“The Worst Kind of Melancholy”: William James in 1869

James William Anderson

William James’s “spiritual crisis,” which culminated in 1869, was a six-year period of intense emotional and physical distress. Feeling that his will was paralyzed, and frequently suffering from depression, James also had eye and back trouble, insomnia, gastro-intestinal disturbances, and periodic exhaustion. On several occasions, he was tempted to kill himself. As he later commented, “I was entirely broken down before I was thirty.”

A nineteen-month trip to Europe in 1867-1868 had brought him no relief. Thus, when James reached his twenty-seventh birthday in January of 1869, he was living with his family in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

One reason James had abruptly terminated his trip to Germany and France was his belief that rest would lead to recovery, and that was more easily obtained on Quincy Street than in European boarding houses and spas. Several months after his return he was still clinging to this hope. He wrote to one of his friends, “...I have discovered that I must not only drop exercise, but also mental labor, as it immediately tells on my back.” He added, “I have consequently made up my mind to lose at least a year now in vegetating and doing nothing but survive.”

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1 William James to Hugo Münsterberg, 8 July 1891 (James Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, hereafter referred to as James Papers). Quotations from the James Papers are used by permission of Mr. Alexander R. James and the Houghton Library.


His mother believed in a different remedy — "moderate bodily activity." During one period in which physical activity and improved health coincided, she commented: "My theory about him (of which I said little) will I think be proved which is, that the complete rest which he kept up for so long was bad for him. . . ." But soon he had a relapse. Eventually, after claiming for so long that rest was the answer, James concluded that he got better "by going into town every day or paying a visit than by keeping [to] the house," but he added, "— not that I improve under it, but it's a less evil than the rest."4

The medical profession was of no greater help. J. J. G. Wilkinson, a physician and close friend of James's father, visited the family during 1869 and made a thorough examination of the young invalid. James's mother reported Wilkinson's impressions: "He says the original strain is not now the trouble but the morbid condition of his whole system which is the result of it." This analysis, of course, explains nothing. Wilkinson prescribed medications, "high dilutions of Rhus and Nux Vomica."5

In addition to Galvanism and hydrotherapy, another method of treatment involved chemically inducing boils on his back in an attempt to alleviate the pain. James tried, but failed, to find a correlation between any of these procedures and the state of his health. On one occasion he underwent a sudden relapse and thought the reason was that the efficacy of the boils had worn off. But then, "suddenly and without known cause," his health improved again. A few days later, he found that "the old weakness (equally without cause) has partially returned." On another occasion he noted that "there seem so many days now on which my state surprises me at not being as bad as I should from past experience have anticipated"; but he also found that interspersed with these days there "abound days of equally unexpected collapse."6

James was probably expressing his bewilderment at the causes of his own relapses and recoveries when he commented, after hearing that his brother Henry had inexplicably found some relief from back trouble in a "lifting cure," "What a dark business it all is, don't you think?"7

4 Mary James to Henry James, Jr., 8 August 1869 (James Papers). William James to Henry James, Sr., 27 December 1869 (James Papers).
5 Mary James to Henry James, Jr., 21 September 1869 (James Papers). Wilkinson practiced homeopathy, in which William James later developed an interest.
6 William James to Henry James, Jr., 2 October and 5 December 1869 (James Papers). Portions of these letters are in TCWJ, I, 306 and 311. However, part of what is quoted here was omitted from TCWJ.
7 William James to Henry James, Jr., 10 July 1868. (The last phrase has been translated
William James in 1869

Although James was unable to make sense of his distressing condition, he made one statement which can help organize our investigation. He noted that during this period of his life he was in a "state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospects." Although a medical student at Harvard, James had no intention of becoming a physician, and he also lacked any practicable alternatives. He did manage, however, to complete his medical degree during 1869, but the manner in which he did so illustrates his disinterest in medicine. To qualify for his degree, he had to write a thesis and pass an oral examination. Feeling listless, and plagued by numerous symptoms, he abandoned his hope of doing an original or challenging thesis. Instead he chose a safe, undemanding topic — the physiological effects of coldness — which he could write from secondary sources without doing any primary research.  

