Introduction

Other than the initial paragraphs, this introduction is divided into four parts. Part one provides a brief background of James’s life up to the time when the correspondence begins. Part two traces the development of his writings and the major events in his life after 1885 until his death in 1910. Part three points out some themes that recur throughout the correspondence and help to accentuate his character. Part four touches lightly on the relation of the present edition to other publications that deal with James’s letters.

Ralph Barton Perry in his Pulitzer Prize-winning Thought and Character of William James (1935) maintained that in 1885 William James “came of age.” That year has been chosen as the point of departure for this collection of James’s previously unpublished correspondence covering the last twenty-five years of his life. Two criteria were used for this collection. The first was the appropriateness of the correspondence to demonstrate the continuous and harmonious integration of James’s talents, interests, and achievements in the fields of science, psychology, and philosophy. The second was the appropriateness of the correspondence to portray James as a pivot around which revolved the lives and works of so many important women and men. As a result this edition hopes to furnish the readers with a vivid, detailed, and personal account of a twenty-five year slice of
both American and European intellectual history. The life of James was an important influence on the intellectual character of his times, but also influential were the lives of many of his friends and colleagues, both young and old, with whom he corresponded.

I

William James was born in New York City on 11 January 1842. He was the first of five children born to Henry and Mary R. Walsh James. The others were Henry, Garth Wilkinson, Robertson, and Alice. William's early education was benefitted by two trips to Europe, where his parents took him and his brother Henry. When the family lived in Newport, Rhode Island, James showed an interest in painting. This talent of keen perception and depiction continued to be manifest in his later dealings with people and with intellectual issues. He once remarked, in a perhaps unintentional autobiographical way, "Expertness in philosophy is measured by the definiteness of our summarizing reactions, by the immediate perceptive epithet with which the expert hits such complex objects off."

After much wavering James entered Harvard University's Lawrence Scientific School in 1861; he studied chemistry under Charles W. Eliot and comparative anatomy and physiology under Jeffries Wyman and Louis Agassiz. In 1869 James earned an M.D. degree, also from Harvard, though he never practiced medicine. In that same year, Eliot became president of Harvard. In August of 1872, he appointed James as an instructor in physiology beginning January 1873. In his diary for 10 February, James wrote, "I decide today to stick to biology for a profession in case I am not called to a chair of Philosophy . . . Philosophy I will nevertheless regard as my vocation." In 1876 he was made an assistant professor
of physiology. Though he continued to offer "Natural History 3" on "The Comparative Anatomy and Physiology of Vertebrates" until 1880, in the fall term of 1876 he also offered a course, which was assigned to the philosophy department, using Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* as a text. Out of it came James's first psychological article, "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence" (1878). James thought, "The conceiving or theorizing faculty... functions exclusively for the sake of ends that do not exist in the world of impressions we receive by way of our senses, but are set by our emotional and practical subjectivity altogether." This practical aspect was stressed in his first philosophical paper (written in French in late 1877), "Some considerations on the Subjective Method." Herein James defended the faculties we have to "set ourselves a task in virtue of an act of faith which can be accomplished only by our own effort; and to enter boldly into action in circumstances when success cannot be assured in advance."

James was made an assistant professor of philosophy in 1880. His colleagues in teaching philosophy were Francis Bowen and George Herbert Palmer. With a new sense of academic security and freedom, James expressed his philosophic difference from the imported German type of philosophy, whether the Transcendental Idealism of Immanuel Kant or the Absolute Idealism of G. W. F. Hegel, which was prevalent both inside and outside of Harvard. At Palmer's 1880–81 seminar on Hegel, James read a witty paper, which in April 1882 was published as "On Some Hegelisms." Writing to a friend about the paper, he said, "I think with the summer Concord School of Philosophy and all the rest of you expanding away here and in Great Britain, a little public opposition will be no unhealthy thing." But the real battle began after Josiah Royce from California joined the department in the fall of 1882, when James was on sab-
batical leave in Europe. Royce's book, *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* (1885), defended Absolute Idealism in a way that James for a long time could not refute. James once remarked that he learned more philosophy from Royce than from anybody else. A year previous to Royce's book, James had written an article "Absolutism and Empiricism." In it he wrote, "The question, 'Shall Fact be recognized as an ultimate principle?' is the whole issue between the Rationalists and the Empiricism of vulgar thought." Also, "The one fundamental quarrel Empiricism has with Absolutism is over this repudiation by Absolutism of the personal and aesthetic factor in the construction of philosophy."

