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Although I am not a psychologist and thus not a member of the American Psychological Association, that august group invited me to present a paper at its 98th Annual Convention, held in Boston in August of 1990, the occasion on which its membership celebrated the centenary of William James's The Principles of Psychology. The topic assigned was "The Spirituality of William James."

THE SPIRITUALITY OF WILLIAM JAMES:

A LESSON FROM ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

INTRODUCTION:

In this paper, I propose to illuminate the place of William James in the ongoing history of American understandings of spirituality. The paper will argue that rather than being a precursor of "New Age" spirituality, James was a vehicle of the more ancient tradition that finds modern expression in the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. Examining especially James's vision of human nature and his treatment of **will**, what follows will touch also on the philosopher/psychologist's roles as a popularizer and an opponent of all reductionisms.¹

1. The Older Challenge and the Newer Data

The proximate context for my treatment of William James and spirituality is a generation-old scholarly opinion that has deteriorated into a kind of semi-popular lore, begetting a misunderstanding that calumniates James.

In this not-very-new age of the so-called "New Age," many ascribe to William James – blame seems a not inaccurate word – many *blame*

William James for New Age ideas on “spirituality.” Intriguing as this suggestion of James’s continuing impact may be, recent developments demonstrate the need for caution. Popular spirituality has more than one face, and the attribution to William James of responsibility for its more bizarre manifestations is less than accurate.

Yet this is an understandable error: James’s tolerance revealed in a breadth that included ample room for the bizarre, and our hero would no doubt have been more fascinated by New Age phenomena than am I. But there is a difference between tolerance of and *responsibility for*. My point is to deny the latter, and so it seems well to begin by looking at the indictment – as first leveled in 1965 by Donald Meyer, then repeated by William Clebsch in 1973, whose version was adopted by Gerald Myers in his 1986 biography of James.ⁱⁱ

The stage was set twenty-five years ago, with the treatment accorded James by Donald Meyer in his useful study of *The Positive Thinkers*.ⁱⁱⁱ A detailed “Postscript” argues that William James was “the authority” for later generations of “positive thinkers.” To the best of my knowledge, that interpretation was not disputed at the time; there seemed neither reason nor basis to do so. Nor did the observation by William Clebsch that “Nobody exerted a wider influence [than James] on the palliative-peddlers of twentieth-century American popular religion,” an attribution accepted uncritically by Gerald E. Myers, awaken much comment, although with each repetition of the charge, the cultural context may be seen in hindsight more and more to have invited some sort of challenge.

Today’s late-twentieth-century “palliative-peddlers,” the instant gurus whose promotions dot the pages of such journals as *New Age* and *Gnosis*, continue, on occasion, to appeal to James. But claimed influence is not necessarily real impact, and just as “patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel,” mention of William James has become the ultimate appeal of the religious nut (if I may be pardoned the use of that technical psychological term). With all due respect to two great students of the human condition, it seems somewhat sadly accurate to observe that most modern references to the religious insights of William James and Carl Jung signal fuzzy thought and a use of language that can be most charitably described as “singular.”

* * *

This paper begs to differ with Professors Meyer and Clebsch and Myers, because more recent history suggests that the significance of William James in the area of spirituality lies in a very different direction. Like any “story,” history is not over with until all the data – all the outcomes – are in. They never are “*all in*,” of course, but later developments do help us better to understand earlier events. And the “spirituality” of the so-called “New Age,” although accurately categorized as our era’s manifestation of the hoary tradition of “mind-cure” by “positive thinking,” differs broadly and distinctly from another modern expression of a far more ancient tradition of spirituality, the one first articulated in modern form over fifty years ago by the Twelve-Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous.

If we would understand not only William James’s ideas on spirituality but also his own spirituality, we need look not to the “New Age,” nor to the proliferation of claimed offshoots of A.A., claims generally based solely on a sloppy concept of addiction: we must look to Alcoholics Anonymous itself. A.A.’s claim to have been influenced by William James, and specifically by its early members’ reading of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, rests on more solid ground. Alcoholics Anonymous came into being out of the Oxford Group, and James’s *Varieties* appeared on that organization’s list of “required reading” and was in fact read carefully by members who had difficulty accepting “the spiritual,” a common difficulty with most alcoholics then as indeed also now.

