

William James and the Varieties of Religious and Drinking Experience: The Case of Pablo Ávila

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Published online: 22 May 2015

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Abstract Based on William James's idea that the most instructive *documents humains* are found "along the beaten highway," this paper revisits the life of Pablo Ávila (the author's father-in-law) using Donald Capps's relocation of Erik Erikson's life stages. The essay connects Pablo Ávila's religious and drinking experience to Bill W., the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, and through him, to William James, particularly to James's references to alcohol in *The Varieties* and his response to different forms of anti-alcohol activism. The paper argues that studying individual experience can engender human creativity and offer insights for more effective pastoral caregiving.

Keywords William James · Erik Erikson · Donald Capps · Bill W · Pablo Ávila · Alcohol · Religion · Human documents · Divided self · Wider self

Introduction

In a sense, a few beers and a bottle of wine got me into doctoral studies. Not that I drank any of these, but their mere presence at a farewell party was enough to extend my time at Princeton Seminary. The night before my trip to New Jersey to begin a masters-degree program, a small group of friends, most of them my former students at a Presbyterian seminary in Mexico City, invited me to join them in a last gathering. They brought lots of good Mexican food, sodas, a few beers, and a bottle of red wine. We had a good time, and on the next morning, I was on my way to Princeton. A few weeks later, one of the students posted a photograph of the farewell party on Facebook, and sure enough, within a few hours it had reached the executives of my presbytery. To make a long story short, I was asked by my presbytery to interrupt my studies at Princeton and come back to Mexico City to face an ecclesiastical trial for inappropriate behavior, because, according to some colleagues, by failing to ask the students to refrain from drinking alcoholic beverages, I had jeopardized my testimony as a minister.

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My family, my friends, and my academic adviser all agreed that the right thing to do was to continue my studies at Princeton. In fact, because things back home did not look promising, I stayed an extra year for an additional master's degree, and later on, thanks to the encouragement of my adviser, I applied to the doctoral program in pastoral theology. Since my original plan was to complete only a 2-year program and return to Mexico, it is no exaggeration to suggest that those few bottles were the originating cause of my prolonged stay at Princeton Seminary. Of course, none of this would have been possible without the kind mentorship of my professors and the love of my family and friends. Since I have recently completed my coursework at Princeton Seminary, it seemed right to pause and give credit to those who deserve it.

Capps (2005), commenting on Levinson's (1978) discussion of the sense of mortality, posits that "there is such a thing as too much stability" (p. 242). He does not suggest that the value of stability should be readily dismissed, "but much may be said for those internal processes that jerk us back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey" (p. 243). Based on Capps's approach, I have come to understand my extended stay at Princeton Seminary as a fresh start that has already prolonged my journey in unexpected ways.

Documents humains

This paper is about alcohol and religion. I will reflect on the intersection of religion and alcohol in my own life, but since I am only an occasional drinker, I will bring into my reflections the life of a person with much more authority on this topic, Don Pablo Ávila, my father-in-law. Even though he passed away more than a decade ago, his presence continues to be a powerful one in my life. He embodied, like few people I have ever met, the intensity of an inner struggle between his love for God and his drinking habits. In his search for healing, he learned about Bill W., the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, and through Bill's books, Pablo was introduced to the life and works of William James.

In the first lecture of his Gifford lectures on natural religion at the University of Edinburgh, subsequently published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James explained that his approach was psychological, and therefore, he would focus on religious feelings and religious impulses and not on religious institutions (2002, p. 8). He added that to accomplish his task he would focus on the lives of individuals: "The *documents humains* which we shall find most instructive need not then be sought for in the haunts of special erudition—they lie along the beaten highway..." (p. 9). According to Nørager (1995) personal stories account for more than half of the entire text of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (p. 63). Nørager also notes that James seldom offers a direct commentary or an analysis of his human examples (63). Rather, he lets each human document present its own particular account of religious experience. In assuming this attitude, James (2002) embodies his definition of religion: "There must be something solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude which we denominate religious" (p. 35). With this sense of reverence and tenderness, I hope to approach a few human documents in this paper. A word, though, is necessary about the decision to focus on individuals. The ultimate purpose of this approach, as James understood it, is to find our heroes, to commune with their spirits, and to discover whatever creative energy may lie in our souls (1992, p. 651). The pastoral theologian hopes to transform this creative energy into a source of hope and healing for a few, and perhaps through these few, to many more.

