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Wayne Proudfoot, ed., William James and a Science of Religion: Reexperiencing the Varieties of Religious Experience

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Wayne Proudfoot, ed.

*William James and a Science of Religion:
Reexperiencing the Varieties of Religious
Experience.*

New York: Columbia University Press 2004.

Pp. vii + 138.

US\$34.50. ISBN 0-231-13204-2.

This volume is a collection of six papers presented at a colloquium sponsored by the Center for the Study of Science and Religion at Columbia University in 2002 to commemorate the centennial of James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*. The collection includes contributions from two philosophers, a psychologist, a historian and two theorists of religious studies.

As Proudfoot observes in his introduction, philosophers interested in James' contributions to pragmatism and the ethics of belief generally pay little attention to *Varieties*. On the other hand, scholars of religion, in whose canon *Varieties* has found a home, often fail to appreciate its relationship to James' earlier and later philosophical writings. The present collection of essays goes a long way toward bridging this gap.

Several papers in the volume distinguish between two different strategies employed by James to defend the legitimacy of religious faith against nineteenth-century scientific agnosticism, and to resolve what David Hollinger describes as the tension between the cultural Protestantism to which James was heir and his commitment to the scientific norms of empirical observation and intersubjective verification. Hollinger himself interprets *Varieties* as 'a product of the particular phase in James' career when he was shifting from one strategy to another' (10) in his pursuit of these objectives.

Hollinger considers the first of these two strategies, already expressed in the 1882 essay, 'Sentiment of Rationality', to be a sophisticated version of the claim that science and religion constitute autonomous spheres of experience and belief that answer to two distinct kinds of questions and concerns. The second strategy seeks rather 'to embrace in a Peircian mode the epistemic unity of all experience and belief' (10) and to evaluate scientific and religious 'hypotheses' according to the same criteria. As James shifts toward this second approach, he takes the 'medical materialists' to task for ignoring the facts of religious experience, while also challenging religious believers 'to renounce the safe harbors of the metaphysicians and to confront the materialists on their own ground, which was experience of the world' (24).

While Hollinger is mainly concerned with the chronological development of James' views, Rorty focuses instead on a fundamental ambivalence at the heart of *Varieties* resulting from James' failed attempt to embrace two irreconcilable sets of philosophical commitments, pragmatism and empiricist foundationalism. Rorty the anti-foundationalist, who does not 'see anything of value in either *Radical Empiricism* or *A Pluralistic Universe*' (96), predictably prefers the former. Whatever continuing value he does recognize in *Varieties* is due not to its philosophical merit, but to the fact that 'it is a

portion of the intellectual biography of an exceptionally magnanimous man' (96), and can help readers to cultivate this virtue in themselves.

Proudfoot, who is the author of an acclaimed book on religious experience, correctly observes that James' strict distinction between explanations of the causes of religious experiences and evaluations of their significance is problematic. James vacillates between acknowledging that whether religious experiences have natural causes is bound to affect our evaluation of them and claiming that the evaluation of such experiences ought to hinge entirely on their practical consequences in the lives of the people who have them. Whereas James' decided position remains neutral with respect to ultimate causes, Proudfoot clearly commits himself to 'the possibility of a fully natural explanation' (45). But commitment to an unspecified but fully natural explanation isn't as demanding or as gratifying as commitment to some particular one, and the non-deterministic historical naturalism that Proudfoot evidently prefers (44-5) is not spelled out here.

Whereas Proudfoot contends that James' attempt to construct a generic typology of religious experience led him to ignore historical specificity and context, Jerome Bruner maintains to the contrary that James took 'a perspectival view of religious experience' (77), that he was 'bent on describing situated realities in cultural context' (78), and that he was 'profoundly interested in *how* people construct their realities' (78). James may not have been the former-day Foucault that Bruner makes him out to be, but neither was he as oblivious to issues of historical context as Proudfoot seems to suggest. When, for example, in 'The Will to Believe', James distinguishes between 'live' and 'dead' religious options, he clearly recognizes that the same religious hypothesis that is plausible for people in one setting may be entirely implausible for those in another.

Philip Kitcher's paper, which breaks with the 'two conflicting strategies' view taken by Hollinger and Rorty, carefully reconstructs and evaluates James' argument in *Varieties* from the standpoint of contemporary analytic epistemology. Kitcher puts forward the interpretive claim 'that *Varieties* is set within the epistemological framework of "The Will to Believe" and that it tries to discharge the function of the quick-and-dirty closing section of the earlier essay' (115). Responding to Allen Wood's and Peter van Inwagen's contrasting assessments of the Clifford-James debate, Kitcher concludes that James succeeds in defending only a truncated form of religious commitment that amounts to little more than 'secular humanism with a benign gesture' (131).