Though the following quote from James was written in 1900, it is placed here to give the reader a feeling for the philosophic atmosphere in which James worked at Harvard. Hugo Münsterberg and George Santayana were the newer members of the department. Writing to Palmer, James reflected, "If our students now could begin really to understand what Royce means with his voluntaristic-pluralistic monism, what Münsterberg means with his dualistic scientificism and platonism, what Santayana means by his pessimistic platonism, what I mean by my crass pluralism, what you mean by your ethical idealism, that these are so many religions, ways of fronting life, and worth fighting for, we should have a genuine philosophic universe at Harvard. The best condition of it would be an open conflict and rivalry of the diverse systems. . . . The world might ring with the struggle, if we devoted ourselves exclusively to belaboring each other."

Bruce Kuklick, in his book *The Rise of American Philosophy, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860–1930* (New Haven, 1977), accurately and fully narrates the interaction of the thoughts of these men. The title suggests the distinction between technical, academic American philosophy, and philosophy in America, which goes back to
thinkers as diverse in their occupations as Thomas Jefferson and Jonathan Edwards.

A few notes on the personal side. James married Alice Howe Gibbens in 1878. He once remarked, "I have found in marriage a calm and repose I never knew before." An account of this remarkable woman was privately printed by their son, Henry, in 1938. Their first three children were boys: Henry (b. 1879), William (b. 1882), and Hermann (b. 1884). The family lived at 15 Appian Way in Cambridge, but William was making plans to build a larger new house for his growing family.

II

While James was in England on his sabbatical in 1882, he met Frederic W. H. Myers, Henry Sidgwick, and Edmund Gurney, who were the leading members of the British Society for Psychical Research. James played a major role in the founding of the American Society for Psychical Research in 1884 and contributed to its Proceedings through 1889. During this period he also wrote many articles on psychology proper. These and other previous articles were rewritten to constitute a large portion of James's first book, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), which he had agreed to write twelve years before. It has been noted that the *Principles* employed two methods constituting distinct strands in the psychology: (1) the traditional method of introspection, which, having resulted in the associationist psychology of British empiricism, culminated in James's doctrine of the stream of consciousness, and (2) the newer experimental method which led to the establishment of psychology as a natural science. In the beginning of that year, James's title at Harvard had been appropriately changed to professor of psychology. This is probably also in connection with the fact that, when Bowen retired in 1889, Palmer
not James, got the coveted Alford Professorship of Philosophy.

James applied his knowledge of psychology to the field of education, when in 1891 he gave, upon request, a course of lectures on psychological topics of interest to the teachers in Cambridge. He repeated these lectures many times to teachers in their summer schools and institutes. As he said to his friend Théodore Flournoy, the Swiss psychologist, “There is a great fermentation in ‘paedagogy’ at present in the United States, and my wares come in for their share of patronage.”

In 1896 James collected for publication in book form many of his nonpsychological articles, which had been first addressed to various groups on and off campus. They appeared in print early the next year as *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. These essays illustrated James’s philosophic attitude which he called “radical empiricism.” The reader should note the different meanings the phrase “radical empiricism” received throughout James’s career. In the *Preface* he wrote, “I say ‘empiricism’, because it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience; and I say ‘radical’, because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as an hypothesis. . . . The difference between monism and pluralism is perhaps the most pregnant of all the differences in philosophy.”

Since the young German psychologist, Hugo Münsterberg, rejoined the department that year as professor of psychology, James requested that his own title be changed back to professor of philosophy. He was losing his interest in psychology proper and returning to his first love.

