Introduction

Thinking of Philosophy

Readers of Henry and William James have often observed that while Henry wrote novels like a psychologist, William wrote psychology like a novelist. Numerous critics have studied the influence of William’s professional disciplines, psychology and philosophy, on the fictional writings of his brother Henry. While I am following these critics in attending to Henry James’ broad concern with depicting consciousness, I am focusing more narrowly on his specific but no less persistent concern with the distinction between thought and ideas. T. S. Eliot famously described Henry James as a man with “a mind so fine that no idea could violate it,” and while this description is occasionally quoted, it has never been adequately explained, let alone tested. None of the scholars who takes up the topic of James’ indebtedness to philosophy and psychology has had much to say about Eliot’s observation or about his distinction between thought and idea, although it was an important (if unexpressed) concern for Henry James as well as for this most discerning critic. Most critics who respond to Eliot’s comment, in fact, have typically misunderstood it as an insult. But the statement was high if eccentric praise from Eliot, whose graduate work was in philosophy and whose distinction between “ideas” and “thought” requires careful attention to elucidate properly. Here is Eliot’s comment in context:

James’ critical genius comes out most tellingly in his mastery over, his baffling escape from, Ideas; a mastery and an escape which are perhaps the last test of a superior intelligence. He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it . . . . In England, ideas run wild and pasture on the emotions; instead of thinking with our feelings (a very different thing) we corrupt our feelings with ideas; we produce the public, the
political, the emotional idea, evading sensation and thought. . . .

Mr. Chesterton’s brain swarms with ideas; I see no evidence that it thinks. James in his novels is like the best French critics in maintaining a point of view, a view-point untouched by the parasite idea. He is the most intelligent man of his generation. (The Little Review 1918)

For Eliot, the practice of “thinking with our feelings” was altogether too rare; the “parasite idea” was too often allowed to corrupt or occlude “sensation and thought.”

What did Eliot mean by this distinction between thought and ideas, and would it be wrongheaded to turn to philosophy to discover the clue not only to Eliot’s criticism but also to James’ depictions of consciousness? Henry James, unlike T. S. Eliot, never studied philosophy, although he was an avid and eclectic reader who enthusiastically read most of his brother William’s writings. He never studied the tradition of “ideas” in Western philosophy—a tradition that begins with Plato’s forms and assumes a number of very different incarnations, as diverse as the thing that evolves from “impressions” in empiricist thought and the substance of all matter in Hegel’s system of world history. We do know, however, that some of this tradition made its way into his consciousness, not only as an adult when he was reading his brother’s published works on philosophy and psychology, but still earlier when he was a young man growing up in Cambridge and hearing the debates about idealism that transpired in that intellectual community.

Henry James’ brother William came to hate the idealism that both boys learned at their father’s knee. For William James, writing later in Pragmatism, abstract ideas were scarcely distinguishable from ideology, the use of an abstract principle that tends to override all contradictory empirical evidence. William derided such abstractions—what he called “rationalism”—in his groundbreaking philosophical study. Rationalism, he claimed, “lose[s] contact with the concrete parts of life” (13), forcing all experience into a single model of truth. To be sure, the philosopher recognized the allure of this model. Writing in A Pluralistic Universe, he observed that philosophers “have substituted economical and orderly conceptions for the first sensible tangle [of experience]; and whether these were morally elevated or only intellectually neat, they were at any rate always aesthetically pure and definite, and aimed at ascribing to the world something clean and intellectual in the way of inner structure” (45). In contrast, the “pluralistic empiricism” that James preferred, he admitted, “offers but a sorry appearance. It is a turbid,