The minimum standards for the examination were no more stringent than for the thesis. From the time of his return to Cambridge, James read medicine to prepare for the examination, but he did so, as he put it, "lazily," without concentrated study. As 21 June, the date of the examination, approached, he became so anxious that he could not study at all. He considered himself "totally unprepared," and he felt his brain was "worth no more than so much old hay." But he knew he was unlikely to fail, if only because a close family friend was among the examiners. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., who was intimate with James's father and whose son was one of James's closest friends, was a professor at the medical school, and James realistically concluded that Holmes would be likely to "veto my being plucked no matter how bad my examination may be." As he had predicted, James passed the examination. Afterwards he said the examination was "trifling enough" but noted that his lack of preparation caused him "some embarrassment" in the part on midwifery.  

During the first half of 1869, his chief concern was finishing his work from German.) Similarly, James commented on another occasion that "the power which gave him his "faculties" "recall[s] them partially or totally when and in what order it sees fit" (William James to Henry James, Sr., 12 June 1869, in TCWJ, 1, 300).  


9 William James to Kate E. Havens, 24 February 1869 (James Papers); to Henry P. Bowditch, 22 May 1869, in TCWJ, 1, 295; to Bowditch, 2 June 1869 (James Papers); to Henry James, Jr., 12 June 1869, in TCWJ, 1, 299; to Bowditch, 12 August 1869, in The Letters of William James, ed. Henry James (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 1, 285 (hereafter referred to as LWJ).
in medicine. After receiving his degree, he had to confront the question of a career. While in Europe he had considered becoming involved in physiological research. But he had found that his various symptoms made it impossible for him to work in the laboratory. He had felt he needed a vocation which would provide meaning to his existence, and his conclusion had been that if he were to abandon permanently the possibility of becoming a scientist, he would feel "as if all value had departed from my life." Now he was flirting with the idea of studying psychology, no doubt because he thought the young science might provide insight into his non-organic problems. But he felt his condition prevented him even from reading seriously.10

For years his father, Henry James, Sr., had been arguing that he ought to become a scientist. For example, when William James at the age of seventeen expressed an interest in art, his father wrote to a friend, "I had always counted upon a scientific career for Willy. . . ." But the elder James did not advocate this career because he thought it suited his son's abilities or because he expected his son to find it fulfilling. Rather, Henry James, Sr., had a more personal aim: he was distressed that his theological ideas had received so little attention, and he hoped that his son, as a respected scientist and a defender of those ideas, would be in a position to gain a hearing for them.11 But, in fact, the more exposure William James had to science, the harder it became for him to accept his father's theology.

Furthermore, the elder James, even while advocating a scientific career for his son, did not conceal his disdain for this field. For example, after writing an article on "Swedenborg's Ontology" and learning that his son had had difficulty with it, James, Sr., wrote: "It is very evident to me that your trouble in understanding it arises mainly from the purely scientific cast of your thought just at present, and the temporary blight exerted thence upon your metaphysic wit." He went on to talk abusively of people who are "dupes of scientific activity" and who have "puerile" minds because they believe that answers can be found in the natural world. And then, as if to make sure that his son realized he was speaking of him, he added, "Now here it seems to me is exactly where you are as yet intellectually: in this scientific or puerile stage of progress. . . ."12

10 William James to Thomas W. Ward, 9 October 1868, in TCWJ, I, 287; to Henry P. Bowditch, 12 August 1869, in LWJ, I, 154.
12 Henry James, Sr., to William James, 27 September 1867, in TCWJ, II, 707-709.
To make matters even worse, William James’s mother, Mary James, stood for a position — practical and down-to-earth — which clashed with his father’s other-worldly emphasis.\textsuperscript{13}

James needed to look within himself and to select a vocation that stemmed from his sense of who he was, what he liked, and what his abilities were. But this was just what he was unable to do. Often when an individual is thrown into such confusion over his choice of career, it is because he does not have a fully consolidated self. Such an individual experiences life as if it were not real; he feels hollow; and he fears that the center of his personhood is in danger of giving way. Without a well-formed self, he lacks a foundation upon which to build a vocation.\textsuperscript{14}

