

One Hundred Years of *Pragmatism*

William James's provocative answer to the problem of maintaining religious belief in the modern age remains perhaps America's most significant contribution to philosophy and a source of inspiration for contemporary thinkers.

BY THEO ANDERSON

WHEN WILLIAM JAMES RETIRED FROM HARVARD in 1907, after 35 years on the school's faculty, it felt like the beginning of a new life. As Professor James, he once confessed to his brother, Henry, "I always felt myself a sham, with its chief duties of being a walking encyclopedia of erudition. I am now at liberty to be a *reality*." Perhaps no retirement has ever begun more productively than James's. *The New York Times* ran a long article about his new book, *Pragmatism*, and

THEO ANDERSON is a doctoral candidate in history at Yale University. He is currently completing a dissertation on religious and cultural transformation in the United States between 1890 and 1940.



"Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with," observed William James, shown here in a 1910 portrait, "but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found?"

reported that his ideas were taking the public square by storm. “When he appears on the lecture platform, breathlessly listening crowds greet him as the messenger of some new gospel. Business men are caught disputing over their lunches about the correct meaning of the word employed to designate the new faith.” *Pragmatism* went through several printings in its first year and helped set the agenda for James’s brief retirement. He spent much of his time refining aspects of his philosophy and defending it from critics, until he succumbed to a chronic heart condition in 1910, at the age of 68.

WILLIAM JAMES WITNESSED the dawn of American modernity—and also helped to shape it.

The interest swirling around *Pragmatism*’s publication was not wholly unexpected. James had been a renowned American intellectual since at least 1890, and several of his works on religious themes—notably, *The Will to Believe* (1897) and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)—had gained a wide readership. But no one could have predicted just how momentous *Pragmatism*’s publication would be—no one, that is, but James himself. Not long before the book’s appearance, he wrote to Henry that the intellectual currents it contained were “something quite like the protestant reformation.” He wouldn’t be surprised, he said, if the book were someday “rated as epoch-making.”

For all its half-joking hubris, that prediction proved well founded. *Pragmatism* became America’s most important contribution to the life of the mind in the 20th century. Filtered through scores of later interpreters, it percolated across a broad segment of academic culture and influenced disciplines as diverse as literary criticism and legal theory. And, in sharp divergence from the typical trajectory of scholarly works and theories, its importance has only increased with the passage of time, particularly

among scholars of a postmodernist persuasion. Like these contemporary academic thinkers in literature, history, and other humanistic disciplines, James always insisted that the human capacity to grasp reality is radically limited—that there is no “God’s-eye” perch available to us. “Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with,” as he once put it, “but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found?”

James’s embrace of uncertainty goes to the heart of the pragmatic philosophy, which denies the existence of fixed, absolute truth and seeks to under-

mine the notion that first principles are reliable guides to human behavior. For the pragmatist, truth is not a static essence but rather a provisional, ever-evolving relationship between ideas and their consequences. A true idea is

one that, if put into practice, achieves its intended result. “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it,” James wrote in his most famous summary of pragmatism. “Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events.” Consider a simple example James once gave. When you meet a new person, there are several possible results: She might like you, dislike you, or be indifferent. Whatever outcome you anticipate, it can only be made true in the actual encounter. And—a critical point—your idea about what her response will be often shapes that response. Believing she will like you makes that outcome more likely, and vice versa.

We don’t passively experience reality, in other words. We actively *shape* it. This idea at the core of pragmatism has deeply radical consequences when translated into a comprehensive vision. Pragmatism holds that traditional philosophy’s quest to discern the “really real” is misguided—a waste of time that leaves humans ill equipped to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world. What we need are not first principles that line up with some dubious, pre-ordained truth about the way things are; rather, we need better methods for creating and testing our

ideas, so that they help us become the kind of people we want to be and build the kind of world we hope to live in. “It is both astonishing and depressing,” wrote John Dewey, the most influential proponent of pragmatism after James, “that so much of the energy of mankind has gone into fighting for . . . the truth of creeds, religious, moral and political, as distinct from what has gone into effort to try creeds by putting them to the test of acting upon them.” In *Pragmatism*, James wrote that abstractions such as God and Reason become existential security blankets: “You can rest when you have them. . . . But if you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any such words as closing your quest. You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience. It appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be *changed*.”

