The Pragmatism of William James
within the
Ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr

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Introduction

The really vital question for us all is, what is this world going to be? What is life
eventually to make of itself?
                                          -William James, 1907

To men and women, what life makes of itself is a practical

consequence. Daily we reap the benefits of successful ventures, of fortuitous

circumstances, even of exemplary deeds. And daily we suffer the havoc of

failed strategies and upsetting particulars. In this setting we can define life as

what we do, think, and say, as well as what happens without our doing. As

such, these ventures, circumstances, deeds, and particulars are practical

consequences of what life makes of itself. We patrol these consequences with

ethics. The relationship between ethics and consequences was summed up by

Reinhold Niebuhr when he said, "Any other interpretation of 'ethical' than

one which measures an action in terms of consequences and [thus] judges

action purely in terms of notions, empties the ethical of content and makes it

purely formal."[1] We consider these consequences and their respective ethics

to be important and a deeply personal level -- they influence our moods, our

decisions, our needs, and our actions. William James believed that these

practical consequences serve another important role: these consequences

determine truth.

I will seek here to demonstrate that William James'[2] theory of truth,

formally known as pragmatism, had significant influence on Reinhold

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[1] Fox, Richard W. *Reinhold Niebuhr, A Biography.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, p. 125.
[2] In many of my sources James in the possessive case is spelled "James's," while I spell it "James'." I have
changed the citation spellings to my spelling in order to avoid discontinuity and excessive acknowledgment of
difference.

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Niebuhr. It is recognizable that both men were aware, as Niebuhr phrased it,
of "the stark reality of existence," but, without becoming idealistic, or
sentimental, sought something that could help them cope with the harshness
of truth and the authenticity of existence. Both based truth on this human
existence, moreover, on the experiences of that existence. And both
maintained that in order for this existence to be tolerable, men and women
must discover some meaning within it, specifically within their experiences.
According to Niebuhr, in his 1961 introduction of James' *The Varieties of
Religious Experience*, "Moral life is possible at all only in a meaningful
existence." Both James and Niebuhr proceeded to determine ethical actions
based on the truth, and meaning, of the resulting consequences.

James' pragmatism and the pragmatism of Niebuhr in consideration of
James can be traced through a variety of affairs in which Niebuhr participated
or wrote about: his view of human nature, his view of and belief in
Christianity, and his positions as a political and social activist and leader.
Finally, there is value to reconsidering both James' and Niebuhr's work in
this manner. I will submit that both men have had and still have significant
effects on recent thinking in the fields of American intellectualism, theology,
the belief in and practice of Christianity, and new paradigmatic thought on
reductionism, complexity, and the fields of science and religion.

It will be arguable that the pragmatism I demonstrate within Niebuhr's
ethics is not necessarily a direct result of William James, as there certainly
have been other influences on Niebuhr aside from James. Thus, my

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objective is to demonstrate the similarities between the two thinkers. The benefit of this is two-fold. First, while James' pragmatism may not be perfect, he does provide a most adequate and understandable description of pragmatism. Moreover, an examination of some of his personal experiences demonstrates that his philosophy is true to form: he lived with his truth based upon his experiences and the meaning he found in them. Secondly, Niebuhr's ability to provide his followers with a pragmatism, and thus a practice, that is better for relating themselves as individuals to empirical human communities, politics, and especially metaphysical meaning than the ability of some other, recent theologians[3] is appreciable. Exposing the similarities between James and Niebuhr will provide an opportunity to reappreciate both men in a new light and reapply their important thoughts to our modern questions.

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[3] See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

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William James

A History

William James, a prominent philosopher, psychologist and religious thinker of the late nineteenth-century, contributed extensively to a variety of intellectual fields including religion, philosophy, and especially psychology, his first academic love.[4] He also wrote what is still regarded as a crucial enhancement of information for the study of scientific psychology, his *Principles of Psychology.* Shortly following the publication of this masterwork, James began writing on philosophy and religion. James wrote substantial and significant essays on morals and ethics, essays which rest on the foundation of pragmatism and the search for meaning.[5]

Prior to James' life as an academic he suffered through years of tormenting depression, lacking virtually any direction or motivation to live a meaningful life.

> He contemplated suicide but may have lacked even the follow-through to accomplish suicide. He could not go on in life without finding a practical solution to his problem. He developed a practical solution, one that appeared not to be based on any piece of knowledge, one that was put forth as a bold speculation, and one that required that he accept what almost none of his contemporaries (except, possibly, his father) accepted: that beliefs are founded largely on individual actions and interests rather than on evidence or reason.[6]

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[4] James' writings on psychology were published in the journals of *Mind, Atlantic Monthly,* and *Nation.*
[5] James writings on philosophy and religion appeared in *International Journal of Ethics, Philosophical Review,* and *Science.* His well known book entitled *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* contains the following essays: "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," "The Will to Believe," "The Moral Equivalent of War," "The Dilemma of Determinism," and "What Makes Life Significant?".
[6] Dean, William. *The Religious Critic in American Culture.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 45

Following years in such a horrid state, James arrived at the conclusion that human effort could be justified if the effects of the effort were noticeable and important – if they were pragmatic. Such effort could very well lead one toward living a full, rich, useful, and thus meaningful, life. When James finally established himself as an academic, he, in unplanned conjunction with other nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers including Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, and Thomas Kuhn, chartered the philosophy of pragmatism.[7] Yet for James, pragmatism was nothing new; it was simply "a new name for some old ways of thinking."[8]

Pragmatism and the Metaphysical Question

> On pragmatic principles we can not [sic] reject any hypothesis if consequences useful to life flow from it. Universal conceptions, as things to take account of, may be as real for pragmatism as particular sensations are. They have, indeed, no meaning and no reality if they have no use. But if they have any use they will have that amount of meaning. And the meaning will be true if the use squares well with life's other uses.[9]

James sought a new perception of reality, something which allowed him to experience some sort of truth and thus protect him from idealism, but also something that could help him cope with the harshness of truth and the authenticity of existence. In conjunction with Morrison I. Swift[10] he thought that certain men experience *reality*, "the simple irreducible elements of this

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[7] James' written contributions following the "establishment" of pragmatism include *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, and *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. See also: Charles Sanders Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," *Popular Science Monthly*, Jan 1878; John Dewey, *Common Faith, The Public and its Problems*, and *Quest for Certainty*; and Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

[8] James, William. *Pragmatism*. Edited by Bruce Kuklick. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981, Title Page following the Introduction. This is the sub-title to the official title "Pragmatism."

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 123.

[10] Morrison I. Swift, known as an anarchist and anti-imperialist, published a pamphlet, in 1905, entitled "Human Submission," which called attention to the foolishness of idealism in vogue in 1905 by pointing out newspaper reports of suicides, and deaths from starvation, as "specimens of our civilized regime." James, W.

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world's life, after millions of years of opportunity and twenty centuries of Christ,"[11] abstract opportunities and Christianity which have ceased to explain to men or help them cope with these painful realities. James' cynicism was a grasp for concrete, rather than transcendent, observation and explanation. James was stating that we must allow or create a truth, be it in a form of religion or not, which encourages the survival of men.

