Menand, The Metaphysical Club, 73-95

As we move deeper into Menand's argument, we should remember his comment that with the eclipse of pre- Civil war intellectual culture and the rise of pragmatism that "there was gain and there was loss" (xii). In other words, Menand is not a champion--or at least not an uncritical champion--of pragmatism. In reference to these two chapters, we might ask if two of the founders of pragmatism - Holmes and James - were "damaged goods" (a description Bronson Alcott used to describe James's father – 84). We might also ask whether heroic disinterestedness and the ability to change one's mind are virtues. Finally, I think the chapters continue to address the question of whether we should think of our beliefs as "timeless oughts" and "circumstantial shoulds" (my awkward phrases, based on a Holmes quotation on 63).

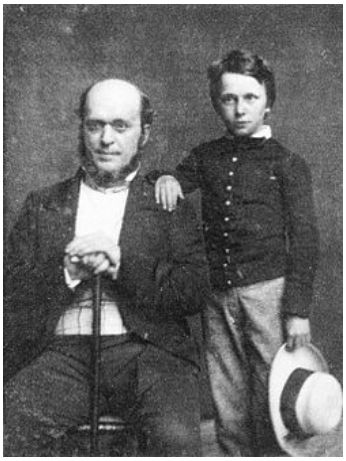
Ch. 4 The Man of Two Minds (William James)

1. Menand offers several comical examples of William James's notorious indecisiveness, but what were the most important things about which James could not make up his mind? How did James resolve his attraction to "risk-taking decisiveness" and his belief that "certainty was moral death" (75)?

William James's Civil War: Decisiveness and Uncertainty: James couldn't decide whether to marry, what to name his son, what career to pursue, when or whether to retire. But the most important issue James could not decide involved the Civil War. James could not decide whether to fight in the Civil War. He never did but he also never stopped questioning that decision, even well after the war had ended. Having witnessed the dashing figures of Charles Russell Lowell and his finance Josephine Shaw, riding horseback with the black Massachusetts 54th Regiment in 1863, James forever after refused to blame his father's restraint for his decision not to enlist but pointed to his own pusillanimity (cowardace, lacking resolution, timidness). The heroic, decisive, socially-assured

Lowell was everything the fragile, indecisive, and socially-insecure James was not. James saw risk-taking decisiveness, the willingness to pursue an uncertain course of action, as a mark of character. But he also believed that certainty meant moral death and thus he could never foreclose any question. He resolved the tension, or at least dealt with it, by acting on every impulse, every "gush of feeling" that he had. Although it continued to frustrate him, it made him an unusual and apparently charismatic figure whom everyone liked. And he did wind up serving in the Civil War or at least in a related conflict, concerning race relations, but served on the "wrong" side (his work with Agassiz - see below).

2. What was William James' father (Henry James, Sr.) like? What was the father's relationship to the second great awakening?

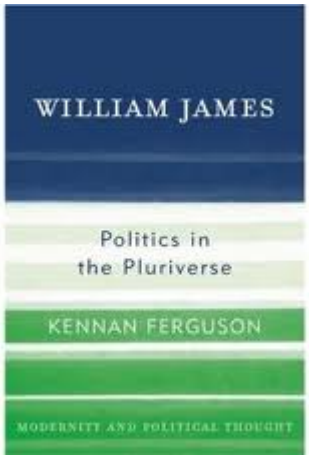


A Born-Again Protestant Eschews the Forms and Searches for the Invisible Realm Henry James, Sr., was the son of a successful Irish immigrant-entrepreneur (William James, the grandfather of the philosopher) who made a fortune helping to construct the Erie Canal. A Calvinist convinced of human depravity, including that of his children, the elder James left only a small stipend to his children, smallest of all to the suspect Henry James, Sr., and stipulated that they should inherit the rest in twenty years only if they developed the proper moral character. Henry James, Sr., sued to invalidate the will, successfully, but in the meantime he underwent a religious conversion as part of the Second Great Awakening. Living in the "burnt-over district" of New York State (where market development and religious revivals made for a potent mix), Henry James, Sr., embraced both the religious enthusiasm and anti-clerical, anti-institutionalism of the awakening. More protestant than the protestants, James "eschewed the forms." As he moved from church to church (including his infatuation with Swedenborg), he believed most fervently, without his son William's constant doubts, in the existence of an invisible realm beyond the visible. Individualism and self-regard, including the moralism that made people think they could become better than others through their own actions, prohibited people from getting in touch with this

