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Jr., and William James (review)

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JAMES DUBAN

The Nature of True Virtue: Theology, Psychology, and Politics in the Writings of Henry James, Sr., Henry James, Jr., and William James

Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001. London: Associated University Presses, 2001. 261 pp.

Those with some familiarity with the place of Edwards, Peirce, Royce, and Dewey in the history of American social thought will find this a substantive treatise. It makes a compelling case that more attention must be given to the ideas of Henry James, Sr. He deserves a more prominent place in the general narrative if for no other reason than that his philosophy “resonates throughout the productions of his accomplished sons,” however ambivalent they may have been about the specific details of his philosophy. But there are many more reasons than this, as Duban clearly demonstrates. The book is a model of meticulous scholarship that opens up new avenues of investigation in 19th century American social and intellectual history. Some of the best and most original chapters focus on Henry Jr. and the ways in which the novelist was indebted to his father’s Edwardsianism, socialism, and phenomenalism. This is also an especially rewarding book to read for anyone with only a vague understanding of the elder James as a theoretical socialist whose theology is a curious amalgam of John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and Emmanuel Swedenborg.

Duban’s aim is to demonstrate that Edwards’s definition of true virtue as love to Being in general, or disinterested benevolence, is central to James’s theory of socialism. He “reconfigured the spiritualism of Swedenborg” combining it with his own socialistic politics and with Edwards’s identification of virtue with universal love as opposed to a specious love focused on any particular entity. Scholars tend to ignore the extent to which Edwards left an indelible mark on James’s thought and on his devotion to Swedenborg. Furthermore, there are some deep philosophical affinities between Edwards and Swedenborg, according to Duban, because they had both read Nicolas Malebranche and derived their common idea of disinterested benevolence from him.

Socialism was for James, as it was generally in 19th century America, a spiritual and religious rather than a secular phenomenon. Hence his debt to Edwards and his conception of true virtue as love to Being in general which helped him to

formulate a religious view of socialism predicated around the displacement of the particular and personal with the expansive and general. According to Edwards, secular moralists and nominal Christians who mistake self-interested action and natural emotions for “virtue” ignore the way true virtue consists of a “disinterested benevolence” or “benevolence to Being in general.” Crucial, therefore, for the socialism of the senior

Henry is Edwards's insistence upon "true virtue" as a "universal system" featuring a "universal tendency" (p. 32).

Duban weaves a convincing argument, which he marshals from all the appropriate texts, that in both Edwards and James one finds an excessive emphasis on the general and the universal at the expense of the particular and the personal. Love to Being in general must of necessity exclude any form of particular love because the object of the latter form of love is phenomenal, an unreal image of Being. Nature consists of appearances which await "true substance through an infusion of pre-existing, socialistic — and therefore virtuous — Being" (p. 203).

This argument is valid as far as it goes, but there is more to be said about the nature of true virtue. The genius of Edwards and his deepest and most original insights may be found in his philosophical realism, that is, in his refusal to accept the particularism and nominalism of John Locke and British empiricism. This is something that Duban overlooks, and consequently he tends to exaggerate the phenomenalism of both Edwards and James. One gets from his account the impression that in their devotion to ethereal Being they had lost all contact with the empirical world of stubborn fact. This is not true of Edwards who was foremost a metaphysical realist and not a phenomenalist, a realist who anticipated the three category realism of Peirce.¹

In the chapter on Edwards and Swedenborg, Duban takes the reader beyond the conventional understanding that Swedenborg was the main influence on James's religious philosophy. He admired the writings of Swedenborg because they "reminded him of the most admirable feature of Edwardsianism — that is, a love of Being in general — without the limitation of Edwards's angry God" (p. 44). While Swedenborg enabled James to reject an angry God (his "view of spiritual creation allowed [him] to develop the socialistic potential of Edwardsian theories concerning disinterested benevolence"), Edwards on the other hand "allowed [him] to extrapolate from the mystic Swedenborg a more socialistically aggressive program of disinterestedness than was . . . evident in the Swedish visionary's writings" (p. 43). But in the end James moved beyond both Edwards and Swedenborg in the development of his own theological version of socialism. "Whatever his attraction to the sentiment of each theologian concerning the need to favor the universal and the general over the personal and the particular, *neither writer had explicitly developed the political implications of their shared doctrine*" (p. 58) [italics mine].