Clearly, James’s depression over his vocational prospects was closely related to his “state of philosophical pessimism.” Indeed, Ralph Barton Perry, the scholar who first characterized this period of James’s life as a “spiritual crisis,” believed that James’s problems were, at heart, philosophical. He saw James’s spiritual crisis as “the ebbing of the will to live, for lack of philosophy to live by — a paralysis of action occasioned by a sense of moral impotence.”\textsuperscript{15} There is no doubt that James, both in his comments at the time and in his later reconstructions, portrayed his crisis in philosophical terms, but Perry failed to notice that James also viewed his philosophical concerns as inextricably tied to psychological factors. James was well aware that in his case the one could not be considered without the other.

James described his basic difficulty as being his lack of will power;


\textsuperscript{15} TCWJ. I. 322.
since the world appeared meaningless to him, he could not find a reason to act. In his diary he wrote that when the outer world "seems to me void or evil, my will is palsied. The difficulty: 'to act without hope,' must be solved." In his daily life in 1869, he not only found it hard to make long-range plans, he often could not bring himself to do anything but lie down. Even reading seemed too taxing. A sketch (Fig. 1) which he drew in his notebook sometime during the late 1860s vividly depicts his depression and lethargy.

Because he was "swamped in an empirical philosophy," he felt as if he had no will and as if every decision he thought he was making were actually determined by forces outside his control. He wrote in a letter to his friend Thomas W. Ward, "I feel that we are Nature through and through, and that we are wholly conditioned, that not a wiggle of our will happens save as a result of physical laws..."

His philosophical dilemma came out most clearly in a private note written during this period. He considered adopting the pursuit of truth as his purpose in life, but he felt this would lead to materialism. And materialism, he thought, failed to "supply any moral incentive" to a devotion to truth. Materialism, he went on, seemed to commend a "frivolous" instead of a "serious" reaction towards the world; in other words, materialism, in James's view, worked at cross-purposes to his attempt to find meaning in life.

Another alternative, he noted, might be to accept "superstition," by which he presumably meant an unquestioning religious faith. He concluded that "frivolity" — the consequence of materialism — and "a fool's paradise in superstition" were equally unacceptable to him.

Years later, in a transparently autobiographical essay, James cast light on his inability, in 1869, to sustain a belief in God, even though such a belief would have solved one of his most pressing problems by giving meaning to his life. He explored the origins of the "nightmare view of life," the view which led to a feeling of meaninglessness and pessimism and a temptation to commit suicide. Such a view, he suggested, was

16 William James, Diary (undated but probably from December 1869, James Papers). Several pages of the diary have been torn out, and the first remaining page after the missing section begins, "when the latter seems to me void and evil..." It is not possible to know with certainty what the referent of "the latter" was, but his other writing suggests that he was referring to the outer world in general.

17 William James to Thomas W. Ward, March 1869, in LWJ, 1, 152-153.

18 William James, Personal Note (undated, but probably from the period 1869-1873), in TCWJ, 1, 502-503.
grounded in "the contradiction between the phenomena of nature and the craving of the heart to believe that behind nature there is a spirit whose expression nature is." James had a "craving" to believe, but, looking at the outer world, he felt forced to conclude that it could not possibly be the expression of a divine spirit. The trouble for James was the existence of evil. As he wrote his brother, "I can't bring myself, as so many men seem able to do, to blink the evil out of sight and gloss it over. It's as real as the good, and if it is denied, good must be denied too." If a just God existed, James wondered, then how could there be so much evil in the world?

Seeking the answer, while in Europe, James had studied his father's ideas, only to conclude that they were not personally meaningful to him. The elder James, suffering as a young man from depression and fear not unlike what his son now faced, had found an answer in his

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19 William James, "Is Life Worth Living?" (1895), in William James, The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (New York: Longmans, Green, 1897), pp. 42, 40. Many of the comments in this essay are paraphrases or direct quotations of diary entries and personal notes which James made in the late 1860s and early 1870s. William James to Henry James, 7 May 1870, in LWJ, 1, 158.
personal version of Swedenborgianism. William James, seeing the comfort his father derived from his faith, probably still hoped his father's ideas would have a similar effect on him, for he turned to his father's philosophy again in 1869. Despite having found it wanting while in Europe, he read at least three of his father's books. He described his reactions in a letter to his brother Henry. James felt that he and his brother, with their serious health problems, were "victims" of the "evil in the world," but he could not understand "[f]or what purpose we are thus tormented." And, he went on, "I don't see that Father's philosophy explains it any more than anyone else's." He concluded that "many points which before were incomprehensible to me because doubtfully fallacious, I now definitely believe to be entirely fallacious."\(^20\) Once again, James had to admit that his father's theology simply could not work for him.