Don Pablo Ávila

Pablo Ávila was one of those who “lie along the beaten highway.” He did not go to college, he never had a permanent job, and he rarely had money in his pockets. Pablo Ávila was born to a very humble couple in Mexico City in 1931. His father owned a fruit stall in *La Merced* market in Mexico City, and his mother was devoted to her home. His early years were marked by shame. He was ashamed of the humble appearance of his mother, of having to work with his father in a market, and of having to sell fruit to the parents of his wealthy classmates. At age 8, Pablo’s father received a note from school informing him that his son had been infested with lice. He responded by sitting Pablo on a chair in the middle of a public patio and shaving off all his hair. Referring to this experience, Sara Forcada, my mother-in-law, says: “This was undoubtedly one of the most humiliating moments of his life” (S. Forcada, personal communication, August 6, 2014). Years later, with his first paycheck, Pablo bought himself a suit. But what was meant to be a joyous accomplishment became an extremely painful experience; instead of celebrating with him, his father mocked him for “wasting” his money in such a way.

In his relocation of the stages of Erik Erikson’s life-cycle theory, Capps (2008a) re-assigns Erikson’s second stage of autonomy vs. shame and doubt to the second decade of life. Capps argues that such relocation is appropriate because the combat between parents and their children tends to be much more intense during the second decade of life than during the second stage of infancy (p. 29). At least part of this combat, Capps explains, is the consequence of the parents’ “reasonable doubt that their sons and daughters are, in fact, capable of governing themselves,” and the claim of the sons and daughters “that they are capable of governing themselves” (p. 29). I think of Pablo’s purchase of a suit at age 15 as an attempt for self-governance or as a coming-of-age ritual. But his quest for autonomy, instead of being recognized and celebrated, was dismissed and judged as a waste of money. Erikson (1964) assigns the virtue of will to the second life stage. He understands will as “the unbroken determination to exercise free choice as well as self-restraint, in spite of the unavoidable experience of shame and doubt in infancy” (p. 119). Despite the shaming experiences of his childhood and adolescence, Pablo was determined to exercise free choice and wear the suit that he had bought with so much effort.

During his twenties, Pablo completed high school and pursued further education on his own by learning to speak English and some French and German. He read profusely and developed an interest in classical music, especially in Bach and Beethoven. When he discovered the German roots of Protestantism and the significance of Presbyterianism for the United States, he became very proud of his Protestant roots. As a child, he had enjoyed attending Sunday school and singing hymns at the First Presbyterian Church in downtown Mexico City. When he was 23, a group split from the mother church to form a new church; because the Ávila family decided to support the new church, from then on Pablo proudly referred to the new church as *his* church. In fact, his relationships with a wealthy Presbyterian family of this congregation got him a job at a furniture store, one he enjoyed and at which he excelled. In a sense, this furniture store, *La Mueblería Nueva* (The New Furniture Store) became a space that allowed for a kind of psychosocial moratorium. According to Erikson (1968), a psychosocial moratorium is a period “during which the young adult through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society, a niche which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made for him” (p. 156). *La Mueblería Nueva* became a niche for Pablo, a place where he was free to experiment as a salesman without worrying about life in the outer world. A store, especially a furniture store, is a place where the newness of things inspires *new*

narratives, dreams, and illusions about the possibility of a better life; the salesman is, in this sense, a kind of prophet who gets to invent and share his stories with customers, frequently adorning them with a touch of fiction. Throughout his life, Pablo was a “salesman”; even after he quit his job at the furniture store, he remained a storyteller.

The beginning of Pablo’s fourth decade was marked by a tragic event. When Pablo was 30, his dad fell from a ladder and died. Apparently his father’s zealous Protestant faith had been recently crushed by a family scandal, and Pablo was left with the sense that his father didn’t really fall but instead *wanted* to fall. (S. Forcada, personal communication, August 6, 2014). A few years later Pablo began drinking. Having studied English and Mexican history, he began to work as a tourist guide. But being a tourist guide introduced him to the world of restaurants, bars, and night clubs. These places made alcohol available to him, often for free. At least during the first stages of his drinking, however, he must have felt liberated from a sense of awkward shyness; he must have felt accepted and recognized as someone who deserved to wear a suit. In *The Varieties*, James (2002) offers a profound explanation of why an individual might develop the motivation to drink:

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. (p. 300)

