

“I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER”

—An Interview Series with John Capps—

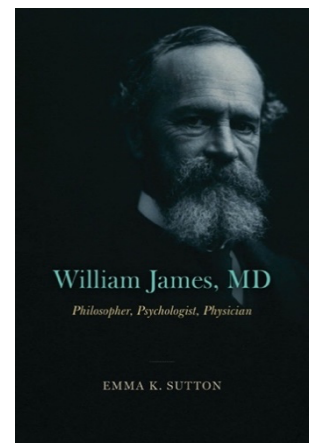


Emma Sutton is an Honorary Research Fellow at Queen Mary University of London. She is the author of *William James, MD: Philosopher, Psychologist, Physician* (University of Chicago Press, 2023) as well as several articles on William James’s conceptions of health, illness and Stoic thought. She is a past winner of the “Friends of the Wellcome Trust Centre and Library Prize” and the “Young Scholar Award” given by the International Society for the History of Behavioral and Social Sciences.

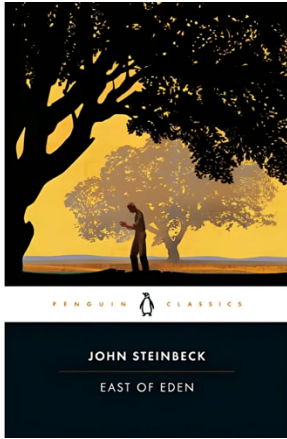
What does American philosophy mean to you?

My experience of American philosophy has been largely a Jamesian experience to date. In its broadest sense, for me a philosophy is a way of being in the world, an orientation to life; and whenever I read William James, I’m struck by how he described these “ways of being.” He depicted both philosophical attitudes and the act of philosophizing as thoroughly embodied affairs. Philosophy was not, for James, a rarified armchair pursuit; it was a visceral vocation involving “coverings,” “cravings,” and “poisonings,” “sick shudders,” “chatterings of the teeth,” “snivelling raptures,” “fighting,” and “leaping.”

In my research and my recent book *William James MD: Philosopher, Psychologist, Physician*, I probe this embodied James and examine how his lifelong experiences of bodily and mental affliction were implicated in the development of his philosophical ideas. I make the case that James’s well-documented meliorism was organized, primarily, around the ideal of health and that he placed considerable weight on the duty of philosophy to help us orientate ourselves with respect to one particular aspect of life, namely the “evils” of illness, pain, and death.

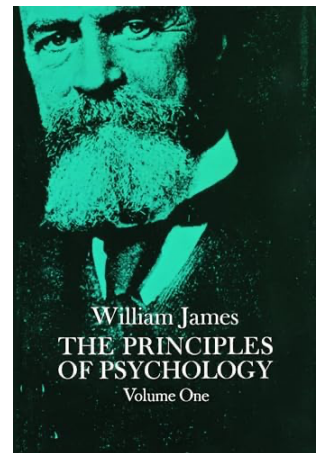


How did you become an American philosopher?



I was studying for an MA in the history of medicine, many years ago, when I first began working on James. I stumbled across an intriguing reference to him and his *Principles of Psychology* in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* around the same time that I was more formally introduced to James via one of my course modules on the history of psychology. Over the duration of the novel, alongside the Bible, two books are discussed and revered by the two central characters whose conversations elucidate the philosophical heart of the narrative. James's psychology text is one of them, and the other is the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius.

I was curious about how Steinbeck appeared to position these two authors in some kind of shared intellectual and cultural space within his turn-of-the-century story world. Working on nothing more than a historical hunch, I started looking into whether there was any more substantive link between them, and there was! I discovered from his personal correspondence that James cherished the *Meditations* from the time he first read them in his early twenties; that his public writings and private letters were strewn with references to Aurelius; and that he drew on his Stoic philosophy in many and varied ways throughout his life. The essay that I wrote about these connections became my first published piece as an academic.



How would you describe your current research?

