

**THE PHILOSOPHY  
OF  
WILLIAM JAMES**

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The Philosophy of William James by Th. Flournoy & Edwin B. Holt & Jr. James

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# THE PHILOSOPHY OF WILLIAM JAMES

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AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION

BY

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## PREFACE

IN the spring of 1910 M. de Vargas, president of the *Association chrétienne suisse d'Etudiants*, conceived the idea of appealing to William James, whom he knew to be passing the summer in Europe, to address the Association at its next meeting in Sainte-Croix. The proposal might have seemed an ambitious one, but the illustrious philosopher received it very amiably and replied at once that he would be glad to come to Sainte-Croix, but must make his acceptance conditional on the state of his health when the time arrived. Unfortunately he was obliged, some weeks later, to give up the project because his health had taken a sudden turn for the worse. We now know only too well how rapidly from that time on his final illness developed. Leaving Nauheim, whither he had vainly gone for relief, James crossed Switzerland and stopped for eight days in the early part of July at Geneva; but while there he was so ill that he was able to see only a

few of his friends. He spent the following month in England, consulting the most competent specialists; then on the twelfth of August he sailed for America. He had been but a few days at his country house in Chocorua (New Hampshire) when, on the twenty-sixth of August, 1910, at the age of sixty-eight and one-half years, he died.

The two following letters from William James to M. de Vargas will give a better idea than any words of mine of the friendliness and candor of this rare man, and of the cordial feeling which he always cherished for our Switzerland.

RYE, SUSSEX, April 12, 1910.

DEAR MONSIEUR DE VARGAS:—

Your invitation naturally fills me with pride and pleasure, and were I in good health, I should immediately accept it for the sake of renewing my old acquaintance with the *jeunesse studieuse* of Vaud and Geneva. But I am at present quite ill; and unless the course of baths which I am going to Nauheim to begin taking in May should change my condition very much indeed, it will not be possible for me, even in October (should I stay in Europe so long) to meet you and your Association at Sainte-Croix.

Nevertheless I will not say "no" at present, but will adjourn the decision until July, when I will



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write to you again. So meanwhile you see that I accept your demand *en principe*. You ought, however, not to delay on that account your other possibilities of guests. . . .

I thank your Committee most cordially for doing me this honor and remain fraternally and sincerely yours,

WM. JAMES.

BAD-NAUHEIM, JUNE 2, 1910.

DEAR M. DE VARGAS:—

I receive your kind letter of May 28th this instant. . . . Unhappily, it will be quite impossible for me to accept. My health gets worse instead of better, and the diagnosis, now sharply *festgestellt*, of enlargement of the aorta, makes it obligatory for me to avoid every occasion of excitement and fatigue.

I deeply regret not to be able to be among you and share in Swiss enthusiasm and Swiss youth. But there is no way! Believe me, with heartiest good wishes and hopes for the success of your meeting, very sincerely yours,

WM. JAMES.

Thus deprived of the unparalleled good-fortune to which it had been looking forward, the *Association chrétienne d'Etudiants* requested me to take the place left vacant on its programme. Other obligations caused me to hesitate for some time; but when the dire news of James's death

arrived, I felt that I ought not to decline the invitation which, sadly enough, lay before me. It seemed a sacred duty to accept this opportunity of evoking for my young hearers the memory of the man of genius, the rare spirit, and the true friend who had been so suddenly taken from us. And hence this present discourse,<sup>1</sup> improvised all too hastily, on the Philosophy of William James. On revising it several months later for publication, at the instance of the Committee of the *Association*, I have become still more thoroughly aware of its incompleteness and its imperfections. Yet to correct it as I should wish would be quite beyond my present ability; and moreover, to aim here at the utmost critical precision would be to sacrifice the one merit which, perhaps, this study possesses,—namely, its unpretentiousness, its easy pace, its popular and non-academic point of view. Accordingly in preparing this volume I have preserved the arrangement and divisions, often even the none too well-turned phrases, of the original discourse. On the other hand I have enlarged it considerably

<sup>1</sup> Delivered at Sainte-Croix, on the eighth of October, 1910.

and perhaps too much, in order to develop certain points which were in the lecture very briefly touched on if not quite omitted. I have also reprinted, as an Appendix, my review of James's work entitled *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This review first appeared in the *Revue Philosophique*, and may be useful, as a preliminary appreciation, to readers of that now famous work.

I could wish that this little volume, in spite of its defects, might awaken in some of my young readers the desire to become more directly acquainted with the writings of a thinker whose whole philosophy seems to appeal especially to youth, so charged is it with energy, courage, and frankness, and with buoyant devotion to those ideals which ever guided his life and conduct.

TH. FLOURNOY.

FLORISSANT, NEAR GENEVA,  
June the first, 1911.