2. James on the Topic of Alcohol

But that somewhat tenuous claim on William James is not the main reason behind A.A. co-founder Bill W.’s reference to him as “one of our founders.” The reference is manifestly hyperbolic. What is striking, in fact, in A.A.’s advertence to James, is the almost studious ignoring, at least by Bill Wilson himself, of James’s many mentions of alcohol, and **especially** in *Varieties*. Midway through that work, in describing the work of Jerry M’Auley’s Water Street mission, James tosses off a footnote observation the absence of advertence to which in the literature of Alcoholics Anonymous is striking: “The only radical remedy I know for dipsomania is religiomania.”^{iv}

Most of the early members of Alcoholics Anonymous (like most of the later members) would have found that reference unwelcome: most

alcoholics would rather be drunk than “religious.” Nor is this the only “obvious” Jamesian passage ignored by A.A. members. James’s direct treatment of alcohol and its use is rightly celebrated:

The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour. Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no; drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes. It is in fact the great exciter of the Yes function in man. It brings its votary from the chill periphery of things to the radiant core. It makes him for the moment one with truth. Not through mere perversity do men run after it. To the poor and the unlettered it stands in the place of symphony concerts and of literature; and it is part of the deeper mystery and tragedy of life that whiffs and gleams of something that we immediately recognize as excellent should be vouchsafed to so many of us only in the fleeting earlier phases of what in its totality is so degrading a poisoning.^v

Surprising as this may be to some, such an understanding of the power of alcohol would not have been foreign to members such as A.A. co-founder Bill Wilson. In his brief correspondence with Dr. Carl Jung shortly before the psychiatrist’s death, and in a far more lengthy exchange with a prominent Philadelphian who had been treated by Jung, Bill revealed a very Jamesian understanding of the affirming, even mystical place of alcohol in the lives of many drinkers who become alcoholics. There is, in fact, a profound similarity between James’s description of his experimentation with nitrous oxide and Wilson’s thoughts on his own explorations with the chemical popularly known as LSD, which enjoyed in the late 1950s a brief vogue among some scientists as a potential cure for alcoholism.^{vi}

Let me be clear on the point here: there is no evidence that Wilson’s understanding of the possible connections between mind-altering drugs and religious experience was drawn from James. Indeed, the bulk of evidence points in the direction of Bill being one of the few early members who did *not* read *Varieties* very thoroughly. Wilson may, of course, have picked up an awareness of William James’s ideas on the topic in conversation (which is how Bill gained most of his knowledge: like James, he was an extraordinary listener). The point here is that

although the affinities between Jamesian thought and A.A. understanding run far deeper, even some more superficial apparent discrepancies are only apparently discrepancies.^{vii}

3. Main Direct Impact:

“Spiritual” Taken Seriously and Unconventionally

For facile references such as the James quotation on alcohol, although interesting, serve mainly to distract. Both James’s main direct contribution to Alcoholics Anonymous, and the very different chief way in which A.A. practice illuminates James’s own spirituality, are more substantial – and more subtle.

The main direct contribution of William James to Alcoholics Anonymous can be simply stated. William James, like Carl Jung, was a world-class intellectual who took religion seriously, declaring it in fact to be “the great interest of my life.”^{viii} More accurately, in the more modern vocabulary that their example encouraged, both Jung and James took *the spiritual* seriously, for neither was in any way a “conventional believer” in any traditional religion. They witnessed, if that term may be used here, to the possibility of being “spiritual rather than religious,” which became a keynote claim and real conviction among Alcoholics Anonymous. That, quite simply – the openness to unconventional spirituality, the lived example that such was possible – was James’s greatest direct contribution to Alcoholics Anonymous^{ix}

Openness to the unconventional may also seem to characterize “New Age” spiritualities, but the deep conventionality of their all-too-traditional “positive thinking” approach is set in relief by another Jamesian animus that is itself clarified by the very different example of Alcoholics Anonymous. As Herbert Schneider has pointed out, James’s revolt against “absolute” philosophical idealisms involved a refusal of all *gnosticisms* – a rejection of those approaches, ever re-current, that seek to find religious satisfactions in philosophy instead of exploring how metaphysics might need to be reconstructed in view of the facts of religious experience.^x Albeit in very different language, the same animus informs Alcoholics Anonymous, to the constant chagrin of many and diverse professionals as well as New Agers.