This definition of truth as a provisional, evolving relationship between ideas and consequences stands as a direct challenge to orthodox religion. For the religiously orthodox, truth is something to be accepted and defended rather than “made” in the realm of human experience. And therein is a curiosity worth exploring on the centennial of *Pragmatism*’s publication. In light of the book’s radical conception of truth, it might appear to clash with the religious interests that occupied much of James’s time and energy. Yet his reference to *Pragmatism*’s publication as an event akin to the Reformation was apt, because the overriding aim of James’s career was to defend religious faith from the onslaughts of modernity. *Pragmatism*, far from a departure from that project, was its culmination.

Recovering the sources of James’s radical reimagining of truth and religion must begin with a brief account of the family and the culture in which he came of age.

In 1878, when he was 36 and preparing to move out of his parents’ home, James signed a contract to write his first book, a survey of the fledgling field of psychology. He told his fiancée, Alice, that royalties from its publication would help support them, but by the time he completed it he had buried both

parents, held appointments in three different academic departments, and fathered five children. The manuscript took 12 years to finish, ran to more than 1,000 pages, and was a decade overdue. The sight of it nauseated him. James grumbled to his publisher that with another decade of tinkering he could trim it by half, but “as it stands it is this or nothing—a loathsome . . . mass, testifying to nothing but two facts: 1st, that there is no such thing as a *science* of psychology, and 2nd, that W. J. is an incapable.” Despite these misgivings, production proceeded throughout the summer, and *The Principles of Psychology* appeared in September 1890. It instantly established James’s reputation as one of the most formidable psychologists in the world. Encouraged by its reception, James revised and condensed the book into a text for college courses, *Psychology: The Briefer Course*.

The renown that James achieved with *Principles* and *The Briefer Course* opened up a new world of opportunities in public lecturing. In late 1891, the Harvard Corporation commissioned him to deliver a series of 10 lectures in the university’s new Department of Pedagogy. In subsequent years, he repeated these talks at Harvard’s summer programs and took them on the road, speaking to teachers across the nation. But James set his sights far higher than simply translating academic psychology into practical advice for educators. Throughout the 1890s, he also developed a set of popular lectures that were religious in the widest sense. They were aimed mainly at college students, and their openhearted earnestness, vaguely embarrassing in this more ironic age, is captured in their titles: “Is Life Worth Living?” for example, and “What Makes a Life Significant.” James began the former essay with a reference to the “deepest heart of all of us,” where “the ultimate mystery of things works sadly.”

He had personal reasons for broaching basic existential questions with audiences poised on the brink of adulthood. His own experience had taught him just how lonely the “lonely depths” could be, and how fragile one’s psychic resources in the face of shattering depression. In one of his books, James included the striking story of a correspondent. Going about his business one day, the man was thunderstruck by the

memory of an epileptic patient he had once seen in an asylum: a “black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches. . . . He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human.” As James later admitted, this harrowing experience was actually his own: “*That shape am I, I felt, potentially. . . . After this the universe was changed for me altogether. I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since.*”

James was so deeply affected by this experience because the boy in the asylum had become an embodiment of the philosophical question of free will: Do we control our own behavior and fate, or is the feeling of control only an illusion? James had suffered bouts of depression throughout his twenties, but in 1870, at the age of 28, he sank into the suicidal despair described above. Its source was the dread of being an utterly determined creature. “Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate,” he wrote of the mental patient, “if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him.” The example was extreme, perhaps, but for James it pressed home the horrifying idea that all his behavior might be driven by mental processes that lay beyond his conscious control.

In late April 1870, while reading an essay by the French philosopher Charles Renouvier, James had a sort of secular conversion experience. As he explained it, he “saw no reason why his definition of free will—‘the sustaining of a thought *because I choose to* when I might have other thoughts’—need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate I will assume for the present—until next year—that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.” Though he cast this decision as little more than a thought experiment, he clung to it for 40 years as the only hope of sanity and survival.

