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Series I

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Number 10

LETTERS FROM WILLIAM JAMES TO THÉODULE A. RIBOT

BY JULIUS SEELYE BIXLER

THROUGH the kind permission of Mr. Henry James the following letters from his father, William James, to the French psychologist Théodule A. Ribot are published here for the first time. Readers of this *Quarterly* may be interested to learn how these letters came to light and how they happened to arrive in the Colby College Library.

Back in 1926 a rumor reached me that Ribot's library along with some letters from William James had been sold to the university at Louvain, as part of the "restoration" of its library after the first world war, by a French bookseller and publisher named Champion. I visited M. Champion in Paris in 1928 and confirmed the fact of the sale. A trip to Louvain in December of that year failed, however, to unearth the letters. I discovered two presentation copies of books autographed by James for Ribot, but of the letters there was no sign. Correspondence later carried on with the library authorities produced no results. Finally, in 1936, I appealed to Mr. Henry James, eldest son of William James. Members of the Colby Library Associates will recall that on April 15, 1943, one hundred years to a day after the birth of his celebrated uncle and namesake the novelist, Mr. Henry James lectured at Colby on the significance of his uncle's work.

The appeal to Mr. James did not fall on deaf ears. He at once put me in touch with the Honorable Dave Hennen

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Morris, at that time Ambassador to Belgium. Mr. Morris's name is also of interest to Colby readers as he was Commencement speaker at our exercises on August 22, 1943, and received the degree of LL.D. from Colby at that time, only a few months before his death. Mr. Morris interceded with the authorities at Louvain and a few days before Mrs. Bixler and I sailed for Europe word came from the Louvain library that the letters were there and would be made available for us. We transcribed them on a hot afternoon in August 1936 and later deposited copies in the Colby Library, along with a collection of letters from various members of the James family. Another set of transcripts has been placed in the Widener Library at Harvard. The original letters were presumably lost in the second destruction of the Louvain library by the Germans in 1940.

So far as I am aware, these letters furnish the only evidence we have that the name of the French psychologist Théodule A. Ribot should be included among the hundreds of scientists and men of letters with whom William James corresponded. No communications to Ribot are to be found in the published *Letters of William James*, and Professor Ralph Barton Perry's monumental *Thought and Character of William James*, which prints so much correspondence, mentions Ribot only once and then in a letter from Professor Joseph R. L. Delboeuf. Writing from Liège on December 19, 1882, Delboeuf, the Belgian psychophysicist and philologist, remarks: "M. Ribot says that you ought to go to the Salpêtrière." Ribot is mentioned again in the same letter but not in relation to James's ideas or plans.

We know that James was well acquainted with Ribot's work. In the *Principles of Psychology* he refers to him in three different contexts: (1) where he discusses vitality as the basis of personality, (2) where he quotes Ribot as saying that muscular adjustment is the basis of attention, and (3) where he cites him on the "foreshortening process" that is necessary if we are to recall in memory events that occurred some time ago. In the *Varieties of Religious Experience* he

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quotes Ribot twice, once on the subject of "anhedonia" or the pathological lack of interest and enthusiasm shown by some patients, once on the fact that in the natural course of events religion tends to evaporate and to turn into religious philosophy.

Ribot was the founder and first editor of the *Revue Philosophique*. As an experimental psychologist he tended to play up the physical factors in mental life. In 1885 he gave a course of lectures on "Experimental Psychology" at the Sorbonne and in 1888 he was made professor of that subject at the College of France. Both appointments are indicated in the letters.

At the time of this correspondence James was busily engaged in turning out article after article on psychological subjects and, toward the end of the period, in combining them to form the *Principles of Psychology* which appeared in 1890. The first two letters bring out the interesting item of information that James offered his article on "The Perception of Space" to Ribot for publication in the *Revue Philosophique* and that it was apparently accepted.

