

The Philosopher as Pathogenic Agent, Patient, and Therapist: The Case of William James

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However, in *Teufelsdröckh*, there is always the strangest Dualism: light dancing, with guitar-music, will be going on in the forecourt, while by fits from within comes the faint whimpering of woe and wail.

Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*

One way to understand philosophy as a form of therapy is this: it involves a philosopher who is trying to cure himself. He has been drawn into a certain philosophical frame of mind—the ‘disease’—and has thus infected himself with this illness. Now he is sick and trying to employ philosophy to cure himself. So philosophy is both: the ailment and the cure. And the philosopher is all three: pathogenic agent, patient, and therapist.

The young William James was such a philosopher. I want to show that, according to James himself, the trouble he got himself into was not just a philosophical puzzle. Rather, he made himself truly melancholic by his philosophical frame of mind. I shall also argue that—contrary to common misconceptions of James—the cure he prescribed to himself did not consist in an arbitrary act of will. Rather, the cure was a radical reconception of how to justify a solution to a philosophical question as the one true answer.¹

Employing philosophy as therapy implies a certain duality of the mind. The philosopher is genuinely drawn to a certain way of thinking and a part of him wants to continue in this frame of mind. But another part of him doesn't. From this perspective, he sees himself as sick and wants to cure himself. So it would seem that the goal of philosophy as therapy must be the unity of the person: unless the philosopher manages to rid himself of the tendency to think in a certain way, he is not cured. In the final section of this chapter, I will briefly

¹ I am only concerned with the early James: his writings until *The Will to Believe*. In fact, the reconception in question is compatible with a rejection of the pragmatic theory of truth.

address the issue of whether this is right—whether the goal of philosophy as therapy should be the unity of the person.

The Illness: Philosophical Melancholy

On April 30, 1870, William James wrote in his diary:

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of [Charles] Renouvier's second 'Essais' and see 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. For the remainder of the year, I will abstain from the mere speculation and the contemplative *Grüblei* in which my nature takes most delight, and voluntarily cultivate the feeling of moral freedom, by reading books favorable to it, as well as by acting. After the first of January, my callow skin being somewhat fledged, I may perhaps return to metaphysical study and skepticism without danger to my powers of action. For the present then remember: care little for speculation; much for the *form* of my action; recollect that only when habits of order are formed can we advance to really interesting fields of action—and consequently accumulate grain on grain of willful choice like a very miser; never forgetting how one link dropped undoes an indefinite number. *Principiis obsta*—Today has furnished the exceptionally passionate initiative which [Alexander] Bain posits as needful for the acquisition of habits. I will see to the sequel. Not in maxims, not in *Anschauungen*, but in accumulated acts of thought lies salvation. *Passer outre*. Hitherto, when I have felt like taking a free initiative, like daring to act originally, without carefully waiting for contemplation of the external world to determine all for me, suicide seemed the most manly form to put my daring into; now, I will go a step further with my will, not only act with it, but believe as well; believe in my individual reality and creative power. My belief, to be sure, *can't* be optimistic—but I will posit life (the real, the good) in the self-governing *resistance* of the ego to the world.²

This is not the statement of a person playing around with philosophical problems. It is also not the report of somebody who suffered a singular 'crisis' yesterday that he has now resolved today. James writes this note

² Henry James (son of WJ), ed., *The Letters of William James*, vol. 1 (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1926), pp. 147–148.

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in an attempt to work his way out of a severe crisis. Yesterday, in struggling with his crisis, he had an insight that he now resolves to hold on to as a way of 'salvation.' (I shall call this entry 'the crisis note.')

What sort of a crisis is it? If James had been alive today, he is likely to have been diagnosed with 'Bipolar Mood Disorder.'³ For brief periods in 1870–1871, he may or may not have checked himself into a mental asylum.⁴ Be that as it may, James certainly was in a severe psychological crisis of some sort in the late 1860s and early 1870s. In 1870 James had not yet found his place or direction in life. Born in 1842, he first studied painting in New Port in 1860–61 before devoting himself to chemistry and comparative anatomy at Harvard (1861–1863). In 1863 he took up the study of medicine. Having realized that the practice of medicine was not his calling, he took a break from medical studies to serve as assistant to the acclaimed geologist Louis Agassiz on a scientific field trip on the Amazon (1865–1866).⁵ In Brazil he discovered that he hated 'collecting'⁶ and, back in Cambridge in 1866, he resumed the study of medicine—only to interrupt his program once again to go to Germany to study experimental physiology and seek relief for his poor physical health (1867–1868). In 1868 he moved back to his parents' house in Cambridge and finally completed his medical degree (1869), but he was never to practice medicine. So at the time of the 'crisis note' in April 1870, he was twenty-eight years old, living again with his parents, suffering from poor physical condition (e.g. insomnia, a difficulty reading for more than a few hours, a bad back), and had no partner in sight (he married in 1878 at the age of thirty-six). He had been in continual conflict with his father about his intellectual development and still had no profession, even though he, the eldest child, had once been the star among the James children.⁷ Now time had passed and his brother Wilky had fought heroically in the civil war—his own physical weakness had

³ Howard Feinstein, *Becoming William James*, with a new introduction (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 13.

⁴ See Linda Simon, *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), pp. 121–122n.

⁵ See Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, vol. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1935), pp. 216–217.

⁶ Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 4 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), p. 128.

