Democratic Temperament

Miller, Joshua I., Wolin, Sheldon

Published by University Press of Kansas

Miller, Joshua I. and Sheldon Wolin.
Democratic Temperament: The Legacy of William James.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84015

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2886424
Chapter 4

Faith and Doubt: Action's Wellsprings

James wanted to cultivate in Americans both action and mutual respect, and he developed a model of a democratic political temperament that would hold them together. He urged citizens to adopt the pluralist conception of truth, i.e., political actors should seek to fulfill their ideals without taking those ideals to be objectively or absolutely true. If people will accept the fact that they alone are responsible for their fates, then they must strive together to create the conditions they desire. And in recognizing that truths and institutions are human choices, people are less likely to embrace their ideals zealously. This process of creating a democratic temperament requires both demystification and the strength to persevere in taking action. "The pragmatism or pluralism which I defend has to fall back on a certain ultimate hardihood, a certain willingness to live without assurances or guarantees." ²

In Pragmatism, James asserted, exaggeratedly, that demystification had already been accomplished in politics and religion and now needed to be adopted by philosophy. "In other spheres of life it is true that we have got used to living in a state of relative insecurity. The authority of 'the State' and that of an absolute 'moral law,' have resolved themselves into expediencies, and holy church has resolved itself into 'meeting houses.' "³ Elsewhere, James suggested that uncertainty had not been widely embraced. In order to respect others, fervent political actors should acquire some doubt about their convictions while realizing that even their opponents possess a share of the truth. ⁴ The joining of committed action with comprehension of the opposition is appealing and even necessary for direct democracy, but James disguised the psychological difficulty of keeping them together.

Although James offered pluralism as a source of both action and respect, the psychological roots of the one are incompatible with the other. He understood that action usually springs from a passionate belief in a principle and that this passionate belief leads the typical political actor to
resist pluralism. Most political actors will neither doubt the truth of their positions nor deeply respect their opponents, and if they did, they might cease to act. According to Wolin: “Under present circumstances, any kind of recognition of the other person’s point of view is seen as ammunition by political consultants for labeling opponents as wafflers. James’s analysis shows—even though he did not intend it—some of the practices we’ve slipped into in recent years that make political dialogue very difficult.”

Dismissing James at this point for being “unrealistic” in his call for mutual respect may be based on a static conception of political action. Perhaps, as Mary Parker Follett suggested, the process of interpersonal political interaction under certain conditions can produce a sympathetic understanding between engaged adversaries. “It is possible to maintain that at one point the civil rights movement had the effect of leading southerners to understand the black position,” suggests Wolin, “or at least their own treatment of blacks in a somewhat different light. It is hard to say what we have now.” A second avenue toward mutual respect offered by pragmatism must also be explored: Will pragmatism’s refocusing of political discussions from principles to consequences reduce hostility?

As James examined the prospects for American democracy at the end of the nineteenth century, he saw two equally problematic groups of citizens who constituted politically relevant audiences for his pluralist theory: one that acts on faith and another paralyzed because its members lack faith.

Of course if any one comes along and says that men at large don’t need to have facility of faith in their inner convictions preached to them, [that] they have only too much readiness in that way already, and the one thing needful to preach is that they should hesitate with their convictions, and take their faiths out for an airing into the howling wilderness of nature, I should also agree. But my paper [“The Will to Believe”] was n’t addressed to mankind at large but to a limited set of studious persons, badly under the ban just now of certain authorities
whose simple-minded faith in "naturalism" also is sorely in need of an airing—and an airing, as it seems to me, of the sort I tried to give.\(^7\)

The first, and larger, group engaged in action based on unquestioned faith. They had admirable, public-minded energy but tended toward fanatic violence and imperialism. The second group, "studious persons," had withdrawn into private life because they had lost faith in a God who cared about human affairs, including politics in the United States. What good is action if it is not guided or assured by God or some other principle of meaning, such as Hegel's absolute spirit or Marx's theory of history? The classic articulation of this despair is Henry Adams's *Education.\(^8\)* As a path out of resignation and toward democratic action, James offered the pluralist explanation of the universe to both believers and skeptics. Pluralism would allow the doubters to act based on choice in place of their lost faith; it would also reduce the fervor of the citizens who continue to act upon faith.

