

# William James and Rudolf Steiner

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This article discusses the philosophical method of William James (1842–1910) in relation to the spiritual science of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). James's religious thought is most explicitly developed in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* ([1902]1985); Steiner's spiritual science includes his spiritual epistemology and his presentation of the evolution of consciousness.

Steiner's spiritual science is developed in his first two philosophical works, *Truth and Knowledge* (1892) and *Philosophy of Freedom* (1894) and his three foundational works: *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and Its Attainment* (1904), *Theosophy* (1904), and *Occult Science—An Outline* (1909). James and Steiner lived barely a generation apart and wrote their major philosophical works during the same two decades before and after the turn of the century. It is almost certain that James was unfamiliar with Steiner's writings, and Steiner's only reference to James shows that he knew only James's *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* ([1907]1975) and *The Will to Believe* ([1897]1979). It falls to us to arrange this dialogue on their behalf.

Consequently, this article offers a comparison of the account of religious experiences and religious knowledge that James presents in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* with the account of spiritual scientific discipline that Steiner presents throughout his writings and lectures and most systematically in three of his basic works, *Philosophy of Freedom* ([1894]1970), *Knowledge of the Higher World and Its Attainment* ([1904]1947), and *Occult Science—An Outline* ([1909]1969). Religious experience and religious knowledge were central concerns for both James and Steiner, and the differences between their approaches provide a revealing perspective on the possible role of spiritual and esoteric discipline in relation not only to James's thought but to American culture.

Perhaps the most immediately obvious difference between James and Steiner is that James is "one of us"—he, too, is looking through a glass darkly, desperately trying to get a glimpse of something, anything, that will suggest "something more," some connection to a Source, to Reality, or even a reality. James wrestled with his nominalism, from which he never fully escaped—and, in this defining fact, we experience him again as one of us. To read James is to swim in the American psyche and to experience its characteristic split between the richness of its religious life and the limitations of its interpretive frame. James enables us to confront the variety and power of religious "experts"—examples of conversion, saintliness, and mysticism—and their collective ability to break the hold of dogmatism and skepticism. James shows us how to widen the research, sharpen the eye, and speculate on the source(s) of such rich transformative fare.

Whereas James emphasizes the surprising and idiosyncratic character of religious experience, Steiner focuses on many additional ways by which religious and spiritual experience can be rendered more intelligible. For an astonishingly broad array of individual and cultural experiences, or modes of consciousness, Steiner develops elaborate interpretive frameworks, including the biographical-karmic, bodily, planetary, linguistic, and historical-cultural. Steiner also offers a detailed discipline by which others can better understand and actually attain the kinds of transformative experience that James so prized. In works such as *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and Its Attainment*, which has no analogy in James's writings, Steiner insists that every individual can develop a spiritual, transformed, consciousness:

There slumber in every human being faculties by means of which one can acquire for oneself a knowledge of higher worlds. Mystics, Gnostics, Theosophists—all speak of a world of soul and spirit which for them is just as real as the world we see with our physical eyes and touch with our physical hands. At every moment the listener may say to himself: that, of which they speak, I too can learn if I develop within myself certain powers which today still slumber within me. (P. 1)

In this respect, Steiner's approach to spiritual and transformative experience has something of a democratic quality that might be understood as closer to yoga or to a Roman Catholic emphasis on effort, all of which stands in contrast to James's attitude, which shows the influence of the Protestant experience of grace.

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If we survey the contents of his thirty books and more than three hundred volumes of lectures, we will find that, in effect, Steiner wrote James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* many times over, but Steiner's vantage point differs sharply from James's in three important respects: (1) James wrote typically as an observer, whereas Steiner wrote as one who regards his experience as authoritative, although Steiner did not intend the results of his spiritual scientific research to be considered infallible; (2) the evolution of consciousness informs all of Steiner's philosophic and esoteric descriptions, whereas James, despite his acceptance of Darwinian evolution, paid little attention to the evolution of consciousness as an interpretive category; and (3) both James and Steiner are thoroughgoing empiricists with an eye to the consequences of experience, but Steiner's empiricism is better described as transformational than as pragmatic.