Although in 1869 James saw philosophical concerns as being at the root of his lack of will, years later he saw this same issue in psychological terms. The section entitled "The Obstructed Will" in The Principles of Psychology focused on what James called "abulia," that is, a lack of will power, the very problem that troubled him in 1869. James wrote that in a person suffering from abulia inner "ideas, objects, considerations" fail to "get to the will" — they "fail to draw blood" — and as a result they seem "distant and unreal." For some reason, which seemed inexplicable to James, a "pungent sense of effective reality" does not attach to the inner ideas of the individual with an obstructed will. For this person "moral knowledge" is "always there grumbling and rumbling in the background, — discerning, commenting, protesting, longing, half resolving." But this moral knowledge "never gets its voice out of the minor into the major key"; it "never takes the helm into its hands." The individual lives, according to James, with a "consciousness of inward hollowness" because of "habitually seeing the better only to do the worse," and this sense of hollowness "is one of the saddest feelings one can bear with him through this vale of tears."\(^21\)

James had himself in mind when he wrote about "the obstructed will." In one letter he described himself much as he depicted the individual suffering from abulia: "Two souls are in my breast; I see the

\(^{20}\) William James to Henry James, Jr.: 2 October 1869, in TCWFJ, I, 306-307; 25 October 1869, in TCWFJ, I, 307-308; 1 November 1869 (the date is omitted in TCWFJ), in TCWFJ, I, 151.

better and in the very act of seeing I do the worse.” In another letter he wrote, “I am a victim of neurasthenia, and of the sense of hollowness and unreality that goes with it.”

As James’s comments on “the obstructed will” illustrate, he realized that his abulia was not merely a philosophical phenomenon. The problem was not that he lacked ideas and morals; rather, it was that — for psychological reasons — he was not able to draw upon them, and they seemed “distant and unreal.” Again, consideration of this theme leads to James’s self. An individual whose self is not well developed finds, characteristically, that his inner goals are not strong enough to induce action because these goals do not feel as if they are deeply anchored. One psychoanalyst explains that such a person often feels impoverished because his self is thin, and the split-off parts of himself do not fuel his personality. The person is unable to forge a link between his inner motives and his actions; he feels hollow and suffers from something like what James called an obstructed will.

It would seem that James’s philosophical concerns and the state of his self, interacting with each other, precipitated his abulia. If he had lived in an era during which belief was secure and duty was clear, he may not have felt that life had no meaning, even if he had had the same difficulties. But James was exposed to intellectual currents which challenged the settled religious assumptions of his father’s generation. As James commented, the “times are past” when one could believe in the old-fashioned idea of a God who acts as a “Moral and Intelligent Conrider of the World”; “we of the nineteenth century, with our evolutionary theories and our mechanical philosophies,” he went on, cannot accept such a God. On the other hand, if he had been faced with the same philosophical concerns but did not have an underlying sense of hollowness, he probably would not have found his will obstructed. James’s friend, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., shared his concerns about a world that seemed to have lost meaning, but these concerns did not substantially trouble the future jurist, who kept living and working as he always had. James could find meaning neither when looking at the outside world nor when looking inside himself. As a consequence, he fell prey to a feeling of emptiness so profound that he became like the person he described in a later essay “who is on such terms with life that

22 William James to Shadworth H. Hodgson, 30 December 1885, in LWJ, I, 245; to George H. Howison, 17 July 1895, in TCFJ, II, 207.

the only comfort left him is to brood on the assurance, 'You may end it when you will.' ”

James’s crisis was deepened by his inability to sustain intimate relationships. He found himself feeling bitter towards his closest friends, Ward and Holmes. It was unusual for James to criticize anyone severely. But after Ward, who lived in New York City, had visited him in Cambridge, James described him as “unpleasantly egotistical and ostentatious of his eccentricity.” And he wrote that “the noble qualities” of Holmes, whom he continued to see from time to time, are “poisoned” by “cold-blooded conscious egotism and conceit.” He added, “... and friendly as I want to be towards him, as yet the good he has done me is more in presenting me something to kick away from or react against than to follow and embrace.”