What view of truth did James offer to these groups? To put it briefly, he imagined a "pluralist universe" in which no higher power determines human fate, in which beliefs are chosen rather than discovered or proved and cultures and institutions are construed as human constructions.\(^9\) "Laws and languages . . . are thus seen to be man-made things."\(^{10}\) According to James, God has not written a discernible text of commandments for humanity to obey; truth exists, but it cannot be clearly apprehended. Therefore, people create social realities by acting upon their best guesses as to what the good actually is. These guesses should be based on reason, study, knowledge of accepted truths, customs, personality, and, finally, faith.\(^{11}\) Truth functions in moral, religious, and political life as a hypothesis. We do not know if we are members of the true church, but our church will thrive only if we believe in it.\(^{12}\)

People who act must be reconciled to the possibility of failure. Some initiatives for new parties, organizations, institutions, vocabulary, and theories are successful, but most, whatever good they might do for those who participate and witness them, fail to become permanent or achieve their goals.\(^{13}\) Would-be founders take two kinds of risks. First, despite their best intentions, their aims and tactics may be misguided—e.g., by running a third-party candidate the lesser of two evils lost the election; when
protestors did not compromise, government hard-liners got the upper hand. Second, sometimes advocates of the most moral cause simply lack the means to succeed. Action has no guarantees. James surmised that this view of truth would give something important to both believers and skeptics. Embracing uncertainty would, he hoped, make citizens more energetic and political partisans more generous toward their opponents.

II

I would like now to elaborate the effects that James intended for pluralism to have on his two different audiences. He wanted them to come to the democratic temperament from two different directions. James did not consistently believe that we are motivated to act by the idea of a pluralist universe; by nature, he often said, we are inclined the other way, i.e., we need faith in the grounding of our ideals. Perry remarked, “For James life assumes a heroic form only when the moral subject believes in the superiority of his own ideal, not as merely his, but as in some sense absolute or infinite.” James wrote that the political actor is like the Christian saint in that both are moved by a truth that they take to be greater than themselves. The saint has

a feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world’s selfish interests; and a conviction, not merely intellectual, but as it were sensible, of the existence of an Ideal power. In Christian saintliness this power is always personified as God; but abstract moral ideals, civic or patriotic utopias, or inner visions of holiness or right may also be felt as the true lords and enlargers of our life.

The saint’s energy and, one can infer by analogy, the energy of committed political actors come in large part from their “sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control.”

James’s description of the saint captures a fundamental strain of the American political tradition. He could have been speaking about Jefferson, Paine, Hamilton, or William Lloyd Garrison when he wrote, “Political re-
formers accomplish their successive tasks in the history of nations by being blind for the time to other causes.”

This way of thinking may not be peculiarly American, but it is an American tradition to believe that when we act, God is on our side. The Puritans saw New England as a light for the entire world, and American revolutionaries and the constitutional framers similarly posited a unique historical role for U.S. political principles and practices.

When individuals claim that their rights are being violated, they tend to echo Jefferson’s formulation, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights.”

“It has been frequently remarked,” wrote Alexander Hamilton in the first number of The Federalist, “that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.”

If the United States failed, given its highly favorable circumstances and ability to make a fresh start, then no country could establish a free government. Most subsequent steps in American history, including the civil rights movement, have sought to link God, country, and cause. For example, many of the people who supported the war in Vietnam believed that the United States embodied good while the North Vietnamese were evil incarnate. James’s critique could also be applied to the Christian right and the anti-Communist crusade that depicted the Soviet Union as the evil empire.

