

and **WITTGENSTEIN** **ILLIAM JAMES**

Russell B. Goodman

CAMBRIDGE

This page intentionally left blank

Wittgenstein and William James

In this study, Russell Goodman explores Wittgenstein's long engagement with the work of the pragmatist William James. He argues that James exerted a distinctive and pervasive positive influence on Wittgenstein's thought. The book details the commitments of these two philosophers to concrete human experience, the priority of practice over intellect, and the importance of religion in understanding human life.

Tracing in detail what Wittgenstein learned from *The Principles of Psychology* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the author provides considerable support for Wittgenstein's claim that he is saying "something that sounds like pragmatism." Goodman finds that Wittgenstein displays a pragmatist philosophical persona – attuned to the human interests served by our theorizing, flexible enough to move on without having every question answered.

This provocative account of the convergence in thinking of two major philosophers usually seen as members of discrete traditions will be welcomed by students of Wittgenstein, William James, pragmatism, and the history of twentieth-century philosophy.

Russell B. Goodman is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of New Mexico.

Wittgenstein and William James

RUSSELL B. GOODMAN

University of New Mexico



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Russell B. Goodman 2004

First published in printed format 2002

ISBN 0-511-03015-0 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN 0-521-81315-8 hardback

For Anne

“The books of all the great philosophers are like so many men. Our sense of an essential personal flavor in each one of them, typical but indescribable, is the finest fruit of our own accomplished philosophic education.”

William James (P, 24)

“The difficulty is to know one’s way about among the concepts of ‘psychological phenomena’. . . . one has got to master the kinships and differences of the concepts. As someone is master of the transition from any key to any other one, modulates from one to the other.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein (RPP, 1054)

“Concepts lead us to make investigations; are the expression of our interest, and direct our interest.”

Wittgenstein (PI, 570)

“. . . the world can be handled according to many systems of ideas, and is so handled by different men, and will each time give some characteristic kind of profit, for which he cares, to the handler, while at the same time some other kind of profit has to be omitted or postponed. . . . science and . . . religion are both of them genuine keys for unlocking the world’s treasure-house to him who can use either of them practically.”

William James (VRE, 116)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	1
1 Varieties of Pragmatic Experience	11
2 Wittgenstein and <i>The Varieties of Religious Experience</i>	36
3 Wittgenstein and <i>The Principles of Psychology</i> : An Introduction	60
4 What Is It Like to Be a Human Being?	89
5 Language and Meaning	119
6 Pragmatism Reconsidered	150
<i>Coda</i>	172
<i>Notes</i>	181
<i>Index</i>	207

Preface

I first began to think about James and Wittgenstein while working through the *Wittgenstein Workbook* published in 1970 by Christopher Coope, Peter Geach, Timothy Potts, and Roger White.¹ Near the end of this slim but useful volume is a one-page list of parallel passages from James's *The Principles of Psychology* and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Over the years, as I discussed the readings from this list in seminars, I learned to free myself from the view of the relationship between Wittgenstein and James that was enunciated by the authors of the *Workbook* – and many others. For according to this “received view,” James was important for Wittgenstein primarily because he committed, in a clear, exemplary manner, fundamental errors in the philosophy of mind.² I found that although Wittgenstein did find such errors in *The Principles of Psychology*, he loved William James, both as a personality in his own writings and as a philosopher. I learned that *The Principles* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* exerted a vast *positive* influence on Wittgenstein's philosophy, early and late.

In 1990, on a trip to Cambridge sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, I discussed Wittgenstein and James with Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe, both of whom attended Wittgenstein's classes in the late 1940s. Wittgenstein considered using James's *Principles* as a text for these classes, and the published notes by his students, including Geach, show that it was a main object of study. When I asked Professor Anscombe if Wittgenstein had ever referred to other texts of James in his lectures or conversations, particularly

Pragmatism, she uttered a statement that haunted me for years: not only had Wittgenstein not read *Pragmatism*, she told me vehemently; but if he *had* read it, he would have hated it.

The *Wittgenstein Workbook* makes no mention of Wittgenstein's ambiguous relation to pragmatism. This topic was first treated at some length in Robin Haack's 1982 paper "Wittgenstein and Pragmatism."³ It was raised in a previous paper, "Must We Mean What We Say?" (1958), by Stanley Cavell, whose remarks about pragmatism I consider in Chapters 1 and 6. However, the earliest commentator on Wittgenstein's relation to pragmatism is Wittgenstein himself. Twice in writings from the last four years of his life he considers, uneasily, his own relation to pragmatism. I begin with one of these occasions in Chapter 1, and I consider the second in Chapter 6. These chapters on pragmatism frame the book's interior chapters on Wittgenstein's readings of James's *Principles of Psychology* and *Varieties of Religious Experience*. The question of Wittgenstein's pragmatism cannot be adequately considered without an assessment of his relationship to James; and an assessment of his relation to James requires an assessment of his relation to pragmatism.