What James explains here so eloquently is an accurate description of Pablo’s life. As he began drinking more and more, he found out that his church, the one he loved for allowing him to connect with the Protestant world, was also an unapologetically judgmental institution. During his twenties and early thirties, Pablo attended his church’s youth group. René Rodríguez, one of his few good friends at church, explains the dynamics of that group: “The youth group was clearly divided into two smaller groups, A and B, the rich and the poor; tolerance was mutual but we did not mix.” Commenting on how Pablo was treated by others in this youth group, Rodríguez explains that because people knew about Pablo’s “problem,” he was simply ignored by others (R. Rodríguez, personal communication, August 17, 2014). In church, Pablo was *crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour*. Church and group youth attendance became for him a radical no, an exercise in diminishment and discrimination. In terms of Capps’s relocation of Erikson’s life stages, Pablo’s fourth decade was marked by an inadequate resolution of the industry vs. inferiority conflict. Capps (2008a) suggests that the ratio between the positive tendency and the negative tendency of psychosocial conflicts would be something like 70 to 30 % (p. xix). In Pablo’s case, the negative tendency of his fourth decade (inferiority conflict) was probably greater than the positive element (industry). And as Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick (1986) explain in *Vital Involvement in Old Age*, too much of the negative tendency during the industry vs. inferiority conflict can lead to “a potentially malignant state of inertia” (p. 43). Based on the epigenetic principle of Erikson’s life-cycle theory, I would suggest that a malignant inertia tainted by a sense of inferiority persecuted Pablo not only during these years but in his later decades as well.

During his fifth decade Pablo got married and had two daughters. This was also the period when he discovered Alcoholics Anonymous and began developing relationships within his AA group. The virtue that corresponds to the fifth decade of life is fidelity (Capps 2008a, p. 87). “The faithful self,” Capps explains, “is the self that enables us to be faithful to who we

are—to our essential identity—and therefore capable of faithfulness to our commitments to other persons and to the tasks that are integral to the social roles that we have made our own” (p. 99). This definition of the faithful self is very useful to understand Pablo’s middle adulthood. Even though his drinking did not subside, during these years he developed a sense of identity as a member of AA, and he became increasingly committed to his friends and family. His family and his new AA friends, I would suggest, helped him resolve the identity vs. identity confusion conflict in a relatively adequate way. From a very early age, my wife, Sara Ávila, became aware of the significance of his new friendships:

My dad would find these very good friends all over the city; now I see that it was no coincidence. Perhaps he simply needed the sense of being accepted that came from seeing them. After church we would stop at the Fiesta Palace Hotel to say hi to the manager, his dear friend Dennis. Later we would stop at the corner of *Rio Churubusco* and *La Viga* to say hi to Machado, an AA friend who sold magazines on that corner and who had lost a finger while drunk. Then we would also greet the car mechanic in our neighborhood, another AA buddy. Sometimes he would invite them for dinner. All of them talked about their Higher Power. My dad used the words “Lord” and “Higher Power” interchangeably. Looking back, I am amazed by how all these people were faithful to each other until their last days. These friends were unmistakably important for my dad; I could sense his love for them. I can still remember their faces, the way they greeted each other, their genuine care for my dad, and for me, his daughter.

(S. Ávila, personal communication, May 10, 2014)

During his sixth decade, Pablo lived with intensity the intimacy vs isolation conflict. As Capps (2008a) explains, intimacy involves not only interpersonal relationships but also intrapersonal relationships (p. 108). Pablo wanted to maintain his meaningful relationships with his wife and daughters, but he also had to acknowledge the desires that led him in a different direction. In other words, Pablo became increasingly aware of his “divided self” and the need for “reducing inner discord” (James 2002, pp. 136–139). According to Capps, “self-reconciliation would manifest itself in *becoming more aware of the desires and impulses within oneself that threaten intimate relations with others....* Thus, intimacy would involve recognizing and embracing that aspect of oneself that one has treated as foreign to oneself, and would be viewed as an internal process, one that is likely to pay dividends in one’s relations with others” (p. 108, emphasis added). Pablo became aware that his desire to drink was threatening his relationships with those he loved the most, but his drinking did not subside. In fact, his drinking during these years became so intense that my mother-in-law, to guarantee the safety of their girls, had to leave him and move in with relatives (S. Forcada, personal communication, August 6, 2014).

At age 62, after 7 years of separation, Pablo reunited with his family. My mother-in-law established several conditions for their reunion, one of which was obtaining adequate housing. In a fortuitous move, Pablo befriended the Rev. Abner López, then the headmaster of the Presbyterian Seminary in Mexico City and suggested that if they were allowed to occupy one of the apartments on campus, his wife could teach courses on pedagogy and he could oversee campus security. Rev. López accepted, and the Ávila family moved to the seminary campus. Interestingly, this is the time when I was a student at the seminary, and although I already knew the Ávilas from school and church, during these years I started to develop a closer relationship with Sara, their eldest daughter. When Pablo learned that I had asked his daughter to be my girlfriend, his first reaction was to look for me to beat me. After 7 years of separation from his

dear daughters, Pablo reacted with anger (fear) to the idea of having to share his daughter's love with someone else. Within a few months, however, Don Pablo and I began to develop a profound relationship of respect and love. His love for Sara, of course, contributed to improve our relationship, but we soon discovered that we also shared a critical view of religious and political institutions. When it came to love, religion, and politics, our hearts beat together.