James sought a practical, specific, definite, and particular manner in which to approach his life and his daily happenings, and a manner to derive meaning from these happenings. He wanted to approach metaphysical questions such as "What is the meaning of life?", "Is there a God?", "What is truth?", and "What is reality?" and not only talk about them, but respond to them through practical experience and knowledge. He wanted his experiences as a child of a wealthy, overprotective man, as a medical student, and as a victim of depression, to give him enough provisions to answer these questions. Eventually James was indeed able to think and speak on such a practical level. One example of his ability to make metaphysics so discernible is his discussion of a "Designer":

> ... any one [sic] who insists that there *is* a designer and who is sure he is a divine one, gets a certain pragmatic benefit from the term. . . . 'Design'. . . becomes, if our faith concretes it into something theistic, a term of *promise*. Returning with it into experience, we gain a more confident outlook on the future.[12]

In essence, James concocted an applied theory of Christianity. As seen here, James allows that, for some people, the concept of a theistic designer works,

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Pragmatism. p. 16.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

there is a benefit to believing in it. For these believers, the difficult

metaphysical questions are answered concretely, for James states:

> We must find a theory that will *work*; and that means something extremely difficult;
> for our theory must mediate between all previous truths and certain new experiences. It
> must derange common sense and previous belief as little as possible, and it must lead to
> some sensible terminus or other that can be verified exactly. To 'work' means both these
> things; and the squeeze is so tight that there is little loose play for any hypothesis.[13]

If a theory seems to work for us, and we test it through some sort of event and

it still works for us, then we can propose it as a truth, for "the truth of an idea

is not a stagnant *property* inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It

becomes true, is *made* true by events."[14]

In this manner, man[15] creates truth through his experiences. This

tested truth can then be used again to scrutinize other experiences and to

make valuable connections among our various individual and shared

experiences. Returning to the theological example of the designer, James says

that, "If theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be

true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much. For how much

more they are true, will depend entirely on their relations to the other truths

that also have to be acknowledged."[16] This quotation raises two important

points -- the definition of truth and the relation of truths to one another.

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[12] *Ibid.*, p. 54.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 98.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 92.
[15] James does not speak of "truth" as being made by other organisms, such as evolutionarily lower animals,
although I consider that to be a obvious possibility.
[16] James, W. *Pragmatism.* p. 36.

The Quagmire of Truth

Truth is important considering that we initiate our course of action or pursue particular thoughts based upon what we consider to be true, but the definition of truth has been long sought and heavily debated. Various ideas of truth have been suggested. For example, according to the theologian Paul Tillich:

> Modern philosophy usually speaks of true and false as qualities of judgments. Judgments can grasp or fail to grasp reality and can, accordingly, be true or false. . . . If the question is asked, 'What makes a judgment true?' something must be said about reality itself. . . . things hide their true being; it must be discovered under the surface of sense impressions, changing appearances, and unfounded opinions. . . . The surface must be penetrated, the appearance undercut, the 'depth' must be reached, namely, the *ousia*, the 'essence' of things, that which gives them the power of being. This is their truth, the 'really real' in difference from the seemingly real. . . . the problem of the 'truly real' cannot be avoided. The seemingly real is not unreal, but it is deceptive if it is taken to be really real.[17]

Hence, truth can be used to make judgments, to grasp reality, and to identify the "essence" which "gives [things] the power of being." But for philosopher Bertrand Russell:

> Truth, as conceived by most professional philosophers, is static and final, perfect and eternal; in religious terminology, it may be identified with God's thoughts, and with those thoughts which, as rational beings, we share with God. The perfect model of truth is the multiplication table, which is precise and certain and free from all temporal dross. . . . What is true (or false) is a state of the organism, but it is true (or false), in general, in virtue of occurrences outside the organism.[18]

For some, truth is used to give explanation, or it functions as that which makes the most sense in a given religious, cultural, and experiential framework.[19] For James, truth is that which is useful, or makes the most

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[17] Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951, p. 101.
[18] Russell, Bertrand. *A History of Western Philosophy*. New York: Simon and Schuster, Incorporated, 1945, p. 820, 822.
[19] See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984.

sense; that which is prosperous, satisfactory, simplifying, or instrumental.[20]

When identified in this sense, that is, when truth is that which is sensible –

not necessarily eternal, nor final, nor perfect -- we are dealing with William

James' philosophy of pragmatism.

James, Truth, and Reality

James' truth is more adequate that of Tillich, Russell, and Lindbeck, not

to mention many other theories of truth, because it integrates reality with

experience. The question, for the purposes here, immediately changes from

"What is truth?" to "What is reality?"

Reality, according to James, has three sets of components.[21] The first

components of reality are concrete facts. Facts are engaging because "truths

emerge from facts; but they dip forward into facts again and add to them;

which facts again creates or reveal new truth and so on indefinitely. The

'facts' themselves meanwhile are not *true*. They simply *are*."[22] Recognizing

this quality of facts is crucial for James because while facts represent a basic

foundation, they themselves are not metaphysically absolute. This is because

the facts are not true or false, they just *are*.

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[20] James, W. *Pragmatism.* p. 30
[21] *Ibid.,* p. 96.
[22] *Ibid.,* p. 101.

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The second components of reality are abstract kinds of things and relations perceived between these facts. These "abstract things" are our experiences and the truths that are created or recognized through these experiences. Because they are not identical in every situation, these abstractions are not facts, but because they have not yet been interpreted or integrated into other realities, they are not true either.

The third component of reality is "the whole body of other truths already in our possession."[23] These are truths which have been noted as such based upon personal and historical experience. According to James, we are all born into a world of truths as established by other people's experiences. Prior to having our own experiences, we assume these truths. But eventually we may begin to have experiences leading to contradictory results and possibly contradictory truths. At this point we must begin to evaluate the "body of truths in our possession," in accordance with our new truth(s). And our, "True ideas are those that we can assimilate [with old truths and facts], validate, corroborate, and verify [through experience]. False ideas are those that we can not [sic]."[24] Thus, not only must we generate truth through experience, but we must also be able to embroil it with the previous truths and facts. This will sometimes require determining the greater degree of truth between two truths. To do this, James says that that "which may be treated as the *more* true, depends altogether on the human use of it."[25] What

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[23] *Ibid.,* p. 96.
[24] *Ibid.,* p. 92.
[25] *Ibid.,* p. 114.

one may qualify as truth may be so because it works better for him, while someone else may qualify a distinctly different truth as what works for her.

James describes this process of truth deliberation and determination as being reality and that obviously we (humankind) are quite essential and interactive in determining reality. Yet importantly he notes that "all the while, however, we pretend that the eternal is unrolling. . . ."[26] We do so because of the abundance of belief in more absolute and metaphysically foundational theories of truth. such as that previously illustrated by Bertrand Russell. James wanted men and women to stray from absolute truths over which we have no influence, and to recognize the reality of our ability to influence, and in fact determine, truth. James himself directly benefited from such recognition, as he fought to overcome the depression that plagued him much of his life. Experience dictated that men and women certainly do influence truth and in turn, other experiences.

The Importance of Truth

William James' rationale for seeking truth is tripartite. He says on the most basic level that in essence we "want to have truth" and, in addition, that "we want to believe that our experiments, studies, and discussions must put us in a continually better and better position" towards truth. In fact, and

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[26] *Ibid.*, p. 110.