The summer of 1898 was the most significant turning point in James’s life. Just before he went to California to defend his recent book and to give a lecture at the University of California at Berkeley and to repeat his lecture
series to the teachers of California in the adjacent city of Oakland, he overexerted himself in his favorite sport—climbing in the Adirondack Mountains of New York. This brought about a valvular lesion and permanent damage to his heart. His condition was worsened in June of the following year as a result of more “indiscreet” climbing just before leaving to prepare and deliver in January the first series of ten lectures at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. A few months before sailing, he saw to the publication of his *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*. The three added lectures were delivered at women’s colleges. In the *Preface* James again took the occasion to state his “pluralistic or individualistic philosophy according to which truth is too great for any one actual mind, even though that mind be dubbed ‘the Absolute’, to know the whole of it. The facts and worths of life need many cognizers to take them in. There is no point of view absolutely public and universal. Private and un­communicable perceptions always remain over.” With regard to *Talks to Teachers*, James wrote in October 1902, “To tell the unvarnished truth, this book is better loved by me than any of my other productions, especially the essay ‘On A Certain Blindness in Human Beings’.” He also said on another occasion that this essay “is really the perception on which my whole individualistic philosophy is based.”

After he and Mrs. James arrived in Europe, nervous prostration complicated his heart condition. As a result the lectures had to be postponed until May 1901. Till then James spent the time taking “bath cures” for his heart and seeking suitable climates to rest and write, however little at a time. After a year at home, the second series of lectures (the Gifford Lectures) was delivered in May 1902 and shortly afterwards appeared in print as *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. This work practically brought into exis-
tence the study of religious psychology. James thought that the originality of the work “consists in the suggestion that our official self is continuous with more of us than appears (subliminal self) which accounts for the striking experiences of religious persons; and that this ‘more’ on the farther side lies open to transempirical realities, and this might allow for the sense of ‘union’ and other mystical experiences being true.”

In August of 1902, James wrote to a friend, “I want now if possible to write something serious, systematic, and syllogistic; I’ve had enough of the squashy popular-lecture style.” He wanted to write a general system of metaphysics. An effort in this direction was the syllabus he wrote for his 1902–1903 course “The Philosophy of Nature” (Philosophy 3). In August of 1903, his ideas were tested on a summer school audience in five lectures entitled “Radical Empiricism as a Philosophy.” Between July 1904 and February 1905, he prepared and delivered a new set of lectures, in which he retraced the outline of his system, and which were given in a course on Metaphysics (Philosophy 9). This material found its way into the journals in eight articles that were very technical, abstract, and addressed to fellow philosophers. These articles expressed James’s doctrine of “pure experience.” The problem he faced was this: “Assuming no duality of material and mental substance, but starting with bits of ‘pure experience’, syncretically taken, to show how this comes to figure in two ways in conception, once as streams of individual thinking, once as physical permanents, without the immediately real ever having been either of these dirempted things, or less than the full concrete experience or phenomenon with its two aspects.” James wanted to get this material into book form, but he found it very difficult to get it into shape for any connected exposition and almost impossible to put it into popular form. James believed that “popular statement is the highest form of art.”
James taught a general introduction to philosophy course at Stanford University the spring semester of 1906. He used Friedrich Paulsen’s *Introduction to Philosophy* as a text. He greatly admired this book and wrote a preface to the English translation edition in 1895. Also, James composed a syllabus to accompany his lectures. The “great earthquake” in April caused all classes to be cancelled. Soon after returning home, James, apparently for the first time, decided to publish two books instead of just one. This move is mentioned in a May twenty-first letter to Giovanni Papini: “I expect to publish them [the above-mentioned articles and others]... only as a sort of appendix volume containing the indigestibilities of my system, after I have published a digestible and popular volume intended as a text-book for students, & sketching the Universe of radical empiricism à grand traits.” He never did the former and only half completed the latter.

The textbook was sidetracked by the acceptance of an invitation to deliver another Lowell lecture series in November. James lectured on a topic that went back continuously to the early 70s, when he belonged to the Metaphysical Club in Cambridge, where “Pragmatism” was born. After the series was repeated at Columbia University in early 1907, the lectures were published that year under the title *Pragmatism: A New Name for Old Ways of Thinking*. Not knowing James’s more technical writings and desire to write out a “metaphysics,” the general public took “Pragmatism” to denote James’s over-all philosophy. But the word meant only a method (consistent with different philosophies) for determining the meaning of our beliefs in terms of their practical consequences. In the book he employed the method to show how some traditional metaphysical disputes could be determined. However, James also veered (perhaps too enthusiastically) in the direction that his two close friends, Dewey and Schiller, were emphasizing, name-
ly, a pragmatic theory of truth. James himself spoke of this aspect as pragmatism in “a wider sense.” The sixth chapter of the book was entitled “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth.” This chapter evoked a storm of protest from his academic readers, who hastened into print to refute his analysis. James replied in print and in private letters to some of his critics through part of 1908.

