

WILLIAM JAMES AS A PRECURSOR OF DABROWSKI

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In 1896 William James, founder and first president of the American Psychological Association, delivered in Boston a series of lectures under the sponsorship of the Lowell Institute. These lectures covered such topics as hypnotism, hysteria, multiple personality, demoniacal possession and witchcraft. In his final lecture, entitled "Genius," James critically reviewed a number of contemporary studies in which genius, or giftedness, was equated with mental degeneracy or mental illness (understood in purely negative terms). Unlike James's famous series of lectures on religion (delivered in Edinburgh) which were later published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the Lowell lectures were not published in his lifetime. In fact it was not until 1983 that the Lowell lectures (in a reconstructed version) were finally made available to the general public. The closing paragraphs of the final lecture on genius constitute something approximating a manifesto for gifted persons who possess psychic overexcitability, and it is for this reason that I feel that many of the readers of the Dabrowski Newsletter will take delight in these sage and literate words from the pen of a true American pioneer. These paragraphs, reproduced from James's own notes, I have taken from Eugene Taylor, *William James on Exceptional Mental States* (The University of Massachusetts Press, 1983). I have added an occasional explanation, as well as Dabrowskian interpretations of James's remarks, in square brackets. And now, William James on giftedness and its relation to "mental illness:"

Quote: "There is a strong tendency among these pathological writers [i.e., writers who equate genius with mental degeneracy]...to represent the line of mental health as a very narrow crack, which one must tread with bated breath, between foul fiends on the one side and gulfs of despair on the other. Now health is a term of subjective appreciation, not of objective description, to borrow a nomenclature from Professor [Josiah] Royce; it is a teleological term. There is no purely objective standard of sound health. Any peculiarity that is of use to a man is a point of soundness in him, and what makes a man sound for one function may make him unsound for another. Moreover we are all instruments for social use, and if sensibilities, obsessions and other psychopathic peculiarities [i.e., psychic overexcitabilities and their expression in neurotic traits] can so combine with the rest of our constitution as to make us the more useful to our kind, why, then, we should not call them in that context points of unhealthiness, but rather the reverse.

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"The trouble is that such writers [who equate genius with mental degeneracy] as Nordau use the descriptive names of symptoms merely as an artifice for giving objective authority to their personal dislikes...Call a man...degenerate, and you've grouped him with the most loathsome specimens of the race, in spite of the fact that he may be one of its most precious members. The only sort of being, in fact, who can remain as the typical normal man...must be a perfect nullity...being free from all the excesses and superfluities that make Man's life interesting, [a being] without love, poetry, art, religion, or any other ideal but pride in his non-neurotic constitution...We all remember the sort of schoolboy who used to ask us six times a day to feel his biceps. The sort of man [i.e., one at the level of primary integration] who pounds his mental chest and says to us: See, there isn't a morbid fibre in my constitution! Is like unto him. Few more profitless members of the human race can be found.

"The real lesson of the genius books [i.e., books equating genius with mental degeneracy] is that we should welcome sensibilities, impulses and obsessions [i.e., overexcitabilities] if we have them, so long as by their means the field of our experience grows deeper and we contribute the better to the race's stores; that we should broaden our notion of health instead of narrowing it; that we should regard no single element of weakness as fatal, in short that we should not be afraid of life. Rather, all these geniuses and their mental peculiarities are organs by which mankind works out the experience which is its destiny.

"Who shall absolutely say that the morbid has no revelations about the meaning of life? That the healthy minded view so-called is all? A certain tolerance, a certain sympathy, a certain respect, and above all a certain lack of fear, seem to be the best attitude we can carry in our dealing with these regions of human nature. And in thanking you for the attention you have given to these tedious lectures, let me express a hope that you go away from them with that more positive attitude increased and confirmed."

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