That James criticized both Ward and Holmes for egotism suggests that he was uncomfortable with them because of his own uncertain self-esteem. Their confidence made more acute his inner view of himself as a “low-lived wretch” (to use a self-description which he one time offered in banter). He protected himself by viewing them as egotistical. Such an interpretation gains support from a comment James made to Holmes in a letter written from Germany. James candidly explained that Holmes had “a far more logical and orderly mode of thinking” than he did, and consequently “whenever we have been together I have somehow been conscious of a reaction against the ascendancy of this over my ruder processes. ...” The reaction, he added, was “caused by some subtle deviltry of egotism and jealousy” in himself, and he found the source of these feelings “untraceable.” As a result of them, he wrote, “I put myself involuntarily into a position of self-defense, as if you threatened to overrun my territory and injure my own proprietorship.” In short, he concluded, his chief reason for being uncomfortable with Holmes was his own “meanness.”

James was thousands of miles from Holmes when he wrote this letter, and he hoped that when they were together again he would no longer feel so insecure with him. But, as we have seen, James found it just as difficult to be with Holmes after returning to Cambridge.

24 William James, “Is Life Worth Living?” (note 19 above), pp. 43, 38. As an example of Holmes’s approach, see Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., to William James, 24 May 1896, in TcwJ, II, 458.

25 William James to Henry James, Jr., 12 June 1869 (James Papers), and 2 October 1869, in TcwJ, I, 307.

James fared no better in his relationships with young women than in his male friendships. Occasionally he spent time with Fanny Dixwell, an attractive and intelligent young woman who eventually married Holmes. But months would pass in which he failed to visit her. In the summer of 1869, while vacationing with his family in Pomfret, Connecticut, James passed many hours talking with Lizzie Booth, an artistic young woman who was also on a holiday in Pomfret. He experienced a temporary alleviation of his symptoms during the summer, and perhaps his flirtation with Lizzie was the chief reason. But he did not keep in touch with her after she left Pomfret. Another time of respite from depression was the week during which his “delightful” and “cheerful” cousin Mary (“Minny”) Temple visited the James family. After her visit, he apologized to his brother for having previously criticized her and explained that “she is more devoid of ‘meaness,’ of anything petty in her character than anyone I know.” But soon after her visit, Minny, who suffered from respiratory problems, left for California, and in March of 1870 she died of tuberculosis.

A decisive development also occurred during 1869 in the most significant romantic relationship James had in the years before he met his future wife. While in Europe, James had lived in Dresden in a boarding house run by a Frau Spangenberg, and for about three weeks an American woman named Kate Havens stayed in the boarding house too. James and Havens developed what Havens later described as “an intimate friendship.” He considered her to be lovely; the “extraordinary musical talent” which she displayed at the piano impressed him; and he found her “hysterical, hypochondriac” tendencies intriguing. James and Havens had many thoughtful conversations in Dresden, and they often went on rides together. He wrote to Ward at the time that she “has stirred chords in this dessicated heart which I long thought had turned to dust.”

27 William James to Henry P. Bowditch, 24-25 January 1869, in TCWF, 1, 293; 22 May 1869 (James Papers; the relevant portion of the letter was omitted from TCWF, 1, 295); 29 December 1869 (James Papers; the relevant portion was omitted from TCWF, 1, 320).
28 Mary James to Henry James, Jr., 24 July 1869 (James Papers); William James to Henry James, Jr., 5 December 1869 (James Papers; this portion of the letter was omitted from TCWF, 1, 311).
29 Kate E. Havens to Henry James (William James’s son), undated, but probably from July 1913 (James papers).
30 William James to Alice James, 14-15 May 1868 (James Papers), and to Thomas W. Ward, 24 May 1868, in TCWF, 1, 276.
31 William James to Thomas W. Ward, 24 May 1868, in TCWF, 1, 276.
On Christmas Day, 1868, and on 24 February 1869, James wrote long letters to Havens, who was still in Europe. In the second of these letters he hinted that he would like to see her:

I often remember back to those peaceful old days at Grandmother Spangenberg's . . . , to our discussions on the back piazza in the balmy evenings, etc., and wonder whether anything similar can ever take place again.\(^3\)

He arranged to visit Havens in New York after her return, and Frau Spangenberg wrote him that Havens was "counting heavily" on his visit. But the grandmotherly German woman advised him not to visit her if he wished that their relationship "should remain only a friendship," because "confidentially she wishes more than a friendship," and "she would certainly become sick again" if she were disappointed.\(^3\) Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine what occurred at this point. All we know is that Havens later wrote, "It was owing to the continuance of my nervous weakness that I felt obliged to discontinue our correspondence from 1869 until 1872, when it resumed. . . ."\(^4\) Apparently James was willing to risk having more than a friendship with Havens, but she abruptly terminated their correspondence. In any case, his experience with Havens in 1869 could only have aggravated his isolation.

He also was unable in 1869 to establish any satisfactory intimacy within his family. His relationship with his mother was particularly strained, although they did not express their hostility openly. She was aggravated by his "morbidly hopeless" temperament and his tendency to talk about his symptoms; he was angry about her lack of sympathy.\(^5\) He and his father kept their distance. James shared some affection with his sister, Alice, and often discussed his reading with her. But she had just undergone her first major breakdown in 1868; so, with the combination of her fragility and his, their closeness was severely limited.\(^6\) He and his brother Henry wrote to each other frequently and frankly, but Henry was in Europe, and both of them probably knew by this time that they were together their respective symptoms worsened.

\(^{3}\) William James to Kate E. Havens, 24 February 1869 (James Papers). (Part of this passage has been translated from German.)

\(^{3}\) Joanna Spangenberg to William James, 3 April 1869 (James Papers). (This quotation has been translated from German.)

\(^{4}\) Kate E. Havens to Alice H. James, 10 July 1913 (James Papers).


William James in 1869

"[T]he distant, cynical isolation in which we live with our heart's best brothers," James remarked to Ward, "sometimes comes over me with a deep bitterness. . . ." He feared that some defect in himself made him unable to maintain an intimate relationship; in his diary he commented, "Nature and life have unfitted me for any affectionate relations with other individuals." 37

James wrote a long personal note in which he explored his concerns about his isolation. He commented that two basic approaches are possible for any individual. The terms we would use today for these approaches are isolation and intimacy. James called the first of these "the centripetal, defensive" tendency; it amounts to "self-sufficingness," he wrote. He added that this is the approach which "the theological view" proposes. In it, "sympathy" — which for James was an emotionally charged word meaning an empathetic feeling of closeness — is "abridged." The disadvantage of this approach, he wrote, is that it requires "self-sufficiency," that is, it excludes the possibility of true intimacy.

James called the second approach the "expansive, embracing tendency" and commented that "sympathy" is central to it. The disadvantage of this approach, he pointed out, is that "sympathy gives pain." Still discussing the second approach, James continued, "Should sympathy go so far as to dictate suicide? As when I [because I am] sick become but an eyesore and stumbling block to others. . . ." Later in the note, he wrote more about the perils of closeness. He noted that before choosing closeness, he would have to determine three quantities. The first of these quantities is "how much pain I'll stand." The second is "how much other's pain I'll inflict (by existing)." And the third is "how much other's pain I'll 'accept,' without ceasing to take pleasure in their existence." 38

During 1869, James found it increasingly difficult to make contact with others. As he stated so clearly in his personal note, he experienced intimacy as bitterly painful. Not only did he find himself suffering when others became close to him, but he was tormented by the thought that his closeness to others caused them pain; in fact, this last thought was so disturbing to him that he even considered committing suicide in order to avoid inflicting pain on others. Whereas James might have,

37 William James to Thomas W. Ward, March 1869, in LWJ, I, 152. William James, Diary, 21 December 1869 (James Papers).
38 William James, Personal Note, Summer 1869 (James Papers). This note is published — but with important omissions — in TCWJ, I, 301-302.
through the acceptance, support, and admiration of others, built up his self, with increasing isolation grew the risk that his self — already so fragile — would fragment.