I am especially indebted to William C. Dowling and Richard Gale for advice and commentary on the manuscript of *Wittgenstein and William James*. I also received helpful comments from Steven Affeldt, Thomas Alexander, Tom Burke, John Bussanich, Stanley Cavell, James Conant, Linda Dowling, David Dunaway, Timothy Gould, Susan Haack, Barbara Hannan, Larry Hickman, Christopher Hookway, Alasdair MacIntyre, John McDermott, Brian McGuinness, David Owen, Fred Schueler, Ken Stickers, Ellen Suckiel, Sergio Tenenbaum, Bruce Wilshire, Aladdin Yaqūb, and readers for Cambridge University Press. The Department of Philosophy and the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of New Mexico provided unstinting support for my research, including a sabbatical leave, for which I would particularly like to thank Dean William C. Gordon and Dean Michael Fischer. Thanks also to audiences at sessions of the American Philosophical Association, Pacific and Central Divisions, and the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, where I presented parts of the book; and to audiences at the Universities of Hertford, Sheffield, Southampton, and Pennsylvania. Thanks to Donna Rivera and Gabriel Camacho for checking citations.

As always, my children, Elizabeth and Jacob, contributed in untold ways to my writing. I dedicate this book to their mother – my wife, friend, and companion, Anne Doughty Goodman.

Russell B. Goodman
Corrales, New Mexico

Abbreviations

Works by Ludwig Wittgenstein

- PI *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. New York: Macmillan, 1958. **Unless otherwise indicated, all references are to the numbered sections.**
- TLP *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961. **All references are to the numbered sections.**
- BB *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964.
- Z *Zettel*. Eds. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967. **All references are to the numbered sections.**
- N *Notebooks 1914–1916*. Eds. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969.
- OC *On Certainty*. Eds. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright. Trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969. **All references are to the numbered sections.**
- RPP *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. 1*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. **All references are to the numbered sections.**
- CV *Culture and Value*. Ed. G. H. von Wright. Trans. Peter Winch. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

L *Wittgenstein's Lectures on Philosophical Psychology 1946–7*. Ed. P. T. Geach. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

LE "A Lecture on Ethics," *Philosophical Occasions*. Eds. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann. Indianapolis, IN, and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993: 36–44.

The numbers following the Wittgenstein abbreviations are either section numbers (e.g., TLP, 6.32) or page numbers (e.g., LE, 79).

Works by William James

P *Pragmatism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.

PP *The Principles of Psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.

VRE *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in *Writings 1902–1910*. New York: Library of America, 1987.

All of the numbers following the James abbreviations are page numbers (e.g., PP, 472).

Introduction

This book concerns two extraordinary men who shaped twentieth-century philosophy: William James (1842–1910) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). James is the author of the thousand-page masterpiece, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), a rich blend of philosophy, psychology, and personal reflection that has given us such ideas as “the stream of thought,” and the baby’s impression of the world “as one great blooming, buzzing confusion” (PP, 462). Ranging from the functions of the brain to multiple personalities, from intellect to will, to our general sense of reality, James’s *Principles* is more than the first great psychology text. It contains seeds of pragmatism and phenomenology, and influenced thinkers as diverse as Edmund Husserl, Bertrand Russell, and John Dewey. It is, as Jacques Barzun has written, “an American masterpiece which, quite like *Moby Dick*, ought to be read from beginning to end at least once by every person professing to be educated.”¹

James’s pioneering survey of religious psychology, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), introduced such terms as “the divided self” and “the sick soul,” and an account of religion’s significance in terms of its “fruits for life.” James’s religious concerns are also evident in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897), *Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine* (1898), and *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909). James oscillated between thinking that a “study in human nature” such as *Varieties* could contribute to a “Science of Religion” and the belief that religious experience involved an

altogether supernatural domain, somehow inaccessible to science but accessible to the individual human subject.

James made some of his most important philosophical contributions in the last decade of his life, even as he labored unsuccessfully to complete a systematic philosophy. In a burst of writing in 1904–5 (collected in *Essays in Radical Empiricism* [1912]) he set out the metaphysical view most commonly known as “neutral monism,” according to which there is one fundamental “stuff” that is neither material nor mental. He also published *Pragmatism* (1907), the definitive statement of a set of views that occur throughout his writings.