This was the context for James’s foray into popular lectures on existential questions in the 1890s. They apparently met a widespread need. He first delivered his lecture “What Makes a Life Significant,” for example, at Stanford, Bryn Mawr, and other college campuses in 1898. It was then collected with

some of his educational psychology lectures and published the following year as *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*. The book went through two printings in its first two years and was reprinted every year but one until James’s death.

Sensitive to the charge of being a mere popularizer, James vowed often to write another traditional academic monograph like his *Principles of Psychology*. The closest he ever came was an unfinished introduction to basic philosophical questions for college students. Instead, he spent most of the last decade of his life tacking between two poles. If *Principles* was a formidable monograph, and his public lectures in the 1890s had a distinctly homiletic flavor, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and *Pragmatism* were serious works of scholarship that were highly accessible to general audiences. The continuing appeal of both books is partly explained by James’s graceful, lively prose. But many gifted writers from James’s era have long since been forgotten, and the vast majority of scholarship is outdated within a few decades. Why, a century hence, is James’s work still read, and why does it still seem relevant? Audiences turned to him because he addressed fundamental questions during a period of wrenching changes and shifting foundations. James remains important because he witnessed the dawning of American modernity—and also helped to shape it. The issues he confronted were, and are, anything but academic.

William’s father, Henry James Sr., once said that skepticism was utterly foreign to him: He had never experienced it, not for a moment. And it does seem unlikely that Henry ever suffered much doubt. He had neither the time nor the energy, consumed as he was with refining and proclaiming his spiritual vision of reality, which was based on the writings of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. According to Henry, the divinity wasn’t so much an omnipotent being as the working out of a process: the evolution of humanity toward a higher, perfect state of being.

Henry never found much satisfaction in his labor,

yet he persevered year after year, trying to make his ideas clear while living off the fortune left to him by his father, a wealthy businessman in upstate New York. For his effort, he was repaid with nearly total indifference by the general public. Some of the Transcendentalists, particularly Ralph Waldo Emerson, did offer him friendship and gave him a sympathetic hearing. But eventually, even they grew tired of his eccentricities and constant hectoring. Trying to put a brave face on the matter, William once observed that if his father had been born in a different era, he “would have played a prominent, perhaps a momentous and critical, part in the struggles of his time, for he was a religious prophet and genius, if ever prophet and genius there were.” Whatever the truth of that assessment, Henry’s work became increasingly irrelevant as the years wore on.

Henry’s ambitions were thwarted, as William recognized, not only by his difficult personality but by the cultural context in which he wrote. Henry came of age in an antebellum milieu of intense religious ferment, but the revival was driven by the growth and spread of established denominations—mainly the Baptists and Methodists—and by the formation of new groups that proposed to restore “authentic” New Testament Christianity. It was a revival with theologically conservative implications. By contrast, William and his contemporaries began their adult lives in the aftermath of the Civil War and in a situation utterly foreign to his father’s experience: one of drift and doubt. The primary culprit was Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), which dealt a devastating blow to natural theology, the 19th century’s chief religious anchor. It held that the most persuasive proof of God’s existence can be seen all around us, in the intricacies and regularities of nature. But Darwin’s theory of natural selection destroyed the need for a designing deity and an ultimate purpose to reproduction. Noah Porter, the highly orthodox Christian president of Yale, summed up the rising unease

within religious circles when he lamented, in 1882, that “multitudes are drifting into the half-formed conviction that the reasons for faith seem one after another to be dissipated by the advance of science and culture.”

At the same time, a tide of centralization and standardization was sweeping American society. The rise of large corporations and the birth of “scientific management” meant that Americans were increas-

ADRIFT AND UNCERTAIN in the intellectual and religious spheres, America embraced new methods and means of standardization and control.

ingly brought within the compass of large organizations. Industrialization drove people from farms to cities and reduced to mere factory hands workers who had once possessed a degree of autonomy built on intimate knowledge of a craft or trade. A managerial class emerged to oversee the massive new corporate enterprises, and along with managers came new methods of tabulating, analyzing, and managing large populations. The corporate executives were joined by growing numbers of academics, bureaucrats, and other knowledge workers. By reducing the anonymous masses to hard numbers, administrators and reformers aimed to render society more orderly and rational—and thus more amenable to control and improvement.