⁷ See Henry James (brother of WJ), *A Small Boy and Others* (London: Gibson Square Books, 2001), pp. 108, 136–137; Simon, *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James*, pp. 39–40.

disqualified him as a soldier (and made it impossible to do laboratory work). And another of his brothers, Henry, was settling into the career of a writer. His sister, Alice, was also living at their parents' house after recently suffering a nervous breakdown, and in her mental condition she exhibited some of the same symptoms as he.⁸ It is easy to see that, at the time of the crisis note, James had good reason to worry about his prospects and his physical and mental health.

Another event highly detrimental to his mental condition was the death of his cousin, Minny Temple, at the age of just twenty-five in the month prior to James's crisis note. After returning from Germany, James had been emotionally and intellectually intensely concerned with the terminally ill Minny. Her person, her death, and her correspondence with him about religious matters in the last months and days of her life had a deep impact on James and his mental condition. Her death was a terrible loss for him.⁹

Erik H. Erikson describes James's development from his art education to his appointment as an instructor at Harvard in 1872 as a 'particularly prolonged identity crisis.'¹⁰ Leaving aside the question of whether this is the best way to describe James's life during these years, there can be no doubt that he was in a serious psychological crisis during the late 1860s and the early 1870s, in particular around the time of the crisis note. However, I am not interested in this crisis as a psychiatric crisis, as a period in a depression disorder or any other psychiatric disorder, or as a purely biographical crisis. Rather, it is of interest to me here as a philosophical crisis with a psychological dimension.

In the essay 'Is Life Worth Living?' which was originally delivered as a lecture in 1895, James briefly mentions 'melancholy' as symptom of a mental condition neither caused by philosophy nor curable by it: 'We are not magicians to make the optimistic temperament universal; and alongside of the deliverances of temperamental optimism concerning life, those of temperamental pessimism always exist In what is called 'circular insanity,' phases of melancholy succeed

⁸ See Simon, *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James*, p. 114.

⁹ See Henry James (brother of WJ), *Notes of a Son and Brother* (London: MacMillan, 1914), pp. 422–423, 478–479; Simon, *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James*, pp 116–123; Richard D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), pp. 96–100, 111–113

¹⁰ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), p. 151.

phases of mania, with no outward cause that we can discover.¹¹ This he distinguishes from ‘philosophical melancholy’:¹²

My task, let me say now, is practically narrow, and my words are to deal only with that metaphysical *tedium vitae* which is peculiar to reflecting men. Most of you are devoted, for good or ill, to the reflective life. Many of you are students of philosophy, and have already felt in your own persons the skepticism and unreality that too much grubbing in the abstract roots of things will breed. This is, indeed, one of the regular fruits of the over-studious career. Too much questioning and too little active responsibility lead ... to the edge of the slope, at the bottom of which lie pessimism and the nightmare or suicidal view of life. But to the diseases which reflection breeds, still further reflection can oppose effective remedies; and it is of the melancholy and *Weltschmerz* bred of reflection that I now proceed to speak.¹³

This distinction between two kinds of melancholy, which James made in 1895, can be seen as a comment on his own life, particularly in the 1860s and the early 1870s. As I have said above, he himself may have been subject to a ‘circular insanity’ and, as I shall show, philosophical melancholy surfaces not only in the crisis note during these years. It is philosophical melancholy—melancholy bred of reflection—that interests me in this chapter.¹⁴

What is the nature of the philosophical melancholy bred of reflection? One may distinguish three components that James invokes to characterize it: judgment, emotion or sentiment, and action. The judgment is that life is not worth living, and the action that the philosophically melancholic person is disposed to perform is suicide.¹⁵ Finally, the emotion or sentiment may be characterized as

¹¹ William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 36; see also p. 39.

¹² James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 44. He also speaks of ‘speculative melancholy’ (p. 42).

¹³ James, *The Will to Believe*, pp. 39–40.

¹⁴ This understanding of philosophical melancholy evinced in James’s ‘Is Life Worth Living?’ must be distinguished from the narrower use of the term also employed in this article. According to this narrower interpretation, philosophical melancholy is specifically related to a ‘contradiction’ between a certain idea of nature and a ‘craving of the hearth’ (*The Will to Believe*, pp. 40–41; see also pp. 42–44). I am only interested in the broader understanding of philosophical melancholy.

¹⁵ See James, *The Will to Believe*, pp. 34–45.

‘melancholy and *Weltschmerz*,’ a feeling of ‘unreality,’ sadness,¹⁶ the ‘sentiment’ of ‘*tedium vitae*,’¹⁷ and as a feeling of uncanniness, or ‘*unheimlichkeit*.’¹⁸

In the crisis note, James formulates a certain resolution. I now want to argue that James hopes with this resolution to cure himself of philosophical melancholy. To do so, I must show that the description of philosophical melancholy and the remedy given in ‘Is Life Worth Living?’ apply to the ailment and the cure discussed both in the crisis note and at other moments in James’s life around that time. I shall consider all three elements: judgment, action, and emotion.

James says in the passage from ‘Is Life Worth Living?’ that ‘too much questioning’ leads to ‘the edge of the slope, at the bottom of which lie[s] ... the ... suicidal view of life.’ Philosophical melancholy can render one prone to suicide. In a letter written to Thomas Ward in January 1868, James confides that ‘all last winter’ he ‘was on the continual verge of suicide.’¹⁹ He suggests that he was prevented from committing suicide by the thought that he might make his ‘*nick* ... in the raw stuff the race has got to shape’ and in this way ‘assert’ his ‘reality.’²⁰ This comment corresponds to remarks in both the crisis note and in ‘Is Life Worth Living?’