Although James respected, for the good it produced, the American tradition of action based on faith, he wanted to transform that tradition in order to reduce the imperialist impulse and to make political resolution of differences possible. Mutual respect will be fostered if people with excessive zeal, a group that includes ordinary citizens as well as political activists, accept the pluralist model of the universe. The fervent ones need to learn hesitation and doubt so they will toil for their causes without claiming to possess all virtue. A tincture of self-doubt makes democratic respect feasible. Perry summarized James’s position:

The grip of the hand on the sword is relaxed by the reflection that the other’s cause is as real and warm to him as is mine to me, and has its
own inner and equal justification. If the principle of sympathy be given priority over the principle of self-assertion it is still possible, however, to save the militant and heroic qualities. The principle of sympathy is itself a cause for moral and even for physical courage.\(^{20}\)

James's description of typical political action based on fervent belief in one's convictions contrasts sharply with the pluralist model he proposed. Without ever saying so explicitly, he appears to have been calling for a transformation of the traditional American political consciousness. Wolin augments this argument: "If you ask, what does the person of faith, the devout person, have to give up in order to embrace a pluralist universe, the answer is 'quite a bit.' James is demanding a great deal that would involve, one might argue, a radical change of character. He or she would cease to be a fervent believer."\(^{21}\) From James's characterization of committed actors in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, there seems to be little grounds for success in effecting this metamorphosis, even though he proposed pragmatism as an alternative at the end of that book. Would he have had a better chance of altering the outlook of his second audience, those who lack faith?

III

In addition to the people who have excessive certainty, James spoke to those who fear there is no solid ground for taking action, a paralyzing doubt that has recently assumed different forms. In the sixties and seventies, many people said they could not engage in politics "until they got their heads together." In part, this was a statement of priorities, but it also identified "the head" as the filter of values, visions, programs, and actions; if the head were "not together," a person might make destructive choices and act inefficiently. I remain friends with a woman who entered a would-be revolutionary party, a cult really, instead of finishing college. Upon her escape from it, under threat to her life, she became disillusioned with all politics because she does not know whom to trust. After Watergate, Vietnam, the Soviet Union, the Cultural Revolution, and Tiananmen Square, what will replace unquestioning conviction as an inspiration for action?
James asked the same question in response to a much different set of events. In the nineteenth century, the carnage of the Civil War, the corruption of the second Grant administration, and the Darwinian revolution were interpreted as indicators of the universe’s absence of meaning. As a young man, James himself experienced a loss of faith and suffered a nervous breakdown, recovering only after reading the work of the philosopher Charles Renouvier, who posited that principles could be freely chosen instead of scientifically discovered. James addressed his essay “The Will to Believe” to people who feared they could not act meaningfully in a random and chaotic universe. He prescribed to American skeptics the cure that had worked for him: beliefs grounded in choice rather than ontology and the fact that ideals need not be based on external, objective foundations.

For pluralistic pragmatism, truth grows up inside of all the finite experiences. They lean on each other, but the whole of them, if such a whole there be, leans on nothing. All “homes” are in finite experience; finite experience as such is homeless. Nothing outside of the flux secures the issue of it. It can hope salvation only from its own intrinsic promises and potencies.

James’s response to this lack of certainty became, Believe in what you need. When asked in an interview whether he believed in God, he said yes, because he needed Him. Of course, James’s assertion can be made to seem absurd—I need a glass of water so I believe it is there—but James’s proposition is actually close to everyday experience. Is the job worth doing? For example, is it worthwhile to write books or attempt to teach young people in a “postliterate” age? Should time be spent in dingy offices making fliers for rallies that will draw only a handful of people? We can and should advance evidence and arguments in favor of our positions, but we cannot prove that our activities matter. Yet, in order to stick with them, we need to believe that they do.

James hoped that adopting this outlook would not only help skeptics overcome paralysis but make their eventual actions less belligerent. He was arguing not simply for a recovery of traditional American faith but for a redefinition of faith to incorporate self-conscious doubt. Faith, he wrote, is “belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possi-
This new understanding would be accepted, James thought, because people would rise to a challenge. "Any mode of conceiving the universe which . . . makes the man seem as if he were individually helping to create the actuality of the truth whose metaphysical reality he is willing to assume, will be sure to be responded to by large numbers."  