This was the American scene that confronted James in his youth: adrift and uncertain in the intellectual and religious spheres, while at the same time embracing new methods and means of standardization and control. Throughout his life, James’s driving ambition was to answer the twin challenges of modernity, which meant fashioning a philosophy that could embrace the uncertainty of the modern condition

while also resisting the forces that undermined personal autonomy. His writings hang together as separate facets of this single project. *Pragmatism* was its most eloquent summation, but that “epoch-making” book was inseparable from the more frankly religious writings that preceded it, particularly *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

The question of conversion occupied a central place in *Varieties*, and Leo Tolstoy served as one of James’s central case studies. He drew on Tolstoy’s autobiography to

it,” he wrote, religion “shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*” This was unmediated Protestantism in its purest, most unfettered form. But what was the source of transcendence or redemption in such an unorthodox faith?

Here James turned to his background in psychology. He described the discovery of subconscious activity in the human mind as the most important development in

that discipline since his youth. Its existence led him to conclude that conversion resulted from eruptions of subconscious mental life into the “normal, waking consciousness.” This process had nothing in common with Christian conversion in any traditional sense. It

THE SUSPICION THAT JAMES was only a sympathizer with religion, not a true believer, remains difficult to shake.

describe the pall that descends over life when meaning disappears. “The questions ‘Why?’ and ‘What next?’ began to beset him more and more frequently,” James wrote. “At first it seemed as if such questions must be answerable, . . . but as they ever became more urgent,” they resisted resolution. Though physically healthy, Tolstoy was psychically and spiritually shattered by his late forties. “I sought like a man who is lost and seeks to save himself—and I found nothing,” Tolstoy said in describing his descent into depression. “I became convinced, moreover, that all those who before me had sought for an answer in the sciences have also found nothing.” He finally gained some peace by converting to Christianity in the late 1870s, and by extolling the simple faith of Russian peasants as the essence of true religion for the remainder of his long life. (He died in 1910.)

Tolstoy’s conversion account appealed to James on many levels, not least because churches and clergy played no role in it. Though James sometimes self-identified with Protestant Christianity, that label was accurate only in the narrowest cultural sense. Theologically, he was as heterodox as he was unsystematic—he theorized, for example, that there might be multiple deities. But if he was at most a marginal Christian, James was enthusiastically a Protestant. In *Varieties*, he pointedly reduced religion to its minimalist essence. “As I now ask you arbitrarily to take

didn’t result from divine intervention or effect eternal salvation. And yet it did have implications for religious faith, James believed. The existence of subconscious life suggested to him that other forms of consciousness might exist in the universe, hovering beyond our grasp. “The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist,” James wrote in the concluding paragraph of *Varieties*, “and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in.”

By the logic of James’s pragmatism, the idea that other realms of consciousness and higher energies exist in the universe cannot be taken on faith alone, and it can have no meaning outside the push and pull of human affairs. Like all other ideas, it must prove itself in the realm of experience. How, then, do humans put it to the test?

James resisted giving systematic formulation to his religious ideas, but perhaps his most explicit answer to that question is his discussion of prayer. It is, he wrote in *Varieties*, the “soul and essence” of religion. “Through prayer, religion insists, things which cannot be realized in any

other manner come about: energy which but for prayer would be bound is by prayer set free." This seems, at first glance, like the traditional relationship between an all-powerful God and supplicating humans. But James's understanding of the human-divine relationship was reciprocal. We need the help of the higher energies, but the divinity needs our help as well. For James, the moral striving of an individual does matter in some ultimate sense; it lends power to the forces of light in the universe. Human existence, as James wrote in a remarkable passage in one of his popular lectures, "*feels like a real fight—as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem; and first of all, to redeem our own hearts from atheisms and fears. For such a wild, half-saved universe our nature is adapted.*"