In the crisis note, he writes that, instead of suicide, he will believe in his ‘individual reality and creative power.’ This is not only an expression of the hope that he will be creative. According to James, it would be impossible to make a difference to the course of history if determinism were true: free will and determinism are incompatible.²¹ Thus, in saying in the crisis note that he will believe in free will—in the ‘self-governing *resistance* of the ego to the world’—he is saying that he will believe in a necessary presupposition of the truth of a thought that prevented him from committing suicide: the thought that he might make his ‘*nick* ... in the raw stuff the race has got to shape.’

¹⁶ James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 34.

¹⁷ James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 130. This description seems justified on account of the context of this quote and the mention of ‘metaphysical *tedium vitae*’ in the passage under discussion.

¹⁸ James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 41.

¹⁹ Skrupskelis and Berkeley, eds., *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 4, p. 248.

²⁰ Skrupskelis and Berkeley, eds., *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 4, p. 250.

²¹ See James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 117; Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 6 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), pp. 98–100, 163.

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This thought expressed in the letter to Ward is similar to a thought he offers to the ‘reflective would-be suicide’²² in ‘Is Life Worth Living?’ as a way of making him see that life can be worth living. In both cases, James appeals to the fact that we owe so much to other people, dead and living, as a way of motivating us to act for the sake of others.²³ In the letter, he describes actions for the sake of others as adding ‘to the property of the race,’ modifying other people’s lives, and thus as enabling one to enter into ‘*real* relations with them.’²⁴ This will allow a person to make his ‘*nick* ... in the raw stuff the race has got to shape.’ Moreover, in both cases James is offering a solution to the same difficulty. In the letter to Ward, James ponders how either of them can manage to feel that through work they take ‘hold of the reality of things.’ James says that this is ‘hard theoretically.’²⁵ He is thus saying that this difficulty of his life has a theoretical root. And this root is the same as the one in ‘Is Life Worth Living?’: how are we to motivate ourselves to act in a world which we do not believe expresses God’s purposes?²⁶

The letter to Ward is a good example of how James’s own melancholic state of mind has—at least according to James himself—two different causes. In speaking about finding work that makes Ward and him feel as if they take ‘hold of the reality of things,’ James also addresses his and Ward’s difficulty in finding ‘work wh. shall by its mere *exercise* interest’ them. He proposes a practical solution to this problem before turning to the theoretical difficulty just mentioned. Philosophical melancholy arises from reflection, but the state of mind—melancholy—may be the same as the melancholy caused by the difficulty of opting for a vocation in life. In struggling with his own melancholy, James typically fights on both fronts, often without making a clear distinction between them.

After proposing in ‘Is Life Worth Living?’ that the ‘reflective would-be suicide’ act for the sake of others, James explains that this proposal is meant for ‘men who have cast away all metaphysics in order to get rid of hypochondria.’²⁷ As used by James, the term

²² James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 47.

²³ See Skrupskelis and Berkeley, eds., *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 4, pp. 248–250; James, *The Will to Believe*, pp. 47–48.

²⁴ Skrupskelis and Berkeley, eds., *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 4, p. 249.

²⁵ Skrupskelis and Berkeley, eds., *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 4, p. 248.

²⁶ See Skrupskelis and Berkeley, eds., *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 4, p. 248; James, *The Will to Believe*, pp. 40–45.

²⁷ James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 48.

‘philosophical hypochondria’ seems to mean the same thing as ‘philosophical melancholy.’ Furthermore, he frequently applies it to himself, as when he writes to his brother Henry in 1872 about his appointment as an instructor giving him ‘diversion from these introspective studies which had bred a sort of philosophical hypochondria in me of late.’²⁸ This echoes the resolution he makes in the crisis note to ‘abstain from the mere speculation and the contemplative *Griðlei*.’

But why does ‘mere speculation’ breed philosophical melancholy? The problem is that ‘mere speculation’ cannot settle central philosophical questions such as the issue of free will. Philosophical questions are not puzzles to be solved as part of a game. Rather, they force themselves on a person as he leads his life. They pertain to a person’s understanding of himself and his place in the world, and the significance of the life he lives will turn on the person’s answers to these questions. If no answers to these questions are forthcoming, then the person will be at a loss as to how to lead his life or whether to go on living at all. This is at least how James treats many philosophical questions. Given this role of philosophical questions in a person’s life, the problem with ‘mere speculation’—if it does not deliver answers to philosophical questions—is that it naturally gives rise to melancholy: ‘Hitherto, when I have felt like taking a free initiative, like daring to act originally, without carefully waiting for contemplation of the external world to determine all for me, suicide seemed the most manly form to put my daring into.’ The problem with pure ‘contemplation’ is that it will not answer the philosophical questions ‘for’ the person asking them. ‘Hitherto,’ when contemplation failed to deliver answers, ‘suicide’ seemed to James the most appropriate response to this situation.

In the crisis note, he resolves to hold on to an insight that makes an entirely different kind of response possible. The insight is that his mistake consisted in ‘waiting for contemplation of the external world’ to decide philosophical questions. In ‘Is Life Worth Living?’ James says that ‘to diseases which reflection breeds, still further reflection can oppose effective remedies.’ However, the reflective remedy that the crisis note offers is to stop thinking that reflection *alone* should settle the relevant issue: ‘Without carefully waiting for contemplation of the external world to determine all for

²⁸ Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 1 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), p. 167. See also Henry James (son of WJ), ed., *The Letters of William James*, vol. 1, pp. 169–171.

me ... I will go a step further with my will, not only act with it, but believe as well.'²⁹

What he resolves to believe in is free will: 'My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.' As already hinted at in the crisis passage, the belief in free will is crucial for 'moral freedom' and belief in the 'good.' As I will elaborate later, according to James, free will is incompatible with determinism and a deterministic world is a world devoid of meaning, a world in which life is not worth living. The problem with 'mere speculation' is not simply that it cannot resolve the question of free will. Rather, there are many philosophical questions it cannot settle. These are often questions, if settled one way rather than another, that lead to the view that life is not worth living. One such question, which James connects closely with the issue of determinism, is whether actions are objectively good or have an objective significance, or whether their goodness or significance is simply relative to subjective feeling. It is the possibility of the latter answer that breeds philosophical melancholy, expressing itself, for example, in a feeling of uncanniness.