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secondly, "on this line we agree to fight out our thinking lives;" we want

truth to such a degree that if a skeptic challenges our knowledge of truth, "we

are willing to go in for a life upon a truth or assumption which [the skeptic],

for his part, does not care to make."[27] Thirdly, James declares that we seek

this truth so vehemently in order to "give meaning to human experience,"[28]

which James seeks to do by actually finding meaning in experience -- the

theory of pragmatism. Once such meaning is ascertained, human existence,

life, can be viewed as significant.

James discovered the facts that we want truth and that we are willing to

work toward truth through observations of himself and others. But the

search for meaning and significance was much more of a personal struggle for

James. He sought meaning and significance after withstanding times of

insignificance, even meaninglessness; times which he eventually sought to

escape:

> Our own life breaks down, and we fall into the attitude of the prodigal son. We
> mistrust the chances of things. We want a universe where we can just give up, fall on our
> father's neck and be absorbed into the absolute life as a drop of water melts into the
> river or the sea.[29]

James did not seek significance or meaning that would be abstract or

theoretical, nor did he seek a metaphysical absolute. He did not seek a theory

and he did not seek Truth, with a capital "T." The meaning and significance

James did seek was tangible -- feeling, thinking, touching, experiential,

practical. These substantial sensations emit directly from and apply to a given

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[27] *Ibid.*, p. 41.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. xv.
[29] *Ibid.*, p. 130.

individual's experience. So, while James refuted a metaphysically foundational truth -- such as what Tillich would demand -- he still insisted on some sort of stability, a stability emitting from personal and historical experience, yet interpreted in a meaningful manner. James sought a stability upon which to lean, for we cannot fall upon our father's neck or necessarily depend upon the truth of another. "The solution lay, instead, in his own discussion and interest and in the speculations issuing from them."[30] If this rationale is used, then it really does become vital for us to determine truth based on experience and to thus make life. As such, what life makes of itself really *is* the essential question.

The Possibilities of Pragmatism and Truth

James' philosophy of pragmatism is one mechanism for searching for, experiencing, and recognizing truth. Specifically, pragmatism can be used to appreciate the practical consequences of our thoughts, actions, and behaviors. These consequences, or results of actions, claims James, are criteria for determining truth. Moreover, the constant search for the consequences and results of our conduct -- what life becomes -- is purposeful. James wanted men and women to "bring out of each word its practical cash-value, [and] set it at work within the stream of [one's] experience."[31] In essence, pragmatic

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[30] Dean, W. *The Religious Critic in American Culture.* p. 46.
[31] James, W. *Pragmatism.* p. 28.

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philosophy seeks to extract truth and thus meaning from our experience --

our thoughts, actions, and behaviors.

One way to understand the philosophy of pragmatism is to examine a

concrete example of pragmatism in action. For the purposes here, the field of

ethics has a myriad of practical issues within various metaphysical debates.

Ethics thus by definition begs to be applied to experience, as it is defined as

"the branch of philosophy dealing with values relating to human conduct,

with respect to the *rightness and wrongness of actions and the goodness and*

badness of motives and ends."[32] Because ethics speaks to the very heart of

what may be true (since it deals with what is right and what is wrong) we may

hold ethics to be an indispensable aspect of human experience and thus a

crucial test case for pragmatism.

> Our acts, our turning-places, where we seem to ourselves to make ourselves grow, are the parts of the world to which we are closest, the parts of which our knowledge is the most intimate and complete. Why should we not take them at face-value? Why may they not be the actual turning-places and growing-places which they seem to be, of the world -- why not the workshops of being, where we catch fact in the making, so that nowhere may the world grow in any other kind of way than this.[33]

Returning once again to our theological example, James concludes:

"On pragmatistic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in

the widest sense of the world, it is true. . . . The problem is to build it out and

determine it so that it will combine satisfactorily with all the other working

truths."[34] While attaining the truth may on the one hand seem a lofty goal,

yet on the other simple, James says that, "Tho [sic] neither man nor God

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[32] *Webster's College Dictionary,* s.v. "ethics." My emphasis is added here for clarity.
[33] James, W. *Pragmatism.* p. 129.
[34] *Ibid.,* p. 133.

should ever ascertain truth, the word would still have to be defined as that which *ought* to be ascertained and recognized."[35]

Ethics, Pragmatism, and Truth

When it comes to approaching the concept of ethics, this determination of *right and wrong, good and bad,* with James' philosophy of pragmatism, we must keep in mind that -- in James' opinion -- there is no absolute Truth in ethics. As James put it, "there is no such thing as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance."[36] Experience continues to dictate our truth, with a lower case "t," and this includes and applies especially to ethics.

William James was not necessarily recognized as an ethicist. Yet as Ralph Barton Perry observes in his introduction to James' *Essays on Faith and Morals,* that because "James' utterances on ethics were occasional . . . in their scattered published form they failed to convey an adequate sense of the author's constant preoccupation with moral questions, or the consistency of his thought in that field."[37] James' writings on ethics are primarily found in this treatise, especially within the essays "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," "The Will to Believe," and "The Moral Equivalent of War."

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[35] *Ibid.,* p. 102.
[36] James, William. *Essays on Faith and Morals.* Edited by Ralph Barton Perry. New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1947, p. 184.
[37] *Ibid.,* p. v.

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And it is here, in his discussion of the moral life that he states the impeccable reason why pragmatism can so splendidly be applied to ethics: ". . . ethical treatises. . . can never be *final,* except in their abstractest and vaguest features; and they must more and more abandon the old-fashioned, clear-cult, would-be 'scientific' forms."[38] Thus, ethics clearly provides us with a metaphysical dispute which undoubtedly involves a practical issue. This exposition also points to the difficulty of ethical quests, to "find an account of the moral relations that obtain among things, which will weave them into the unity of a stable system, and make of the world what one may call a genuine universe from the ethical point of view."[39] Thus, the ethical quester fights to protect a certain type of good.

According to James, the philosopher or ethicist realizes that an abundance of opinions and thoughts regarding ethics exist, often in conflict with one another. Yet the philosopher will often idealize that "over all these individual opinions there is a *system of truth,*" which can somehow be discovered.[40] James objects to this absolutism and points to the historic methods -- all of which he thinks fail -- thinkers have used in order to determine this supposed system of truth: that an ethical base 1) be a mean between two extremes; 2) be recognized by a special intuitive faculty; 3) make the agent happy for the moment; 4) make others and the agent happy in the long run; 5) add to the agent's perfection or dignity; 6) harm no one; 7) follow from reason or flow from the universal law; 8) be in accordance with the will

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[38] *Ibid.,* p. 210.
[39] *Ibid.,* p. 184-5.

of God; 9) promote the survival of the human species.[41] James denies that any of these nine forms of ascertaining truth work. For James, the *"most universal principle (is that) the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand."*[42] James does qualify these demands:

> Since everything which is demanded is by that fact a good, must not the guiding principle for ethical philosophy...be simply to satisfy at all times *as many demands as we can?* That must be the best act, accordingly, which makes for the *best* whole, in the sense of awakening the least sum of dissatisfactions.... In the casuistic scale, therefore, those ideals must be written highest which *prevail at the least cost,* or by whose realization the least possible number of other ideals are destroyed.[43]

Thus, we can conclude that James' pragmatic ethics must function in the interest of the "conventionally recognized good," or the "largest total universe of good which we can see."[44]

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[40] *Ibid.,* p. 199.
[41] *Ibid.,* p. 200.
[42] *Ibid.,* p. 201.
[43] *Ibid.,* p. 205.
[44] *Ibid.,* p. 206 and 209.