I have shown that James offered the pluralist universe to two types of political actors. He invited the faithful to a measure of doubt and skeptics to generous action based upon new guiding principles. Ideals would remain the inspiration for action, but the political actors would not assume those ideals to be guaranteed by anything other than choice. Having described James's pluralism as one element of a democratic political temperament, I now want to turn to another tool he offered democratic citizens, pragmatism.

IV

In everyday language, pragmatism implies the practical and the concrete. In politics, the call to "be pragmatic" means to settle for what you can get. Its opposite is rigid idealism or an insistence upon inopportune discussion of principles when the situation demands action. These definitions are only indirectly related to James's position, which proffers pragmatism as both a theory of truth and a method of resolving fierce philosophical and political conflicts. His concerns intersect with everyday language at one point, however: to take a "pragmatic" view of truth in political discussions is to consider the consequences of a proposed idea rather than dispute first principles.

Instead of posing such dilemmas as, What is justice? or Should a society guarantee equality of condition or only equality of opportunity? political opponents should imagine the potential results of implementing their respective principles. James would try to redirect a political conversation toward the query, If we accept your view to be true rather than mine, what difference does it make to our course of action? Where there is no difference in result, James postulated, there is no meaningful difference in principles. James thought that disputes often could be resolved by showing that if either position were implemented the effects would be the same. In poli-
tics, policy debates usually create different repercussions; where they do not, James is right, the debate can cease. But once anticipated effects are established, political opponents must assess them, which leads back to fundamental principles.

One might assume that pragmatism is the enemy of political theory because it disparages an overlong consideration of ideals. Machiavelli was an ancestor of political pragmatism, given this definition of it: in politics power, context, and consequences must always be considered. "A great many men have imagined states and princedoms such as nobody ever saw or knew in the real world, for there's such a difference between the way we really live and the way we ought to live that the man who neglects the real to study the ideal will learn how to accomplish his ruin, not his salvation." The just person who goes into the world unarmed will be ineffectual. Machiavelli never denied the existence of justice and truth, and never suggested that might makes right, but he had no faith that right makes might.

Political theory's stock-in-trade is debate of first principles, and so it will always be an enemy of vulgar pragmatism, but this fact does not foreclose consideration of the narrower issue of turning to consequences as a method for reducing the intensity of political conflict. As a rhetorical strategy, James's proposal is attractive, but it is unlikely to be effective because there is no clear distinction between first principles and consequences. It would be splendid if turning to outcomes reduced terrorism:

The national government is indeed dangerous, but if you bomb either the plane or the building many innocent people will be hurt. Really? Then forget the whole thing.

Civilian deaths are not assessed uniformly. Some people believe that no lives of the enemy are "innocent." Deaths are unfortunate, but necessary to gain attention for the cause. People are dying all the time at the hands of military force, and some lives must be sacrificed in order to stop injustice. This view might remind some readers of Machiavelli's insight that a discussion of repercussions requires as much imagination as does a debate about principles because in politics, and even in life, no one knows what the actual effects of an action will be. Anticipated consequences are often ironically related to intentions.
It might be countered that examining consequences rather than debating first principles would reduce emotions and make resolution more likely, but it is remarkable how little impact pragmatic arguments have on those people who assert that only morality matters. In the abortion debate, one might say, “Let us not focus solely on the question of when life begins and whether all human life must be protected but instead remember that the outcomes of making abortions illegal would be that only wealthy women could afford them while other women would have more unwanted children and many women would seek dangerous illegal abortions.” Some Catholics among others argue that the most serious consequences of free choice on abortion will be a callousness about life and an avoidance of personal responsibility, and one cannot convince an orthodox Catholic or Jew that abortion or birth control is necessary to prevent the consequence of overpopulation. Flannery O'Connor wrote in a letter:

The Church’s stand on birth control is the most absolutely spiritual of all her stands and with all of us being materialists at heart, there is little wonder that it causes unease. I wish various fathers would quit trying to defend it by saying that the world can support 40 billion. I will rejoice in the day when they say: This is right, whether we all rot on top of each other or not, dear children, as we certainly may. Either practice restraint or be prepared for crowding.29

I do not accept O’Connor’s view, but it reveals that even if effects should be considered in assessing the validity of a proposed action, it is unlikely that political actors motivated by faith will be willing to shift consideration from first principles to consequences or that they would weigh those consequences similarly. To suggest that someone shift from a consideration of principles to consequences is really to ask them to change their identity.