My dear Monsieur Ribot,

Cambr. Feb. 26, 1884

It was as agreeable as it was unexpected to receive your letter. And such words of praise from so good a judge are very flattering. I feel however as if you didn't do quite justice to Ward, whose 2nd article seems to me full of original and important considerations. The way you keep your journal going astonishes me more and more. Apparently you have more writers to draw upon than they have in England.

As for my Psychology bad eyes and nerves, and lots of other work, keep it at a complete standstill, so that I am ashamed I ever spoke of it. It advances somewhat in my head, but nowhere else. I am curious to know what you will think of a speculation on the physiology of the emotions which I shall have in the April *Mind*. You ask for a chapter to translate. I am much obliged for the honour. I have now a chapter all but finished which I should be glad to see translated or published in any way in advance of the (only possible) book. It is on *the perception of space* and would probably take up 60-70 of your pages, perhaps even a few more. It is thoroughly empirical, has a good many new points, and having worked over it a great deal, it seems to me the best thing I have so far written. If you think the translation of so long a

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bit a *possible* enterprise, I shall be happy to send you the MS. to make a definitive judgment on.

I think I wrote last summer to thank you for your *Maladies de la Volonté*. I'm glad you've begun to apply your method to the ego and personality. I daren't hope however that you'll leave no mystery behind, in that most impossible of all subjects.

Yours always,

WM. JAMES.

Otsego Lake, N. Y.

June 29, '84.

My dear Moniseur Ribot

I received your letter a couple of weeks ago and felt much flattered at your willingness to accept my long lucubration on Space. I had to wait many days before looking it over, because I was in the agony of winding up my University work for the year, (examinations, faculty meetings etc.) and of getting ready to move off into the country, for the vacation. The latter feat is just performed; but when, on the eve of it, I took out my unfinished manuscript to see if it was in a fit state for the honour of a french translation *I feared to send it*. That is, I feared to let the first part go until I was sure of the termination. The number of pages lacking is not great but their content is important, and I will not risk the beginning till the end is sure. I expect to finish the thing in the autumn; and if it turns out well, I will without fail transmit it. The appetite of your countrymen for foreign things is wonderful and admirable.

I have read M. Binet's two articles with interest and admiration, and verified the *dédoublement* of an illusion by a mirror in one hypnotic subject; I hope his theory will bear all tests, for it brings a great simplification to the physiology of perception. I did not think so much of his former paper on localization in the *Revue*. How well he writes too! Is he a frenchman or a swiss?

I feel somewhat disappointed with Sully's Psychology! — a certain colorlessness, arising I think from a too strong desire to be safe, and not speculative. I wish you joy of your holiday in Spain. I should think midsummer was hardly the best season for enjoying that shadeless country, except on the principles laid down by Théophile Gautier. I am in a cooler region. Hoping that you will return refreshed and valiant, I am always sincerely yours,

WM. JAMES.

Cambridge Sept. 7 '85.

My dear Monsieur Ribot,

I take the liberty of introducing to you hereby my friend Mr. Benjamin I. Gilman of New York, who is spending the next few months in

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Paris pursuing psychological studies, and will be exceedingly grateful to you if you can give him a little information and advice as to how he may best profit by the *psychological resources* of Paris. I should not take this liberty were not Mr. Gilman a gentleman of superior character and attainments. He has been studying with me,—I will not say under me—for the past two years.

Hoping that this will find you well and not overwhelmed with the abundance of your labors, I am always faithfully yours,

WM. JAMES.

Dear Monsieur Ribot,

Cambridge, Oct. 28, '85.

Your announcement fills me with delight, first for the *cause*, second that the Ministry should have been intelligent enough to pick you out as the new professor. I hope, however, that it will not interfere with your editorial duties in the *Revue*. No professorship can begin to be as important as that place. And it could hardly have been possible that any professor could have done as much good to philosophy in France as you have done by founding and editing so well that review.

I thank you for what you say of my theory of emotions. I am *very* sorry we are not yet to have your book on attention. However, perhaps it will be all the better for being delayed.

Pray receive my cordial felicitations and prayers for health and strength to do your double work.

Always faithfully yours,

WM. JAMES.