James thus inverted one of Christianity's central themes. He focused not on God's redemptive work on behalf of humanity but rather on humanity's redemptive work in cooperation with God. And he added another twist: The final result of all human struggle and striving might be a redeemed universe that does not include

individual salvation. His speculations on personal immortality were contradictory, and he finally settled on a hopeful "maybe," but he never expended much energy on the question. True to his pragmatism, he treated eternal life as beside the point. What ultimately mattered for James was not the possibility of eternal life in some other realm but human behavior in this one. His redeemed universe served as an ideal for which humans should fight—a goad to moral effort—but the exact nature of that redemption remained mysterious.

James's inversion of some religious tenets and indifference to others is difficult to square with his own self-identification as a believer. One of his colleagues and former students at Harvard, George Santayana, once wrote that his mentor "did not really believe; he merely believed in the right of believing that you might be right if you believed." Commentators ever since have speculated on the authenticity of James's faith. If we credit him with any sincerity at all, James genuinely did believe in the power of prayer and the existence of higher energies. Still, the suspicion that he was only a sympathizer with religion, not a true believer, remains difficult to shake. The question



"In prayer, spiritual energy, which otherwise would slumber, does become active, and spiritual work of some kind does become effected really," James wrote.

lingers: Did James make a case for faith, or a case for faith in faith? Is the ultimate object of belief simply one's own will to believe?

In *Pragmatism*, James didn't so much answer this question as come down on both sides of it. The book's driving, deeply personal ambitions were to affirm human

FOR A THINKER so focused on the implications of human struggles, James devoted remarkably little attention to the political debates of his era.

freedom and help humans navigate the uncertainty of this earthly realm. James's theory of truth addressed the latter goal by denying recourse to divine revelation as a guide for human action. Rather than being vouchsafed from an eternal realm, James said, truth "grows up inside of all the finite experiences. They lean on each other, but the whole of them, if such a whole there be, leans on nothing." *Pragmatism's* later, secular uses flow from this aspect of James's thought, which is his most important philosophical contribution and his most controversial idea. By denying truth's transcendent essence, he seemed to undermine the foundations of faith. But if he did so, it was for the purpose of creating a new foundation. In James's vision, truth making was bound up tightly with the practice of prayer, the harnessing of higher energies, and the possibility of cosmic redemption, whatever form it might take.

In *Pragmatism's* closing pages, he asked readers to imagine a deity who, before creating the world, had issued a challenge to humans. The world it intended to create was "not certain to be saved" but was "a world the perfection of which shall be conditional," that condition being the good-faith effort of individuals. "I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwaranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk?" This was quintessential James. If we begin with

the premise of uncertainty, as he thought we must, we can find hope and courage by believing that our daily struggles contribute to an unfinished cosmic battle.

Nothing could be further from skepticism or determinism. Where orthodox religion posits certain answers and an all-controlling God, James's religious vision offers only uncertain answers and an uncertain future. The details—the nature of the deity, the fate of individual souls and of the universe—remain veiled in mystery. Perhaps there is nothing behind the veil but a void, after all. And yet: Perhaps believing in the existence of higher energies—and *acting* on that belief—helps make them true, helps the redemptive forces in the universe to ultimately "win through."

For a thinker so insistently focused on the implications of human struggles, James devoted remarkably little attention to the political debates of his era. His own youthful struggle against despair, and the leap of faith that saved him from suicide, were always the wellsprings of his thought, and he focused mainly on the broadest macro and narrowest micro levels: the cosmos and the individual.

Nonetheless, James's work did have profound consequences for American politics and society. In his own time, his theory of truth gave momentum to a wave of reform measures that aimed to make American institutions more responsive to human needs. Progressive theorists recognized that American corporations and government bureaucracies had grown too big, too fast, while their practices remained caked over with 19th-century laissez-faire economic and social theory. As Walter Lippmann wrote in *Drift and Mastery* (1914), "We can no longer treat life as something that has trickled down to us. . . . In endless ways we put intention where custom has reigned. We break up routines, make decisions, choose ends, select means."