Capps (2008a) assigns the generativity vs. stagnation conflict to the seventh decade. Commenting on Erikson's understanding of generativity in the revised edition of *Childhood and Society*, Capps posits that stagnation can be understood as "the situation in which an older adult's need to be needed by one or more members of the younger generation is not reciprocated by those who are younger" (p. 127). Stagnation, Capps concedes, can occur at any stage of adulthood, but he thinks "it may be felt most acutely in one's sixties when one is no longer considered a significant player in the productive enterprise in which one has heretofore been involved" (p. 127). Pablo hadn't been a very productive person, at least not in the traditional sense, due in part to his inability to maintain a job. In this sense, it appeared that Pablo was condemned to develop a high sense of stagnation and a very low sense of generativity. Two factors, however, allowed him to connect significantly with younger generations and thus to defy stagnation. The first one was his ongoing relationships with AA men, many of them younger than him. The second factor was life on the seminary campus, an ideal space to connect with younger generations of students and scholars. Indeed, Pablo sought every opportunity to talk to seminary students; he often invited some of them for breakfast, and he served them as best as he could.

Pablo remained sober for the last 7 years of his life. It is amazing that despite his abuse of alcohol and the consequent damage to his liver, Pablo survived into his eighth decade. He died at age 72. During those last years, he saw his first daughter get married, and he met his first granddaughter and his first grandson. We, in turn, met his caring self (seventh decade) and some of his wise self (eighth decade). In the concluding paragraphs of *Dimensions of a New Identity*, Erikson (1974) says: "In youth you find out what you *care to do* and who you *care to be*—even in changing roles. In young adulthood you learn whom you *care to be with*—at work and in private life, not only exchanging intimacies, but sharing intimacy. In adulthood, however, you learn to know what and whom you can *take care of*" (p. 124). In this context, Erikson suggests that "the only happiness" that lasts is "to increase, by whatever is yours to give, the good will and the higher order in your sector of the world" (p. 124). This, I believe, is an adequate summary of the last years of the life of my father-in-law. He became a deeply caring man and sought to increase goodness, however modestly, in his part of the world.

Pablo meets Bill W. and William James

According to Sara, by the time she was in third grade her father found it more meaningful to go to his AA meeting than to go to church. As he discovered the AA literature, he became fascinated with the testimony of Bill W., and through him, he was introduced to Carl Jung and William James. Because of his fascination with Protestantism, Pablo cherished the English language and owned and read several books in English. His modest personal library included a Bible, Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* (1962), and a copy of *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism* (1955). The handwritten annotations on this book suggest that Pablo read it carefully and made every effort to understand the words and phrases with which he was

unfamiliar. His careful reading of the AA literature and the testimony of his daughters and wife had led me to conclude that Pablo had become familiar with Bill W.'s testimony and was well aware of the influence of Carl Jung and William James on the origins of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Bill (1957), the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, recalls that while hospitalized in the middle of the summer of 1934, his doctor explained to his wife, Lois, that his drinking habit had become an obsession and a "true insanity" that Bill could not conquer through will power (p. 52). Bill's situation was becoming hopeless. But in the midst of these days, one of his drinking buddies, Ebby, visited Bill and explained that he was sober because he had found religion (p. 58). Bill quotes Ebby on his religious experience in an Oxford Group:

I don't go along with all their teachings by any means. But those folks have given me some wonderful ideas. I learned that I had to admit I was licked; I learned that I ought to take stock of myself and confess my defects to another person in confidence; I learned that I needed to make restitution for the harm I had done [to] others. I was told that I ought to practice the kind of giving that has no price tag on it, the giving of yourself to somebody.... I know you are going to gag on this, but they taught me that I should try to pray to whatever God I thought there was for power to carry out these simple precepts.... And you know, Bill, it's a queer thing, but even before I had done all this, just as soon as I decided that I would try with an open mind, it seemed to me that my drinking problem was lifted right out of me. (pp. 58–59)