In spite of the offer and the acceptance of the article on "The Perception of Space," it was finally published, not in Ribot's *Revue*, but in four instalments in the British journal *Mind* for 1887. What caused the change in plan we do not know. In a letter from James written from Jaffrey, New Hampshire, September 12, 1886, to G. Croom Robertson, Editor of *Mind*, we find this passage: ". . . your very flattering request about *Mind* quite tunes me up again. . . . Of already written things I have a long-finished paper on space-perception, clinging closely to the experimental facts and being of course the last word of human wisdom in the matter. But it might fill eighty of your pages, and I can't advise you to take it, unless you are really hard up for matter.

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It certainly is as dull as the dullest thing you can possibly have printed of late." (R. B. Perry, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 604.) Then on February 6, 1887, from Cambridge, James wrote to Professor Carl Stumpf in Berlin: "I found to my surprise and pleasure that Robertson was willing to print my chapter on Space in *Mind* even though it should run through all four numbers of the year. So I sent it to him. Most of it was written six or even seven years ago." (*Ibid.* vol. 2, p. 69.) After appearing in *Mind* the article was reprinted with some changes as Chapter XX of the *Principles of Psychology*.

Dear Professor Ribot

Cambridge April 22, '88.

I should ere now have written to extend you my hearty congratulations on your appointment, which is a piece of good fortune, not only for yourself, but for the *cause*. The details you gave me of the "politics" of the election were very interesting. Things are tamer here, *quand il s'agit* of a scientific place. Party spirit runs less high.

I hope you won't be overworked with these duties added to your editorship. Can't you drop some of the latter work? The *Revue* never seemed to me so good as now—so much empirical matter in it. And how that sort of matter is lacking in *Mind*! Certainly *at this moment* France is doing more for psychology than any other country. Wundt's school breaks no new ground, as such articles as Binet's and Pierre Janet's have done.

I am ashamed to say that I know your articles on Attention only through the resumé of one of my students. I have been postponing the reading of them till next winter, when I shall have to revise a chapter of my own on attention, written last year.

Wishing you the greatest success and happiness in your new position, I am as always

faithfully yours,

WM. JAMES

The most interesting letter in the collection is the next one, dated May 13, 1888. The last sentence of the first paragraph throws light on the way James's mind was working on the problem of the self. It was not until 1904 that he published his famous paper "Does Consciousness Exist" with its view of consciousness as a relation rather than an entity in its own right. In the *Principles of Psychology* he pre-

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pared the way for this in his identification of the “thinker” with the “passing thought.” The second paragraph of the letter here printed is impressive in its warning against a neglect of metaphysics. James prided himself on being as eager to base his philosophy on experience as the best of the empiricists. But in this paragraph he makes it clear that he has no sympathy with positivism or the reliance on sense experience to the exclusion of metaphysics. The definition here given as “the search for clearness” deserves to stand beside his other and often quoted characterization of metaphysics as “an extraordinarily stubborn attempt to think things through consistently.”

Dear Monsieur Ribot

Cambridge May 13 '88.

I receive this morning the *Revue Scientifique* with your very interesting leçon d'ouverture—a delicate and difficult task very nicely executed indeed. Of your flattering mention of my humble name, I am of course very proud. My *Psychology*, to which you give such publicity in advance, still lags behind. It is one thing to write chapters, another to write a book, on a subject of which the first principles are as yet undetermined. My mind is in more of a chaos than ever, what with automatic writing, multiple personality, “sommeil à distance”, and “veridical phantasms”! I disbelieve in the existence of “ideas” in the Lockian sense; I have come almost to disbelieve in states of consciousness in any sense; I have for many a long year harbored an animosity to the “ego”; the “soul of the world” I can “take no stock in”; yet experience is cognitive—but who, what, or where the vehicle of cognition is, transcends my powers!

One thing! Empirical facts without “metaphysics” will always make a confusion and a muddle. I'm sorry to hear you still disparage metaphysics so much, since rightly understood, the word means only the search for *clearness* where common peo[ple] do not even suspect that there is any lack of it. The ordinary positivist has simply a bad and muddled metaphysics which he refuses to criticize or discuss.