#### JAMES'S PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS AND PSYCHIC EXPERIENCE

One of the surest introductions to a philosopher is a glance at his (or her) opponents. James's opponents can be gathered into two groups: dogmatically skeptical scientific empiricists (the mentality that expressed itself subsequently as logical positivism and logical empiricism); and two forms of antiempiricists—orthodox believers and philosophical idealists.

Against these three opponents on two sides, James argued for a pragmatic, experiential empiricism, one that would faithfully observe and interpret the fullest imaginable range of human experience. It was this commitment that led James to serve as the first president of the Society for Psychical Research and to support the cause of parapsychological research throughout the entire three decades of his philosophical career.

In the conclusion of *A Pluralistic Universe* ([1909]1977) (his last work, and his only systematic philosophic work), James expressed his hope for his distinctive brand of empiricism: "Let empiricism once become associated with religion, as hitherto, through some strange misunderstanding, it has been associated with irreligion, and I believe that a new era of religion as well as of philosophy will be ready to begin" (p. 142). This version of empiricism seemed to James not only the most fruitful approach to religion and to psychological phenomena, but the proper philosophical corrective to the science-inspired narrowing of the model of knowledge or what in recent terminology is referred to as scientism.

Against all extreme, or overconfident, claims to truth, James insisted that truth and meaning are personal, provisional, processive—that is, in the stream or flow of consciousness. In *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth*, he gives a classic account of this perspective and philosophical method:

Pragmatism represents a perfectly familiar attitude in philosophy, the empiricist attitude, but it represents it, as it seems to me, both in a more radical and in a less objectionable form than it has ever yet assumed. A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns toward concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power. That means the empiricist temper regnant and the rationalist temper sincerely given up. It means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality in truth. (P. 31)

He continues:

No particular results then, so far, but only an attitude of orientation, is what the pragmatic method means. *The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, "categories," supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.* (P. 32)

Nowhere is the effect of his opponents on his philosophy more apparent than in his pragmatic method: against the dogmatism and skepticism concerning the varieties of human experience that had limited the empiricist temper, and against a dogmatic religious and idealist position, James proposed a method that aims to study the outer reaches of consciousness. In his research concerning both psychic phenomena and religious experience, James sought to show facts and consequences

to be more diverse—and more remarkably revealing—than scientific, philosophic, and conventional religious investigators seemed capable of imagining.

Although the work of so productive, complex, and original a thinker as William James cannot easily or confidently be identified with one characteristic or culminating insight, his double affirmation of "Something More" and "a wider self" as discussed in *Varieties of Religious Experience* seems to represent the furthest reaches of his philosophic imagination: "The conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come" (p. 405). James refers to this "wider self" as "a Something More." The case can be made that James's thought, in the end, is more accurately characterized by pluralism, or by pragmatism, or by process, or by the will to believe, but I think it can be shown that this concept of "Something More" is not only characteristic and defining, but the end point of James's philosophical striving, what we ought to consider his ultimate, and most life-sustaining, philosophical achievement.

This "wider self" or "Something More" is an insight that carries the imprint of James's philosophical attitude, hopes, and method. As a philosophical empiricist, James was a sympathetic observer, a patient and probing inquirer, a tough-minded data-collector ("data" here being the varied experiences of all possible subjects) and, as such, was on the lookout for news from the farthest, and most revealing, outposts. He sought out those whom he regarded as experts in the hope that they would confirm the reality of the "Something More."

In search of living evidence on behalf of this "Something More," or of what we might call a "Something More kind of knowledge," William James spent more than thirty years as a psychical researcher. He longed to find "one white crow" that would prove, finally, that not all human beings are forever separated from spiritual or psychic knowledge, such as knowledge of the afterlife. James remained committed throughout his philosophical career to "potential forms of consciousness" that are "discontinuous with ordinary consciousness." In a line often quoted from *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James reminds us that these exceptional states of consciousness "forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality" (p. 308).

