

Being Twice-Born

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Charles Joseph Meinhart suggests that “the masculinity experience is a (perhaps *the*) religious experience for men.” Education is always about personal identity and, no doubt, gender identity is immensely important. I admit my own experience of masculinity has been spiritual. Nevertheless, while any experience may be, no experience is necessarily religious. The same holds for feminine, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer experience, which we cannot entirely separate from each other or masculinity. Primordial identity formation often depends upon negation, just as our growth depends on including the differences previously excluded.

Meinhart uses William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* not only as a “tool for thinking about the myriad ways in which boys react to the miseducation that comes with brutalization,” but to expand “the variety of spiritualities” males may “embrace as responses to their brutalization.” I think Meinhart’s account is correct as far as it goes, which is considerable. My response explores one of James’s tools Meinhart omits in hopes of furthering our understanding of the varieties. Ironically, I will reject Meinhart’s healthy-minded spirit that “might choose goodness, truth, or beauty to be interpretative keys, while still acknowledging evil.” I think Meinhart has the ideal right, but perhaps misclassifies it.

For James, sick souls have epistemic privilege; only they may occupy the tragic position of genuine choice because their experience requires them to recognize, reflect on, and struggle with the horror of meaninglessness and evil. Healthy souls experience only goodness, beauty, and joy. Lower, merely pious, constrictive sick souls seem unable to experience anything other than existential melancholy or moral sin. Higher, saintly, expansive sick souls accept the experience of existential meaninglessness and malevolence along with the good and beautiful as aspects of the larger whole of experience. They creatively transform meaninglessness into meaning, evil into good. The most expansive create beyond good and evil. For them the meaning of life is to make more meaning. I will conclude with such expansive spirits that seem to satisfy Meinhart’s novel category, for he is right to recognize it as an ideal type.

The missing analytical distinction is that between the “once-born” and the “twice-born.” James insists on separating “the healthy-minded, who need to be born only once, and the sick souls, who must be twice-born in order to be happy.”¹ One recent commentator, Charles Taylor, believes “the very heart of James’s discussion” in *Varieties of Religious Experience* involves “the description of the plight of the ‘twice-born’.”² James himself identifies Buddhism and Christianity as religions that contend “the man must die to an unreal life before he can be born into the real life.”³ The “real life” that interests us is that of expansive reflective, philosophical, poetic awareness and capacity for sympathetic comprehension.

Being twice-born, James and I are biased toward that perspective, though whether we are of the constrictive or expansive type others must decide. I agree with James that twice-borns have epistemic privilege and greater existential awareness. If they are expansive selves, they also achieve special moral insight. We cannot ameliorate suffering well unless we can recognize it fully. The twice-borns have been banished from Eden for eating of the tree of knowledge and knowing the difference between good and evil. Traveling in the larger world, they can envision the many varieties of religious experience.

Because the healthy-minded are once-born while the sick souls are twice-born, Meinhart's depiction of healthy minded and sick souls, along with his distinction between lower constricted and higher expansive states, provides a good preliminary distinction between the two. What I do here is to identify the epistemic and existential advantages of every twice-born and the ethical advantage of the expansive ones.

According to James, once-borns have "an abstract way of conceiving things as good" and every "abstract way of conceiving things selects some one aspect of them as their essence for the time being, and disregards the other aspects."⁴ James defines essence thus: "*The only meaning of essence is teleological, and that classification and conception are teleological weapons of the mind.* The essence of a thing is that one of its properties which is so *important for my interests* that in comparison with it I may neglect the rest."⁵ The healthy-minded simply ignore those properties of existence that do not interest them even if they threaten them. Their narrow interests help maintain their essence while closing their minds to the interests of others. James notes that meanwhile "the reality overflows these purposes at every pore."⁶ Twice-borns experience this overflow. They not only comprehend more of the actual world, but also perceive more of its possibilities.

Expansive twice-borns are more poetic and creative than literal and hyperlogical once-borns or constricted twice-borns. Perceiving the plentitude, they break categories to release possibility while creating categories to ameliorate suffering. Constrictive twice-borns experience the overflow, but work to narrow their personal essence and that of others; often they strive to return to their initial healthy-mindedness. Expansive twice-borns strive to grow by incorporating otherness and difference into themselves while sacrificing their sameness. Recall the universal characteristics of saintliness enumerated by Meinhart and exemplified by John Stuart Mill whose "personal transformation led toward an understanding of life that found meaning in liberal values like equality and personal freedom, including social equality for women." The liberal values espoused by Mill might come to a healthy-minded once-born raised in them, but only a twice-born like Mill would strive to create them in the first place.

Once-borns do not experience alienation. Harmonized, self-confident, and self-possessed, they are not only sure of themselves, but of others. They maintain their healthy-mindedness and evade the pain of rebirth by exclusion. The healthy-minded assume others suffer because they are unhealthy in body or spirit. When they express sympathy, they see others as suffering as do they. When they attempt to ameliorate

suffering, they prescribe remedies that restore others to their norms of healthy functioning. If brutalized they, like Robert Bly, will prescribe the same brutal remedy for all. If treated kindly, they cannot entirely understand the suffering of brutalization.

When Meinhart introduces his novel variety, he notes that James gives us expansive and constricted forms of sick souls, but not of the healthy minded. That is because for James every once-born abstracts out everything that is not good as they judge it. Meinhart, however, does make a tacit distinction that allows us to identify better and worse once-borns. The only example of Sky-Blue masculinity he gives is Bly. Meinhart rightly recognizes there exist healthy minded but brutal once-borns. Having judged brutalized masculinity as the essence of manliness, Bly uses his poetic talents to impose his constrictive norm of healthy manhood on all. Battered children often become battering adults. I suspect the working distinction here is that between kindly treated and brutalized healthy-minded once-borns. However, even kindly treated once-borns can be unintentionally cruel when they insist that what is good for them is good for all.

Even kindly treated once-borns lack the epistemic understanding, existential insight, and moral perception requisite for responding appropriately to the needs, hopes, and aspirations of the radically different. They can do as much harm as those who prescribe brutal remedies because they too prescribe “one size fits all” responses. In education, these people support No Child Left Behind because they know that the same standards of learning and testing are good for all students regardless of gender, social class, or race. Expansive twice-borns understand we sometimes prescribe situated, strategic violence against violence such as Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.’s strategy of civil disobedience. Even kindly treated once-borns cannot tolerate those who violate their abstract way of conceiving things, the moral order, or the canons of beauty or correct thinking.

I praise Meinhart for defending a variety of religious experience that fully acknowledges evil and existential angst while affirming goodness, truth, and beauty as the interpretive keys to existence, although I think only twice-borns may occupy it. The poet Walt Whitman is a wonderful example of just such a spirit, yet James places him among the once-born. *Maybe Meinhart is right after all*. James credits Whitman for lifting him out of his own melancholy. Whitman walked past stacks of human limbs to nurse men wounded in the Civil War and often wrote letters to their families when they died. His poetry lovingly excludes nothing within the infinite plentitude of existence. Whitman realized that while creativity is most holy, yet in a perfect world creation cannot occur without error and fallenness. I believe Whitman creates beyond good and evil, and because he creates in love, he creates beyond Friedrich Nietzsche. I believe Whitman, like Buddha and Christ, awoke from the common dream to be born again, but according to the ideal Meinhart wisely envisions rather than the one James intends.

1. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 166.

2. Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 33.
3. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 165.
4. *Ibid.*, 88.
5. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 2 (New York: Dover, 1950), 335.
6. *Ibid.*, 334.