As far as it refers to Edwards, this last statement is incomplete and somewhat misleading on two counts. First, scholars such as Perry Miller² and Alan Heimert³ have shown that Edwards was very much a social and political philosopher as well as a theologian, and very much embroiled in the issues of his time. Miller argues that he understood the profound social implications of the Great Awakening and that his treatise of *The Nature of*

True Virtue was his final meditation on the meaning of the religious revival. Heimert speaks of the “primacy of a social vision” in Edwards’s thinking. Such key notions as benevolence, virtue, and being in general lead to the conclusion that “in substance, the God of Jonathan Edwards was a supremely excellent Christian commonwealth.”

Second, and more importantly, behind these insights and at the heart of his system of thought is a profoundly rich philosophical doctrine which I would characterize as the “each and all” nature of Being in general which enables Edwards to insist that true virtue is not only love to Being in general but, within the context of this conception, love to being in particular as well. Duban leaves us with the impression that Edwards’s conception of true virtue floats in an ethereal world of Being unconnected to the phenomenalistic world of sense. But Edwards the realist does full justice to particularity as well as to generality in his metaphysics. These are not two discrete, isolated and fixed principles in opposition to one another. They are the principles of a dynamic relationship in which generality and particularity are continuously reconciled, one to the other. It is this continuous exercise of reconciliation, of parts with wholes, of singulars with universals, of individuals with societies, that constitutes Being.

There is in other words what Edwards himself calls the “consent to being” which accounts for both the unity of being and the singularity of its parts. The consent of particular beings to each other and hence to Being in general, and the consent of Being to itself and to its particulars makes it possible for Edwards to define true virtue not only as love to Being in general or disinterested benevolence as Duban would have it. There is in true virtue an element of consent in the order of particularity, i.e., love to being in particular.

In the concluding chapter, “William James, Henry Jr., and the Life of the Soul Under Socialism,” Duban rightly suggests that his “revelations” about the “persistence of Edwardsian theology . . . in the writings of the James family” represent an important advance in the scholarship on this subject. “New possibilities for scholarly dialogue and conjecture,” he writes, “emerge from the elder Henry’s channeling of true virtue toward socialism, from Henry Jr.’s literary use of his father’s beliefs about phenomenalism and disinterested benevolence, and from William’s ‘interest’ in the Edwardsianism of the elder James” (p. 201). The chapters in the latter part of the book are among the most original in bringing to light the depth of the father’s influence on the work of his illustrious sons.

The illumination is especially bright in Duban’s examination of the themes of Edwardsian true virtue, phenomenalism, and socialism in Henry Jr.’s later novels. The early works such as *What Maisie Knew*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Europeans* ponder the nature of true virtue “in terms that evoke the intellectual preoccupation of Henry Senior with the writings of Edwards and Swedenborg” (p. 147). *The Ambassadors* and *The Portrait of a Lady* depict the idea of true virtue, i.e., love to Being in general, as ephemeral and phenomenalistic.

Both of these fictions “feature a play of ideas that illustrates the ability of Henry Jr. to convert his father’s Edwardsian skepticism about virtue into exquisite representations of . . . what the novelist calls ‘pious misrepresentation’” (p. 165).

Much more attention, and with great success, is given by Duban to *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima* in which the principal characters mask their selfish behavior in the guise of disinterested benevolence. Duban challenges the generally accepted assumption that Henry Jr. idealized his father and that he refused to confront the social and political implications of his thought. Duban sees these novels as an indictment of the “armchair socialism” and the “pretentious radicalism” of the elder Henry who, like the Princess Casamassima, is “a political dilettante.” They both “typify the inconsistencies displayed by so-called socialists who live comfortable, risk-free lives” (p. 189).

Duban appears to be on equally solid ground in his assessment of the differences between William James and his father. While the latter focused his attention on “channeling” Edwards and Swedenborg toward socialism, the former “rejected systems of philosophy, like his father’s, that posited transcendent principles of unity and antecedent abstractions as the inevitable Being of phenomenalistic and inconsequential forms . . . William, through a system of pragmatism and radical empiricism, instead emphasized the ‘functional identity’ of states of consciousness, the reality of relations existing in fields of consciousness, the highly personal dimension of cognitive reality, and the absolutely vital nature of interest in psychology, religion, and ethics” (p. 118). Duban concurs with Ralph Barton Perry that father and son were on opposite sides in their main philosophical positions, that William “expounded pluralism and healthy-mindedness in his own behalf, and the monism of the sick soul in behalf of his father” (p. 203).