James did, in fact, undergo a temporary fragmentation experience in 1869. We know about the experience because he described it, while disguising his identity, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, but he did eventually reveal that the narrative was actually about himself.39 James presented his experience in the context of a discussion of people whose confrontations with melancholy have sensitized them to the existence of evil. He introduced his account by calling it an “excellent example” of “the worst kind of melancholy.”

One evening, probably in the autumn of 1869, James walked into his dressing-room, and “suddenly,” as he later wrote, “there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence.” In talking of this fear he seems to be referring to the feeling of losing his sense of reality. This sense of annihilation is what, according to recent psychoanalytic writing, an individual experiences when his self gives way.40

“Simultaneously,” James continued, “there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum. . . .” The patient had black hair and “greenish” skin, and he would sit all day “moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human.” (See Fig. 2, James’s drawing of a person who may be similar to the patient he described here.) At that moment, James had a frightening thought: “That shape am I, . . . potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him.” James apparently became aware of a primitive self image, deep within himself, which resembled the patient.

As a result of his “horror” of the patient and his realization of “my own merely momentary discrepancy from him,” James explained, “it was as if something hitherto solid within my breast gave way entirely, and I became a mass of quivering fear.” His image of something giving way within his breast is a particularly graphic metaphor for a self-fragmentation experience.

39 According to Theodore Flournoy, James told Frank Abrauzit, the French translator of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, that the account referred to his own experience (LWJ, 1, 145).

The "panic fear" which he felt at the moment receded. But "morning after morning" he awoke "with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach," and for months he was "unable to go out into the dark alone."  

As 1869 drew to a close, he apologized to one of his friends for not having written to him. "I have been a prey to such a disgust for life during the past three months as to make letter writing almost an impossibility." He added, "My own condition, I am sorry to say, goes on pretty steadily deteriorating in all respects. . . ."  

After the period of his "spiritual crisis" ended in the 1870s, he never again suffered from prolonged depression, the temptation to commit suicide, nor a chronic inability to work. But he continued for the rest of his life to struggle with psychological difficulties. In 1887, he wrote

41 William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, pp. 157-158.
42 William James to Henry P. Bowditch, 29 December 1869, in TCWJ, I, 320. The letter is among the evidence which suggests that the fragmentation experience occurred in the autumn of 1869. In William James: A Biography (New York: Viking Press, 1967), Gay Wilson Allen conveniently placed it after Minny Temple's death in early 1870, but the evidence from that period is inconsistent with James's account of the experience. In "The Making of a Scholar-Citizen" (unpublished), Larry Miller concludes that the experience probably took place in the late winter or autumn of 1869.
that he had a generally “miserable nervous system,” and in 1909, just a year before his death, he remarked that he had “carried,” throughout his life, “neurasthenic fatigue.”

Although James in his later years was a changed man in comparison to the James of the “spiritual crisis,” his experience in 1869 was not merely an aberration which students of his life and thought may overlook. The year 1869 fundamentally shaped his interests and his world view, including his attitude toward religion. James himself specifically commented, “I have always thought that this experience of melancholia of mine had a religious bearing.” Before his fragmentation experience, as we have seen, he was unable to sustain a belief in God. The only image he then had was of a masculine God, who was a rational “Conrander” of the universe. But during his fragmentation experience, James found himself relying on a maternal image of God, a God who protects and offers refuge to those who are in need. He wrote that during the experience he “clung to scripture-texts like ‘The eternal God is my refuge,’ etc., ‘Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden,’ etc., ‘I am the resurrection and the life,’ etc.” These thoughts, he believed, kept him from becoming “really insane.” Later on in his life, although he never developed what he called “a living sense of commerce with a God,” he retained a “germ” of belief, and he found that “there is something in me which makes response” when he heard others speak of their consciousness of God.