Wittgenstein’s work is at the center of twentieth-century analytic philosophy in at least three of its phases: logical positivism, “ordinary language philosophy,” and contemporary philosophical psychology. His *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) offers a breathtakingly comprehensive and oracular account of language, logic, ethics, aesthetics, and philosophy – in a mere seventy-two pages. Wittgenstein holds that although everyday language is in perfect logical order (TLP, 5.5563), it nevertheless conceals its real form. The task of the book is not only to uncover that form or permeating structure but to argue for its necessity. For at the heart of the *Tractatus* is a transcendental argument: that without eternal, objective, and definite “senses” with perfectly precise relations to one another, language that succeeds in saying something could not exist. From this argument flows Wittgenstein’s metaphysics of objects, states of affairs, and logic as representing “the scaffolding of the world” (TLP, 6.124).

Although most of the sentences in the *Tractatus* concern logic and language, Wittgenstein wrote that the point of the book was “an ethical one”:

My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one. My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the *ONLY rigorous* way of drawing those limits. In short, I believe that where *many* others today are just *gassing*, I have managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it.²

That “silence” took the form in the 1920s of Wittgenstein’s devotion to such nonphilosophical activities as gardening, teaching elementary school, and designing a house in Vienna for his sister Margaret.

In 1924, responding to an invitation to return to Cambridge from John Maynard Keynes, Wittgenstein wrote about his interest in philosophy: “I myself no longer have any strong inner drive towards that sort of activity. Everything that I really had to say, I have said, and so the spring has run dry.”³ By the end of the decade, however, the spring had begun to flow again, as Wittgenstein came both to see profound difficulties in the system of the *Tractatus*, and to work out the more “anthropological”⁴ approach of his later philosophy. Wittgenstein’s posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations* introduces an open-ended and human-centered account of language and logic through such notions as “language-game,” “forms of life,” and “family resemblances.” His new philosophy arises, however, as he begins his twenty-year study of James’s *Principles of Psychology*.

James came to be the object of some of Wittgenstein’s most deeply reaching criticisms, yet Wittgenstein loved and trusted him from the start. He read James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1912, in his first year as a student of philosophy at Cambridge, when he wrote to Russell: “Whenever I have time now I read James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*. This book does me a *lot* of good.”⁵ James was one of those very few writers – Tolstoy was another – whose works Wittgenstein could *stand* to reread. At one point after his return to philosophy in the 1930s, James’s *Principles of Psychology* was the only book of philosophy visible on Wittgenstein’s bookshelves.⁶

Wittgenstein learned from James. One can trace his assimilation of James’s distinctions between two types of intentional action, one involving an act of will and the other not; between our normal experience of the words of our language and our experience of a mindlessly repeated word whose “soul has fled”; between a word that has an essential definition and one, like “religion,” which connotes “many characters which may alternately be equally important” (VRE, 32). In James’s texts, Wittgenstein discovered an acute sense of the “variety” of human experience – religious, secular, emotional, cognitive, receptive, active, extraordinary, ordinary – that was deeply congenial as he worked on what he called his “album” of “remarks” and “sketches” of human life (PI, v).

James and Wittgenstein never met, of course, for James died in America a year before Wittgenstein came to England from his native Austria to study engineering. Yet one might imagine them strolling

along the footpaths of Cambridge, or, better still – given their taste for wildness – in the mountains of New York or New Hampshire where James had summer homes, talking about human psychology, the pluralistic nature of reality, pragmatism, or the forms of human life. However, there would be an anxiety to such conversations because of Wittgenstein’s substantial criticisms of *The Principles*; but also because of his concern near the end of his life that he had produced a version of pragmatism, which was a philosophy he abhorred. The genial James would have been a match for the severe Wittgenstein, I believe, but I wonder how much ground he would have yielded in the face of Wittgenstein’s criticisms. And in a face-to-face meeting with James, would Wittgenstein have acknowledged with less anxiety his affinities with James’s own pragmatism? Would he have been able to teach James the differences between pragmatism and his later philosophy?

This book does not consist of such imaginary conversations, however. It is rooted in discussions of James that did take place – in Wittgenstein’s journals and typescripts, and in his published works, especially *Philosophical Investigations*. If, as Stanley Cavell has written, the *Investigations* offers a picture of “our times,” our culture,⁷ I wish to consider James’s prominence in that picture. Seventeen people are mentioned in the *Investigations*, among them Beethoven, Schubert, and Goethe; the Gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Köhler; and the physicist Michael Faraday. Five others are mentioned twice – Lewis Carroll, Moses, and three philosophers: Wittgenstein’s Cambridge colleagues Frank Ramsey and Bertrand Russell, and Socrates. The three remaining people named in the *Investigations* are also philosophers: Gottlob Frege and William James, each mentioned four times, with only St. Augustine exceeding them with five citations. Such counting – and merely focusing on the places where Wittgenstein mentions James – may of course be misleading. We will see, for example, that James is more extensively present in the *Investigations* than these explicit citations reveal and that these citations are not fair indicators of what Wittgenstein learned from James. John Passmore, one of the first commentators to assert the importance not only of *The Principles of Psychology* but of *Pragmatism* for understanding the *Philosophical Investigations*, is thus right not only to note the “rare distinction” of Wittgenstein’s many references to James, but to observe that Wittgenstein does so in a manner that fails to “bring out the nature

of his relationship to James.”⁸ The specification of that relationship is a main concern of the following chapters.