4. Main Deep Point: Open to Dark Side of Being Human

For here as in this next main point of my presentation this afternoon,

my concern is less with the impact of William James on A.A. than how Alcoholics Anonymous illuminates James's spirituality. A.A. spirituality differs from "New Age" approaches precisely in its acceptance of the reality of "the dark side" of human experience. A.A. members, that is to say, in their embrace of the identity "sober alcoholic," accept in that vocabulary the reality that they are – in Jamesian terms – "sick souls." The thin spirituality of the New Age, on the other hand, is emphatically the religion of "healthy-mindedness."

Two key passages in co-founder Bill W.'s telling of A.A.'s story detail his debt to William James. Describing how he came to understand his own "spiritual experience," Wilson tells of reading in *Varieties* of "the great common denominators of pain, suffering, calamity. Complete hopelessness and deflation at depth," Bill read, "were almost always required." *Then* it was that "The significance of all this burst upon me. *Deflation at depth* – yes, that was *it*. Exactly that had happened to me."^{xi}

Six months later, Wilson went on to record, after the total failure of all his efforts to sober up even one other drunk, his physician, Dr. William Duncan Silkworth, "again reminded" Bill "of Professor William James' observation that truly transforming spiritual experiences are nearly always founded on calamity and collapse."^{xii} That insight, Wilson always felt, undergirded his first successful approach, a month later, in Akron, Ohio, to the person who would become A.A.'s other co-founder, Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith. Alcoholics Anonymous thus learned, from the very beginning, the importance of acknowledging "the dark side." The often echoed axiom "Remember When" combines with the repeated profession of the identification, "I am an alcoholic," to ensure embrace of identity as, in Jamesian terms, a "sick soul."

James, of course, identified *himself* as one of the "sick souls." "The constitutional disease from which I suffer," he once casually confided, "is what the Germans call *Zerrissenheit* or torn-to-pieces-hood."^{xiii} William James knew the paradox, the two-sidedness of human nature and of human beings; knew the truth of the Islamic insight: "All sunshine makes a desert."^{xiv}

What James termed "the religion of healthy-mindedness" is a vigorous, full-bodied, optimistic type of spiritual sensibility that sees nature as beneficent and God as intimately, affirmatively, related to all His creatures. Characterized by the "inability to feel evil," this

spirituality “looks on all things and sees that they are good.” This *is* the “simpler” view, and it is aptly captured by the spiritualities of the New Age. The problem with this uncomplicated affirmation of the goodness of creation, as James points out with an uncharacteristic restraint that perhaps reflects his own continuing tussles with “melancholy,” is that it is bought at the cost of a certain amount of blindness to the reality of evil in life.

James’s description of twice-born religion, the spirituality of the sick soul, runs far differently. These individuals remain ever aware of the sense of risk, danger, and pervasive moral evil running through the world. They are people possessed by a divided self – knowing an inner instability, tension, and conflict between the various elements of their lives.^{xv} James’s “sick-souled” express in vivid relief the traditional insight that the self of every human being is an unstable, even conflictual phenomenon. This is not a self about which to be glum, but it is a self that will find vacuous those philosophies that can be formulated on bumper-stickers and those theologies that can be encapsulated by smiley buttons. James may not be explicit about preferring such a self, but he is frank about the reason for his preference for such religions: they work better. “The completest religions would therefore seem to be those in which the pessimistic elements are best developed.”^{xvi}

And this is precisely the insight of Alcoholics Anonymous, the intuition that sets A.A. off from the New Age healthy-mindedness that sometimes claims to imitate it. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous identify themselves as alcoholics, even though they are sober. The acceptance, the insistence, on the identity, “sober alcoholic,” both signals and teaches acceptance of the reality of human duality. What was new in the A.A. vision at its birth in 1935, the element of the A.A. vision that still confuses so many of the modern “once-born,” is that one can be sober and yet still “alcoholic.”