Throughout The Varieties of Religious Experience, James maintained an appreciative, uncritical tone towards those with faith; his tone no doubt owes much to the solace he received when he thought about God during his fragmentation experience.

In addition, as James wrote in his account of that frightening evening in 1869, “the experience has made me sympathetic with the morbid feelings of others ever since.” James went on to introduce the study of psychopathology into academic psychology. And he consistently avoided the denigrating attitude toward the mentally ill which was characteristic of many professionals in the field. Beginning with the 1893-94 academic year, he taught what was probably the first course

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43 William James to Henry James, Jr., 12 November 1887, in LWJ, 285, and to Henry P. Bowditch, 1 July 1909 (James Papers).


45 William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 158.
at an American university on abnormal psychology. One student later recalled being impressed that James did not see those with “unhealthy” minds as being radically different from those with “healthy” minds. After taking the class on a visit to two insane asylums, James told his students, “President Eliot would not like to admit that no sharp line could be drawn between himself and the men we have just seen, but it is true.” In 1896, James gave a series of lectures at the Lowell Institute in Boston on “Abnormal Mental States.” A comment from the lectures suggests that he was still concerned, after all these years, about his fragmentation experience. He wrote in his lecture notes: “Now some minds get easily out of gear, & go to pieces, others keep together. Why? is the one great question in theoretic psychology.” In addition, he was receptive, long before almost all other American psychologists, to the pioneering work of European psychiatrists such as Pierre Janet, Hippolyte Bernheim, and Sigmund Freud. He also took a central role in promoting the mental hygiene movement. In addition to public support, he made several generous donations to the movement and wished he could have done more. As he wrote to the movement’s founder, Clifford W. Beers, “I have long thought if I were a millionaire, with money to leave for public purposes, I should endow ‘insanity’ exclusively.”

But the most important consequence of his experience in 1869 was its influence on his basic view of the world. James argued that there are two fundamental stances which an individual may take. The “healthy-minded person” views life optimistically. By contrast, the “morbid-minded person” sees evil as being at life’s essence. In an undated note which James probably wrote in the aftermath of his fragmentation experience, he commented:

To the man who has been insane and come back from it should not the tranquil confidence of most people in the absoluteness of their sane consciousness have an almost ghastly effect? It too is special, and as it were accidental, around it an ocean of undreamt of (or of only dreamed of) possibilities, whose imminence the crazy man realizes all the time. The sane are blind then.

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46 According to the annual editions of the University Bulletin in the Harvard University Archives, he also taught courses in this area in 1894-95, 1896-97, and 1898-99.
47 Dickinson Miller to Henry James (the son of William James), 24 August 1917 (James Papers).
48 William James, notes for lectures on “Abnormal Mental States” (alternately entitled “Exceptional Mental States”). 1896 (James Papers).
49 William James to Clifford W. Beers, 1 July 1906 (James Papers).
50 William James, Personal Note (undated; James Papers).
James no doubt identified himself with the man who has returned from insanity. He did not have confidence in the "absoluteness" of his "sane consciousness." In his diary, three and a half years after his fragmentation experience, he noted his fear that "that dream-conception, 'maya,' the abyss of horrors, would 'spite of everything grasp my imagination and imperil my reason."\(^{51}\) He accepted that the healthy-minded person might go through life satisfactorily. But healthy-mindedness, he concluded, "is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality."

What is more, he suggested that these evil facts "may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth."\(^{52}\) In short, James, as a result of his experience in 1869, decisively cast his lot with the "morbid-minded" view of life. A comment he made late in his life succinctly summarized his position: "Melancholy! gives truer values."\(^{53}\)

\(^{51}\) William James, Diary, 10 April 1873 (James Papers; these words were edited out when the diary passage was published in *TCW*, 1, 343). "Maya" refers to the Hindu concept that the world of the senses is illusory. It should be added that James was at one time a patient in the McLean Asylum, but it is impossible to determine when this was. Officials of the present-day McLean Hospital in Belmont, Mass., while acknowledging that they have his medical records, have not released them to scholars.

\(^{52}\) William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 160.

\(^{53}\) William James, notes for lectures on "Abnormal Mental States," 1896 (James Papers).