Introduction

Before turning to James’s explicit ideas about democratic action, I must establish the fact that he had political interests, because treating James as a theorist, or even as a thinker with serious political concerns, may seem strange to people familiar with his traditional identities as a philosopher, psychologist, and interpreter of religious experience. It has been frequently asserted that he was a radical individualist, with no interest in politics, and discussions of pragmatism’s political implications usually turn quickly from James to Dewey. At the same time, critics characterize James as a democrat, an egalitarian, and a localist before passing on to other themes in his work. More recent commentators, however, especially George Cottkin and Deborah J. Coon, have shown that James’s lack of interest and insight into politics has been exaggerated.

Admittedly, his attention to the tradition of political theory was not comparable to his devotion to philosophy, psychology, and the supernatural, but James was not ignorant of that tradition. He knew and criticized Plato, Hegel, and Nietzsche. His Principles of Psychology frequently cites Hobbes’s Leviathan, and he acknowledged the influences of John Stuart Mill, Nation editor E. L. Godkin, and Tolstoy on his political thinking. It is thus no surprise that James often called himself a “liberal.” One can presume that as a well-educated Harvard professor and a godson of Ralph Waldo Emerson, James was steeped in the classic texts of American political thought. His student Santayana thought that James’s devotion to the principles of the Declaration of Independence was at the heart of his “native” anti-imperialism.

Much of James’s writing is implicitly related to politics. He had a Puritan commitment to moral action, i.e., to combating evil in order to reshape the world according to a vision of justice. James believed that God
exists and is on the side of good, but he also believed that God offers no salvation if people do not struggle to save themselves. To depoliticize this theme in James's work reflects an overly narrow definition of politics rather than its true place in James's thought. There is no reason to restrict James's reflections on action to private life since he made clear that he did not sharply distinguish between public and private action. In *The Will to Believe*, James was concerned with the philosophical and psychological bases for acting when faith in absolute truth has been shaken. The essays “Great Men and Their Environment” and “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” can be read as descriptions of the psychological and ethical dilemmas of a person who wants to transform institutions and ideas. In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James identified radical political actors with the religious activists he studies in the book: “The Utopian dreams of social justice in which many contemporary socialists and anarchists indulge are, in spite of their impracticability and non-adaptation to present environmental conditions, analogous to the saints' belief in an existent kingdom of heaven.”

James expressly discussed such political themes as action, equality, citizenship, obstacles to respect among individuals and communities, materialism, and war in his essays “A Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” “What Makes a Life Significant,” and “The Moral Equivalent of War” and in his speeches “Robert Gould Shaw” and “Remarks at the Peace Banquet.” Although he did not pay sufficient attention, from the standpoint of political theory, to institutions, economics, or power, his insights into psychology and religion can be applied to political experience. I do not claim that his primary concern was politics, but the political dimension of his work has been insufficiently acknowledged and studied.

In this book, I do not attempt to address all aspects of James's political thinking but instead focus on the theme of democracy. By “democracy,” I usually mean radical or participatory democracy and thus distinguish democracy from two terms with which it is commonly associated, “liberalism” and “representation.” Many readers distrust radical democracy with its stress upon citizen power, action, equality, and community. They prefer liberalism that, in its ideal form, is embodied in a benign and limited centralized authority which protects individual rights and represents the people's true interests. Radical democrats do not repudiate the ideals of indi-
individual rights and a government that rules in the public interest, but they emphasize equality of power; direct participation of citizens in decision making, both in politics and in civil society; and mutual respect for the diverse members of the community. As one who believes in participatory democracy, my political ideas differ from James's: he was not consistently a radical democrat, although much of his thought is compatible with radical democracy. In this book, I translate James's thinking into the language of democratic politics, not only interpreting him to be a theorist of action but also exploring the complexities of that theory.

Students of politics should be interested in James because he speaks to the paradoxical condition of modern political existence: widespread withdrawal from public life combined with fanatic action. James lived through the Civil War and wrote his major works during the era of massive immigration from Europe, the building of the railroads, the escalation of American imperialism, the Populist movement, the campaign for women's suffrage, the Haymarket riot, and violent struggles between labor and management. Reconstruction was dismantled while lynching became common, the Ku Klux Klan was formed, Jim Crow laws were passed, and, in response, a nascent civil rights movement took shape. Nonviolent resolution of domestic and international conflicts seemed a remote possibility. Yet, even in this period of change, James and other intellectuals were anxious about a lack of reasonable political action. The national government had become corrupt after the Civil War, and after the defeat of the Populist party in 1898, citizens began to withdraw from national politics. Political scientist W. Y. P. Elliott wrote that

the twentieth century began with a fear of the monstrous complexity with which it was faced hanging in the air like a heavy pall. Life had lost forever, men seemed to think, the poetic simplicity and untroubled confidence with which the youth of Western civilization had faced its problems. Eucken said of this time . . . : "paralyzing doubt saps the vitality of our age. We see a clear proof of this in the fact that with all our achievements and unremitting progress we are not really happy. . . ." The prophet of this period is old Henry Adams.