Because Wittgenstein and James are typically placed in two distinct traditions of contemporary philosophy, their relationship has not often been taken into account. Wittgenstein commentators tend not to have studied James, and students of James often know little about Wittgenstein.⁹ When the relationship is discussed, commentators tend to focus on Wittgenstein’s criticisms of James – which are substantial – and to ignore the complicated overlapping views and temperaments of these two great writers. My claim is not simply that James and Wittgenstein share views about specific topics, but that they share a set of commitments: to antifoundationalism, to the description of the concrete details of human life, to the priority of practice over intellect, and to the importance of religion in understanding human life.

James held that the key to a philosopher was his vision of things, his “mode of feeling the whole push.” He wrote: “The books of all the great philosophers are like so many men. Our sense of an essential personal flavor in each one of them, typical but indescribable, is the finest fruit of our own accomplished philosophic education” (P, 24). Wittgenstein agreed with James on the connection between the philosophy and the philosopher. He wrote that work in philosophy is “more like a kind of working on oneself. On one’s own conception. On the way one sees things.”¹⁰ It was, I shall try to show, for his nuanced and broadminded way of “seeing things” that Wittgenstein admired William James.

In standard English-language accounts of twentieth-century philosophy, the classical American philosophers (Peirce, James, Dewey, Santayana, etc.) are treated tangentially, with the main developments occurring elsewhere: in England and then the United States with the rise of analytic (or “Anglo-American”) philosophy; in Austria and again in the United States with the rise of logical positivism; or on “the continent,” where phenomenology, existentialism, the Frankfurt School, and postmodernism developed. The depth and importance of Wittgenstein’s relationship to James requires, it seems to me, that we adjust our picture of twentieth-century philosophy, just as the recent understanding of the Emerson–Nietzsche connection is changing the way we see nineteenth-century philosophy.¹¹ There is, I shall argue, a classical American presence in analytic philosophy running

not only through C. I. Lewis, Morton White, W. V. O. Quine, and Hilary Putnam – Americans all – but, a generation earlier, through the work of an Austrian who worked in England and visited America only in the last years of his life.

If this story has two heroes, it also has a subplot: Wittgenstein's troubled relation to pragmatism, the tradition that James (along with Charles Sanders Peirce) is generally supposed to have founded.¹² In the last four years of his life, Wittgenstein twice questioned his own pragmatism: in the account of knowledge called *On Certainty*, and in the preliminary study for the second part of *Investigations* published as *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*. As I shall begin to argue in Chapter 1, James's writings help us appreciate some respects in which Wittgenstein's thought is indeed akin to pragmatism, but they also show that pragmatism is what Wittgenstein calls a "family resemblance" term, with no one feature running through all its instances. Just as there may be a typical Jones family nose or laugh, there are typical pragmatic emphases – on practice, for example, or on the future – but these are no more found in all pragmatisms or pragmatic doctrines than the Jones laugh is found in every last brother, sister, and cousin of the same family. The question I will consider is how closely Wittgenstein is related to the pragmatist family, and particularly to William James.

In James's *Pragmatism* alone, pragmatism is at least five things: a theory of truth, a theory of meaning, a holistic account of knowledge, a method of resolving philosophical disputes, and a human temperament. I consider some similarities between each of these facets of pragmatism and Wittgenstein's philosophy, but two of them are particularly important, for they mark the respects in which Wittgenstein asks himself whether he is a pragmatist. The first of these, the pragmatic account of knowledge, forms the subject of Chapter 1. The second, the pragmatic account of meaning, is the point of departure for Chapter 6.

In the "revival of pragmatism"¹³ during the last decades of the twentieth century, two philosophers – Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam – occupy especially prominent positions.¹⁴ Each in his own way embraces a Wittgensteinian philosophy of language and a pragmatic account of knowledge and truth. Rorty, for example, gives a pragmatist slant to the "Wittgensteinian analogy between vocabularies and tools,"¹⁵ holding that for Wittgenstein "all vocabularies, even those which contain the words which we take most seriously, the ones most