Lippmann judged this new way of thinking to be the "profoundest change that has ever taken place in human history." The claim is dramatic but nonetheless correct, and it goes to the heart of why pragmatism was—and remains—

enormously influential and controversial. In the pragmatic philosophy that the young Lippmann took as his gospel, nothing is certain but the fact of perpetual change. There are no final truths, no fixed meanings, no extrahuman foundations on which to build human societies and construct moral systems. The pragmatic method—rooted solely in human experience and intelligence—is our only guide.

Lippmann was among the scores of students James taught and befriended as they passed through Harvard. Others included W. E. B. DuBois and Gertrude Stein, suggesting the range of his influence on early-20th-century political and artistic movements. The effect of his ideas took unanticipated forms, though, because James's vision of pragmatism barely survived his death. In Lippmann's writings, and more important in John Dewey's, the supernatural element was displaced by an emphasis on scientific method. But here is the curious thing about James's work. His religious vision and his theory of truth not only survived the decoupling. They flourished. And their influence has only risen in the wake of the anti-authoritarian political, religious, and academic currents that swept America in the 1960s.

On the religious side, James's writings contain glimmerings of the spirituality industry that would burgeon in the later 20th century. He posited other realms of consciousness and higher energies as agents of human "empowerment," themes that have become ubiquitous among self-help authors. James likely would have deplored much of this genre, yet it is in some ways a logical outgrowth of his emphasis on the pragmatic consequences of faith. The ecumenism of the self-help genre is also quintessentially Jamesian: Spirituality is presented as an unmediated relationship between the individual and the divine. Institutions only get in the way.

On the other side, James's influence endures among theorists who have borrowed and built on his pragmatism. Though most are frankly secular in outlook, they are in fact grappling with ancient religious themes in new guises, circling around the same pressing questions that James faced: Is there an absolute grounding for truth? Is there any hope of redemption? Do humans possess free will in any meaningful sense? Many of the 20th century's eminent intellectuals and theorists of modernity—from the German sociologist Max Weber to the French theorist Michel Foucault—found little reason

to answer those questions affirmatively. Weber saw an "iron cage" of soulless, bureaucratic rationality descending over the West. Foucault described a world in which Enlightenment rationality, far from delivering on its promise of human liberation, circles back and ensnares the liberated in ever-constricting webs of coercion and control.

James's pragmatism departed decisively from this critique. It was a forceful statement that human efforts do matter, and that humans are fundamentally free beings. He was hardly blind to the perils of an increasingly bureaucratized, centralized, and numbingly impersonal world. On occasion, he could be as bleak and acerbic as the most despairing of cynics. Yet he finally came down on the side of faith and hope. It was an uncertain faith and a hard-won hope, and orthodox believers and thoroughgoing skeptics alike have found much to deride in James's thought. "His wishes," as the wry Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. once wrote, "made him turn down the lights so as to give miracles a chance."

But James wasn't hoping for miracles—not of the divine sort, in any case. His point was that humans make miracles happen by individual initiative. He persistently directed his audiences' attention to their own free will, navigating between the dogmatism of materialistic science and orthodox religion by yoking the earthly focus of science to the eternal hopes of religion. Without the possibility of some higher purpose underwriting human efforts, James feared, life becomes meaningless. But the grounds for hope and faith cannot be objectively and certainly true, given our limited perspective on "this moonlit and dream-visited planet." The onus rests on us to make them true.

James's thinking drew heavily on the work of many who came before him, of course, and a complex line of descent runs from his work to the modern pragmatists and self-help gurus who can claim him as their spiritual godfather. Still, the men and women who greeted James as "the messenger of some new gospel," as *The New York Times* reported in 1907, were on to something. *Pragmatism* did indeed herald a new way of thinking—indeed, a new way of being and acting—and James was the most eloquent prophet of the new age. Through various channels, his gospel "truth" has shaped and reshaped American life for a century, an epoch maker after all. ■