

Erin C. Tarver and Shannon Sullivan (editors)

*Feminist Interpretations of William James*

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**Celia Bardwell-Jones** is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo. She is currently chair of the Gender and Women's Studies Program. Her research focuses on transnational feminist thought, feminist philosophy, philosophy of race, indigenous philosophies, and American pragmatism. She regularly teaches courses in epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of nature.

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Rereading the philosophical canon requires that philosophers cultivate habits of heightened critical reflection. It is clear that an important purpose of rereading the canon is to develop new interpretive horizons on traditional texts, which can address the experiences of those who have historically been oppressed in society. As Nancy Tuana notes in the preface to this anthology, canon-formation in Western philosophy tends to privilege the perspective of the "upper-class white males" (viii). Hence, it is evident that in the pursuit of universal truth, meaning, and certainty, the trajectory of Western philosophy has cultivated interpretive blind spots, missing perspectives in the philosophical development of larger narratives of truth. Given this problem inherent in Western philosophy, the task of this anthology in particular aims to recover not only lost texts but also to constantly question "whether a philosopher's socially inherited prejudices concerning women's nature and role is independent of her or his larger philosophical framework" (ix).

It is exciting to see *Feminist Interpretations of William James* as part of this series. As many of the authors in this anthology have commented, pragmatism shares many philosophical commitments to feminism, and it is not unusual for many of the authors to acknowledge the existence of feminist-friendly elements in William James's philosophical theories. The editors of the volume, Erin Tarver and Shannon Sullivan, cite a few examples in James's work, such as "James's appreciation of fluidity, of truth as a value of life, of the value-laded [sic] character of rationality, and of perspectivism and selective emphasis" (10). However, the editors of this volume do not approach James's work uncritically, as they acknowledge and point out how James suffers from existing social norms of sexism and class-bias regardless of the progressive intentions he had in advancing social life. In fact, Charlene Haddock Seigfried's and Erin McKenna's essays painfully draw out James's unconcealed sexist temperament. Hence, the main task of the anthology goes beyond merely highlighting feminist-friendly resources in James's philosophical work, but carefully untangles the "useful and the irremediably sexist aspects of James's work" (10). All of the essays in this anthology carefully evaluate the ethical project of philosophy: is it possible to parse out the good and the bad of William James's thought? Is it possible for a philosopher's theories ever to be reconstructed to serve feminist ends? Can a reconstruction of any philosopher whose explicit social prejudices against women necessarily generate a reification of those sexist values ever fully engage in the task of liberation for women? I will consider the essays of this anthology with these ethical questions of philosophical analysis and practice in mind.

It appears that any rereading of traditional philosophical texts must take seriously the social prejudices of the philosopher. In considering James's particular sexism as well as his race, sex, and class bias, it seems as if there are three strategies a critical philosopher might entertain. The first strategy recognizes the sexism of the philosopher, however, it can evade this sexism and find it independent of the philosophical theories, which hence can be usefully utilized to further feminist ends. In this sense, the sexism is accidental to the philosophical frameworks. The second strategy recognizes all too well the sexism of the philosopher and rejects any philosophical theory despite its potential to advance social life as it deems it impossible to separate the sexism from the philosophical framework. In this sense, the sexism is essential to the philosophical frameworks. The third strategy involves a critical engagement of the philosopher, which doesn't excuse the philosopher's sexism but seeks to carefully untangle the sexist aspects of the philosophical theories that can be reconstructed to advance feminist ends. In this sense, the strategy aims to reinterpret and even perhaps add to the philosopher's framework while directly engaging the sexism of the philosopher. Between the dichotomies of philosophical practice, feminist pragmatism carves out a middle ground in rereading the pragmatist canon of William James.

