piety, charity, poverty, asceticism and saintliness. I think these traits, however, are firmly rooted in an institutional value system. In Judaism, for example, poverty is not necessarily a virtue. Wealth is considered an equally challenging spiritual state. Although James includes some example from Buddhism and Islam in his talks it is worth noting he is a Christian speaking among Christians and thinking about how that might structure his analysis.

In the lecture about the Value of Saintliness, James turns to how these fruits are to be judged. He prefaces the lecture by saying we must first judge God’s reality for if we presume there is no God then we set up a theology of our own which cannot account for the possible divine effects or value of man’s actions. I think this speaks to the need to evaluate people’s experience in part from within their own tradition and using their own logic. Without such knowledge or context the researcher will no doubt be reflecting their experience through his or her own prism of value. However, ultimately James says he will use as his guide common sense prejudices and instincts. It is likely that every scholar at some point uses their own sensibilities and terms to “judge” their subjects. Certainly, the academic project is unfamiliar to many people outside of it and has its own internal logic and values. It is interesting that James values the mystic’s fruits so long as they are balanced and useful for others. He describes the nun who was so in love with God she would have perished if not for the kindly schoolgirls who cared for her. If there not a value perhaps in personal attainment and devotion, however?

To return to Kleinman’s article, he offers an interesting perspective on experience, as it relates to the body, due to his background in medical anthropology: My purpose, then, is to call attention to a form of being-in-the-world that insists that experience is both within and without the boundary of the body-self, crossing back and forth as if that boundary were permeable. Enculturation of persons into society accompanies the socialization of both their physiologies and their selves (Kleinman 326). In much of James work, particularly in the mind-cure lecture, we see a relationship between the flight of the psyche into higher consciousness or even a trained positive mental state with somatic change. For Kleinman, this occurs at the intersection of trauma and suffering and their bodily, psychological and social consequences. James perhaps also uses this framework in the usefulness of religious experience. For example, in whether an experience conditions a person’s body to be useful, for example in overcoming addiction to alcohol or tobacco, or useless when such an experience leads to fanatical bodily affliction or stupefaction. The very individuation of suffering and religious experience I think call attention to it happening in and to body and could raises questions as to what we define as the limits of the self. Certainly, James delight at the subconscious as a place to locate religious experience is part of the desire to plant it firmly some ‘place’ in the body.

Like my fellow blogger, I was also intrigued by one of James final statements that, “we and God have business with each other; and in opening ourselves to his influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled” (James 391). There is a certain buoyancy in James work that may be due to the nature of his own faith or that of his audience, but it allows genuine religious experience to exist alongside academic study in a way that may benefit them both.

1. The role of James’ audience on his talks would be interesting to investigate since he often assumes they have religious convictions and he does not want to upset those too greatly. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)