Alcoholics got well before Alcoholics Anonymous: they called themselves “ex-alcoholics,” a wording that through borrowing crept into the first printings of A.A.’s own “Big Book.” But that wording was excised – the *only* change of wording in what quickly became a kind of sacred text. It is the centrality of this vision, this very Jamesian vision, that more recent and very different spiritualities fail to grasp. The point, for “the spirituality of William James,” is that James understood the

highest levels of spirituality to emerge only from an honest confrontation with the evil in oneself and the world.^{xvii}

5. Tolerance and Open-mindedness as Flowing from This:

From this central vision flow the related Jamesian points of tolerance, popularization, and opposition to reductionism, the last of which will also afford transition to a few final animadversions on the connections between Jamesian spirituality and his thought on will.

James's vaunted tolerance and open-mindedness were rooted in and sprang from precisely his awareness of human duality. And A.A.'s flows similarly: "Who can imagine one alcoholic judging another?!" Bill Wilson once queried, tongue only partly in cheek. For from the recognition of human duality flows the understanding that the line between good and evil, between brilliance and stupidity, runs not between nations or peoples or classes or individuals, but **through** each individual human being. James's key insight of *homo duplex* affords the only sure undergirding of true tolerance, of the capacity for that forgiveness that heals the *resentiment* named within Alcoholics Anonymous as "the number one offender" that "destroys more alcoholics than anything else."^{xviii}

6. James as "Popularizer" and on "Reductionism"

In William James's own life, as in the experience of most members of Alcoholics Anonymous, recognition and acceptance of the *mixed* human condition flowed into readiness to assume that everyone is teachable. To the scandal of some later philosophers and psychologists, James reveled in his role as popularizer.^{xix} Already as early as 1868, as Gerald Myers points out, James had "adopted the posture that would become his philosophical trademark – the middle term in a Hegelian triad, in this instance between academia and the populace." The Varieties of Religious Experience affords perhaps the best example; in it most explicitly, James "took religious experience to academics and philosophical interpretations of that experience to the people."^{xx}

Not unrelated to James the popularizer was James the staunch adversary of all forms of reductionism. In decrying what he saw as a tendency to "medical materialism," William James was taking the larger stance of opposing all reducing of **any** reality to "nothing but." More than his explicitly labeled "Progressive" contemporaries, James

recognized the anti-democratic implications of the nascent modernist tendency to identify the “hidden” with the real. This was, indeed, one reason for his wariness of the thought of Sigmund Freud.

For James, like the Progressives who gave us Prohibition, was a moralist; but unlike the Progressives and the Prohibitionists, he was a moralist who looked first to himself and those like him. As Gordon Allport observed, William James “wanted psychologists to confront the fundamental moral fact that by their own theories of human nature they have the power of elevating or degrading this same human nature. Debasing assumptions debase the mind; generous assumptions exalt the mind.”^{xxi}

For James, “health” was a term that took on full meaning only when placed in the context of broader concepts about the meaning of the good in ethical terms.^{xxii} The key to William James as both “pluralist” and “pragmatist” is to be found in his insistence on looking **always** to the whole – a realization that should undergird especially any re-reading of “The Sentiment of Rationality.” James’s chief argument with W.K. Clifford concerned not the scientific approach as the criterion of “belief,” but whether in its necessary activity of analysis and dividing up, science did not lose that contact with **the whole** that is necessary for ultimate credibility. And for James, “religious experience” was an undeniable part of “the whole life” actually lived by most people.

7. Divergence from “New Age” in “The Strenuous Mood”

The Jamesian war on all forms of reductionism and “medical materialism” is important not least because it once again helps to distinguish between Jamesian insight and New Age distortions of that insight. There is a world of difference between tolerant open-mindedness and the insipidness that flows from the absence of principles – and this is one of those Jamesian “differences that make all the difference.” James’s own vocabulary sometimes obscures this point. Coinages such as “The Gospel of Relaxation” may seem to suggest affinity with the New Age world-view, but those word usages came out of a context so different that it is in fact the opposite that is true. The most obvious divergence between Jamesian thought and the therapeutic narcissism of the New Age may be found in the philosopher-psychologist’s lauding of the strenuous mood.