My primary research interest is in the history and philosophy of health concepts and arose out of my work on James. The ideal of health has assumed such widespread cultural authority that we now take its normative status for granted. We don't just talk about healthy people, but healthy relationships, healthy workplaces, and healthy institutions. "Healthy," it would seem, is now the supreme synonym for "good," but a marked lack of historical attention has been paid to how this came to be; what exactly is meant and has been meant in the past by the concept of "health;" and what the consequences are of defining human value and aspiration within a medically-minded worldview.

I address this historiographical gap in my analysis of James's preoccupation with medical concerns and the many ways he brought a physician's eye to bear on his influential and

multidisciplinary corpus. Through his writings, I argue, we learn how ideas about illness, health, and healing were meaningfully and inextricably linked with the philosophical, religious, and political agendas of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century America. More recently, I've been exploring similar terrain but looking beyond James and his lifetime at how these themes played out in British and American ideas about health, childhood, and child-rearing in the decades that followed his death.

What do you do when you're not doing American philosophy?

Before I began my academic research, I worked as a documentary filmmaker at the BBC. Ever since we met there, I've enjoyed a long-standing creative collaboration with Sara Kenney, who now runs a not-for-profit public engagement organization: [Wowbagger Productions](#). She is the driving force behind this project, and I help where I can with medical humanities and story-editing input. We share a keen interest in issues around mental health and medical philosophy. We are also both firmly committed to the belief that academic knowledge belongs to everyone and that its production and dissemination should involve as many different voices as possible. To that end many of our outputs over the years have explored the potential of visual media formats, especially films and comics, to engage with underserved audiences.

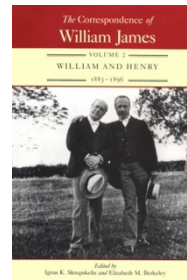
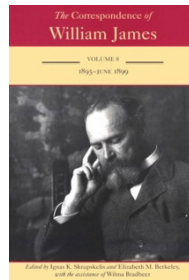


Recent Wowbagger productions include Image Comics' *Surgeon X*, a series set in near-future Britain in a world where antibiotic resistance has reached crisis point, prompting social unrest, political controversy and medico-ethical dilemmas for the central characters; *Planet Divoc-91*: a comic series exploring the socio-political consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, co-produced with a young adult cohort; and a documentary escape game *She Could Fly*, inspired by the comic of the same name, which aims to increase understanding, reduce stigma and create equitable policy change around the diagnosis of OCD.

What's your favorite work in American philosophy? What should we all be reading?

My favorite work in American philosophy is the twelve-volume collection of *The Correspondence of William James*. For me his landmark publications, *The Principles of Psychology*, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and *Pragmatism* etc., are like the studio

photographs of his era; they preserve one moment in his thinking, carefully staged and curated for public viewing; but his letters are more akin to home movies, less polished and professional but also more revealing. Owing to their frequency and intimacy, they capture James's philosophy in motion and, crucially, in context; the juxtapositions of his comments and ideas are frequently gossipy, humorous, and mundane but at the same time arrestingly profound.



In place of recommended reading, I'd like to propose some recommended viewing! I recently watched [this video](#) of a talk by James scholar Ariel Dempsey. She's a medic and dancer who is currently carrying out research for her PhD on James's ideas about living with uncertainty, with the aim of enriching medical approaches to end-of-life care. (Her focus on the difficulties of coping with uncertainty also, I'd suggest, has practical applications within the field of mental health more generally.)

She performs some of her own choreography as part of her presentation, and this type of embodied philosophical enactment is appealing on many levels, not least its valuable public engagement potential. In his essay on the "The Gospel of Relaxation," James himself began unpacking the links between emotion, body and gesture, and his embedding of emotion and feeling into the project of philosophy is well known. It seems to me that there is much to be gained, in practice and pedagogy, from moving beyond text and brain-based conceptions of philosophy and into a realm of whole-body thinking.

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