Ebby's testimony must have impacted Bill significantly. Even though Bill continued to drink in the next few days, he also began to ponder the idea of a Power greater than himself. He even visited Ebby's group, but nothing seemed to change until, back in the hospital, Bill felt that he was "at the very bottom of the pit" (p. 63). In desperation, Bill exclaimed: "If there is a God, let Him show Himself! I am ready to do anything, anything!" This is what happened next: "Suddenly the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe. It seemed to me, in the mind's eye, that I was on a mountain and that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man" (p. 63). After this sudden spiritual experience, Bill became frightened and worried that he might have been hallucinating (p. 63). But Bill's physician, Dr. Silkworth, assured him that he had experienced "some basic psychological or spiritual event" (p. 63). Greater understanding came to Bill the next day when his friend Ebby gave him a copy of William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (p. 64). These are some of Bill's thoughts after reading the book:

It was rather difficult reading for me, but I devoured it from cover to cover. Spiritual experiences, James thought, could have objective reality; almost like gifts from the blue, they could transform people. Some were sudden brilliant illuminations; others came on very gradually. Some flowed of religious channels; others did not. But nearly all had the great common denominators of pain, suffering, calamity. Complete hopelessness and deflation at depth were almost always required to make the recipient ready. The significance of all this burst upon me. *Deflation at depth*—yes, that was *it*. Exactly that had happened to me. (p. 64)

Bill found in *The Varieties* a plausible explanation for his sudden spiritual experience, but most important, he felt understood: "Here was another man who didn't think these experiences were hallucinations. His was the keenest sort of insight, accompanied by a most sympathetic

understanding” (Bill 2000, p. 151). But the works of William James were significant not only for him but for Alcoholics Anonymous. Referring to the night when he finished reading *The Varieties*, Bill W. says: “By night this Harvard professor, long in his grave, had, without anyone knowing it, become a founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. Dr. Jung, Dr. Silkworth, and the Oxford Groupers had already set candles upon the table around which our society was to arrange itself. William James had lighted still another” (p. 151).

William James and alcohol in *The Varieties*

Bill (2000) explains that in reading *The Varieties*, he found that most experiences of conversion shared three common denominators: utter defeat, acceptance of absolute helplessness, and appeal to a higher power for help (pp. 151–152). As someone who had experienced these three things, Bill felt understood. In what follows, however, I want to suggest that James’s sympathetic understanding of men like Bill, Ebby, Pablo, and, in one way or another, of each of us, is based not only on his understanding of conversion but on a radical sense of gracious acceptance of individual experience. This kind of acceptance is not based on moralism or on what James (2002, p. 263) calls “the spirit of dogmatic dominion.” Rather, it is based on a pragmatic principle: “If the *fruits for life* of the state of conversion are good, we ought to idealize and venerate it, even though it be a piece of natural psychology; if not, we ought to make short with it, no matter what supernatural being may have infused it” (p. 186). James’s emphasis on the fruits for life is a helpful framework to understand his approach toward controversial topics, in this case, the consumption of alcoholic beverages. In the next paragraphs, I will discuss two specific references to alcohol in *The Varieties*; the first one occurs in the second lecture on conversion; the second one, in the lecture on mysticism.

In his second lecture on conversion, James (2002) discusses “automatisms.” He explains that automatisms include unconsciousness, convulsions, visions, involuntary vocal utterances, and suffocation (p. 196). He argues that these experiences have “no essential spiritual significance,” but they make conversion more significant for the convert (p. 196). Furthermore, James posits that “it has never been proved that converts who show them are more persevering or fertile in good fruits than those whose change of heart has had less violent accompaniments” (p. 196). In his discussion of automatisms James gives special attention to photisms or, as he calls them, hallucinatory or pseudo-hallucinatory luminous phenomena (p. 197). Saint Paul’s heavenly vision, he argues, must have been a kind of photism (p. 197).

In his presentation of photisms James includes the case of Mr. Peek, a man who experienced “chromatic hallucinations produced by the intoxicant cactus buds called mescal by the Mexicans” (p. 198). These are the words of Mr. Peek reflecting on his drinking and religious experience: “When I went in the morning into the fields to work, the glory of God appeared in all his visible creation. I well remember we reaped oats, and how every straw and head of the oats seemed, as it were, arrayed in a kind of rainbow glory, or to glow, if I may express it, in the glory of God” (p. 198). James attempts no analysis of Mr. Peek’s experience. He only adds a brief comment on a footnote: “These reports of sensorial photism shade off into what are evidently only metaphorical accounts of *the sense of new spiritual illumination*” (p. 198, emphasis added). James implies here that Mr. Peek’s photism was indeed an experience of spiritual illumination, even if it was a consequence of drinking mescal. James, of course, was not the first to refer to the link between religion and the ingestion of alcohol. In the foreword to *Alcohol in Ancient Mexico*, anthropologist Peter T. Furst (2000) reminds us, for example, that

for Mesoamerican and South American Indians, “‘getting high,’ by whatever technique, was a means not of escape but of integration with the sacred” (p. x). The same, of course, would be true in other cultures around the world.