Reinhold Niebuhr

An Introduction

William James wrote:

> It is . . . perfectly possible to accept sincerely a drastic kind of a universe from which the element of 'seriousness' is not to be expelled. Whoso does so is, it seems to me, a genuine pragmatist. He is willing to live on a scheme of uncertified possibilities which he trusts; willing to pay with his own person, if he need be, for the realization of the ideals which he frames.[45]

It is with such a model in mind that I portray Reinhold Niebuhr as a

pragmatist, influenced by James, and as evidenced by his similarity to James.

Niebuhr indeed was willing to sacrifice himself for the ideals he held, yet

these ideals he would not have classified as such. Rather, he may have

retorted "'that in the main we may hold on to our personal values and

demand that the universe appreciate them.' We may believe, that is," as

biographer Richard Fox states, "whatever we consider it important to believe,

as long as our belief does not contradict verifiable facts or entail undesirable

consequences."[46] For as Niebuhr stated in retaliation to Karl Barth, "we can

escape relativity and uncertainty only by piling experience upon experience,

checking hypothesis against hypothesis, correcting errors by considering new

perspectives, not by the mere assertion of an absolute idea that is beyond

experience."[47] The similarities between James and Niebuhr are already

beginning to make a showing, and the similitude will continue to flourish

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[45] James, W. *Pragmatism.* p. 133.
[46] Fox, Richard W. *Reinhold Niebuhr, A Biography.* p. 32.
[47] Niebuhr, Reinhold. "The Unhappy Intellectuals." *Atlantic,* June 1929, p. 793-794.

through a recount of Niebuhr's thoughts on human nature, Christianity, and social action.

A History

Practicality and pragmatism made a distinct showing in the Niebuhr family long before the birth of Reinhold. Gustav Niebuhr, Reinhold's father, attended the training school for ministers of the Deutsche Evangelishe Synode von Nord-Amerika, and as Richard Fox notes, the synod and most frontier faiths "cared less about the fine points of dogmatic theology than about inner spirituality and practical results: conversions made, churches raised, welfare structures built,"[48] these were important. Consequently, Reinhold and his siblings endured childhoods of utility -- the parish his father ran was based on what worked and what did not, as was the household. Just before his graduation from Eden Seminary Reinhold's father died. The only thing to do was what worked. Reinhold assumed the responsibilities of the hometown parish, was ordained, delivered sermons, and administered to his father's parishioners for the summer prior to attending Yale Divinity School. Speculation that this event, along with others, helped Reinhold become more open and accustomed to pragmatic thinking, is fairly safe.

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[48] Fox, Richard W. *Reinhold Niebuhr, A Biography.* p. 4.

In the fall of 1913, Yale Divinity School had a newly appointed Dean, Charles Reynolds Brown, a self-proclaimed social activist. The rationale for Brown's appointment was actualized as Yale soon become "a combined training center for practical work and a school for the scientific study of religion and social problems."[49] Such an atmosphere undoubtedly appealed to Niebuhr and his practical mindset. He completed a Master of Divinity at Yale and was assigned Bethel parish in Detroit following graduation. Over the course of Niebuhr's stay at Bethel, it, along with many other parishes throughout the United States, underwent a distinct process of modernization of ideas and practices. When Niebuhr left Bethel to teach at Union Seminary in New York, he had been able to explore liberal, socialist, and practical ideas and actions and to make concrete his dedication to change and transformation within American society and religion.

The Place of Truth

The transformations that Niebuhr sought to bring about were done so within a quest for reality. As previously illustrated regarding William James, an adequate theory of truth integrates reality with experience. Truth, for Niebuhr, was within both transformation and an appreciation of reality;

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[49] *Ibid.,.* p. 26.

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nowhere else could reality be so blatantly found as within an examination of his realistic experiences with human nature.

In his *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, Niebuhr borrowed Karl Polanyi's phrase by claiming that human beings live by "personal knowledge," not by scientific truths.[50] Similar to James, Niebuhr was convinced that the daily experience of men and women is what constitutes their substructure and determines their truth. Most scientific knowledge, he contested, led men and women through the halls of a deterministic life. This determinism gave the overbearing perception that the efforts required in life actually had very little impression upon what had already been determined. As he stated in his Bachelor of Divinity thesis, "The revolt of men like William James against the determinism of the universe...is the revolt of the growing moral consciousness in men, that is becoming increasingly impatient with a universe in which its struggles are without effect and its powers not its own. Man wants to know that life is not a sham battle."[51] Even in the youth of his college days, Niebuhr was determined to demonstrate the human need for meaning and significance. As Niebuhr determined in a later work, "moral life is possible only in a meaningful existence." This meaningful existence was made possible, he would argue, by prophetic religion, which "insist[s] on the organic relation between historic

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[50] *Ibid.*, p. 162.
[51] Niebuhr, Reinhold. "The Validity and Certainty of Religious Knowledge." *Bachelor of Divinity Thesis.* Yale Divinity School, 1913.

human existence and that which is both the ground and the fulfillment of this existence, the transcendent."[52]

Experience, Truth, and Human Nature

Experientially evaluating the nature of human beings was one of many tasks of Niebuhr's distinguished career, and it was in this nature -- this very base and stark foundation of human life -- that Niebuhr found a place to begin his own analysis of truth. Niebuhr dealt with human nature on two levels. One manner was to concede the idealism with which most people either approached living or interpreted the natures of other people. This idealism consists of two specific aspects: that of desperate metaphysical foundations, people wanting "something to support the finite many, to tie it to, to unify and anchor it,"[53] and that of denouncing an evil character of humankind. As Niebuhr vehemently stated in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*:

> What is lacking among all these moralists, whether religious or rational, is an understanding of the brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all intergroup relations. Failure to recognise [sic] the stubborn resistance of group egoism to all moral and inclusive social objectives inevitably involves them in unrealistic and confused political thought. ... the limitations of the human imagination, the easy subservience of reason to prejudice and passion, and the consequent persistence of irrational egoism, particularly in group behavior, make social conflict an inevitability in human history, probably to its very end.[54]

[52] Niebuhr, Reinhold. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1935, p. 105.
[53] James, William. *Pragmatism*. p. 117. Although these are James' words, they succinctly describe Niebuhr's thoughts on man's desire to escape his finiteness.
[54] Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932, xx.

Recognition of the faults of man was key to Niebuhr's development of truth -- the possibility of man doing evil is something all people are obliged to eventually accept. The theologian took pains to allude to the practical differences between insisting that the world be saved and hoping that it might. The first view denies the possibility of an unhappy ending and thus considered intolerable the concept of an evil nature as well as never-ending conflict. The latter view, in Niebuhr's opinion, granted men the potential to be accepted to the kingdom of God, but offered no guarantees. While the ethic of Jesus might encourage one to treat others with respect, to give rather than take, to love openly and without reward, simply enough, "Men living in nature and in the body will never be capable of the sublimation of egoism and the attainment of the sacrificial passion, the complete disinterestedness which the ethic of Jesus demands."[55] And yet Niebuhr, himself being a believer in Jesus and his teachings, allowed that while man may be internally and eternally base, vile, greedy, egotistical, or indecent, "to lose confidence in [man] is to commit the basest sin against him." As Richard Fox concludes, "[Niebuhr] had no choice therefore but to proclaim his 'robust' faith in man even when all 'immediate evidences' disputed it."