This question is one of the topics in the philosophical lectures that James delivered in the late 1870s, the 1880s, and the 1890s, and that are collected in *The Will to Believe*, published in 1897. It is also a central issue in the notes he made to himself in the late 1860s and early 1870s. In a note addressed to Oliver Wendell Holmes, James records some thoughts he had been 'groping for the other evening' in a discussion with Holmes, perhaps during the winter of 1866–67: he states that a theory which implies that it is impossible to 'authenticate' a person's 'most pleasurable feelings' by 'guaranteeing the objective significance' of these feelings is 'inconsistent with a high degree of happiness,' given that 'a man's happiness depends on his feelings.'³⁰ In a note written sometime between 1873 and 1875, James rejects Chauncey Wright's 'nihilism,' which denies that there is a 'relation of reality, which implies not only that we feel so

²⁹ I had been assuming that the passage from 'Is Life Worth Living?' should be read as saying that 'further reflection' can provide 'effective remedies' to the 'diseases which reflection breeds.' I am grateful to Jonardon Ganeri for pointing out to me that the sentence can also be read as saying that 'further reflection' is an obstacle to 'effective remedies.' In that case, the remedies that James is proposing would presumably not be 'reflective' at all.

³⁰ Henry James (son of WJ), ed., *The Letters of William James*, vol. 1, pp. 82–83.

& so, but that we *should* feel so.’³¹ James says in a note (possibly from 1873) that ‘to human nature there is something uncanny, *unheimlich*’ about reality as interpreted by such an approach.³² James expresses this in even more personal terms in the following passage about this ‘Humean’ view: ‘I for one must confess that if by an effort of abstraction I am able for a moment to conceive of the world in Humean terms ... I feel as if the breath was leaving my body.’³³ Later, in a letter written to Shadworth Hodgson in 1886, James responds to Hodgson’s criticism of ‘The Dilemma of Determinism’ by repeating his claim about uncanniness: the act of excluding ‘moral categories altogether from a place in the world’s definition ... leaves the world *unheimlich*, reptilian, and foreign to man.’³⁴ From this view, which makes James ‘feel as if the breath was leaving’ his body and experience the world as uncanny, there is ‘no possible *theoretic* escape.’ This, at least, is how James puts it in ‘The Dilemma of Determinism’ (1884) when describing a related view: ‘The only escape is by the practical way.’³⁵ James’s own crisis note is a record of an ‘escape by the practical way’: having realized that ‘mere speculation’ will not settle the issue for him, he resolves to believe in a view which does not render the world uncanny to him. One can only conclude that the crisis note is part of James’s attempt to cure himself of a condition that has all the essential elements of philosophical melancholy: the judgment that life is not worth living, the tendency to commit suicide, and emotional reactions such as the feeling of uncanniness.

The Cure: The ‘Whole Man’

In the ‘Dilemma of Determinism,’ James says that it is an ‘issue of fact’ whether determinism or indeterminism is true.³⁶ However, it is an issue that is insoluble ‘from any strict theoretical point of view.’³⁷ James thus turns to unraveling the consequences of the belief that determinism is true. He offers a complicated argument

³¹ William James, *Manuscript Essay and Notes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 154.

³² Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, vol. 1, p. 499.

³³ Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, vol. 1, p. 500.

³⁴ Skrupskelis and Berkeley, eds., *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 6, p. 163; see also James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 71.

³⁵ James, *The Will to Believe*, pp. 133–134.

³⁶ James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 117.

³⁷ James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 124.

which I must simplify here: that, from a 'strictly theoretical point of view,' subjectivism is the most 'rational' reaction to the assumption that determinism is true.³⁸ Subjectivism is the view—to simplify further—that actions and events are in themselves neither good nor bad.³⁹ The acceptance of subjectivism, in turn, leads to 'romanticism.' In other words, if one believes that determinism is true, then one is rationally led to become a romantic. James refers to Ernest Renan and Emile Zola to explain what the 'romantic state of mind' amounts to:

Both [Renan and Zola] are athirst for the facts of life, and both think the facts of human sensibility to be of all facts the most worthy of attention. Both agree, moreover, that sensibility seems to be there for no higher purpose—certainly not ... for the sake of bringing mere outward rights to pass and frustrating outward wrongs ... under the pages of both [Renan and Zola] there sounds incessantly the hoarse bass of *vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas*, which the reader may hear, whenever he will, between the lines. No writer of this French romantic school has a word of rescue from the hour of satiety with the things of life—the hour in which we say 'I take no pleasure in them'—or from the hour of terror at the world's vast meaningless grinding, if perchance such hours should come. For terror and satiety are facts of sensibility like any others; and at their own hour they reign in their own right. The heart of the romantic utterances, whether poetical, critical, or historical, is this inward remedilessness, what [Thomas] Carlyle calls this far-off whimpering of wail and woe. And from this romantic state of mind there is absolutely no possible *theoretic* escape. Whether, like Renan, we look upon life in a more refined manner, as a romance of the spirit; or whether, like the friends of M. Zola we ... prefer to be cynical, and call the world a 'roman experimental' on an infinite scale—in either case the world appears to us potentially as what the same Carlyle once called it, a vast, gloomy, solitary Golgotha and mill of death.⁴⁰

As a version of subjectivism, romanticism assumes that no action is objectively worthy of being performed. Actions only have a worth relative to our sensibilities. Likewise, the sensibilities themselves have no objective worth. As such, one sensibility is no more worthy

³⁸ James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 131.

