

TO DIVE BACK IN THE FLUX OF LIFE: WILLIAM
JAMES'S CRITIQUE OF INTELLECTUALISM

On the principle of going behind the conceptual function
altogether, however, and looking into more primitive flux
of the sensational life for reality's true shape,
a way is open to us ...

(William James)

WHAT DO THEY MEAN BY INTELLECTUALISM?

William James and his works can inspire and at the same time confuse every inquisitive mind. His talent to grasp and expand (both in the scholarly and the edifying manner) the most essential ideas in the psychology, philosophy, theology, sociology and natural sciences of his time can be a source of inspiration. However, he doesn't come forward as an apologist or a critic of these insights but, instead, he uses different ideas as building blocks to construct his personal universe. Therefore, in studying W. James it is worth to pay attention not only to direct messages and clearly stated references but also to subtexts, indirect and associative links, and patterns, pronounced and hidden influences upon his thought. The latter factor especially puts him within the realm of different scholarly fields and traditions even though he doesn't actually belong to those. Cornel West in his book *The American Evasion of Philosophy. A Genealogy of Pragmatism* characterizes James's predicament as follows:

James is not a traditional philosopher by either temperament or training. Rather he is a cultural critic trained in medicine, fascinated with the arts, imbued with a scientific conscience, and attracted to religion. This unique combination of skills, talent, and interests leads him onto philosophical terrain where he leaps – quickly and often unsatisfactory but as it suits his fancy – from one major issue to another.¹

So in James's texts we find repeated references to Charles Sander Pierce, Josiah Royce, Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud and other major figures on the intellectual scene of the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning

of the twentieth century. Thus William James could be viewed as a marginal figure moving freely within different constellations. This, in turn, leads to interpretative difficulties: psychologists regard him as a psychologist; theologians, as a religious student; and philosophers, as a forerunner of the classical pragmatism and a source of inspiration for the contemporary neo-pragmatism. The attitude towards James's heritage therefore is highly selective; on the basis of different works, or fragments within these works, scholars come to quite opposite conclusions. For example, neo-pragmatists are fascinated by James's rhetorical strategies, descriptive models, poetics of experience, and most of all by his conception of truth (truth is being made rather than discovered). At the same time, phenomenologists dwell upon James's notions of the intentional structure of consciousness, the stream of consciousness, the orders of reality, and field theory embedded in his philosophy of radical empiricism. And paradoxically enough, both the contemporary pragmatists and the phenomenologists take up the same strand in James's thought, namely his critique of intellectualism, and develop it in rather different directions according to their fundamental theoretical assumptions. If neo-pragmatists tend to see their vocation as "the conversation of mankind" (using James's terminology), as a series of temporary, fleeting agreements on what is to be regarded as a genuine philosophical problem at the moment, phenomenologists aim at the description of the phenomenon of experience *per se*. If the former emphasize experience's discursive (experience is meaningful only if it is verbally expressed) or poetical (contemporary variation of the Ralph Waldo Emerson's notion of self-reliance), the latter hold on to James's conceptions of intentionality, anti-psychologism, fringe of consciousness, and temporality of experience. This means that from the same springboard (i. e. the theory of radical empiricism) there is a leap in different directions. But what kind of phenomenon does James himself describe as intellectualism? In the sixth chapter of *A Pluralistic Universe* entitled "Bergson and His Critique of Intellectualism" James states,

The ruling traditions in philosophy has always been the Platonic and Aristotelian belief that fixity is nobler and worthier thing than change. Reality must be one and unalterable. Concepts, being themselves fixities, agree best with this fixed nature of truth, so that for any knowledge of ours to be quite true it must be knowledge by universal concepts rather than by particular experiences, for these notoriously are mutable and corruptible. This is the tradition known as rationalism in philosophy, and what I have called intellectualism is only the extreme application of it.²

In other words, the conceptual analysis takes life in its frozen state as a series of captured moments. The conceptual method deals with that part of the experience that has already been processed, purified, and frozen, in this sense it is always retrospection, and our concepts are retrospective instruments.