Why would Niebuhr behave in such a manner if his observations in political and social circles had led him to experience a seemingly different truth? I suggest that although his experiences perhaps outwardly dictated one thing, he interpreted them to infer that to view man in such a vulgar way

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[55] Niebuhr, Reinhold. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. 1935, p. 31.

would not work. He, nor any man or woman he cooperated with, could attain any benefit from viewing all of mankind as only evil. Thus, no matter how much Niebuhr had to search for the goodness of men, he possibly did so for the pragmatic benefits such a view brings to policy, action, and thought.

Another means that Niebuhr used to describe the nature of man was to distinguish the basic difference between individual actions and ethics and collective actions and ethics, the focus of his 1932 *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. "... a sharp distinction," he states, "must be drawn between the moral and social behavior of individuals and of social groups, national, racial, and economic; and that this distinction justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individualistic ethic must always find embarrassing."[56] Niebuhr's interpretation of the individual human nature was similar to Sigmund Freud's. Neither man viewed the self as under its own control, but rather as a melange of rationality and irrationality, of thoughts and impulses. "People were poor judges of their own motives; no one could be sure whether he were a sinner or a saint."[57] Yet Niebuhr's view of the individual was more optimistic than his view of the collective. When dealing with international relations and the two World Wars, Niebuhr emphasized these differences. "Genuine forgiveness of the enemy requires a contrite recognition of the sinfulness of the self and of the mutual

[56] *Ibid.*, 1935, p. ix.
[57] Fox, Richard Wightman. "Reinhold Niebuhr's 'Revolution,'" *The Wilson Quarterly*. Autumn 1984. Vol. VIII, no. 4, p. 91.

responsibility for the sin of the accused. Such spiritual penetration is beyond the capacities of collective man."[58]

The intent of Niebuhr's recognition of these crucial differences, I recommend, is three-fold: he was roused by a general interest in and desire to learn about the idea of these different natures, he wanted to see what sorts of affect this recognition could have on social and political policy, and he was seeking truth. When Niebuhr wrote the introduction to the 1961 re-release of William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*, he noted that while James is thorough when describing the excruciating existence of the individual, which contributes to the pragmatic philosophy of workability, he lacks focus on the collective experiences of men.[59] It is certainly conceivable that Niebuhr, obviously disappointed with this dearth of attention, perceived the viability of James' pragmatism on the individual sphere and was devoted to taking pragmatism one step further, to the sphere of the collective.

> Niebuhr was . . . heir to William James. Niebuhr's early distinction between the morality of individuals and the immorality of social groups had a lasting effect. As he explains it, the crucial experience of self-transcendence seems to occur in a 'vertical' vacuum existing between the self and God, and only secondarily to have 'horizontal' implications and consequences in ones interpersonal and social actions.[60]

Simply enough, Niebuhr's personal experiences had demonstrated to him that equal attitudes and policies for individuals and collectives were not working equally well. I propose that one of Niebuhr's underlying reasons for not only acknowledging this distinction, but arguing it in a myriad of essays,

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[58] Niebuhr, Reinhold. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. 1935, p. 111.
[59] James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: a Study in Human Nature*. Introduction by Reinhold Niebuhr. New York: Collier Books, 1961, p. 8.
[60] Moseley, James G. *A Cultural History of Religion in America*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981, p. 115.

speeches, and sermons, was partially based on pragmatic reasoning. Niebuhr made use of his judgment that the reality of group life is based upon the "ubiquitous struggle for power that virtually defines the human condition."[61] In the introduction to *Moral Man and Immoral Society* Niebuhr maintains that "In every human group there is less reason to guide and to check impulse, less capacity for self-transcendence, less ability to comprehend the needs of others and therefore more unrestrained egoism than the individuals, who compose the group, reveal in their personal relationships."[62] Because individuals instead can conduct themselves with considerations for the interests of others, with sympathy, and with objective and just actions and thoughts, it is necessary to call for different actions and ethics in a group setting than in an individual setting. We are witness to Niebuhr's desire to make the policies and actions of the society work: "Niebuhr shows us that coming to moral judgment on issues of public policy begins with individual moral judgment on what is just, is filtered through socially agree-upon norms, and ends with the ability to see the relationship between principle and power."[63]

The Jamesian pragmatism in this thinking is clear: Niebuhr has called for different ethics based on individuals and collectives because these different ethics work better than a single ethical policy. One example of this is Niebuhr's reaction to the 1931 Japanese bombing of Manchuria: "It has shown

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[61] Rosenthal, Joel H. "Private convictions and public commitments: *Moral Man and Immoral Society* revisited." *World Policy Journal.* Summer 1995, v12, n2, p. 90-91.
[62] Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society.* 1932, p. xi-xii.
[63] Rosenthal, Joel H. *World Policy Journal.* Summer 1995, v12, n2, p. 93.

that a mere pacifist promise to abstain from war is not an adequate social policy," although he had previously conceded that such a policy was certainly viable on an individual level. "Perhaps," he says in an article for the *Christian Century*, "this is the proof of the theory that inter-group relations require a different ethic from that which applies to individuals within a group."[64] It is certainly arguable that Niebuhr was seeking the truth of both individual and collective natures of men. If we as mankind are committed to seeking and using truth, than Niebuhr had no odd requests: seek the truth, that being that the natures of the individual and the collective are different and recognize what those differences are, and proceed to make public policy and take social action based on that truth. In the realm of truth, "Niebuhr was a thoroughgoing Jamesian pragmatist. . . . Truth in the moral realm was personal, vital, a product of will as much as mind, confirmed not in logic but in experience. Truth was what 'worked' -- as long as it contravened no known facts -- in the furtherance of desired ends."[65]

Experience, Truth, and Christianity

Niebuhr's theory of the nature of men in the collective form applies directly to his theory of the benefits of religion, specifically Christianity. George Hammar notes the uniqueness of this position. He states, "The

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[64] Niebuhr, Reinhold. "China Will Yet Win," *World Tomorrow*. Jan, 1932, p. 5.
[65] Fox, Richard. *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, 1985, p. 85.

originality of Niebuhr lies in his profound realistic experience of the relation of social ethics to the brutal facts of politics and the absolute Christian ethics of love. Niebuhr's theology grows out of the tension between absolute ethical demand and the relativity of all our ethical enterprises."[66] Niebuhr sought to highlight two key aspects of Christianity, its pragmatic value, and thus its bearing on reality.