³⁹ See James, *The Will to Believe*, pp. 128–130.

⁴⁰ James, *The Will to Believe*, pp. 133–134.

of being had than any other. Although the romantic rejoices in the observation of the multiplicity of facts and human sensibilities, objectively speaking, all that exists is ‘the world’s vast meaningless grinding.’ Thus, romanticism accepts the judgment at the core of philosophical melancholy: that there is nothing about life that, objectively speaking, renders it worth living. This means that the romantic is entirely defenseless against feelings of philosophical melancholy if they overcome him: in experiencing life as meaningless, the romantic’s feeling has—in his own view—placed him in touch with the way things really are: objectively speaking, nothing is worthy of being done.

James’s two references in this passage to Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* are particularly noteworthy. Carlyle’s book presents itself as an edition of, and commentary on, a work on the philosophy of clothes by ‘Professor Teufelsdröckh of Weissnichtwo.’⁴¹ However, the book also recounts the biography of Teufelsdröckh. The reference to Golgotha is part of an autobiographical comment by Teufelsdröckh: ‘To me the Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me to limb from limb. O vast, gloomy, solitary Golgotha, and Mill of Death!’⁴² Such thoughts and the events of his life drive Teufelsdröckh to the verge of suicide.⁴³ Now, James knew his Carlyle inside and out.⁴⁴ The reference to the world as a ‘solitary Golgotha’ should therefore not be understood as a reference to a purely theoretical work. Rather, it is a reference to a particular person who describes his own experiences of the world in this way and is almost pushed to suicide on account of this way of seeing the world. In other words, James wants to demonstrate that romanticism drives people to the verge of suicide—a condition from which ‘there is absolutely no possible *theoretic* escape.’

The other reference to Carlyle is no less important. In drawing attention to ‘what Carlyle calls this far-off whimpering of wail and woe,’ James quotes him out of context. The relevant passage is part of the editor’s description of Teufelsdröckh: ‘However, in Teufelsdröckh, there is always the strangest Dualism: light

⁴¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, edited by K. McSweeney and P. Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 6.

⁴² Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p. 127.

⁴³ See Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, pp. 127–128.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., the quotes from *Sartor Resartus* in James, *The Will to Believe*, pp. 42–44.

dancing, with guitar-music, will be going on in the forecourt, while by fits from within comes the faint whimpering of woe and wail.⁴⁵ Thus, although it is not how James uses the quote, the ‘whimpering of woe and wail’ is something that continues to occur within a person who is trying to escape this very condition. This description of Teufelsdröckh is presented just after Teufelsdröckh’s own account of his first success in pulling himself away from the ‘CENTRE OF INDIFFERENCE’ by a ‘first preliminary moral Act.’⁴⁶ This means that, here, Teufelsdröckh attempts to perform something very similar to James’s act, as reported in the crisis note. The question is whether the editor’s description of Teufelsdröckh is not just as true of James: despite his positive assertion of life by the performance of ‘light dancing, with guitar-music ... in the forecourt,’ there is ‘whimpering of woe and wail’ going on underneath. In other words, the question is whether James’s attempts to cure himself of philosophical melancholy are and can be a success. I will return to this question in the final section.

So if there is no ‘theoretic escape’ from the melancholy of romanticism, what sort of escape is possible? According to James, ‘the only escape is by the practical way.’⁴⁷ In making this proposal, James draws again on Carlyle. To escape, one must take ‘conduct, and not sensibility,’ as ‘the ultimate fact for our recognition.’⁴⁸ We must assume that there are actions to be performed—actions that are good irrespective of our subjective feeling—and we must act accordingly. The passages in Carlyle’s work to which James refers at this point are part of a discussion in which Carlyle quotes from Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* as follows: ‘Doubt of any sort cannot be removed except by Action.’⁴⁹ In *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, it is not purely theoretical doubt that is at issue. On the contrary, the advice that doubt should be eliminated by action is presented as part of a method for curing the mad.⁵⁰ Although Carlyle does not explicitly identify the context of the quote from Goethe, it would have been clear to James. He wrote to his correspondents about reading *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* while he himself was

⁴⁵ Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p. 142.

⁴⁶ Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p. 142.

⁴⁷ James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 134.

⁴⁸ James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 134.

⁴⁹ Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p. 148.

⁵⁰ See Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (Munich: Insel, 1980), pp. 358–359.

fighting melancholy during his stay in Berlin in 1868.⁵¹ Again, the trouble for which James proposes a cure is not some theoretical puzzle: it is the cure to a madness fed by too much reflection—a madness to which James felt he was subject.

Summing up, one can say that, in the ‘Dilemma of Determinism,’ James reports that he opts for indeterminism by an act of belief. By showing that the acceptance of determinism leads rationally to romanticism, a state that drives a person to the verge of suicide, James has given us grounds for deciding to believe in indeterminism. However, does James not make it much too easy for himself? He spells out the practical consequences of accepting determinism. Finding these emotionally unacceptable, he decides to believe in indeterminism. This, at least, is a common criticism leveled at James. The following passage is exemplary of such criticism. It is taken from Jean-Paul Sartre’s novel *Nausea* and consists in a dialogue between the main character of the novel, Antoine Roquentin, and the so-called ‘autodidact.’ Roquentin has the first word:

‘I was just thinking,’ I tell him, ‘that here we are, all of us, eating and drinking to preserve our precious existence, and that there’s nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing.’