Interestingly, Bill W.’s spiritual experience in the hospital was also a photism: “Suddenly the room lit up with *a great white light*. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe” (1957, p. 63, emphasis added). Although Bill was initially worried that his experience was a hallucination, Dr. Silkworth assured him that it had been “some basic psychological or spiritual event” (p. 63). James, I think, would have agreed. Whether his encounter with “the wind of spirit” that made him a free man was really hallucination or not is not the main point. What is most significant about Bill’s religious experience was his sense that God, by whatever means, touched his divided self to make him a *wider* self. For James, it seems, the *wider self* is a religious self, a self “through which saving experiences come” (2002, p. 397). The widening of the self is James’s way of solving the apparent contradiction between psychology and religion, between scientific and theological claims. On the one hand, James the scientist embraces the idea of “the subconscious continuation of our conscious life” (p. 394). On the other hand, he claims that the theologian’s contention that religious individuals are moved by an external power is vindicated by the tendency of the “subconscious region to take on objective appearances and to suggest to the Subject an external control” (p. 394). Ultimately, the most significant consequences of religious experiences are the fruits of life that the widening of the self brings to those like Bill, Ebby, and Pablo.

The second reference to alcohol in *The Varieties* occurs in the lecture on mysticism. It is, indeed, an eloquent description of the effects of alcohol on the human soul. Although I have already quoted the first part, given its significance I include here the complete quotation:

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. (James 2002, p. 300)

James reflects here on the mysterious and tragic aspect of alcohol consumption. On the one hand, as “the great exciter of the *Yes* function,” alcohol liberates people from inner and external oppressions. Most important, it offers an alternative by stimulating “the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour.” James’s tone here is tender and pastoral; he seems interested in affirming any mystical experiences that may bear fruits of life. On the other hand, James knows that the abusive consumption of alcohol can be deadly. He chooses to live in the tension between life and death, between liberation and oppression, between elixir and poison. Ultimately, for him, “the drunken consciousness is one bit of the mystic consciousness” (p. 300). As such, a drunken consciousness can be an expression of religious mysticism or an expression of “*diabolical* mysticism, a sort of religious mysticism turned upside down” (p. 330). For James, all forms of

mysticism spring from the “subliminal or transmarginal region,” and “this region,” he explains, “contains every kind of matter: ‘seraph and snake’ abide there side by side” (p. 330).

William James: alcohol as seraph and snake

In January of 1895 William James delivered a lecture on the effects of alcohol under the auspices of the Harvard Total Abstinence League (Richardson 2006, p. 345). After explaining the physiological and psychological effects of alcohol, James (1988, p. 51) came to the conclusion that is just “safer to drink cold water, or hot water, or any kind of water.” And then he added: “Every ounce of handicap that is added should be avoided, and the daily use of even the smallest amount of alcohol is *probably* a real handicap, increasing the fatigue and wear and tear of life, diminishing reserve force and elasticity, and tending to shorten existence” (p. 51, emphasis added). In terms of his approach to helping people withdraw from alcohol, James invoked the significance of habits in people’s lives: “The best way to wean people from intemperance is to fill them with a love of temperance for its own sake. In other words replace the drink idol, & ideal by another ideal” (p. 51). Although James himself took an occasional drink (Richardson 2006, p. 345), his notes make it quite clear that James favored abstinence. This doesn’t mean, however, that he was willing to join this league or any other form of temperance movement. In his lecture, James (1988, p. 48) includes this disclaimer: “I think we must thank and respect this League, even if we do not join them. Their existence is either a challenge or a rebuke. I do not join them... but they help me none the less.” James chose not to join an organization that endorsed *total abstinence* perhaps because such a position would have gone against his pragmatic pluralism; but as we shall see, for the same reason he refused to join more moderate groups.

When in 1889 William James built his house at 95 Irving Street in Cambridge and was appointed Alford Professor Psychology at Harvard University (Richardson 2006, p. 526), the city of Cambridge was not issuing licenses for the sale of liquors. In October 4, 1881 the Cambridge Home Protection League had pledged to begin a campaign against these licenses (Citizen’s No-License Committee 1898, p. 89). Their first victory came 5 years later when in December of 1886 the no-license position won with a majority of 616 votes (p. 98). In May 1, 1897, the Citizens’ No-License Committee organized a “jubilee” to celebrate ten consecutive years “without the curse of the open saloon” (p. v). In his jubilee address, J. M. W. Hall, commenting on the role of churches in this movement, said: “The churches of our city, regardless of denominational difference, have stood together in this contest. So should it always be. Let our churches continue steadfast, united, unconquerable, as they go forth to battle against social or civil corruption and vice, always and everywhere” (p. 12). And then he made an open invitation to the children and youth in the audience: “Take your stand now on the side of right and truth, of temperance and godliness, and when your turn comes, do your part to keep our city life pure and clean...” (p. 13). Such was the kind of discourse that pervaded many of the halls of Cambridge at the time.