James believed resignation to be a danger to democracy, and even to-
day passivity remains a formidable obstacle to the recovery of democratic politics. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli depicted a popular attitude like the one James saw in the United States in the late 1800s and one that remains widespread:

It is not unknown to me that many have held, and still hold, the opinion that the things of this world are, in a manner, controlled by Fortune and by God, that men with their wisdom cannot control them, and that, on the contrary, men can have no remedy whatsoever for them; and for this reason they might judge that they need not sweat much over such matters but let them be governed by fate. This opinion has been more strongly held in our own times because of the great variation of affairs that has been observed and that is being observed every day which is beyond all human conjecture.\(^\text{12}\)

From the standpoint of the people who are acquiescent, God, the government, late capitalism, or any power except themselves and their neighbors shapes reality and controls events; human beings are helpless to do more than accommodate to the direction of force. Seeing no hope for political change, many citizens focus on themselves (the private life of self, friends, family, work, body, spirit, psyche, pleasures) or turn their attention from this world to the next.

James challenged those elements of American political culture that encourage compliance, particularly education and the rise of large-scale institutions.\(^\text{13}\) Even today most conflicts are not resolved democratically; usually one person or a small group decides and then gives orders to subordinates. Despite our nation's professed commitment to democracy, the bureaucratic, hierarchical model is assumed to be natural, efficient, just, and conducive to productivity, and this model has been adopted by most corporations, families, colleges and universities, and even social change organizations. Because challenging authority is risky, most citizens obey the people who have power over them, even when they strongly disagree with their actions or beliefs, both because they fear the penalties of resistance and because they have come to accept inequality as natural. From the perspective of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, continuous obedience without consent is a system of coercion akin to slavery. One function of leaders and
teachers, according to James, is to overcome resignation and initiate ac­
tion.¹⁴

As in James’s time, the popular alternative to passivity is still moral
absolutism. For James, this concept was embodied in the imperialism of
Teddy Roosevelt, in American chauvinism, and in the inability of the
bourgeoisie and working classes to understand the other’s point of view.
Today, moral absolutism can be seen in the anti-abortion movement, the
religious right, parts of the left, the Nation of Islam, and the campaign to
censor books, television, music, art, and film. One fears that acts of politi­
cal terrorism, such as the bombings of the World Trade Center and the
Oklahoma Federal Building and the shootings of doctors and staff mem­
bers at abortion clinics, will increase. Many groups and individuals act as
if they have a direct line to God, condemning their opponents as deluded
or deviant; their demands are nonnegotiable. Absolutism is antidemo­
cratic because politics requires recognition of, and negotiation with, oppo­
nents; democratic politics implies that people are at least allowed to state
their claims and, ideally, to take part in making a decision.¹⁵ Neither pas­
sivity in the face of increasing governmental and corporate power nor vio­
ence, terrorism, and hatred are harmonious with democracy.

As I explain in Chapter 3, James sought to balance action based on a
self-critical faith with tolerance for the causes of others. His concept of
“the will to believe” spoke to intellectuals who feared that they could not
act legitimately if they could not discover solid external ground (e.g., God’s
will) or scientific certitude for their causes. According to James, motives
for human action are never completely rational, and therefore people
should abandon the quest for certainty; if they do so they will be less likely
to censure the causes of others.

Democrats today wish to promote, as did James, both principled action
and mutual respect among citizens of different viewpoints, races, genders,
classes, and religions. James offers, if not a path leading out of resignation
and violence, an analysis of the antecedents of those reactions and the
difficulties of overcoming them. One finds James to be a critic of imperi­
alism and absolutism and an advocate for esteeming and tolerating diverse
cultures. It might not be too strong to say that in this advocacy, James laid
the groundwork for the cultural pluralism developed by Randolph Bourne
and James’s student Horace Kallen.¹⁶
I will say something now of James's life, but only a little, for I have no wish to contribute to the tradition of subsuming his ideas to his admittedly compelling biography. In his person, James was short, charismatic, and a sharp dresser. In personality, he was humane, lively, and generous, and those qualities are reflected in much of his political thinking. Born in New York City, William was the oldest son of Henry James, Sr., one of the wealthiest men in America and an eccentric writer on literature and religion. Ralph Waldo Emerson was a friend of the elder James and visited his home on Washington Square a few days after William was born. At Emerson's suggestion, Henry David Thoreau also called on Henry James. William's younger brother, Henry, Jr., wrote The Turn of the Screw, The Bostonians, Portrait of a Lady, and What Maisie Knew, and his invalid sister, Alice, has received attention from feminist scholars for her insightful diary. Two other brothers fought in the Civil War. Wilkinson James, who served under Robert Gould Shaw in the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, a black regiment, was wounded at Fort Wagner. After the war, "Wilky" and Robertson James started a racially integrated farm in Florida, but it failed, largely because of attacks by local racists after they discovered Wilky's connection with Shaw.

In 1860–1861, William James studied painting in Newport, Rhode Island. Abandoning that career at the insistence of his father, he entered Harvard where he studied chemistry and anatomy. In 1863, he began medical school, graduating in 1869; the M.D. was his only degree. He interrupted his training to join a scientific expedition to Brazil and then studied psychology in Germany.