The Autodidact ... repeats slowly:

‘No reason for existing ... I suppose, Monsieur, you mean that life has no object. Isn’t that what people call pessimism?’

He goes on thinking for a moment, then he says gently:

‘A few years ago I read a book by an American author, called *Is Life Worth Living?* Isn’t that the question you are asking yourself?’

No, that obviously isn’t the question I’m asking myself. But I don’t want to explain anything.

‘He concluded,’ the Autodidact tells me in a consoling voice, ‘in favour of deliberate optimism. Life has a meaning if you choose to give it one. First of all you must act, you must throw yourself into some enterprise. If you think about it later on, the die is cast, you are already involved. I don’t know what you think about that, Monsieur?’

‘Nothing,’ I say.

Or rather I think that that is precisely the sort of lie that the commercial traveler, the two young people, and the white-haired gentleman keep on telling themselves.⁵²

⁵¹ See Skrupskelis and Berkeley, eds., *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 1, pp. 49–51; vol. 4, pp. 305–308.

⁵² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, translated by R. Baldick (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 162.

'Life has a meaning if you choose to give it one.' That is the thesis attributed to James in this passage.⁵³ According to Roquentin, this is a 'lie'—a lie that the people in the café where he is sitting 'keep on telling themselves.' Believing that life is meaningful may make people 'happy,' as Roquentin observes about the young people he mentions in this passage.⁵⁴ They invent their lies in order to 'conceal the enormous absurdity of their existence' and to keep themselves from noticing that they exist. Contrary to them, Roquentin knows that he and they exist and there is 'absolutely no reason for existing.'⁵⁵ This is not the place to analyze the precise content of Roquentin's thesis about existence, but it surely includes the claim that the world is devoid of meaning. The point to notice is that Roquentin thinks that this is something he knows. He has discovered that the world is devoid of meaning. It is simply true. The tragicomic fact about James and the people in the café is that they believe something that, though it may make them happy, is simply false.

Despite Roquentin's mockery of James, they in fact have much in common. *Nausea* is written in the form of Roquentin's diary. Roquentin's impetus for keeping the diary is to try to understand the nature and implications of the unsettling emotional reaction he has been having to things. He, like James, fears that these reactions may be a sign of insanity.⁵⁶ However, as with James, these emotional reactions are part and parcel of a philosophical engagement with the world. Both of them expect important philosophical truths to come to light through emotion. Roquentin comes to describe this emotional reaction as 'nausea,' which is also the title of Sartre's book. However, Sartre originally planned to call the work *Melancholia*.⁵⁷ Although it would be wrong to identify nausea with melancholy, Roquentin is surely a philosophical melancholic.

Roquentin thinks that his nausea has revealed to him (though this is not his terminology) the metaphysical nature of reality. Moreover, he thinks that one can gain access to this deepest of metaphysical truths *only* through, first, having had a certain emotional revelation and, second, having understood it: 'Existence is not something which allows itself to be thought of from a distance; it has to invade you suddenly, pounce upon you, weigh heavily on your heart like a

⁵³ See Martin Suhr, *Jean-Paul Sartre zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2001), p. 42.

⁵⁴ Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 156.

⁵⁵ Sartre, *Nausea*, pp. 161–162.

⁵⁶ See Sartre, *Nausea*, pp. 9–15.

⁵⁷ See Suhr, *Jean-Paul Sartre zur Einführung*, pp. 29–32.

huge motionless animal.’⁵⁸ It is through his nausea that this invasion of existence happens, and through understanding his nausea, he understands existence and his own life.⁵⁹

This Roquentin shares with James: a proper metaphysical understanding of reality is only possible through an emotional relationship to reality. However, there are important differences. The emotion that reveals existence to Roquentin is a *passive* emotion: something that overcomes him. One may suppose that this is part of the reason Roquentin thinks it is so revealing: when he experiences this emotion, reality impresses itself upon him. He just needs to correctly apprehend what has imposed itself on him. Thus, as James might put it, Roquentin misunderstands the role of reflection: he thinks that he has simply reflected upon an emotion that was there independent of reflection. In fact—as James might continue—the opposite is the case. Nausea—or melancholy if you will—is bred by reflection. More specifically, it is bred by the assumption that only by reflecting on the world at a distance can we arrive at the truth about it. If reflection fails to deliver any determinate results, we may be overwhelmed with the same kind of emotion as triggered by Roquentin’s experience of existence as a huge and superfluous presence suffocating him in its arbitrariness.⁶⁰ Such experiences are overwhelming precisely because we suppose them to amount to a neutral access to the way things are. This is precisely not what they are. Rather, as James might elaborate, melancholy is just one of many possible emotional relationships with the world.

So, one might think that James’s cure for philosophical melancholy can be summarized as follows: philosophical melancholy is bred by the assumption that pure reflection can unravel the nature of reality. When a person realizes that pure reflection cannot deliver definite answers, that person develops a melancholic relationship with the world. The cure is to stop searching for definite answers. Instead, one should playfully take up the different perspectives that exist without assuming that any of them represents the correct way of looking at things. In other words, the cure for philosophical melancholy is to become an ‘ironist’ in Richard Rorty’s sense.⁶¹

Yet this is not the cure James proposes. The ironist makes the very mistake that James wants to avoid. The ironist thinks that reflection

⁵⁸ Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 189.