But not all Cambridge citizens agreed with the Citizens’ No-License Committee. In 1893, “the Committee of Fifty” was organized with the purpose of investigating what they called “the Liquor Problem” (Billings et al. 1905, p. 3). Among the members of this committee were Charles E. Eliot, President of Harvard University; Charles E.

Briggs, a Presbyterian minister who at the time was on trial for heresy;¹ and C. W. Shields, a graduate of Princeton Seminary and Episcopal minister (pp. viii-ix). The purpose of this committee was not to “create one more agent in practical reform” but to offer facts that could “serve as a basis for intelligent public and private opinion” (p. 3). This body of facts included a consideration of the physiological, legislative, and economic aspects of alcohol consumption. The physiological sub-committee, for example, concluded that the “limit of judicious” alcohol consumption by middle-aged persons is a single glass of wine, preferably toward the end of the day “as a sedative” (p. 9). Ultimately, the purpose of the Committee of Fifty was to point out the dangers of excess in either drinking or in obsessively speaking about drinking: “The cause of temperance has been much obstructed by intemperate speech and exaggerated statement.... There is much to fear from excess of drink, but there is also much to fear from excessive statements which experience soon discovers to be unsupported by facts” (p. 9).

My purpose in offering some context about the approach to alcohol consumption in Cambridge during those years is to present some evidence for James’s position. James did not join the Harvard Total Abstinence League but he also refused to join the Committee of Fifty. When Francis Peabody, secretary of the committee and his colleague at Harvard University, invited James to be part of the 50, he responded with this letter:

[October 18, 1894]

Dear Peabody:

I hate to say no to anything, especially to anything proposed by you, but pray don’t propose me for this committee of fifty, council of ten, or Garibaldi thousand, whatever it may be. Do you fellows think you can scare alcohol by the portentousness of your names? Never! It seems to me we *know* quite enough for all practical purposes already, and that this is a kind of swell front to a house about 3 ft deep. I confess that the sight of the report of the physiological Committee with its proposal to have more dogs sacrificed, and an expert in the library to look up the literature of the subject for several weeks made me quite sick inside...

What is *effective*, it seems to me, is the example of abstinence, and the gradually progressive weaning of the people from the habit of expecting to drink on all occasions. Your aqueous dinners to the Club e. g. do more than your name on this circular will ever do. As in all things, the real cure is the substitution of the better ideal—one needn’t then be at pains to drive out the worsen one. For our students, e.g. the admiration of, and belief in that pure early-morning health, that is better than all drunkenness, and no man that has drunk anything the day before can ever feel, will do more for temperance than anything. I admit is something to *live up to*!

Excuse the appearance of churlishness that this letter wears. I am no man for committees anyhow.

Yours fondly, | W. J.

(Skrupskelis and Berkeley 1999, pp. 554–555)

¹ On June 1, 1893, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America suspended Charles A. Briggs from his office as a minister claiming that he had “uttered, taught and propagated views, doctrines and teachings... contrary to the essential doctrine of the Holy Scripture and the Standards of said Presbyterian Church in the United States of America” (McCook 1893, p. 377). For more on the Briggs trial see Hatch (1969).

This fascinating letter offers a good sense of who James was. It conveys his distrust of committees and his love for dogs, but it also points to his belief that negative habits can be effectively eradicated through the incorporation of a better habit. Habits can help individuals be all they can be in life, but James (1948, p. 149) also thought that there is no worse hell than “habitually fashioning our characters in the wrong way.” But reading this letter between lines suggests another reason for James’s refusal to be part of either the Committee of Fifty or the Harvard Total Abstinence League. In both cases James seems to be protecting himself from assuming a position that could endanger his commitment to plurality in human experience. James (2002, p. 397) pledges to treat “over-beliefs” with “tenderness and tolerance so long as they are not intolerant themselves.” In this respect, absolute abstinence, the idea of drinking one glass of wine per day, or the possibility of seeing the glory of God as a result of drinking mescal could all potentially count as legitimate religious experiences.