One of the criticisms was that James maintained a doctrine of Idealism. But he replied that his theory of knowing and truth postulated a realism. He did, however, concede that in his articles on his doctrine of “pure experience,” one might find sentences “that squint towards Idealism.” One might add that the Idealism was of the Bishop Berkeley type, where to be is to be experienced.

Despite his poor health, James accepted the invitation to give the Hibbert lectures at Manchester College, Oxford, in 1908 because he could not resist the professional challenge. He did, however, regret that the job of writing lectures forced him again “to publish another book written in picturesque and popular style when I was settling down to something whose manner would be more . . . concise, dry, and impersonal.” He published the lectures the following year under the title A Pluralistic Universe, to which he added two articles from the 1905 period as Appendixes. Radical Pluralism was the thesis of the lectures, but the effort was still not the systematic presentation of his doctrine. Thus, on 28 March 1909 he began writing, at long last, his introductory textbook in philosophy for students. “The first eight chapters follow the Stanford syllabus in the order of topics and often verbally” (Perry). But for the next six months he was able to do very little writing due to poor health.

Also in that year, tiring of any hope that any further explanation could clarify his meaning of the word ‘truth’, James terminated the debate on his part by collecting his
writings on this subject into book form. The title of the volume was called *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to Pragmatism* (1909).

James, it will be recalled, previously held the pragmatic method to be consistent with different philosophies. But now that "Pragmatism" covered a theory of truth, he wrote in the preface, "It seems to me that the establishment of the pragmatist theory of truth is a step of first-rate importance in making radical empiricism prevail. Radical empiricism consists first of a postulate, next of a statement of fact, and finally of a generalized conclusion. The postulate is that the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things in terms drawn from experience. The statement of fact is that the relations between things, conjunctive as well as disjunctive, are just as much matters of direct particular experience, neither more so nor less so, than the things themselves. The generalized conclusion is that therefore the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience. The directly apprehended universe needs, in short, no extraneous trans-empirical support, but possesses in its own right a concatenated or continuous structure."

James continued to work on his textbook manuscript while in Europe in 1910. But he must have sensed that his extremely poor health would preclude him from finishing it. On 26 July he gave directions for the publication of the manuscript: "Call it ‘A beginning of an introduction to philosophy’. Say that I hoped by it to round out my system, which now is too much like an arch built only on one side." He had built a bridge that extended only halfway across the river of experience. He died just a month later. The work was published the next year under the title *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy*. One wonders who was responsible for adding the first part of the title to what James himself said to call the volume? Most
likely it was his son, Henry, who wrote in a prefatory note, "For several years before his death Professor William James cherished the purpose of stating his views on certain problems of metaphysics in a book addressed particularly to readers of philosophy."

III

Generosity was one of the aspects of James's character, which appears often in the correspondence. He spent much time and effort in recommending others for teaching positions in the colleges and universities. He was continually giving money of his own or raising money from others to support needy individuals and worthy projects. James spent hours listening to and writing to "cranks"—his way of referring to the eccentric. Many authors profited from his criticisms. He wrote prefaces for the works of five others upon request, which no doubt enhanced the value of the publications.

Another aspect was his role as peacemaker. Just to mention a number of the quarrels he tried to moderate is impressive—between J. M. Baldwin and J. M. Cattell; between H. Münsterberg and D. S. Miller; between E. B. Titchener and E. W. Scripture; between F. C. S. Schiller and Münsterberg; between a whole raft of people involved in a proposed International Congress of Psychology to be held in America—academic politics killed the prospect.

The reader might be surprised to learn that within the twenty-five year period covered by this correspondence, James traveled to Europe eight times. The occasions were various: to attend an International Congress, to visit his sick sister Alice, to spend his sabbatical there with his whole family, to vacation once by himself, and to lecture. Of course, while there he saw much of his brother Henry who lived and wrote in England. Though
James was thoroughly American, he deeply appreciated, and at times envied, European cultures. After he had been in Europe for a while, he was eager to get home. While at home, though of course for longer periods, he could hardly wait to go to Europe. James had many friends in Europe, both personal and professional.