We can only imagine how James would have assessed the clairvoyant capacity of Rudolf Steiner. We know that on second-hand infor-

mation he was not impressed by H. P. Blavatsky (James, 1986: 96). After a thirty-year search for a subject who convincingly exhibited the kind of special consciousness that produced reliable knowledge of the supersensible, James settled on one candidate, Mrs. Piper, as his "white crow," and, in *Essays in Psychical Research* (1986), concluded undramatically:

I find myself believing that there is "something in" these never ending reports of physical phenomena, although I haven't yet the least positive notion of the something. It becomes to my mind simply a very worthy problem for investigation. Either I or the scientist is of course a fool, with our opposite views of probability here; and I only wish he might feel the ability, as cordially as I do, to pertain to both of us. (Pp. 271-72)

Mrs. Piper's disclosures might appear at first glance to be more dramatic than Steiner's, but as they dealt with trivial matters, none were as significant for knowledge of spiritual or psychic realms. Steiner was disinterested in displaying his occult powers and instead concentrated on knowledge of spiritual beings and guidance of mankind. Particularly, he sought to develop an epistemology by which others could attain such knowledge.

#### STEINER'S SPIRITUAL SCIENCE

Steiner's most significant insight in philosophy (Steiner made original contributions in many other areas) would seem to be the epistemological method, which stands at the base of all of his extraordinary research. This method can be referred to as imaginal thinking and, in the form that would enable us to experience and evaluate it, can be understood as a method for generating spiritual (including philosophical and moral) insights that can be known to be simultaneously individual and universal. Steiner's insight, then, issues from, calls for, and confirms a new capacity, namely the ability to establish a cognitive link between the spiritual dimension of the moral self and the spiritual dimension of the universe—in this case, the moral-spiritual universe. Steiner exemplifies and recommends the same capacity for the sciences, the arts, and other areas of inquiry.

It is easy to miss the significance of Steiner's philosophic work because the body of his writings that can properly be classified as philosophical—approximately three to five volumes—constitutes a minute portion of his entire corpus, consisting as it does of approximately three hundred volumes, fifty books

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and two hundred and fifty volumes of lectures. Further, the same sociology of the field, which hides the philosophy in the writings of medieval Christian thinkers such as Aquinas or classical Indian philosophers such as Sankara, would similarly lead philosophical inquirers (assuming they looked in Steiner's direction) to fold the philosophical into the spiritual.

Given the probability of this predisposition, it might be useful to look at Steiner's spiritual position before turning to his philosophical position per se, though it is important to note that Steiner's first two books, his doctoral dissertation and his major philosophical treatise, are technical, carefully argued epistemological treatises that he intended to be evaluated by philosophical (albeit highly introspective) criteria.

Steiner's massive body of writings, his entire teaching, evidences spiritual and esoteric development yet is definitely a unified whole: there is no early/late dichotomy. His *Philosophy of Freedom* predates the spiritual experience of 1899 that resulted in his viewing the deeds of Christ as the central transformative event in human history (p. 319). After 1900, Steiner's writings typically contained esoteric and spiritual-scientific disclosures. Whether we approach *Philosophy of Freedom* from the perspective of subsequent writings or entirely on its own, it is clear that at its core this work is a spiritual epistemology. Using a teleological principle characteristic of Steiner's worldview, we might say that the following definition of his teaching, referred to alternately as Spiritual Science and Anthroposophy, is the end toward which his early epistemological writings were aiming—and toward which he was intending to lead his reader.

In the first of a series of letters to members of the Anthroposophical Society, written in the last year of his life, Steiner defined An-

throposophy (or spiritual science) as follows (McDermott 1984):

Anthroposophy is a path of knowledge leading the spiritual in the individual to the spiritual in the universe. It arises as a need of the heart, and justifies itself to the extent that it answers that need. (P. 415)

From the perspective of philosophy (temporarily ignoring Steiner's role at the end of his life as the founder of a spiritual-esoteric school and the author of an incomparable body of occult revelations), this statement would seem to occupy a place in Steiner's thought comparable to James's "Something More." It is the end point, or the full expression, of that life-defining insight that was striving to come forth in his earliest writings. It is also—as it is the purpose of this article to show—a call to a thoroughgoing empiricism, a method of philosophy that can significantly advance the American philosophical and cultural agenda.

Philosophy, in this teaching, comes to mean a heart-filled, warm and willful, imaginative reflection on, and by, the deepest level of the self in relation to the entire universe—from stars to soil, including gender, the economy, history, language, ethics, education, and myriad other areas of inquiry—far more, in fact, than any American philosopher, including Dewey, attempted to illumine. Even when Steiner is at his most explicitly spiritual—as in his description of anthroposophy—quoted in the passage above—he is calling for a mode of thinking which, while spiritual, is not based on belief. In these words written for the Anthroposophic Society, members of a new mystery center and a community of spiritual seekers, he advocates the path of spiritual thinking.