We may note one of James' descriptions of pragmatism: "Any idea that helps us to *deal*, whether practically or intellectually, with either the reality or its belongings, that doesn't entangle our process in frustrations, that *fits*, in fact, and adapts our life to the reality's whole setting, will agree sufficiently to meet the requirement. It will hold true of that reality."[67] In this light, Niebuhr emphasized the connections of religion to life, to existence, to the "specific perils and immediate possibilities."[68] As Robin Lovin points out, "Niebuhr was convinced that, far from being a threat to Christian faith, pragmatism made it possible to test the validity of Christian affirmations in a way that is consistent with their own genius: 'By their fruits ye shall know them.'"[69] Niebuhr's apologetics, according to Richard Fox, "came straight out of William James' pragmatism, as it had ever since his BD thesis. '. . . it was reasonable to believe that God was a Creator because of the fruits of that belief.'"[70]

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[66] Hammar, George. *Christian Realism in Contemporary American Theology.* Uppsala: Appelbergs Boktryckeriaktiebolag, 1940, p. 60.
[67] James, W. *Pragmatism*, p. 97.
[68] Niebuhr, Reinhold. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 1935, p. 122.
[69] McCann, Dennis P. "The Case for Christian Realism: Rethinking Reinhold Niebuhr," *The Christian Century.* June 7-14, 1995. p. 606.
[70] Fox, Richard W. *Reinhold Niebuhr, A Biography*, 1985, p. 163.

Niebuhr argued a number of pragmatic aspects of Christianity specifically. First, he considered the Hebrew-Christian tradition and religion to be significant because "the tension between the ideal and the real which it creates can be maintained at any point in history, no matter what the moral and social achievement because its ultimate ideal always transcends every historical fact and reality."[71] Second, if viewed pragmatically and realistically, the ethics, the ideals, of Christ can be understood, appreciated, and put to use. Third, for Niebuhr, "Christian faith...provides the vision of a morally meaningful universe and inspires a sense of confidence capable of sustaining a commitment to social justice."[72]

When examined closely with Jamesian pragmatism, we see the correlations between James and Niebuhr's rationale for Christianity. James states that, "On pragmatistic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true. . . . The problem is to build it out and determine it so that it will combine satisfactorily with all the other working truths."[73] Thus, Niebuhr's next step was to recognize the role the Christian Church plays in understanding and permitting other truths -- the recognition of reality. This recognition became Niebuhr's Christian realism, which, as Fox puts it, "taught people to commit themselves to political struggle while reconciling themselves to the fertility of trying to perfect the world."[74] Niebuhr struggled with reality in the light of

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[71] Niebuhr, Reinhold. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 1935, p. 20.
[72] McCann, Dennis P. *The Christian Century*. June 7-14, 1995. p. 607.
[73] James, William. *Pragmatism*, 1981, p. 133.
[74] Fox, Richard W. *The Wilson Quarterly*. Autumn 1984. Vol. VIII, no. 4, p. 92.

Christianity in two ways. Of significant concern to him was the role of the Christian church and Christian ideals in social justice. As he stated, "In a struggle between those who enjoy inordinate privileges and those who lack the basic essentials of the good life it is fairly clear that a religion which holds love to be the final law of life stultifies itself if it does not support equal justice as a political and economic approximation of the ideal of love."[75] Niebuhr called upon the church to provide alternatives to war, to call men to service, to mandate ethical actions. In reply to Bonhoeffer's defense of Barth, Niebuhr said, "Obedience to God's will may be a religious experience, but it is not an ethical one until is issues in actions which can be socially valued."[76] His faith in Christianity as beneficial to both the individual and the collective was rooted in the idea of a morally meaningful universe and commitment to social justice.[77] Niebuhr wanted men and women to see the church as an outlet for action and truth, and he wanted the church, in turn, to speak "the truth about human selfhood."[78]

Similarly, Niebuhr focused equally on the concept of the ethic of Jesus and its viability in the realities of society. The foremost concern regarding the ethic of Jesus was it unattainability. Since the ethics of the Son of God had been so incredibly ideal, to expect a human to attain these same pious actions was absurd. Niebuhr maintained that if we are to expect any sort of appropriate outcome, any sort of augmentation of the morals of humankind,

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[75] Niebuhr, Reinhold. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 1935, p. 131.
[76] Fox, Richard W. *Reinhold Niebuhr, A Biography*, 1985, p. 125.
[77] McCann, Dennis P. *The Christian Century*, June 7-14, 1995. p. 607.
[78] Fox, Richard W. *Reinhold Niebuhr, A Biography*, 1985, p. 147.

we must base our "moral imperative in an order of reality and not merely in a possibility."[79] Niebuhr did not advocate an ethic of pure love, nor of ideal actions. His experiences and understandings taught him to ascertain the identity of reality when seeking a moral imperative.

Niebuhr's appeal for Christianity was successful in the eyes of pragmatism thanks to two aspects. First, Niebuhr demonstrated the relevance of Christianity to the realistic life. As James Mosely states in his book *A Cultural History of Religion in America,* for Niebuhr, Christianity's relevance "was in the way its views of man clarified the problems of modern life. ...he appeals, as did James, to his audience's sense of personal experience rather than to biblical norms or to any other external authority."[80] And thus the second aspect of Niebuhr's success — Christianity's pertinence to experience. As Fox claims Niebuhr's Christian realism was successful, and true, "not because it was supernaturally revealed, but because it was validated by experience."[81] In Niebuhr's own words:

> Only a vital Christian faith...is capable of dealing adequately with the moral and
> social problems of our age; only such a faith can affirm the significance of temporal and
> mundane existence without capitulating unduly to the relativities of the temporal
> process. Such a faith alone can point to a source of meaning which transcends all the
> little universes of value and meaning which 'have their day and cease to be' and yet
> not seek refuge in an eternal world where all history ceases to be significant. Only such
> a faith can outlast the death of old cultures and the birth of new civilizations, and yet
> deal in terms of moral responsibility with the world in which cultures and
> civilizations engage in struggles of death and life."[82]

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[79] Niebuhr, Reinhold. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 1935, p. 55.
[80] Moseley, James G. *A Cultural History of Religion in America,* 1981, p. 111.
[81] *Ibid.,* p. 92.
[82] Niebuhr, Reinhold. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 1935, p. 33-34.

The Quagmire of Action and Theory

Not unlikely, Niebuhr was decidedly in favor of attaining results from his thinking, writing, and acting, from his personal struggles, from his commitment to change and progress of social justice. He assumed many responsibilities regarding the world of politics and ethics, for he felt that "rather than leaving God to manage the brutalities of nature and society as he saw fit" – which many idealists and sentimentalists thought proper – "men ought to intervene."[83] His want for explanations and resolutions drove him to write, think, and commit himself to realistic public action all the more, seeking answers in Christian faith and morals, in personal experience, and in the strenuous evaluation of modern ideas, politics, and religions. Through the generation of articles and columns, of Socialist political and religious groups, and of speeches and sermons, Niebuhr slowly made evident his undertaking of public action and helping society finding the pragmatic answers it needed.

Certainly one of Niebuhr's chief venues for public access was the Christian Church. "While Christian action was not for him a means of progressively embodying ideals in history, it was certainly a matter of transforming the world in light of ideals, and using those ideals as critical levers for generating commitment to action."[84] And thus in order to attain results, Niebuhr steered away from the pontification of ideals and encouraged

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[83] Fox, Richard W. *Reinhold Niebuhr, A Biography,* 1985, p. 133.
[84] *Ibid.,* p. 157.

other men of the church to do the same. Sure, ideals were a nice goal and made for pleasant Sunday morning sermons, but the realities of the injustices of the work week, the factories, the racism that was plaguing the country, and the seemingly constant war served as reminders of the finitude of human life. He argued, "like Churchill that 'Sermon on the Mount ethics' are of little use in making and conducting public policy."[85] Yet one of the largest difficulties to overcome, at the nearly opposite spectrum of idealism, was the complacency of the bourgeois Christians: if the people could get by with the bare minimum, that was all that was ever going to be offered. As Niebuhr grew more comfortable and widely accepted within the Protestant church he began to cultivate his leadership for action and organization towards social justice and he offered up his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* with an ultimate purpose "to find political methods which will offer the most promise of achieving an ethical social goal for society."[86] He had to find a method of determining just social policy that worked.