James’s long trips were not confined to Europe. In the United States, he went as far south as possible to Florida and as far west as possible to California (twice). Many times he visited Chicago. Once he lectured in Colorado Springs, Colorado. In writing to his hostess, at whose house he stayed while there, he said: “For me change of scenery and life is a vital necessity without which I go out like a fire that isn’t poked. I regret it, for if there is anything I aspire to, it is to be able to work steadily on day after day with no need of change, but my bad nervous temperament keeps me exiled from that Eden.”

A significant confirmation of the integrated interests and talents of James exists in the fact that his peers thought so too by electing him to various organizations. He simultaneously belonged to the National Academy of Sciences, the American Society of Naturalists, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Philosophical Association, and the American Psychological Association.

The only advanced degree James earned was his M.D. degree. But many universities conferred upon him honorary degrees—Padua, both a Ph.D. and a Litt. D. in 1893; Princeton, a LL.D. in 1896; Edinburgh, a LL.D. in 1902; Harvard, a LL.D. in 1903; Durham, a Litt. D. in 1908; Oxford, a Sc.D. in 1908; and Geneva, a Sc. Nat. D. in 1909 in absentia.

James’s work was honored also by his being elected to many foreign Academies. In 1898 he was elected as a Correspondant de l’Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques of the Institut de France; in 1900 as a corresponding member of the Royal Prussian Academy of Sci-
ences of Berlin; in 1903 as a member of the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and also in the same year as a foreign associate of the Accademia Nazionale Dei Lincei of Rome; as a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy in 1907; and, finally, in 1910 as a full member of the Institut de France, its only foreign philosopher.

IV

James’s eldest son, Henry, selected the letters of his father to write what actually is a biography. *The Letters of William James*, in two volumes, appeared in 1920. In his review of the work, Schiller wrote, “There is no noticeable difference between James’s books and his letters. Both abound in the same vividness, lucidity, fertility of illustration, and a pure Irish sense of fun, which had no doubt descended to him from an ancestry that came almost entirely from Ulster.” And in another writing: “The letters are a complete proof that James could write as well on the spur of the moment as in his most laborious works.” The current edition stresses James’s professional life, though it also aims to fill in, to some degree, the details of his personal life.

*The Thought and Character of William James* (1935) by Ralph Barton Perry used about five hundred letters of James to document just what the title states. Perry wove this material into his own account of James’s intellectual development and writings. It is not, however, an uninterrupted account. Interspersed are chapters that deal with James’s relationship to others, for example, C. S. Peirce, Schiller, Strong, which cover periods of time not related to the book being analyzed. Further, however well Perry fulfilled his task and however indispensable his work has been to subsequent investigators, still it appeared fifty years ago and much James scholarship has intervened and will continue.
Elizabeth Hardwick edited *The Selected Letters of William James* (1961). She drew mainly on the two previous works. However, her edition has eight letters that are not included there but that cover the period of the present edition of the last twenty-five years of James's life.

Robert C. Le Clair edited *The Letters of William James and Théodore Flournoy* (1966). These letters reveal two very like-minded men and scholars. This volume is helpful for our knowledge of philosophy and psychology in Switzerland for the period covered by the correspondence. Flournoy is mentioned often in the present edition, because James spent so much time in Europe and traveled often through Switzerland.

The first full-scale biography of James appeared in 1967 by Gay Wilson Allen. He used for the most part the Henry James edition and *Thought and Character* (Perry). He did have access to some unpublished James family material. As a professor of English and a biographer of Walt Whitman, Allen had the skill and literary experience to portray James with broad, integrated, dramatic, and, at times, imaginative strokes. But, there are far too many factual mistakes, which make his book an unsafe source for the scholar.

Since 1975 there has been in progress a definitive edition of *The Works of William James*. This multi-volumed project will include all of James's published and unpublished writing except his letters as such. Citations from such letters, and, more rarely, full letters have been used to document the history of the composition of James's various writings. The present edition may be viewed as a complementary and supplementary work to *The Works*.