Steiner's emphasis on the feeling dimension of thinking should not be mistaken for softness and sentimentality: whether expressed in spiritual terms (as in the passage quoted above) or in terms of concepts and precepts (the terminology of *The Philosophy of Freedom*), Steiner consistently strives to show, by example and precept, that the thinking "I" can be the source and instrument of a self-generated, perfectly adequate and essentially true grasp of reality—including the concept and reality of the self as a moral agent.

Steiner's basic philosophic text, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, offers an epistemology and a moral philosophy as a way of solving the most fundamental problems of modern life. With James, Steiner was intrigued by and

sought to provide a way out of the impasse of philosophical disputes. But whereas James sought primarily to remove the sting from philosophical conflicts by removing their pretense of adequacy or finality and, secondarily, to establish the attitude and value of philosophic pluralism, Steiner offers an epistemological discipline to be developed in order to move past conflicts to a pluralism of ideally adequate perspectives. More important, and more radically, Steiner chronicled the history of philosophy as a series of appropriate, or symptomatic, expressions of the evolution of consciousness.

Whereas James rests in a pluralism of partial versions of the truth, Steiner affirms a pluralism of positions that are simultaneously harmonious and individual. This process seems perfectly plausible to Steiner because he is convinced that true ideas live harmoniously in a spiritual realm and can be accessed by one's highly disciplined, individual spiritual effort. To a degree quite foreign to James, Steiner depicts all such individual efforts in historical, or evolutionary, contexts. For Steiner, it makes all the difference when Socrates, Plato and Aristotle—or St. Paul, or Descartes—impressed their vision of reality on the consciousness of subsequent centuries.

#### CONCLUDING COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS

In addition to the contrasts just developed between the religious thought of James and Steiner, it is worth noting some commonalities. Specifically, they share determination to establish their positions between scientific rationalism on one side and traditional religious belief on the other. Of the first of these two excesses, both James and Steiner forcefully opposed the negative implications of nineteenth-century scientific thought. They both struggled with the realization that their immediate scientific and philosophical predecessors precluded an easy affirmation of what James refers to as "the religious hypothesis." Yet in quite different but entirely compatible ways, James and Steiner begin with the recognition that Humean skepticism (or its later version—positivism) and Kant's critical philosophy fail to account for the depth and varieties of religious experience.

James and Steiner also shared a critique of belief as a way to overcome the limits on religious knowledge set by science and naturalistic philosophy. Their case, again in different terms, rested on privileged, and highly transformative, experience, not on a belief system

oblivious to the demands for validation and discernible positive effects. James sought evidence for the source of religious experience, for the "Something More" to which large segments of the human community—some quite demonstrably—have access, and Steiner looked to the tradition of mystics, gnostics and theosophists as evidence on behalf of the case for knowledge of the spiritual world.

Almost all of the contrasts that could be explored between James and Steiner fall under three general headings: (1) individual experience, (2) evolution of consciousness, and (3) spiritual discipline.

The first point of comparison concerns the role of individual experience. In the two years during which James delivered the Gifford Lectures, published in 1902 as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Steiner wrote several chapters on nineteenth-century thought (published as part of *The Riddles of Philosophy* ([1914]1973), lectured on Goethe and Nietzsche, and delivered two series of lectures published as *Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age* ([1901]1971) and *Christianity as Mystical Fact* ([1902]1972). All of these lectures and publications presage the distinctively twentieth-century fascination with religious experience(s) of paradigmatic individuals. Both James and Steiner point to the transformative experience of figures such as Buddha, Augustine, Eckhart, and Luther, as evidence for a spiritual reality as the source of the kinds of religious experience that James refers to as conversion, saintliness, and mysticism.

Although James himself had little to report in the way of personal experience—the lone exception being the autobiographical passage that he inserted in the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, with attribution to a "French Correspondent" (pp. 134–35), he did recognize the primacy of personal, and particularly autobiographical, perspectives for the fashioning of an adequate worldview. But because his own experience seems to have been undeveloped, or at least lacking confidence relative to those whom he referred to as "experts" and on whom he relied for religious insight, he remained an observer and interpreter.