Niebuhr knew what he wanted men and women to be committed to and he knew his personal ideal, which he considered much more realistic than the ideals of most religious people:

> His sermons consistently combined priestly and prophetic postures: a priestly gospel of hope for coping with the everyday perplexities and tragedies of earthly life; a prophetic gospel of repentance for confronting personal sin and social evil. He laid out his philosophy of homilies in an anonymous article in 1922. 'A true gospel will at the same time encourage men to hope and persuade them to repent.... We need prophets who know all about man and yet believe in him, whose faith in his destiny as a son of God has been won without ignorance of his real crimes and sins. Like Jesus they must hate sin while loving the sinner; and like Jesus they must be able to apprehend sin in

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[85] Rosenthal, Joel H. *World Policy Journal.* Summer 1995, v12, n2, p. 92.
[86] Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 1932, p. xxiv.

the respectable conventions and traditions of society no less than in individual departure from them.[87]

Niebuhr was appreciated for his efforts, commended for his results. As Richard Fox epitomized, "Those who came to political awareness between the depression of the 1930s and the Cold War of the 1960s found in Niebuhr a 'crisis' theologian for troubled times."[88] Moreover, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a devoted friend to Niebuhr, pronounced that his friend was valued for his philosophy and practicality, and he was recognized by McGeorge Bundy as "'probably the most influential single mind in the development of American attitudes which combine moral purpose with a sense of political reality."[89] While a pastor at Bethel Church in Detroit he initiated Sunday evening lectures and discussions of current events to encourage his parishioners to become active members of society.[90] And while a professor at Union Theological Seminary he was appreciated by his students for bringing "the inside story from the outside world, [for] poking holes in the stone wall that separated the seminary from 'real life.'"[91]

But his greatest motivation was to promote the role of religion as one which projected the ideal ends of service, sacrifice, and benevolence, and to generate the necessary passion to realize them in society. While Niebuhr strongly disbelieved in the possible actualization of these ideals, he wanted Christianity to serve as a generator of activists. His question became: is the man who idealizes and actualizes a centralization of wealth unethical, even if

[87] Fox, Richard W. *Reinhold Niebuhr, A Biography*, 1985, p. 64-65.
[88] *Ibid.*, p. ix.
[89] Fox, Richard Wightman. *The Wilson Quarterly*. Autumn 1984. Vol. VIII, no. 4, p. 85.
[90] Fox, Richard W. *Reinhold Niebuhr, A Biography*, 1985, p. 66-67.

he may technically earn it? The actions of service and sacrifice bear heavily

upon ethics. As Joel Rosenthal acknowledged:

> Ethics, according to Niebuhr and most of his realist colleagues, is all about evaluating competing moral claims. This evaluation must ultimately be done by individuals who live within the confines of a particular historical moment, replete with all of the contingencies that moment provides, including their membership in different social groups. These individuals face real choices with real constraints, and it is they who are charged with translating their decisions into public action.[92]

As such, both Niebuhr and James pushed their contemporaries to think and

consider various elements of society and to act upon those considerations.

Bruce Kuklick quotes James as stating: "I have discussed the kinds of risk; I

have contended that none of use escape all of them; and I have only pleaded

that it is better to face them open-eyed than to act as if we did not know them

to be there."[93] Niebuhr beseeched his fellow men in the same way as he

helped to lead the American people past their doubt and disillusions to

realistic, yet acceptable views of the nature of man. For him, all good has its

necessary elements of bad, and it is better to recognize these elements and

accept and challenge them, than to ignore them and fan their flames.[94]

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[91] *Ibid.*, p. 112.
[92] Rosenthal, Joel H. *World Policy Journal.* Summer 1995, v12, n2, p. 94.
[93] James, William. *Pragmatism,* 1981, p. xv.
[94] Fox, Richard W. *The Wilson Quarterly.* Autumn 1984. Vol. VIII, no. 4, p. 83-84.

Conclusion: The Current Relevance of James and Niebuhr

The questions facing the contemporary scholar, ethicist, social activist, intellectual — the members of society — are not much different than the questions facing James and Niebuhr. We still must determine how to account for moral considerations when defining national interest, how to incorporate ethical behavior in our individual lives, how to define and where to search for God, and what actions render legitimate answers, outcomes, and truths. Re-examining James and re-evaluating Niebuhr in the context of James is important and valuable for helping us to answer these questions. The influence of Niebuhr's pragmatism can be recognized specifically in three categories of current society: American intellectualism; belief in and practice of Christianity; and new paradigmatic thought on reductionism, complexity, and the fields of science and religion.

American Intellectualism

In the study of American intellectualism, William Dean, author of *The Religious Critic In American Society*, classifies James in the following manner: "James acquired a sense of the American whole and became a public intellectual. But to make way for this, James had, first, to confront and to overcome an emotional confusion and a disregard for the public, which

resembles the confusion and disregard now prevalent among American academic intellectuals."[95] Such confusion and disregard is partially a function of the professionalization and narrowing in scope of academic and industrial institutions. These phenomena encourage American intellectuals to remain in their ivory towers and to forego application of that which they study to "real life," or to avoid becoming a part of the public arena.

Yet James solicited "a philosophy that will not only exercise your powers of intellectual abstraction, but that will make some positive connexion [sic] with this actual world of finite human lives."[96] The beauty and complexity of pragmatic thinking and especially James' *Pragmatism*, is that it "exists in that uncertain, complex space between public and professional philosophy. One agenda in pragmatism points toward the technical development of a new conception of truth; another, toward a public imperative."[97] James, although not necessarily politically or socially active, spoke to an audience of a much different make-up than today's academic audience. His congregation was of the American public, blue-collar workers, the actors as well as the thinkers of American society. He sought an engagement with life from an intellectual perspective -- what he experienced and thought based on that experience became truth. ". . . I think, therefore, that however particular questions connected with our individual destinies may be answered, it is only by acknowledging them as genuine questions, and

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[95] Dean, William. *The Religious Critic in American Culture*, 1994, p. 52.
[96] James, William. *Pragmatism*, 1981, p. 13.
[97] Cotkin, George. *William James, Public Philosopher*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. 161.

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living in the sphere of thought which they open up, that we become profound."[98]

Niebuhr, as seen, not only encouraged participation by his audience, students, and colleagues, but regularly engaged in it himself, making himself known as a political theorist, as well as pastor and theologian. Furthermore, Niebuhr was able to maintain the connection between Christianity and public life, in a way we struggle to do today. As Niebuhr stated early in his career, "'The new world is filled with men who are pathetically incapable of doing anything with life outside the rounds of their specialization.'" Niebuhr took comfort in "the example of William James, 'who was in many respects an amateur philosopher rather than a professional.'"[99] In defiance of professionalization, Niebuhr wrote to benefit the public. An evaluation of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* demonstrates this: ". . . Niebuhr's book does offer us a way to gauge where we have been, where we are, and where we might go on this vital issue of how we should relate our private convictions to our public commitments."[100] The very fact that we still employ ethics which demand lively thinking on a religious, philosophical, and intellectual level demonstrates that James' theory and Niebuhr's actions serve as excellent guides to our impending reconnection of intellectual abstraction with the actual world of finite human lives.