According to what Kitcher refers to as the 'natural reading' (100) of the chapter on mysticism in *Varieties*, James' thesis is that mystical states of consciousness provide warrant for belief in a transcendent religious reality that is directly apprehended by the mystic. Ann Taves' well-informed discussion of James' relationship to Pierre Janet and Frederick Myers (co-founder of the British Society for Psychological Research), shows clearly how this reading falls short. Taves argues persuasively that the comparative methodology employed by James, and the theory of subliminal consciousness underlying

his discussion of mystical states, are more sophisticated and more cautious than has previously been recognized. Although in identifying his own 'over-beliefs' James clearly inclines toward the religious hypothesis, his aim in the closing chapters of *Varieties* is not to validate this hypothesis but to offer 'a theoretical explanation of how individuals might subjectively experience a presence that they take to be an external power, when such is not necessarily the case' (62). Taves contends that James' attention to similarities between religious and non-religious phenomena, his avoidance of descriptive reductionism, and his appreciation of the fragmentary nature of selfhood are features of his thought from which contemporary theorists of religion can still learn. Together with the other essays collected here, hers is likely to generate continuing interest in James' seminal study.

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Nils-Eric Sahlin, ed.
Ramsey's Ontology.
Somerset, NJ: Transaction Books
(for Ontos Verlag) 2005.
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Theses regarding the ultimate nature of things constituted an essential starting point on the basis of which Frank Ramsey formulated his ideas, and an integral part of his worldview. An at least general knowledge of such theses is thus one key element to a proper understanding of the contributions he made to a vast range of subjects. However, not much can be found in the literature that fosters the study of Ramsey's ontological positions. This collection of essays goes some way towards filling this gap. It is surely not a comprehensive overview of Ramsey's ontology, but it offers some interesting interpretative suggestions and critical analyses.

The starting point, and the theme around which most of the collection revolves, is Ramsey's criticism of the distinction between particulars and universals as an unwarranted ontological conclusion derived from linguistic practice, which he formulated in his 'Universals' (1925). This doesn't come as a surprise, since this is one of the most renowned of Ramsey's essays, and perhaps the only one that has an overtly ontological 'flavour'.

In the first contribution, Maurin and Sahlin examine this paper and, following a suggestion of Mellor's, claim that Ramsey's argument is best understood as a means to avoid Bradley's classical 'relation regress' (the reader is offered here a useful analysis of what distinguishes vicious from

non-vicious infinite regresses.) By denying any intrinsic difference between universals and particulars, that is, Ramsey allegedly avoids an apparently inevitable proliferation of intermediate entities that the existence of such a distinction would entail. This, Maurin and Sahlin maintain, implies that 'Universals' must be interpreted as suggesting a fact ontology, that is, that *'the world is a world of facts'* (13).

However, Maurin and Sahlin go on to argue, a fact ontology fails to steer clear of Bradley's regress, for as soon as we try to distinguish between the internal constituents of facts and/or between facts, the 'infiltration' of an infinite series of relations immediately occurs again. Indeed, if there is anything like the regress formulated by Bradley, it points towards the necessity of a conception of reality as a Parmenidean unchangeable 'One' (27).

In his complex and rich paper, Hochberg goes back one step and criticizes Ramsey's very attempt to deflate the ontological distinction between particulars and universals. He focuses on the fact that, throughout his analysis, Ramsey appears to assume the concept of 'predicable', that is, of what can be predicated of something else as its subject (32), so implicitly employing exactly the distinction he intends to reject. Not only does one have to acknowledge an intrinsic asymmetry between what is predicable and what is not: being predicable is simply not a purely linguistic feature. It coincides with the ontological asymmetry between what is repeatable ('multiply instantiable'), and what is not (39). Curiously, Hochberg doesn't say much on the crucial ontological notion of multiple instantiability, preferring to focus on the — prevalently linguistic — concept of predicability.

In a more sympathetic article, McBride defends Ramsey's argument from the allegedly lethal objection, first formulated by Aristotle, to the effect that only qualities can be negated, i.e., only properties have equally real contraries. He first distinguishes an ontological and a weaker, merely linguistic, interpretation of Ramsey's thesis, and shows that the Aristotelian 'dictum' is certainly ineffective, by itself, against the former, which is nevertheless what Ramsey really aimed to convey. Moreover, McBride convincingly argues that in its weaker version too Ramsey's thesis can be secured against Aristotle-like criticisms. He shows that Dummett misinterprets Ramsey's arguments, failing to correctly understand the basic point formulated in 'Universals': namely, that there is no reason to claim that names are less incomplete than predicates and, if they are not, then ontology remains undetermined by language, and it is consequently perfectly possible to formulate a language in which subjects can in fact be negated (70). Also Geach, who appears to offer clear-cut logical arguments against the possibility of negating subjects, is shown to only demonstrate that one cannot negate subjects and accept conjunctive predicates at the same time (80); which of these two things to presuppose and make an integral part of one's language-structure, though, remains an open choice.

In his contribution, Koslow comments on an unpublished paper read by Ramsey in 1922, in which two basic interconnected ideas are presented — first, that the world is simple and there are no complexes, and second that