⁵⁹ See Sartre, *Nausea*, pp. 182–185.

⁶⁰ See Sartre, *Nausea*, pp. 182–193.

⁶¹ See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

alone delivers truth. Failing to arrive at the truth through reflection alone, the ironist does not give up the idea that reflection alone delivers truth, but instead gives up the idea of a single truth and proposes—like James's romantics—that we rejoice in the different perspectives that exist. The James I love—the young James—advocates a different course.

To understand James, it is extremely important to distinguish between two possible interpretations. The first way of interpreting him is in accord with the main line of argumentation in his essay 'The Will to Believe': 'Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds.'⁶² Applying this maxim to the issue of determinism, we might say: the question of whether determinism is true cannot be decided on intellectual grounds alone. So we are permitted to decide to believe in determinism or indeterminism. We may have certain practical reasons for making this choice, but these reasons have nothing to do with the question of whether determinism is true or not. That remains an open question.

This is certainly a strand in James's thinking. However, there is also another one. First of all, one needs to note that, according to James, an emotional reaction is a way of expressing how the world is. By reacting in this way, one is saying that the world is such that it calls for a reaction of this kind. If an opposite reaction were appropriate, the world would be different. The emotional reaction may also be the only way of capturing the relevant feature of the world. In particular, a purely intellectual description of the world could not adequately capture it.⁶³

Now, if two opposite emotional reactions amount to different descriptions of the world, and these emotional reactions are the only way of bringing out the differences between the two accounts of the world, how are we to decide which of these emotional reactions correctly captures the way the world is? James has a remarkable answer to this question:

My action is the complement which, by proving congruous or not, reveals the latent nature of the mass to which it is applied. The world may ... be likened unto a lock, whose inward nature, moral or unmoral, will never reveal itself to our simply expectant gaze ... nature has put into our hands two keys, by

⁶² James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 20 (italics deleted).

⁶³ See James, *The Will to Believe*, pp. 73, 84–87, 106–111.

which we may test the lock. If we try the moral key *and it fits*, it is a moral lock. If we try the unmoral key and *it fits*, it is an unmoral lock.⁶⁴

The issue—is this a moral or an unmoral world?—is the same as the one touched upon in our previous discussion of ‘The Dilemma of Determinism.’ To assume that the world is unmoral is to take the subjectivist position presupposed by romanticism. In other words, it is the position one is rationally led to if one is a determinist. In contrast, the assumption that we live in a ‘moral universe’ amounts to the objectivist view that the ‘moral order’ rests on ‘an absolute and ultimate *should*, or on a series of *shoulds* all the way down.’⁶⁵ According to James, this objectivist view presupposes indeterminism.⁶⁶

This passage is a philosophical elaboration of the position taken in the crisis note and stands in a marked contrast to Roquentin’s approach and Rorty’s ironism. In the crisis note, James records his refusal to wait ‘for contemplation of the external world to determine all for me.’ He says in this passage that the ‘world ... will never reveal itself to our simply expectant gaze.’ Several features of James’s alternative approach must be stressed: (1.) The world does not reveal itself to the simple passive observer. *Action* is called for. (2.) Certain features of the world cannot be discovered through purely theoretic deliberation. Rather, these features are only accessible through *emotion*. (3.) However, to get at the truth, it is not enough to analyze these emotions. The relevant *emotional attitudes* must be lived out *in action*. (4.) Objectivism and subjectivism call for different courses of action.⁶⁷ An inquiry into the truth of these theories requires that one follow these *different courses of action*. (5.) James is really proposing a *test*: by acting on theories, we can find out which one is true.⁶⁸ (6.) The world is *responsive to our action*. By acting in a certain way, we can find out *how the world is*. (7.) The test involves ‘all *three departments of the mind*’: the ‘impressions of sense,’ ‘the theoretic and defining department,’ and the ‘active and emotional powers.’⁶⁹ (8.) The ‘verification’ of the relevant theory does not ‘occur in the life of a single philosopher.’ Rather, ‘the *experience of the entire human race* must make the

⁶⁴ James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 88.

⁶⁵ James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 85.

⁶⁶ See James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 135.

⁶⁷ See James, *The Will to Believe*, pp. 85–87.

⁶⁸ See James, *The Will to Believe*, pp. 86–89.

⁶⁹ James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 100 (emphasis added).

verification.⁷⁰ The important task of elaborating on these points is something that cannot be undertaken here.⁷¹ Explicating these points would be to explain what James means by his claim that the 'entire nature of the man,'⁷² the 'entire man,'⁷³ or the 'whole man within us'⁷⁴ is required to confirm certain philosophical theories.⁷⁵

An important ambiguity in the metaphor of the world as a 'lock' should be emphasized. One way of understanding this metaphor stresses the fact that the lock and its key are two independent objects. For example, if the key is destroyed, the lock still exists and we may make another key to fit the lock. According to this interpretation, our emotional reaction—the key—seeks to fit a world which is independent of such emotional reactions.

The other understanding of the metaphor is that the concept of a key and the concept of a lock are interdependent: a hole can only be understood as a lock if we understand it as something into which a key fits that opens some object such as a door. Likewise, an object which can be stuck into a hole can only be understood as a key if it has the function of opening an object such as a door. In light of this, James's metaphor can now be interpreted as follows: the world in question is a world whose nature cannot be understood independently of the emotional reaction through which the world's nature is revealed.

