

**WILLIAM JAMES AND  
HENRI BERGSON: A  
STUDY IN CONTRASTING  
THEORIES OF LIFE**

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William James and Henri Bergson: a study in contrasting theories of life by Horace Meyer Kallen

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# WILLIAM JAMES AND HENRI BERGSON

A STUDY IN CONTRASTING THEORIES  
OF LIFE

*By*

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TO  
WILLIAM JAMES  
MY MASTER



## PREFACE

In the spring of 1912 I was asked to give a series of talks on the relation between the philosophies of William James and Henri Bergson. This book is the outcome of the meditations which compliance with that request demanded. I have sought in it to draw the "counterfeit presentment of two brothers," brothers in that they are the children of the same age, that the same blood of its characteristic and perhaps unique tradition runs in the veins of their thought, and also, it may be, in that their individualities are so strikingly distinct and unique.

"There is," William James writes somewhere, "very little difference between one man and another; but what little there is, is very important." The difference between James and Bergson has seemed to me much more than little, and of an importance difficult to calculate in advance; for the difference turns on what is ultimately a philosophic prevision of the future and a philosophic summation of the past.

James's theory of life seems to me to face forward, to be an expression of the age's underlying and hence vaguely felt and unformulated tendencies. Bergson's theory of life sums itself up as a consummation of the philosophic tradition, restated in the modes of thought and harmonized with the modes of feeling of the age.

For this reason it has been easier to portray Bergson's philosophy than James's. Bergson has a system in which there is logical relation between premise and conclusion, a relation so complete and integrative, indeed, that it is difficult to state any single opinion of Bergson's plausibly without becoming involved at once in a restatement of the whole system. His doctrines literally "interpenetrate," and have thus made necessary a certain amount of repetition in the exposition of them. To portray James's philosophy, on the contrary, has required much direct quotation, partly because of the novelty of his opinions, partly because of the existence of some difference among philosophers concerning just what was central and important in James's own mind. James,

more than any other protagonist in the history of thought, was free from that "certain blindness in human beings." His mind and eye were alert to the unique, the individual, hence the *important*, in all phases of life and reflection (it is said of him that he used to put an opponent's case better than his own); he could so think himself into a cause as to become, for the moment, dramatically identical with it, to the exclusion of everything else. His sympathetic and persuasive statement of one phase of the Bergsonian point of view, for example, has led many careless readers to regard him as a Bergsonian; and of the position of the "psychical researchers," as a spiritist, and so on; while his readiness to entertain and to try out any philosophical hypothesis has led various readers to consider him irrevocably committed to this or that philosophic dogma. His attitude toward "panpsychism" (see the concluding passages in *Some Problems of Philosophy*) is an example.

Now readers approaching so myriad-minded and empirical a thinker as James will, if they are philosophical, approach him with preconcep-