V

James sought to inspire both citizen action and mutual respect with his conception of a pluralist universe in which beliefs are grounded in choice rather than in something external. Would this vision be compelling
enough to inspire skeptics to act? Would it soften the hard edges of those driven by faith without discouraging them altogether? James himself supposed that great political action was usually fueled by deep faith. Even if activists have never heard of debates about epistemology, they tend to hold to their beliefs tenaciously, acting as if those beliefs were objectively true. The cultivation of doubt and tolerance might make political actors more generous but less impelled to act. Doubt may be an essential component of scholarship, but not of politics; fervent political actors are usually not skeptics. The rest of us may often recognize strong arguments on both sides of an issue, and be thankful that we do not have to decide, but partisans feel their cause to be righteous. Would the notion of a pluralist universe really motivate action if, as James posited, action typically emerges from faith in a cause? Can a freely chosen ideal, experienced as freely chosen, produce the same inspiration? His description of action inspired by faith seems truer to the experience of transformative political action; the proposed alternative, action based on choice and respect for others, is attractive but difficult to achieve.

As James conceded, confidence in the absolute virtue of one’s aims has been a typical component of great political efforts. An intellectual biographer of Frederick Douglass writes:

Without a spiritual anchor to rely upon, without a God of justice to overrule a society that promised only injustice, without the simple but powerful theory that history is a process where things somehow get better, and without a fierce commitment to agitation, black leaders could not realistically have continued to exhort their people to remain hopeful of a life and opportunity and dignity in the face of oppression.30

If James exhorted, “Believe in what you need,” what were the psychological needs of Ida B. Wells who tried in the 1890s to stop lynching and attain the vote for women in the face of massive, often violent resistance, even from white suffragettes? Did she not need unquestioning conviction in the justice of her struggle?31 Could Martin Luther King, Jr., who tried to love his enemies, have continued his work if he had not believed that racial equality was an unequivocal good? He wrote, “We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God
are embodied in our echoing demands.\textsuperscript{32} It is difficult to picture a pluralist, postmodern King who did not tie his crusade to heavenly will.\textsuperscript{33}

Recognition of a pluralistic universe might give strength to some people in despair, but it could undermine the determination of committed activists. One can imagine a person who is afraid that nothing can be changed because everything is controlled by large forces—you can’t fight city hall or progress, to say nothing of late capitalism—being able to find inspiration in the notions that those forces do not govern history, present conditions have not been sanctioned by God or the march of history, and people can, at least to a degree, affect the world in a meaningful way. But one can also envision activists who become discouraged if they adopt the vision of a pluralistic universe and conclude that their cause lacks objective superiority. In short, action and respect may have contradictory sources. What produces one undermines the other so that the natural tendency is toward either fanatic action or tolerant passivity. Are these the only alternatives?

The authors of \textit{The Federalist} had a solution: since politics inflames the passions, they designed institutions to reduce political participation.\textsuperscript{34} Although James may have supported the Constitution in principle, institutions and practices that promoted passivity were unacceptable to him, and thus he implicitly rejected the Federalist contempt for action. An inert populace is unlikely to be more tolerant than an active one, if only because political participants often learn about their opponents by working with them politically rather than fearing them as imaginary enemies. James demanded that the person of deep faith should continue to work for his or her causes but become more pluralistic upon entering the realm of politics. In effect, James was calling for a new type of political actor, yet he made it clear why that type will be difficult to create. The tension between faith and pluralism that can be seen in James’s theory does not mean that the democratic temperament is impossible to engender, but it does mean that it will not be easy to do so. James’s proposed combination of action and mutual respect should be judged to be, not so much a contradiction, as a formidable and worthy goal.