The evidence Duban presents for this striking contrast is compelling, but all this evidence notwithstanding, there is much of equal importance to be said, and he fails to say it, about the positive influence of Edwards, Swedenborg, and Henry Sr. on the thought of William and how he conceived the role of religion in human life.⁴ There is for example the concluding chapter of *Pragmatism*, the subject of which is religion, in which he argues that pragmatism is a melioristic response to the question of salvation; it sees salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible but as a possibility grounded in human initiative. It is a real adventure with real risks and with real winners and losers. If this meliorism arises from the quintessential philosopher of risk, as R. W. B. Lewis puts it, “it does so not less from the son of Henry James the Elder. For the conception of human beings by their endeavors ultimately bringing about the salvation of the world: this is a version, however individualized, of Henry Senior’s vision of human society as the redeemed form of man” (Lewis, p. 563).

William acknowledged an indebtedness to his father’s thought on several occasions. The most poignant expression is found in a letter written shortly

before Henry Sr.'s death in which he says: "All my intellectual life I derive from you; and though we have often seemed at odds in the expression thereof, I'm sure there is a harmony somewhere, and that our strivings will combine. What my debt to you is goes beyond all my power of estimating — so early, so penetrating and so constant has been the influence."⁵ The profoundly complex relationship between father and son and the profoundly penetrating and constant influence of the former on the latter in all its ambivalence and ambiguity is given a balanced examination by Duban. In his radical empiricism, pragmatism, and pluralism, William rejected his father's rationalism, absolutism, and monism. The world of pure experience needs no trans-empirical connective support, for it is self-contained; experiences lean on one another and on nothing else.

There is on the other hand the mark of the elder Henry and Swedenborg on much of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In discussing the reality of the supernatural world and its continuity with the natural, James echoes his father and Swedenborg as he speaks as a pragmatist:

The further limits of our being plunge . . . into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible . . . world. Name it the mystical region, or the supernatural region . . . So far as our ideal impulses originate in this region . . . we belong to it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world, for we belong in the most intimate sense wherever our ideals belong. Yet the unseen region . . . is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world. When we commune with it, work is actually done upon our finite personality. But that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself. . . . God is real since he produces real effects.⁶

While Duban might not have paid as much attention to texts such as this, he has nevertheless raised new questions and presented new paths of inquiry concerning the intricate and subtle web of relationships between the patriarch of a distinguished 19th century family of letters and his celebrated sons.

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NOTES

I. John E. Smith, *Jonathan Edwards: Puritan, Preacher, Philosopher* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), pp. 86–87, 132. "Edwards [argues] against what has come to be called the particularism of the tradition of British empiricism expressed in the doctrine that all that 'really' exists is the individual case. This doctrine runs counter to any belief in natural kinds, tendencies or universal structures in the scheme of things. . . .

Edwards found this conception of being too limited and insisted on the need to recognize the reality of the tendencies and propensities—what Charles Peirce would later call the *general*—that become manifest through a multitude of events and human actions. In this respect, Edwards, for all the emphasis that has been placed on his ‘Idealism’, was a realist in the philosophical sense; reality is not exhausted by particulars, because there are, as well, continuing structures in the natures of things.”

2. *Jonathan Edwards* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1959).

3. *Religion and the American Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1966).

4. See for example Anni Varila, *The Swedenborgian Background of William James’ Philosophy* (Helsinki, 1977), and R. W. B. Lewis, *The Jameses: A Family Narrative* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991).

5. R. B. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, I (Boston, 1935), p. 130.

6. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1922), pp. 515–17.



DOROTHY G. ROGERS

America’s First Women Philosophers: Transplanting Hegel, 1860–1925

New York: Continuum, 2005. 208 pp.

When Midwest met East in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Platonists from Illinois, Hegelians from Missouri, and Transcendentalists from Massachusetts traversed back and forth by train from St. Louis, Missouri to Concord, Massachusetts in search of philosophical dialogue for knowledge and practical application. The wonder of this particular period of such transaction was led in part by women who wrote and taught philosophy. The story has yet to be written which details this travel and networking of the many women engaged in philosophical exchange. This text, however, begins the tale.

The emphasis of locale in this text is St. Louis, but lines radiate in many directions, to Michigan, Chicago, California, and New England. The main connecting line is with the Concord School of Philosophy operated every summer for a ten-year period (1879–88) in Massachusetts. Offering lectures, discussions, and networking, the school was literally headquartered in the small building in the backyard of Bronson Alcott’s home. Here, the forces of the aging Ralph Waldo Emerson engaged with those of the younger William Torrey Harris. Harris, superintendent of the St. Louis schools and “founder and editor of the nation’s first journal devoted exclusively to philosophy, the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*” becomes the prevailing focus of this text. Not only Bronson Alcott but also Ednah Dow Cheney and Julia Ward Howe, who taught at the Concord School, traveled to St. Louis to further engage with Harris and see firsthand the educational sys-