**Politics in a New Key: The political vision of William James’s pragmatism**

William James was long considered a thinker disengaged from politics. He rarely engaged the canon of political thought, and his pluralism has a strikingly individualistic dimension. For James, to believe in pluralism is to see each one of ourselves as indispensable to the dynamic creation of the universe. Novelty in the universe emerges through the unique preferences, beliefs, and actions of each individual. Hence for James, even though there may be very “little difference between one man and another…what little there is, *is very important.*”[[1]](#footnote-1) As James admits himself, there is an important individualistic tenor to his work.

This focus on the individual has led many scholars to criticize James as apolitical. For them, the individual is an “unfortunate encumbrance” limiting his engagement with politics. Or as Cornell West puts it, James’s philosophy is one of “political impotence.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Recently, however, there has been a great effort at resuscitating the political significance of James’s thought. This new group of scholars argue that the individual is central to James’s political contribution, and my paper partakes in the effort.

In the first section, I examine the work of James Albrecht and Stephen Bush, as exemplars of this new scholarship. Yet there is something lost in Albrecht meticulous reading of habits in *Principles of Psychology* and Bush’s study of experience in *Varieties of Religious Experience.* They eithertranslate James into the language of John Dewey’s social philosophy or that of democratic theory. James’s political contribution, however, is not captured by either of this vocabulary—nor by republicanism, socialism, or anarchism for that matter. As Colin Koopman puts it, James presents a “politics in a new key.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Moreover, both Albrecht and Bush are caught up in a view of institutional reform as the locus of political agency. But James’s politics, I argue, is not limited to institutional design. In the second section, I propose that we take James’s *critique* of institutions seriously as a starting point for unlocking his political vision. This new focus brings to light James’s concerns about political passivity and acquiescence, as well as his account of the psychology underlying this phenomena. In short, James demonstrates an individual entangled in the world—“always already relationally imbricated in the structures, myths, and values” of the world surrounding it—and this imbrication demonstrates that we interact with the world not only by acting, but also by *not* acting, through our beliefs, passions, and desires.[[4]](#footnote-4) This is the unique political lesson to be drawn from James’s essays and lectures, one that places the ethical at the heart of the political.

**Word Count: 497**

1. William James, “The Importance of Individuals” in *Writings 1878-1899* Bruce Kucklick (New York: Library of America, 1992) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 60 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Colin Koopman, William James’s Politics of Personal Freedom,’ *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, no. 2 (2005): 175-186, 182 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alexander Livingston, *Damn Great Empires!: William James and the Politics of Pragmatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 163 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)