Stanley Hall has been made president of a new University founded with a capital of several millions by a business man named Clark in Worcester near Boston. Mr. Clark would have done more wisely to give his money to some of the preexisting institutions. But Hall and the trustees will try to give to the new institution a special character, not duplicated at Harvard or the other New England colleges. What it will be, I do not know. I'm afraid that the psychophysical laboratory at the Johns Hopkins University will grow lazy after Hall's departure,

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and that he will not have leisure at Worcester to carry on experimental research.

That you may enjoy your professorial duties, and exert the influence you so richly deserve to, is the ardent wish of yours most cordially,

WM. JAMES.

34, De Vere Gardens, W.
London, Aug. 12 [1889]

My dear Monsieur Ribot,

On the eve of my departure for America, I can not help writing you a word of farewell, and saying how successful I think the Congress to have been. The chief thing of course was the sociability, the [opportunity to] make the acquaint[ance] of so many first rate men. I am only sorry it was so short, and that I could really talk with so few. Apart from M. Richet, the french psychologists with whom I had most to do were Marillier, Gley, and Pierre Janet. From all of them great things are to be hoped, it seems to me. I had no talk with Binet, nor with several others whom I should have been glad to see in a more intimate way. No matter! I go home quite "set up" as a psychologist and shall finish my everlasting text book on that subject with infinitely more interest and zeal after finding myself in presence of this large number of persons to whom the subject is a reality.

The great pity of the Congress was that you were not there!

Cordially yours,

WM. JAMES.

[P.S.] Of course this needs no *reply*.

95 Irving Street
Cambridge, Mass.
Jan. 22, 1892

Dear Monsieur Ribot,

Thanks for your very considerate letter of the 10th. Pray do not on *my* account feel any chagrin about Marillier's delay. The poor fellow is doubtless overburdened (as we all are) for his strength, and I am only too happy to have so solid a review as he will probably make, at any *date*.

You speak of *Mind*. I doubt whether its character will be much changed by Robertson's defection. The *Revue Philosophique* remains at the head! The new American *Philosophic Review* has a good editor, and will, I trust, develop into an important Journal. There is a great fermentation commencing in this country in the line of philosophy and the higher education generally, and it is hard to say where it will end.—The strange thing to see is the almost entire cessation of psychological study in England.

With best wishes for the New Year, I am very sincerely yours

WM. JAMES.

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You will ere this have received the abridgement of my Psychology which M. Boirac (?) is, I believe, engaged already in translating for the french public.

Albergo primavera, Rome, Jan. 31, 1901.

Pray pardon the post-card, forced on me by medical precaution!—Your kind letter of Dec. 25th, forwarded to me here, touches me by its assumption that I have the right to expect you to present me with a copy of everything you publish. You have already sent me far more than I ever can make return for, and I rejoice to see what wider and wider ground you keep settling upon and cultivating. This last volume awaits in Cambridge my return home in July.—I have had a very bad year with heart, aorta, and acute neurasthenia, but expect to get into some moderate working condition again. Progress is exceedingly slow, but I am writing some lectures for Edinburgh on the “Varieties of religious experience” quite on your method, using biographic documents as much as possible.—Thanks and regards!

WM. JAMES.

Cambridge, Oct. 16, 1904

I have again to thank you for a volume—the *Logiques des Sentiments*, just arrived! Its publication is opportune for us, in consequence of the discussions already raging over the “humanistic” or “pragmatistic” philosophy. I expect to read it with great interest.

WM. JAMES.

This card seems to have ended the twenty-years’ correspondence. James went to Oxford in 1908 to deliver the Hibbert Lectures—afterward published as *A Pluralistic Universe*. He visited England again in the spring and summer of 1910, but with no convenient opportunity for a meeting with Théodule Ribot. James reached Chocorua, New Hampshire, on August 19, 1910, and died there on the twenty-sixth of August.