James's "strenuous mood" was not the hardness of Theodore Roosevelt, although our philosopher borrowed that contemporary vocabulary, which was truer to his purpose than would have been a less sanguine phrase. For as his treatment makes clear, James emphasized the "strenuous mood" as the opposite of the "easygoing mood" – the "laid back" attitude of "I don't care." James's "strenuous mood," then, involves not the blasé labeling of every inclination to responsibility a manifestation of "co-dependence," but urges precisely the opposite: a positive and active attitude of care – care for oneself, for one's family, for the wider community, for possible future communities that may extend beyond the limits of one's own individual life.^{xxiii}

8. Will

For the final point on William James and spirituality, and how Alcoholics Anonymous throws light on that spirituality, concerns a contribution as central as James's model of unconventional spirituality and his vision of *homo duplex* – his thought on *will*. As unwelcome a topic as may be "the spiritual" in academic psychological settings, the subject of will seems even less seemly. Yet William James knew the reality of human will, its possibilities and its limitations, and he expressed and lived that reality as well as any twentieth-century thinker, at least up to the time of the psychiatrist, Leslie Farber, the title of whose book of collected essays would surely have delighted James: *Lying, Despair, Jealousy, Envy, Sex, Suicide, Drugs, and the Good Life*.^{xxiv}

Central to James's treatment of will was his understanding of *attention*: although some of our behaviors may appear "determined," we shape that very "determination," for we can *choose* that to which we will attend, at least to the extent of naming it. William James knew the nature of obsession.^{xxv} But even more powerful is his description of the "drunkard's" games of naming, in a passage that shows sufficient insight to qualify James posthumously as an alcoholism counselor, if not a member of Alcoholics Anonymous!

How many excuses does the drunkard find when each new temptation comes! It is a new brand of liquor which the interests of intellectual culture in such matters oblige him to test; moreover it is poured out and it is sin to waste it; or others are drinking and it would be churlishness to refuse; or it is but to enable him to sleep, or just to get through this job of work; or it

isn't drinking, it is because he feels so cold; or it is Christmas-day; or it is a means of stimulating him to make a more powerful resolution in favor of abstinence than any he has hitherto made; or it is just this once, and once doesn't count, etc., etc., ad libitum – it is, in fact, anything you like except being a drunkard. That is the conception that will not stay before the poor soul's attention. But if he once gets able to pick out that way of conceiving, from all the other possible ways of conceiving the various opportunities which occur, if through thick and thin he holds to it that this is being a drunkard and is nothing else, he is not likely to remain one long. The effort by which he succeeds in keeping the right name unwaveringly present to his mind proves to be his saving moral act.^{xxvi}

As strikingly as reads that passage, this is not the moment to belabor *will*, nor indeed even to attempt to say anything further about James's spirituality itself. Rather, following the example of the many illustrative stories James used in *Varieties*, an example echoed in the A.A. practice of storytelling, let me conclude by summarizing will, spirituality, and I trust more in a well-known story about James, as told by Sigmund Freud.

The two men, Freud and James, met only once, at G. Stanley Hall's Clark University Conference in September of 1909, a conference attended also by Freud's student, Carl Gustav Jung, as well as by such American luminaries as James Jackson Putnam, Morton Prince, and Adolf Meyer. Later, in 1925, two years after his own first operation for the cancer that would ultimately kill him, Freud recalled the meeting and his most vivid memory of James:

I shall never forget one little scene that occurred. [As we were walking, James] stopped suddenly, handed me a bag he was carrying and asked me to walk on, saying that he would catch me up as soon as he had got through an attack of angina pectoris which was just coming on. He died of that disease a year later; and I have always wished that I might be as fearless as he was in the face of approaching death.^{xxvii}

Conclusion:

James's life and career attest that all explanation need not be reductive. James's point, in *Varieties* and "The Sentiment of Rationality" as

well as *The Principles of Psychology*, was that *explanation* becomes flawed as a vehicle of understanding if we insist on making it the *only* vehicle of understanding. On the topic of “spirituality,” William James was less scientist than artist. Art describes rather than explains, as both William James and the storytelling members of Alcoholics Anonymous knew. I hope that on the topic of James’s own spirituality, I have succeeded in following that example in a way helpful to your understanding.