*Feminist Interpretations of William James* is thematically organized into four sections. The chapters in the first section, entitled "The Promise and Peril of James's Philosophy for Feminism," carefully consider James's misogyny and its impact on feminist philosophy. Seigfried's and McKenna's work deals directly with James's sexism, cautioning the reader not to readily excuse this misogyny when considering his work for feminist ends. Seigfried provides an updated preface when commenting on her earlier groundbreaking work, *Reweaving the Social Fabric*. Seigfried earlier had tried to "mitigate the severity" of James's misogyny, but there was always a masculinist perspective that forcefully appeared throughout his work. In this way, Seigfried recognizes the limits of a Jamesian feminist reconstruction of his thought. Though James values many aspects that feminists would support, such as his critique of universal truth, or his attention to sentimentality, Seigfried reads James against his own sexist impressions of women. Women's natures are different from men's natures. This can be interpreted as supporting a cultural feminist viewpoint (though vastly distinct from Jane Addams's cultural feminism). However, the differences between men and women, for James, as Seigfried argues, leave the status of women as subordinate. Women's nature is constrained while men's nature expands into action. Women's nature is to ultimately serve men as wives or mothers. In fact, James's conception of the universe can be analogous to an "'automatic sweetheart,' meaning a soulless body indistinguishable from a real maiden" (28). Seigfried mines James's works and excavates the hidden perspective, exposing the deep and pervasive misogyny that underlies much of James's thought. I find Seigfried conflicted in her admiration of James and critically insightful in treating James's work as a potential resource for feminist thought. This is a tough ethical road the feminist pragmatist must travel.

McKenna's chapter continues the cautionary impulse of rethinking James's sexism in light of his relations with the actual women in his life. Though she finds James's work appealing to feminists, McKenna is concerned with James's tendency (and that of many men of his time) to background women: "their labor and support is assumed to be there, but it remains in the background and is not acknowledged" (81). McKenna's concern in bringing out this disposition in James is that he is oblivious to his white and male privilege. Though this concern need not

sanction a wholesale rejection of James's thought for feminist ends, one must be cautious in uncritically accepting/excusing James's construal of privilege as natural. McKenna looks to James's relationships with the women in his life: colleagues, family members, and lovers. James had the privilege to work with many strong women in his career, including Jane Addams and Zina Peirce. Yet, despite these interactions, he was unable to re-evaluate his privilege. The attitudes toward women that emerge in his home further add to an explanation of his obliviousness. It was clear that his father also had a naturalized view of women's nature: to serve men as wives and mothers. This of course carried over to his relationships with the women he loved, such as his wife, Alice Gibbens. Alice's self-sacrifice and passivity was viewed as her strength. James's view of women affects his view of the individual, and if feminists see his view as a resource for advancing feminist projects, then a critical re-evaluation of James's sexism is required, since as McKenna points out, "his great men stood on the backs of women" (96).

After reading Siegfried's and McKenna's damaging exposé of James's view of women and obliviousness to his own privilege, which affects his view of the individual, the feminist pragmatist might be tempted to ditch James's work and move toward pragmatist thinkers such as Dewey or Royce who valued the community. However, in response to this cautionary impulse, the next two readings, from Jacob Goodson and Erin Tarver, attempt to (in different senses) expose the subversive feminine elements hidden within James's sexism. Goodson attempts to read James's remarks on women in his criticism of Mill's *The Subjection of Women* in the context of the debate between liberal and radical feminism. Goodson's chapter provides an interesting foray into mining a perspective on James that can serve the aims of radical feminism. At stake in this debate is how Mill understood women's nature. Does Mill assume that gender is a social construction or a natural feature of women's identity? In Siegfried's concluding remarks to the volume, she reiterates that Mill argued that the subordinate status of women was unnatural and was legitimized by a social and legal system that assumed that women were naturally inferior (283). James's theories should have accommodated the complexities of the interpretive frameworks of meaning when examining an object; however, James's privileged position may have led to his obliviousness to women's "nature" as a product of social circumstance. Although there are enlightening aspects to James's work, this debate demonstrates the need for feminist pragmatists to embark on the difficult road of not excusing the philosopher's sexism, but critically engaging it.

Hence, I appreciate Tarver's position on James's philosophy, particularly the two-pronged suggestion that pragmatists must a) adopt feminist perspectives when evaluating James's theories, particularly his views on individual autonomy, and b) feminists can find elements within James's thought that can better serve feminist projects, such as philosophical conceptions of the situated self. This compelling approach cultivates a "critical posture . . . necessary if we are to make the consequences of James's tacit sexism clear to ourselves--and more importantly, if we are to avoid importing the consequences of such problematic views into our own theorizing" (115).

