

## EMOTIONS, PERSONS, AND THE BODY: WILLIAM JAMES AND JAN PATOČKA

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### ABSTRACT

In this essay, I argue that there are striking parallels between the later work of the American pragmatist William James and the philosophy of Jan Patočka. Taking the naturalistic approach of existential moods in James as my point of departure, I show how both James and Patočka consider the dynamics of the feeling body to be the key to human self-understanding. They both see emotion as a paradigmatic form of embodied consciousness. What has remained an implicit and intuitive view in James gains a pronounced philosophical articulation in Patočka.

**Key words:** Jan Patočka; William James; emotion; body; individuality

### LES ÉMOTIONS, LES INDIVIDUS ET LE CORPS : WILLIAM JAMES ET JAN PATOČKA

Dans cet article l'auteur tente de mettre en évidence les parallèles frappants qui existent entre les travaux du philosophe et psychologue américain William James, chef de file du « pragmatisme », et la philosophie de Jan Patočka. En prenant l'approche naturaliste de James (1902) comme point de départ, l'auteur montre comment James et Patočka ont tous deux vu dans la dynamique du corps une clé permettant de comprendre la condition humaine. Tous les deux considéraient également l'émotion comme une forme paradigmatique de l'intelligence incarnée. Ce qui est demeuré implicite et intuitif dans l'oeuvre de James a pris une articulation philosophique dans les travaux de Patočka.

### EMOCE, OSOBY A TĚLO: WILLIAM JAMES A JAN PATOČKA

V tomto článku chci ukázat, že mezi dílem amerického pragmatisty Williama Jamese a filozofií Jana Patočky existují překvapivé paralely. Jako východisko si vybírám naturalistický přístup u Jamese (1902) a ukazují, jakým způsobem James i Patočka považují dynamiku těla za klíč k lidskému sebepochopení. Oba považovali emoci za paradigmatickou formu vtěleného vědomí. To, co zůstalo v Jamesově díle implicitním a intuitivním, bylo filozoficky artikulováno v dílech Patočkových.

## I. Introduction

Two different perspectives have dominated the philosophical debate on emotions over the past century. According to one, emotions are personal experiences that are cultured, learned, meaningful, and have a moral dimension – they are to be understood as cognitive phenomena based on evaluative judgements. According to the other, emotions are primarily events in the body, closely bound up with bodily changes such as racing of the heart, shortness of breath, sweaty palms, trembling lips, tensing muscles, and changes in facial expression. They may express themselves in bodily behaviour such as jumping

for joy or striking out in anger, and are causally determined by processes taking place in the chemistry of the brain, the blood circulation, and the digestive system. Emotions are therefore to be explained as involuntary bodily responses that can only indirectly be regulated and controlled.

Both perspectives have proved to be quite fruitful over the years, and philosophers today agree that it would be useful to have a theory that accounts for the cognitive as well as the bodily aspects simultaneously. This, however, is easier said than done. It proves not at all simple to move beyond the dichotomy and to restructure the concept of emotion in such a way that it involves the head and the body at once. Over the past half a century, most theorists have chosen an easy way out, by classifying emotions as disembodied cognitive phenomena in the 1970s and 1980s, and then shifting to evolutionary-based non-cognitive (neuro)physiological approaches in the 1990s. It is only recently that advances in theories of the affective brain and in the philosophy of embodied cognition have resulted in an increased interest in more integrative accounts of how subjective emotional experience is structured and how it relates to the body.