According to both interpretations, acting on an emotional attitude plays an important role in revealing the nature of the world. However, only the second interpretation can provide a straightforward explanation of the success of testing theories in this way: if the world in question is something whose nature cannot be understood independently of emotional reactions, then it is not surprising that emotional reactions play a role in revealing the nature of the world. Taking this interpretation further, one can argue that, in the passage under discussion, James is not talking about the world as a whole. Rather, he is interested in certain philosophical questions such as the issue of the objectivity of values and the freedom of will. The world is either such that the will is free or it is such that the will is not free.

⁷⁰ James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 87 (emphasis added).

⁷¹ This chapter is part of a larger project on the early William James and this and many other points will be elaborated in the longer work.

⁷² William James, *Essays, Comments, and Reviews* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 325.

⁷³ James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 61.

⁷⁴ James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 77.

⁷⁵ See William James, *Essays in Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 360.

However, the world in question here is a world whose nature is not independent of our emotional reactions to it. If it turns out that one emotional reaction is appropriate, then the world is such that the will is free. If another emotional reaction is appropriate, the will is not free. The purpose of James's test is to find out which reaction is appropriate.

Is The Cured Philosopher a Unified Person?

James writes that 'to the diseases which reflection breeds, still further reflection can oppose effective remedies.'⁷⁶ Reflection is the source of philosophical melancholy: a person assumes that reflection alone—theoretical reasoning alone—should be able to solve all philosophical questions and then discovers that it alone cannot settle some philosophical issues. James's proposed cure, which he prescribed to himself, was to give up this assumption. The cure consists in coming to realize that some philosophical questions can only be answered by relying on much more than theoretical reason. The 'entire man' must be involved. In particular, emotions play an important role in the justification of a particular solution. Philosophical melancholy is an emotional reaction to a refusal to allow emotions their proper say in solving certain problems. Thus, one might say that philosophical melancholy is caused by a certain imbalance of the soul. Theoretical reason has claimed too much territory for itself. The cure lies in restoring the harmony between the different aspects of a person—in making the man 'whole' again.

Or so it would seem. But does James really believe that philosophical melancholy can be entirely overcome? Does he think that we can and should become unified persons in this way? And would he be right? Should we strive to avoid philosophical melancholy and to become unified persons? Let me conclude this chapter by saying just a few words about these difficult issues.

James states that 'reflection' provides 'effective remedies' to the 'diseases which reflection breeds.' But is it theoretical reason alone that recognizes its own limits and allows emotions to have their say? More specifically, is it theoretical reason alone that realizes that the question of the objectivity of value cannot be settled by theoretical reason alone and should be settled by acting on the different theories and allowing emotions have their say in the matter? Or, in contrast, do we only come to this realization on the basis of all the

⁷⁶ James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 40.

departments of human reason? If the former is the case, theoretical reason has, as it were, cured itself. However, if the latter is the case, then the tendency to rely on theoretical reason alone has been corrected by something other than theoretical reason. If that is the case, will this tendency not continue to exercise its influence? In other words, will there not continue to be two opposite sentiments within the reflective person: the longing to have all problems settled by theoretical reason and the desire to achieve intellectual peace by giving emotions their say? Is it not proper that these two opposite sentiments should exist? Is philosophical melancholy not simply an expression of our appropriate sadness about the impotence of theoretical reason to solve central questions of life? Our melancholy would be proper because—as reflective people—we should never rest assured that theoretical reason cannot solve the problems we are facing. To rest assured would be to stop being truly reflective. So perhaps philosophical melancholy—or at least a certain kind of sadness—is simply the price we need to pay for reflection.

As far as I know, James himself never explicitly addressed this issue. However, in other related contexts he recognizes that we are subject to opposite philosophical sentiments without a clear way of solving the conflict. In his introduction to *The Literary Remains of the Late Henry James* (1884), a book containing works by his father, James describes the acceptance of a position such as the one he advocates in ‘The Dilemma of Determinism’ as an expression of ‘healthy-mindedness.’ James continues:

But healthy-mindedness is not the whole of life; and the *morbid* view ... asks for a philosophy very different from that of absolute moralism ... What he [the morbid-minded person] craves is to be consoled in his very impotence, to feel that the Powers of the Universe recognize and secure him, all passive and failing as he is. Well, we are all *potentially* such sick men. The sanest and best of us are of one clay with lunatics and prison-inmates.⁷⁷

The morbid position—his father’s theological doctrine—is close to the optimistic position rejected in ‘The Dilemma of Determinism.’⁷⁸ However, this morbid view is also just one possible

⁷⁷ William James, *Essays in Religion and Morality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 62.

⁷⁸ Given my focus on the early James, I have refrained from discussing *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. However, the work is of course relevant to our topic: In his discussion of healthy-mindedness, morbidity and melancholy, James illustrates the ‘worst kind of melancholy’—that is, the one

expression of the longing to have pure reflection solve the problems of life all on its own. James recognizes that he himself has been subject to such a sentiment. The question remains whether he thinks he has entirely overcome it—or whether he should.⁷⁹

‘which takes the form of panic fear’—by describing a terrifying experience he himself had ‘whilst in this state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospect’ (William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985], p. 134). In this work, James attributed the experience to a French correspondent, but he later admitted that he had described his own experience (James [son of WJ], ed., *The Letters of William James*, vol. 1, p. 145). It is a subject of debate when the episode occurred, but it is not unlikely that it took place around the time of the crisis note or perhaps a few years later (see Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*, p. 543n4).

⁷⁹ I am greatly indebted to Róbert Haraldsson for the discussions we have had about James over the years, in particular during the course we co-taught about James at the University of Iceland. I would also like to thank Adam Blauhut for his diligent editorial work and the audience at the University of Liverpool for their helpful remarks on a previous version of this chapter.