While his reach toward the psychic and spiritual may be more adventuresome than any major American philosopher, there is scant original or autobiographical religious reflection in James's writings, considerably less so than in the writings of Josiah Royce, his primary philosophical and religious foil. James's "circumspection of the topic" of religion in the *Varieties of Religious Experi-*

ence, in terms of individual experience without regard to what he acknowledges as the institutional (and historical) half of the topic, must be seen as a limiting device entirely characteristic of his psychology, philosophy, and view of religion. Steiner similarly did not focus on the institutional dimension of religion, but he invariably emphasized the historical and cultural context of all individuals, including those with highly idiosyncratic experience. More to the point, for Steiner, all experience, and particularly transformative spiritual experience, must be understood in the double context of individual and cultural evolution.

For Steiner, a transformative experience—whether conversion, enlightenment, or salvation—has its place in the destiny of individuals who, in turn, have their places in the destiny of cultures. In this respect, Steiner's view is closer to Royce, who offers a profound account of individual ideals in relation to one's community; it was against Royce's view—and, indirectly, Steiner's—that James delivered and published his *Varieties*. In his emphasis on the evolution of consciousness, Steiner goes against James and beyond Royce: he insists that in pre-Christian times an experience such as mysticism was nearly ordinary and is considered extraordinary in the modern West because of the radical transformation wrought by modern Western rational and scientific consciousness. Or rather, the rarity of mysticism is due to the transformation of consciousness that produced both rational scientific consciousness and the gap between the experiential self and the spiritual world.

This leads to the second major difference between James and Steiner, namely, Steiner's comprehensive use of the evolution of consciousness. Steiner emphasizes the historical and cultural context of individual biographies, as well as their cultures, in the light of the evolution of consciousness. Although James was committed to an evolutionary and radically processive view of human experience, his view of religious experience is not as evolutionary as Steiner's. References to religious personalities throughout *Varieties of Religious Experience* pay little or no attention to the century or culture that provided the distinctive character of the religious qualities for which James provides such shrewd and memorable phenomenological analyses.

For Steiner, the exact place of every religious experience in the evolution of consciousness—including the particular language, folk-soul (or psyche of the people), religious be-

liefs and practices, and many other influential factors—accounts for the essential meaning of each experience. In Steiner's grid, the individual and the culture of the original experience are interdependent.

The third general contrast between James's view and Steiner's centers on the significance for Steiner of spiritual discipline. In his *Varieties*, James explains two types of conversion—volitional and self-surrender—but nevertheless allows the impression that life-transforming experiences, saintliness, and mysticism just happen. Throughout the *Varieties of Religious Experience* and his forty years devoted to psychical research, James generally ignored the preparation, particularly deliberate and disciplined preparation, for religious transformation and focused instead on the fruits of exceptional experiences:

If the grace of God miraculously operates, it probably operates through the subliminal door, then. But just *how* anything operates in this region is still unexplained, and we shall do well now to say good-bye to the *process* of transformation altogether—leaving it, if you like, a good deal of a psychological and theological mystery—and to turn our attention to the fruits of the religious condition, no matter in what way they have been produced. (P. 218)

Steiner acknowledges the limits of his knowledge concerning the process of transformation in individual cases, but the intent of his spiritual scientific method is to penetrate such mysteries, beginning with one's own experience. Such knowledge, of course, requires disciplined effort, or spiritual practice.

What would seem to be missing in James's work is precisely such a practice, that might have enabled him to see deeper into the subjects who so intrigued him and on whose transformative experiences he tried to build a genuinely radical empiricism, that is, a philosophy that grants primacy to individual experience. It might be time to supplement, and perhaps transform, James's philosophical and religious insights by means of the kind of spiritual discipline that Steiner exemplified and explained.

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Rudolf Joseph Lorenz Steiner (27 (or 25) February 1861 – 30 March 1925) was an Austrian philosopher, social reformer, architect, economist and esotericist. Steiner gained initial recognition at the end of the nineteenth century as a literary critic and published philosophical works including *The Philosophy of Freedom*. At the beginning of the twentieth century he founded an esoteric spiritual movement, anthroposophy, with roots in German idealist philosophy and theosophy; other influences include