Concluding remarks

William James’s commitment to treat individual religious experience with tolerance and tenderness is an invitation to revisit the cases of those who have been traditionally counted as “non-human documents” because they “failed to live righteous lives.” The purpose of revisiting these human documents is not to idealize evil or human suffering but to recognize that evil and goodness are complexly intertwined in human experience. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish the snake from the seraph in a person’s life. In her attempt to make sense of her father’s drinking, Sara Ávila says: “Pablo Ávila could not have been who he was if he had not been an alcoholic. He was an alcoholic because he was prone to the disease, extraordinarily smart, and determined; or because he was an alcoholic, he developed certain type of smartness and determination” (S. Ávila, personal communication, May 10, 2014). I would reframe her response by suggesting that through his drinking and religious experience, and through the diverse community he found in AA, Pablo’s divided self became, step by step, a wider self, a self that included a drinking self but also a serving, caring, and loving self.

At the beginning of this paper I referred to James’s idea that we study and emphasize individual variation, we pick our heroes from history, and we commune with their kindred spirits with the ultimate purpose of finding and strengthening the sense of creativity, wisdom, and courage that lies within our souls (1992, p. 651). In thinking of Pablo as a hero, there are at least three aspects of his life that I have found inspiring. The first is his vocation as a salesman, that is, his ability to sell hope and a dose of good humor through conversation; a joke, a brief comment, or a compliment were often enough to make one’s day better. Capps (2008b) suggests that “the ethos that ‘A guy goes into a bar...’ jokes create or assume is the very ethos that Good Humor Ministry seeks to foster” (p. 22). Pablo was a bar goer and a minister of good humor. And if he spoke so profusely whenever he had a chance it was because he was probably trying to make up for earlier attention deficits (p. 47). The second element is a sense of preferential hospitality. Pablo was quite critical of persons in position of high authority like politicians and church leaders, but he was kind and welcoming to those he found on the beaten highway, especially to service workers. Finally, I have been impressed by Pablo’s sense of endurance. He endured not only in the face of a compelling inner desire to drink but also amid the religious fundamentalisms that judged and persecuted him in both open and subtle ways. Despite criticisms, Pablo attended his church until the end. Perhaps he was able to do so because, as Dykstra (2014, p. 2) suggests, recognizing “our own inner fundamentalists” allows

us to establish empathic relationships with other fundamentalist individuals and communities. René Rodríguez, one of Pablo's few church friends, offers a hint of this sense of empathy: "Regarding his situation [Pablo's drinking problem] I never confronted him; I just loved him" (R. Rodríguez, August 17, 2014).

Although in this paper I have highlighted the positive aspects of Pablo's life, I do not want to conclude this paper without underscoring, as has William James, that drinking is often the source of much suffering and degradation. But when one considers the life of men like Ebby, Bill, and Pablo, even their excessive drinking seems to have at least some redeeming aspect: "There is no doubt," James once said, "that to some men sprees and excesses of almost any kind are medicinal, temporarily at any rate, in spite of what the moralists and doctors say" (1926, p. 18). God, in his gracious intervention, has the power to transform our darkest nights into bright and hopeful mornings, not by dismissing darkness but by helping individuals integrate it into the complexity of their living human documents. God has the power to make our excesses medicinal. While I had previously thought of the significance of Pablo's life for me and my family, writing this paper has allowed me to reflect more attentively on how Pablo has affected my understanding of pastoral theology. Earlier in my life I had adopted the idea that a pastor's work is to locate what is morally wrong in a person's life and then work to change that person's behavior. More recently, I have come to believe that a pastor is called to attend humbly and wisely the different ways in which God may be at work in a person's life. Christian ministry requires an ethos akin to a bar, "an ethos in which one is the object of an attentive eye, an extended hand, a sympathetic ear" (Capps 2008b, p. 52). By creating "an atmosphere of mutual respect and decorum," a minister, like a bartender, can enable others to express their needs (p. 52). This non-judgmental atmosphere can also help individuals face their demons and fears and discover the value of their darkest moments. The drinking and religious experience of individuals like Pablo and his heroes supports James's contention that sometimes evil facts "may...be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth" (2002, p. 130). Indeed, sometimes the best path to find God and the seraphim is to face and embrace one's snakes and demons. This is, I believe, a valuable claim for pastoral ministry. A caregiver is not called to judge and dwell in the "dry criticisms of the sober hour." On the contrary, pastoral caregivers are called to be exciters of the *Yes* function in people's lives by seeking ways to attend to the inner discord of the divided self and to affirm the expansion of the pluralistic self.

Finally, I want to point out, in reference to my introductory paragraph, that a conflict with one's judiciary is in no way a joyous experience; ecclesiastical conflicts are quite painful and deeply distressing. But men like Pablo Ávila inspire us to seek light and truth even in our darkest moments. Indeed, those who lie "along the beaten highway" often teach us to see the seraph behind the snake.

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