This first section succinctly lays out the ethical project of feminist pragmatism, carefully engaging James's misogyny, not excusing his tacit sexism, while highlighting the useful aspects of his work. The rest of the anthology carefully incorporates James's work within feminist philosophical topics, such as the ethics of care, embodiment and emotion, and feminist

epistemology, being mindful of the feminist-pragmatist ethical project developed in the first section. All of these articles draw upon James as a resource for feminism while at the same time being mindful of his misogyny and obliviousness to his privilege. My comments for the rest of the review will focus on the strategies of engaging James's thought in light of his misogyny and obliviousness to his privilege.

In the "Pragmatist Ethics of Care" section, Susan Dielman and Maurice Hamington evaluate the usefulness of James's thought within the ethics of care. Both thinkers tackle one of the most pressing problems of James's thought: his gender essentialism. Recall Siegfried's and McKenna's critique that James thought women's nature was designed to serve men as wives and mothers. Expecting women to care perfectly and naturally sets women up for failing to care. McKenna notes how even James's father laments how he thought his wife (James's mother) "was perfect, but soon learned that this was not the case" (84). How can care be reformulated to address the consequences of James's gender essentialism? I applaud Dielman's attention in addressing this problem directly and her attempts to reformulate an understanding of care as caring habits, which assumes an anti-foundationalist approach to James's gender essentialism. It is clear that James may not have had this anti-foundationalist gender essentialism of actual women in mind, however, Dielman points out resources in James scholarship that can support an interpretation of his pragmatist vision. Given this anti-essentialist argument, it is clear that James's view of women is also in need of revision.

Hamington finds value in James's work to enhance "a rich understanding of care that emphasizes attending to unfamiliar others, the willingness to act on their behalf, and how such caring can become an intentional part of our self-identity" (159). To hearken back to the gender essentialism that haunts James's thought, Hamington wonders if James's conception of masculinity is consistent with an ethics of care, given his sexism and masculinized hero-worship. Though there are resources that can defend an interpretation of a Jamesian masculinity that defies the problematic hegemonic masculinity that affects our contemporary patriarchal culture and whether it can contribute to an ethics of care, I am not clear if a sound connection can be made. Hamington, however, does leave us with a provocative question: what would caring habits or a vision of care look like from a masculine as distinct from a feminine approach to care ethics?

The next section considers the role of the body in James's work to serve as a feminist resource in psychology, emotion, and religious experience. All three chapters in this section utilize James's theory of the body and expose the promising aspects of this work for feminist projects, though there seems to be more of a forgiving spirit in these sections when confronting James's sexism (with the exception of Megan Craig). Given philosophy's modern history of devaluing the body, which has often been linked to women's "irrational" experience, the authors in this section argue that the body, as theorized by James, can provide important resources in extending feminist philosophies of the body. Craig's chapter shifts analysis of James's work to the realm of psychology. This analysis of James's "The Gospel of Relaxation" and critique of Americanitis is pertinent in our highly technological and industrial contemporary life. Despite the poignant remarks James makes about the modern industrial world, Craig acknowledges the "potentially dangerous and conservative undercurrent to his 1895 pleas" (174), in particular the suggestion that young women should refuse an education as it supports a meaningless notion of success. Moreover, Craig alerts us to the deep "feminist tensions" as well as "racial, ethnic, and class

tensions," and also tensions with regard to transgender individuals that punctuate James's thought. These intersectional aspects of social life are not explicitly revealed or perhaps considered by James. The obliviousness to his privilege continues. Psychological stress requires more sensitivity to social and cultural differences that James clearly is not aware of. Nonetheless, Craig finds useful resources in James's thought. I appreciate Craig's recognition of James's pluriverse as "a space of decentered subjectivity--a place where subjects remake themselves and are remade in light of new experiences" (183). This could be a place in which feminists may find value in advancing liberating projects as well as one for pragmatists in challenging their own assumptions of privilege and views of others affected by race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on.