Many proponents of such an integrative account have rediscovered the writings of William James as a main source of inspiration. James's psychological theory of emotions, presented in *Mind* (1884) and reprinted in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), has been unanimously praised by neuroscientists (Damasio, LeDoux, Panksepp) as well as philosophers (Jesse Prinz), for defining emotions as 'feelings of bodily changes' and for its focus on the role of the autonomous nervous system in situations of acute emotional disturbance. James defended the claim that if we abstract from this 'coarse' emotion the feelings of all its characteristic bodily symptoms and expressions, we have nothing left behind, no 'mind stuff' out of which the emotion can be constituted. Without the body, the experience would be 'pale, colourless, destitute of emotional warmth'.<sup>1</sup>

James's later work on emotion, particularly *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), has been reanimated recently by the philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe (2008). In Ratcliffe's reading, James was primarily interested in emotions as 'existential feelings', a neglected but phenomenologically unified group of affective phenomena that are simultaneously bodily feelings and experiences of practical possibilities in the world. James's original contribution, according to Ratcliffe, is that he reconceptualized intentionality so as to include bodily feeling in its structure.<sup>2</sup>

I am aware of the current controversy over James's view of emotion, but this essay is not the place to go deeper into that discussion. Instead, I follow Ratcliffe (2008), and argue that James's account of emotions boils down to a naturalistic phenomenological theory of affective feelings, which shows striking parallels to Patočka's discussion of 'moods' and 'movement' in *Body, Community, Language, World* (1998) and to his theory of embodied personhood.

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<sup>1</sup> William James, 'What is an Emotion?', *Mind* 9 (1884), 194.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being* (London: Oxford University Press, 2008), 219–41.

## II. Emotions in James's *Varieties*

In psychology, James's influence has mainly been the effect of his claim that emotions are physiologically mediated 'feelings of bodily changes'. Less widely known is that in his old age James was still actively interested in the topic of emotion. Eight years before his death, he published his thoughts on the subject in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), which would become one of his most popular books. It has been in print for more than a century now; and in the psychedelic 1960s it was a cult book. But thus far, it has hardly received any attention from psychologists working in the field of emotion – most probably because they have mistaken it for a work on theology, not on human feelings and emotions.

Yet this is precisely what we find in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: a detailed, but unsystematic account of emotions, conceived from a somewhat unfamiliar, spiritual perspective. *Varieties* focuses on emotional feeling – it aims to rehabilitate the emotional element of religion, as James puts it himself.<sup>3</sup> The book defends the provocative claim that emotional feelings, in matters of religion and spirituality, have absolute priority over the findings of the rational intellect. Religion's essence is mystical experience, according to James, and mystical states of consciousness are deep, intense states of feeling – states of inspiration, of feeling connected to some higher, profoundly meaningful reality. *Varieties* analyses the significance of these 'mystical' states, by examining how they are related to more commonplace emotions and feelings, and by explaining why they are so important in human life. The book deals with all sorts of spiritual enthusiasms: experiences of ecstatic affirmation and joy, related to traditions in Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Vedanta; but also 'psychedelic' experiences, induced by the use of alcohol, mescal, peyote, cocaine, chloroform, ether, and other drugs that stimulate what James calls 'the mystical faculties of human nature' and bring a temporary 'high'. States of being 'moved' by poetry or art are included as well. Music is also placed on the mystical ladder, because listening to good music is a way of opening oneself up to a whole new realm of reality, says James. On the continuum, there are progressively greater feelings of affirmation, unification, and enlargement of vision, which involve deeper, more significant levels of the self. The higher we climb, the more intense is the positive feeling involved. At the top are full-fledged mystical states such as those experienced by a small group of classical mystics, who see the whole universe in a new light. At the bottom, seeing them as the opposite of euphoria, James situates negative psychotic experiences of anxiety and despair, or 'religious mysticism turned upside down', as he puts it.

Emotional disorders like existential 'Angst' and depression are given quite a lot of space and serious attention in *Varieties*, which is one of the reasons why the book is unique. James did not draw a fixed line between normal and abnormal, religious and secular experience. Just like Freud, he was pioneering the psychology of the unconscious, and by focusing on the more extreme and unfamiliar versions of emotional feeling, he was making a methodological point. Extremes like mystical ecstasy and psychotic depres-

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<sup>3</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1982), 341–2: 'I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophical and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations into another tongue.'

sion should, according to James, be considered expanded forms of ordinary emotional states. The more exotic cases can provide us with a better understanding of the basic reality that is involved. Or, as he put it:

I say that it always leads to a better understanding of a thing's significance to consider its exaggerations and perversions, its equivalents and substitutes, and nearest relatives elsewhere [...] Insane conditions have this advantage, that they isolate special factors of mental life, and enable us to inspect them unmasked by their more usual surroundings.<sup>4</sup>

### III. At Home in the World

*Varieties* is organized around a number of 'first-hand' testimonies of mystical emotion, written down by celebrated saints and famous literary writers, as well as ordinary people. On the basis of a careful analysis of all these personal documents James lays out the scope of a (sketchy and imprecise) phenomenological psychology that is grounded in two elementary dispositions: a sense of belonging, of feeling at home in the world, and a sense of not belonging, feeling unhappy and disconnected. The two dispositions are so deeply rooted that they seem to come close to personality traits: James distinguishes between the 'healthy-minded' individual, who feels confident and protected most of the time, and the 'sick soul', who is miserable and lonely. Healthy-minded people – Walt Whitman is one of his main examples – are natural-born optimists, they have an instinctive sense of belonging and seem to be blind to all the negative aspects of life, philosophically immune in the face of evil. They accept suffering and death as natural and unproblematic. James sees this positive attunement to life as an essential characteristic of the religious condition. In mystical experience, positive feelings of acceptance and belonging become intensified, and may ultimately result in complete euphoria, an oceanic feeling of oneness with God or Nature, or the Spirit of the World.

It is not, however, the happy person, living in harmony with the world, who is the most likely candidate for such mystical ecstasy. In *Varieties*, James's sympathy is clearly with the 'sick soul', who has a deeper, more sensitive view of reality than his superficial, optimistic counterpart. Mystical experience is the prerogative of the unhappy individual, the pessimist who finds that 'unexpectedly, from the bottom of every fountain of pleasure, something bitter rises up, a feeling coming from a deeper region and often with an appalling convincingness'.<sup>5</sup> James's example of a 'sick soul' is inspired by Tolstoy's autobiographical *My Confession*, where the Russian writer describes his experience of a severe depression in which the world is rapidly losing all its practical familiarity. Tolstoy writes: 'I felt that what I had been standing on had collapsed and that I had nothing left under my feet.'<sup>6</sup> Tolstoy will be saved by a sudden religious awakening, mysteriously intruding the self from a corner of the unconscious, a sense that all is ultimately well, even though the outer conditions remain the same.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>6</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*, trans. Aylmer Maude (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), 14.

In *Varieties*, James presents a huge variety of such ‘existential feelings’, as Matthew Ratcliffe has called them in *Feelings of Being* (2008),<sup>7</sup> and examines their transformations over time. They all share the hedonic qualities of pleasure or pain, but they are more flexible and changeable than the global dispositions of well-being or ill-being, more like parts of an inner ‘stream of consciousness’, a continually changing flow of experience. They can be found in religious and in non-religious persons alike, and include quite commonplace and ordinary experiences, such as feeling alive, anxious, guilty, blessed, frustrated, detached, inspired, hopeful, lost, estranged, in love, out of love, overwhelmed, indifferent, cut off, out of touch with things, at peace with things, empty, unreal, exhausted. They are not the suddenly occurring ‘coarse’ emotions that James examined in his earlier work, they are not directed at some specific object, and they do not include feelings of some specific part of the body. ‘Existential feelings’ are more like moods, remaining in the background of consciousness most of the time – we may not even notice them unless they take on an unusually intense form, as, for example, in mystical ecstasy or in psychotic depression. They are so basic that they precede the separation the division between subject and object.

Heidegger would capture this foundational layer of emotional experience by the German word *Befindlichkeit*, to be translated as ‘a way of finding oneself in the world’. ‘The mood has already disclosed, in every case, Being-in-the-world as a whole, and makes it possible first of all to direct oneself towards something.’<sup>8</sup> Existential feelings – moods, dispositions, emotional states – frame and colour all our perceptions, thoughts, behaviour, and self-awareness. They determine how things matter to us, and constitute our pre-intentional ‘openness’ to the world.