[98] James, W. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1961, p. 388.
[99] Fox, Richard W. *Reinhold Niebuhr, A Biography*, 1985, p. 110.
[100] Rosenthal, Joel H. *World Policy Journal*. Summer 1995, v12, n2, p. 90.

Modern Christianity in Light of James and Niebuhr

The philosophies of James and the theology of Niebuhr are carried out by many people who seek God in any fashion. As James states, pragmatism "widens the search for God" -- "a belief in spiritual powers essential to the being of the universe was also necessary to make life significant."[101] Niebuhr assessed James' religious pragmatism as an assertion of ultimate meaning.[102] James wanted both significance and meaning, but believed that "men should *believe* -- to the extent of staking their lives on the truth of their beliefs. . . . men must still find some way . . . by which they can draw upon their latent energies, run risks, and act together, for an object of faith."[103] In essence, whatever religion men assumed, it must work for them in the struggle against evil, in the search for understanding, it must be comforting. This mandate for religion applies equally as well to our modern struggles which still embody evil, understanding, and a basic need for reassurance and comfort.

The need for such a religion was implored by Niebuhr as well -- he pleaded for the human race to recognize the necessity of a meaningful existence. Since Niebuhr's writings are more recent than those of James, it is understandable that they may appear more useful and applicable to current religious thinking. Yet they are most appropriately summarized by James' own insight of human nature and our use of God:

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[101] Kuklick, Bruce. *Pragmatism* by William James, 1981, p. xiv.
[102] Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* by William James, 1961, p. 5.

> The notion of God, however inferior it may be in clearness to those mathematical notions so current in mechanical philosophy, has at least this practical superiority over them, that it guarantees an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved. . . . This need of an eternal moral order is one of the deepest needs of our breast.[104]

Religion in the Halls of Science

Handling the clear, rational, and mechanical ways of science in the company of seemingly contrasting religion is the last modern category to which I would like to apply James and Niebuhr. When Niebuhr published *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he was seeking a motivational force for radicals, a force to overcome social inertia -- a problem prevalent still today -- a force not dependent upon scientific reason. Science as we currently know it is based upon a reductionist paradigm in which the whole equals the sum of its parts. As Niebuhr acknowledged in his *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, science analyzes, segregates, divides, and relates with observable sequences.[105]

This paradigm has been applied to humanitarian studies and has resulted in a segregated society of thinkers, of academic fields, of people. Looking at people or groups of people as parts or sums of wholes does not work -- it is not pragmatically viable. In his essay "The Dilemma of Determinism," James admits that he fears that "those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall

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[103] Perry, Ralph Barton. *Essays on Faith and Morals*, by William James, 1947, p. vi.
[104] James, William. *Pragmatism*, 1981, p. 51.
[105] Niebuhr, Reinhold. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 1935.

be,"[106] leading to a deterministic world. As James stated, "science and metaphysics would come much nearer together, would in fact work absolutely hand in hand"[107] if pragmatism was the norm. Bruce Kuklick affirms that James "attempts to link the facts of nature and spirit, of science and religion,"[108] both in his writing and his work as a physician and philosopher. Niebuhr proposes a similar idea, to use philosophy to "mediate between science and religion, 'bring the religious myth into. . . [terms of] rational coherence with all the detailed phenomena of existence which science discloses.'"[109] As William Dean notes, James' theory that "decisions, interests, and even impromptu speculations give rise not only to theories but, more importantly, to facts"[110] has affected noted philosophers and scientists including Paul Feyerabend, author of *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*, Thomas Kuhn, in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Graham Rees and his reassessment of Francis Bacon, and Stephen Jay Gould, author of many noted books about evolution, philosophy and the quirks of both fields.[111] And such an effect is promising, for James calls upon our unscientific contemplation: "A moral question is a question not of what sensibly exists, but of what good or would be good if it did exist. Science can tell us what exists; but to compare the *worths*, both of

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[106] James, William. "The Dilemma of Determinism," *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979, p. 117.
[107] James, William. *Pragmatism*, 1981, p. 28.
[108] *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
[109] Fox, Richard W. *Reinhold Niebuhr, A Biography*, 1985, p. 162.
[110] Dean, William. *The Religious Critic in American Culture*, 1994, p. 46.
[111] *Ibid.*, p. 46, see footnote number 19.

what exists and of what does not exist, we must consult not science, but what

Pascal calls our heart."[112]

A Final Conclusion

The effects of James on Niebuhr and, in turn, of both James and

Niebuhr on current academia and society are profound and important. An

assessment of James demonstrates this: "We are drawn to James because he

forcefully confronted the essential problems of modernity -- the metaphysics

of the abyss, the bewildering plurality of the world growing at the edges, the

nightmare of reason, and the numbing freedom of subjectivity."[113] Similarly,

Niebuhr's biographer states:

> . . . a study of his theology must begin with the central fact that it was intimately
> linked to his social and political views. He self-consciously eschewed the label
> 'theologian;' he was, he insisted, a teacher of 'social ethics.' It will take a number of
> sustained inquiries from different perspectives to measure the full significance of his
> work. Taken together, however, they will still fall short. It is a sign of his stature
> that each generation will have to confront him anew.[114]

Simply enough, one may argue that James and Niebuhr are still relevant and

worth considering because the human condition has not changed drastically

enough since either man lived. We still confront the mire of truth and the

difficulties of religious faith. We are still embroiled over the theories and

actions of politics. We are still very much in touch with James' ideal of

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[112] James, William. *Essays on Faith and Morals*, 1947, p. 53.
[113] Cotkin, George. *William James, Public Philosopher*, 1990, p. 1.

pragmatism, "the *character* of reality."[115] Our commonality is perhaps best

phrased by Niebuhr:

> All men who live with any degree of serenity live by some assurance of grace. In every life there must be at least times and seasons when the good is felt as a present possession and not as a far-off goal. The sinner must feel himself 'justified,' that is, he must feel that his imperfections are understood and sympathetically appreciated as well as challenged. Whenever he finds himself in a circle of love where he is 'completely known and all is forgiven' something of the mercy of God is revealed to him and he catches a glimpse of the very perfection which has eluded him.[116]

But most essentially, both Niebuhr and James help us to still answer the

question of why do we have or need morals, for:

> In as far as the world exists at all it is good; for existence is possible only when chaos is overcome by unity and order. But the unity of the world is threatened by chaos, and its meaningfulness is always under the peril of meaninglessness. The ultimate confidence is the meaningfulness of life, therefore, rests upon a faith in the final unity, which transcends the world's chaos as certainly as it is basic to the world's order.[117]

[114] Fox, Richard W. *Reinhold Niebuhr, A Biography*, 1985, p. x.
[115] James, William. "Notebook O, Notes for Wellesly Talks." *James Family Papers*, Houghton Library, Harvard University, c. 1905.
[116] Fox, Richard W. *Reinhold Niebuhr, A Biography*, 1985, p. 152.
[117] Niebuhr, Reinhold. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 1935, p. 38.

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