Shannon Sullivan also finds value in James's theories of the body to counter cognitivist frameworks in thinking about emotion. Cognitivist accounts of emotion tend to privilege the intellectual over feelings. Sullivan weaves together James's view of the body as an influential aspect in developing emotions. There is an infectious quality to this feminist pragmatist account of the body. Bodies are animate, expressive, and reveal to us what the intellect cannot. Although Sullivan does not directly critique James's sexism, and points out problems with James's conception of the individual as atomistic, she identifies James's attention to the primacy of physiology and its accompanying capacities of transactional engagement with the world, which thereby breaks down mind and body dualisms. Hence, James's criticisms of a narrow and confined American social life in "The Gospel of Relaxation" could be useful for feminists in cultivating a social space where women and other marginalized identities are able to play, create, and imagine, if we can disentangle James's lack of sensitivity to those who are hindered in cultivating freeing habits of play due to social oppression.

The embodied dimension of emotion carries over to ecstatic accounts of religion. Jeremy Carrette does an interesting job in highlighting the limits of James's famous work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Carrette acknowledges that though James "is entangled in complex nineteenth-century patriarchal frames and inherited models of patriarchal Christianity" (214), it may be difficult for a skeptic of James's self-conscious revision of his own sexism. However, Carrette argues there are resources in James's work that emphasize the body in religious experience and his unwavering philosophical attitude of the "more." These features in James's thought makes room for competing religious impulses that acknowledge the fleshly realm of experience and a religious idealism that cultivates a philosophical attitude of openness.

An area in feminist thought where pragmatism can be modified or enhanced through feminist and critical race theories is in the realm of epistemology. It is exciting to see how recent scholarly work in the epistemology of ignorance has advanced our understanding of the politics of knowledge-production. Both José Medina and Lorraine Code take seriously one of the major flaws in James's perspective: his privilege. Though James's work gestures toward a pluralistic vision of the world, often he himself failed to acknowledge his own blind spots and obliviousness to the social experiences of those who are oppressed, as feminists in this volume have pointed out.

Code's argument draws upon Jamesian resources in "The Will to Believe" and can be extended beyond a pragmatist conception of knowing "facts" generally in the world. Code emphasizes the

need to modify the will to believe to include a "conceptual repertoire sufficiently sensitive to oppose racism/sexism on moral-political grounds not themselves created by or part of the will to believe" (277-78). This would entail that the privileged knower must perceive the world in the context of injustice, which requires the knower to become familiar and acquainted with the lives of those who are oppressed. Code finds resources in James's "as-if" model to cultivate that imaginative character of knowing toward ends of social justice. Code's treatment of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an example of how privileged knowers may have the opportunity to critically engage their own normative assumptions of racial inequality and widen the political and moral "as-if" frameworks in developing more sensitive epistemic models that include the experiences of those who are oppressed.

Medina continues this effort of dismantling privileged perspectives, and his treatment of James's work is powerful in the context of an epistemology of resistance. I agree with his claim that feminist and critical race theories can help supplement and modify Jamesian conceptions of "radical pragmatism" "in order to be sensitive and responsive to experiences of oppression" (236). Medina is astute in exposing the limitations of Jamesian epistemology as being hampered by his "bourgeois individualism." Though there are hints within James's work that can help in eliminating this blind spot, Medina argues that it may not be enough. What is needed is an epistemology of resistance, a will not to believe, which entails a "refusal to engage with certain perspectives--in short, a will not to believe certain things" (250-51). One needs to engage in epistemic processes of self-estrangement, which requires acknowledging the reality of one's own ignorance and blind spots created by social prejudices. This epistemic friction is necessary to cultivate a self-reflective, critical epistemology that can challenge social injustice and hence be truly radical.

This volume represents some of the best applications of feminist pragmatist scholarship. It also takes seriously the documented sexism of a seemingly socially progressive and well-intentioned pragmatist philosopher, William James. This method of rereading the canon offers a new perspective on James's thought. Against his own impulse to cultivate a model of the individual as atomistic and masculine, the scholars in this volume have carefully disentangled and modified this limiting understanding of the individual and offer new interpretations of his work in light of this critique. This method of rereading the canon serves as a model for feminists to generate complex and rich interpretive horizons that don't excuse the sexism of the philosopher as accidental to his philosophical theories, nor advocate a wholesale rejection of the philosopher's work as essentially sexist, but seek a middle interpretive ground that critically engages the philosopher's social prejudice while attempting to transform pragmatist thought toward meeting the goals of feminist projects.