#### IV. Feeling through the Body

This Heideggerian analysis goes well with James’s insight that mystical states have a noetic quality and present themselves as revelatory for a wider and more profound world, a deeply meaningful ‘reality’, which discloses itself to the mystic. An aspect that is not covered in Heidegger’s treatment of the topic, however, is reference to the body, which is frequent in James’s account. James describes the phenomenality of existential states most of the time in terms of movements and bodily conditions, as feelings of expansion or contraction, approach or withdrawal, reaching out or turning away, of tension or relaxation, pleasure or pain. ‘We pass into mystical states from out of ordinary consciousness as from a less into a more, as from a smallness into a vastness, and at the same time as from an unrest to a rest’,<sup>9</sup> he writes. In this experience, one’s consciousness suddenly ‘widens’, so that things that were at the ‘fringe’ of consciousness are suddenly grasped, that which was marginal becomes central. The feeling is a feeling of enlargement and liberation, getting free from restraints.

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<sup>7</sup> Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962): 176.

<sup>9</sup> James, *Varieties*, 330.

This polarity of expansion and contraction seems to be the underlying structure of all the other existential feelings as well: emotional feeling can be described as a feeling of bodily movement in space and time. One either feels like welling up, reaching out towards the world, or one feels like shrinking back, turning away from it. Positive states like hope and happiness open us up; negative states like anxiety, guilt and shame narrow us down. Being happy makes you outgoing; you may feel like dancing or embracing the world. Being depressed makes you heavy and immobile; you can't reach out to the world anymore; you may feel completely out of touch.

Even with aesthetic emotions, where at first sight there seems to be no readiness for specific movements at all – just a blissful paralysis – the feelings involved are feelings of bodily movement all the same. People who have experienced intense aesthetic inspiration often describe it metaphorically as a state of being overwhelmed and knocked over by force, when confronted with something sublime or beautiful; a feeling state that sometimes results in kneeling down and silently weeping, melting away in joy.

This stress on the bodily dynamic of existential feelings is resolutely rejected by Heidegger, who had no place for the body proper in his analysis in *Being and Time*. Yet, it is through the body that the person is connected to the possibilities of a given situation. Here, James's approach seems much closer to Patočka's, who in his well-known lectures on the 'lived body' also highlights the corporeity of our fundamental openness to the world. Before we start perceiving, thinking, and acting, the world already has us in a mood, in a particular position, a stance and movement, Patočka says in *Body, Community, Language, World*.<sup>10</sup> Every instance of dealing with *pragmata*, as Heidegger would say, presupposes a sense of bodily contact, a sense of balance and orientation in the world. Human life is a realization of possibilities that we identify with in a practical sense, irreflectively, and that we act upon. We can do so only because we are feeling bodies that are able to move.

Patočka would have no difficulty with James's pragmatist view that feeling is functional, and that we have feelings because we need to move and act on our own. More systematically than James, his later philosophy focuses on the dynamics of the body and the crucial role of movement in human existence. What we feel, subjectively, are movement intentions in space and time, attractions and repulsions, corresponding to practical possibilities in the environment. Emotions are 'e-motions': feelings of being moved in a certain situation, experiences of simultaneous alterations in our sense of reality and our self-awareness. The living, 'lived' body is the key to understanding our being-in-the-world. Without the body, no meaningful relationship with the world and the self could be furnished.

## V. Self Regulation and the Body

Consequently, both James and Patočka see the subject as an embodied, active agent, not as a Cartesian rational thinker or a living system aiming at reproduction and self-

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<sup>10</sup> Jan Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World*, trans. Erazim Kohák (Chicago: Open Court, 1998), 43.

preservation. The I, in Patočka's words, is 'the primordial awareness of effort'.<sup>11</sup> In his lecture 'Three Types of Phenomenology', he writes:

How we are includes an entire scale of feelings and emotions, all in a practically undifferentiated mode. [...] A mood 'comes over us' but it is our mood, we are in the mood. We are wont to say, 'How are you feeling?' [...] In a mood we feel how we are. Depression and elation that rises up within us can tell us more about ourselves, about our interest, about what it is in which we have become involved, than an explicit, willing decision to act. Mood is closely linked with corporeity, with being as a body. Our posture is rooted in mood. Our attitude betrays our mood. [...] Mood constrains or encourages us. We grasp it corporeally, we feel it in our dynamism. We grasp certain possibilities in it: at times we live in a mode of defying all, at other times we float lightly, as on wings. The corporeal, dynamic subject is rooted in such postures. Further components of the way we are feeling – for instance, pleasure, pain – are corporeal states in the matrix of a self-understanding lived experience.<sup>12</sup>

Emotional 'postures' are states of 'readiness for action'<sup>13</sup> – they do not prompt us actually to realize specific actions or behaviours, but they can be very helpful, by making us see situations in life as less difficult than they are, easier to cope with. In the famous case of the 'Alpine climber', which he describes in 'The Sentiment of Rationality',<sup>14</sup> James gives the example of a climber who must execute a dangerous jump she has not performed before. If she is engaged by a mood of confidence and optimism, she is likely to perform a jump that would otherwise be impossible. But as soon as she starts to doubt and fear, and realistically to calculate the chances of success, her preparations are likely to lead to catastrophe.

The transformative power of emotion is what James had in mind in his chapters on the phenomenon of conversion, presented as a therapeutic instrument in the struggle against depression and the loss of meaning in modern life. James testifies repeatedly of the good that it can bring to people, the sudden resurgence of energy in the midst of despair. Mystical experience may result in personal rebirth, as in Tolstoy; it can create new centres of personal energy that may attune the subject to a meaningful reality again. Of course, transformations of the self may also be triggered by more everyday emotions such as falling in love. But in all instances of personal regeneration, the structure is the same: there is an explosion of energy and a new willingness to live, a new engagement with the world as a whole, even though everything in it has remained the same.

According to his biographers, James's interest in the powers of mysticism was motivated by his private struggle with a serious depression in his late twenties. He has his own symptoms in mind when he describes a case of acute existential Angst in *Varieties*:

I went one evening into a dressing room in the twilight to procure some article that was there; when suddenly there fell upon me without warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth, with greenish

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 78–9.

<sup>13</sup> A central concept in Nico Frijda, *The Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984).

<sup>14</sup> William James, 'The Sentiment of Rationality', *Mind* 4 (1879).

skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin. That shape am I, I felt, potentially. There was such a horror, [...] that it was as if something solid within my breast gave way entirely [...] and I became a mass of quivering fear. After this, the universe had 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.<sup>15</sup>

For months, James felt completely disoriented and lost. In *Varieties*, he concludes that he could relate this experience of extreme anxiety to religious experiences, but more by contrast than identity with them. 'I mean that the fear was so invasive and powerful that if I had not clung to scripture-like texts like "the eternal God is my refuge [...]" I think I would have grown really insane'.<sup>16</sup> That is why James – who certainly was not a traditional Christian and was not used to prayer – finds that religion is among the most important biological functions of mankind, as an effective strategy of coping and self regulation, in times of deep personal crisis.

## VI. Conclusion

In James's later writings on existential moods and feelings, some striking parallels with Patočka's philosophy of movement and the body can be found. In a sketchy, intuitive way, James anticipates a phenomenological view as to how the personal and cognitive features of emotion could be integrated with its bodily dynamics. Much that remains implicit and fuzzy in his account, is systematically exposed by Patočka in his lecture series, collected in *Body, Community, Language, World* (1998). Both Patočka and James take the feeling body as our primary access to the world, and as the key to self-understanding and self-regulation. It is through moods, that the subject assesses the environment and experiences how she is moved by its practical possibilities. The body is not just an object; it is first and foremost a subject – an active, striving I, feeling inspired or repulsed by the world. Embodied feelings open and close horizons of possibilities. Just like Patočka a century later, James considers emotional feelings to be 'feelings of the body', to be the place where *Leib* and *Körper* converge and where meaning and action are born – emotions literally move us.

If, therefore, we wish to understand who we are, as embodied human beings, we have to start here.

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<sup>15</sup> James, *Varieties*, 129.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.



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