NOTES

i Although I recognize that this presentation is occasioned by the centenary of William James’s *The Principles of Psychology*, I will draw the majority of my argument from his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, for I agree with Jacques Barzun that this later work is “Volume Three of the *Principles*”: *A Stroll With William James* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 242.

ii

Gerald E. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 607, cites William A. Clebsch, *American Religious Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 153.

iii Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965).

iv VRE, p. 213, quoting, with apparent approbation, Samuel Hadley.

v VRE, p. 297.

vi For James, VRE, p. 298; the best description of Wilson’s taking of LSD, although it does not mention him by name, may be found in Aldous Huxley, *Moksha* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, Inc., 1977), ed. Michael Horowitz and Cynthia Palmer; on the scientific practice of the time, *cf.* the “Foreword” by Humphrey Osmond.

vii In a formulation offered by Jung in 1961, alcoholism and the use of other such chemicals represent an example of “*spiritus contra spiritum*” – a warring of “spirits against the Spirit” evident in the lives of many such chemical-users. William James shared the same insight, as the quoted and cited passages on alcohol and nitrous oxide make clear.

viii To the scandal of Morton White, who offers this information in a very different context in his *Science and Sentiment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 171, quoting Perry, TCWJ, vol.

1, p. 165.

ix On this aspect of James as not conventional in belief, *cf.* William Barrett, *The Illusion of Technique*, pp. 272 ff: “Among all the things that James says about religion he never speaks from within faith” – and Barrett goes on to explore the significance in a chapter titled, “The Faith to Will.”

x Schneider is treating especially of the James of *A Pluralistic Universe*, *cf.* Herbert W. Schneider, “Varieties of Religious Experience Since William James,” in Herbert W. Schneider (ed.), *Religion in Twentieth-Century America* (1952), pp. 173 ff.

xi AACCA, p. 64.

xii AACCA, p. 13.

xiii Perry, *The Complete William James*, vol. 2, p. 679.

xiv Harriott, John F.X., “The Aspirin Society,” *The Tablet*, 244:2809, 334.

xv *Cf.* VRE, pp. 141, 126, 135.

xvi

VRE, p. 139.

xvii Meyer, p. 321, does seem to grasp this, noting that “James made no less an assertion of human values than did liberalism, but he registered the decisive point . . . : if human values were to count for anything, they had to endure fear with strength for experiencing the non-human and inhuman, subconscious depths and unmeasured transcendencies. . . . James’s orientation was similar to . . . Dostoevski’s portrait of the saint as one with the most profound awareness of evil.”

xviii VRE, p. 141: “The psychological basis of the twice-born character seems to be a certain discordancy or heterogeneity in the native temperament of the subject, an incompletely unified moral and intellectual constitution.” In the recent literature, this aspect has been most helpfully treated by Don S. Browning, *Pluralism and Personality: William James and Some Contemporary Cultures of Psychology* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1980); the quotation on “resentment” is from *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 64.

xix Among those scandalized, Morton White, who relates this specifically to James’s interest in religion.

xx Myers, p. 464.

xxi Quoted by Browning, *Pluralism and Personality*, pp. 33-34.

xxii Browning, p. 27.

xxiii *Cf.* Browning, pp. 41 ff., for a fuller treatment of this point,

although it also pervades Browning's book.

xxiv Leslie H. Farber, *Lying, Despair, Jealousy, Envy, Sex, Suicide, Drugs, and the Good Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), is probably the most Jamesian book to appear in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

xxv The discussion of craving – under the heading of “monomania” – appears in *Principles*, vol. II, p. 543.

xxvi *Principles*, vol. II, p. 565.

xxvii Freud, “An Autobiographical Study,” Standard Edition, vol. 20, p. 52, as quoted and cited by Nathan G. Hale, Jr., *Freud and the Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 19.