Although William James was a man of prodigious energy and accomplishment, he was afflicted throughout his life with feelings of depression and lethargy. He had a nervous breakdown at twenty-eight, which concluded with the adoption of a new philosophy that posited a pluralistic universe in which convictions are chosen rather than supplied by God. James went on to teach psychology and physiology at Harvard and later became a professor of philosophy at the same institution. His students included Gertrude Stein, W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter Lippmann, Horace Kallen, and Theodore Roosevelt, each of whom had a significant impact on American politics, political theory, or culture. James sought an audience
for his ideas that was broader than professional philosophers. After his classic works, the two-volume *Principles of Psychology* and his essays *Will to Believe*, his most prominent books are collections of public lectures: *Talks to Teachers*, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and *Pragmatism*.

In the 1890s, James took an increasing interest in politics. In 1895, he protested the United States' role in the crisis connected with the Venezuela boundary dispute and "was henceforth keenly concerned about colonialism, imperialism, international relations, militarism, and America's role in the world scene." He supported the nineteenth-century movement to establish and protect African Americans' civil rights and publicly denounced lynching. He vigorously protested U.S. involvement in the Philippines and in the Spanish-American War. James had a strong interest in defining the public role of the intellectual, and he distinguished theory from action. In a letter to Wincenty Lutoslawski, a Polish Plato scholar and political reformer whom James highly respected, he wrote: "Division of labor is the great thing. You belong to the theoretic sphere as few men do, and you do not belong to the practical sphere. Work out the abstract theory of freedom, and let the close-lipped, iron-willed, hard-hearted men of affairs who exist for that purpose translate it into action. Thus it shall best succeed." In his letters, James defined his vocation variously as philosopher, academic, teacher, and intellectual, yet he believed all of those activities had a public dimension.

### III

In the chapters that follow, I attempt to articulate a coherent democratic theory in James's writings, yet I must also acknowledge his contradictions. He was a pacifist who called for a warlike spirit. He was egalitarian and open to points of view dismissed by most others, but he was also an elitist who called the college-educated an aristocracy and the many "a herd of nullities." The individual was perhaps his central value, but he insisted that people had strong obligations to serve the community. He has been labeled an anarchist because he hated institutions that might restrain creativity and energy and recognized that geniuses were innovators who transgressed existing laws and customs. Yet he also supported the consti-
stitutional order and said that punishing lawbreakers was essential to its preservation. He seemed to believe in God but doubted that God could be comprehended. Although asserting that we can never be sure that our values are ultimately true, he often assumed that the liberal reformist values of his circle were true and was convinced that history would eventually remake reality according to those values. The philosophy of pragmatism emphasizes the practical and successful, but James also celebrated idealists, visionaries, and lost causes. He believed in and practiced the scholarly and intellectual life, but he praised action so much—hating ideals that were not acted upon—that he has sometimes been depicted as anti-intellectual. What method of interpretation is appropriate for a thinker with so many contradictions?

It has been said that James’s ideas embody that part of Nietzsche that Americans can accept. James’s figure of the genius, which I will discuss in Chapters 1 and 5, is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s overman. Yet, there is no strain nihilism or misogyny in James, and James wrote, “The sallies of the two German authors [Schopenhauer and Nietzsche] remind one, half the time, of the sick shriekings of two dying rats.” James’s contradictions, at least, may be comparable to those of Nietzsche, and Karl Jaspers provides a model for interpreting James in his reading of Nietzsche:

The interpretative study of Nietzsche’s thinking thus always requires the gathering together of all utterances that relate to a given topic. . . . All statements seem to be annulled by other statements. *Self-contradiction* is the fundamental ingredient in Nietzsche’s thought. For nearly every single one of Nietzsche’s judgments, one can also find an opposite. He gives the impression of having two opinions about everything. Consequently it is possible to quote Nietzsche at will in support of anything one happens to have in mind.

The method of this book is inspired by Jaspers’s recommendation to bring together statements that appear to be contradictory. Virtually every chapter focuses on a paradox in James’s thinking. In struggling with each paradox I attempt both to interpret James’s “real” intention and to draw out of the paradox something illuminating for politics today, particularly the possibility and problems of reviving democracy.

What are the ambiguities of democratic revival? Leadership is needed
if efforts at social change are to succeed, yet leadership itself can overwhelm initiatives on the part of the many. Public opinion can be terribly wrong—supporting demagogues, punishment, sexism, and violence—yet the people must be respected in order to accomplish democratic transformations. Politics should be conducted with gentleness and courtesy, but struggles over power are intensely fought and one seems to need a strong stomach and sufficient aggression to play hardball. Democracy implies mutual respect among people who hold contrary opinions and who battle for conflicting gains, yet the very faith or self-interest that motivates political action makes it difficult to tolerate the opposition. Tolerance probably requires a feeling of commonality, a sense that even though we disagree we are bound by common values or a country. The question then arises, Is all commonality coercive? If education is necessary to develop a "democratic temperament," can that temperament be fostered by an education that contains significant elements of elitism, hierarchy, and discipline? These questions are at the heart of democratic politics and at the center of James's political thought.