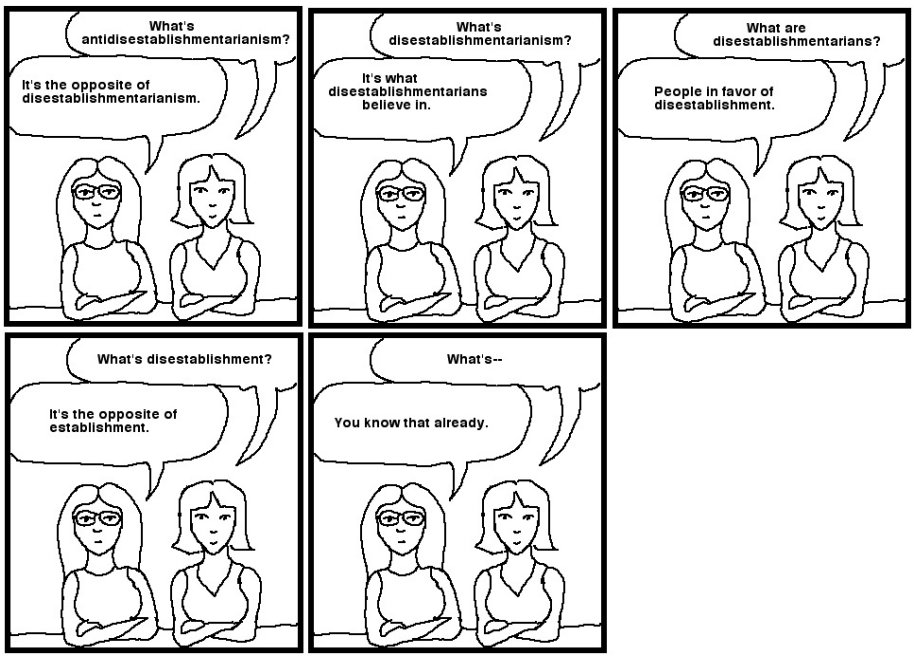
invisible realm which was the only true realm, radiating divine love that would result in perfect brotherhood. But what all this meant in practice was, as Menand teases, "not self-evident" (86). Henry James, Sr., thus had some odd and some objectionable views, from free love to the inferiority of women and blacks.

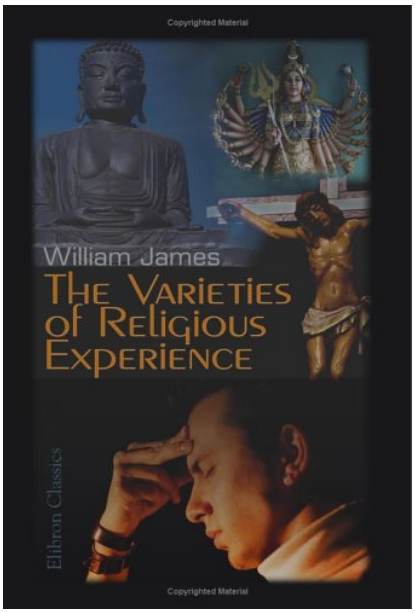
3. What part of his father's intellectual legacy did William James reject and what part did he embrace (if those verbs aren't too strong)? What impact did William's disorganized schooling have on his subsequent scholarly career?

No: WJ embraces an open "pluriverse" and individual agency: Much of his father's intellectual orientation, Henry's "monistic belief in the unchanging reality of an unseen world, indifference to temporal moral distinctions, and anti-individualism," had no meaning whatsoever for William James. William saw such views as implying a "block universe," closed and pre-determined. William preferred to think of the "pluriverse" and found even standardized spelling troubling. He believed, above all, in the power of individual agency.



Yes: Disestablishmentarianism and the Contingency of all Social Forms: Protestantism, American Democracy, Evolution: But Henry James, Sr., did represent something of the intellectual ferment out of which his son's pragmatism would come. Again, more protestant than the protestants, Henry hated forms, rituals, established authorities. He identified Protestantism with American democracy, as both exploded the forms, the institutions, and attacked authority and conformity. Here is the connection between Henry and Emerson's anti-institutional strain. And William himself later defined pragmatism in terms of Protestantism, a matter of rejecting verbal ritual and inherited authority.





Maybe: Science or Religion and Education? Henry and his son William also appear to have shared a desire to unite scientific inquiry and religious belief, something that Swedenborgians aspired to as well (and hence Henry's fascination with such). This same impulse, of squaring science with religion, was another aspect of William's indecisiveness or double-mindedness. He joined in the late 19th century fascination with hypnotism and mind cure, believing that we might break down the barriers that isolated individual minds from an extra-personal consciousness (reminiscent, if distinct from, Henry's invisible realm). William's willingness to try to unite disparate things, his creativity and openness in intellectual inquiry, his indifference to established conventions and his passion to follow and change his own mind, may also have come from the amazingly haphazard and chaotic education that his father provided him.

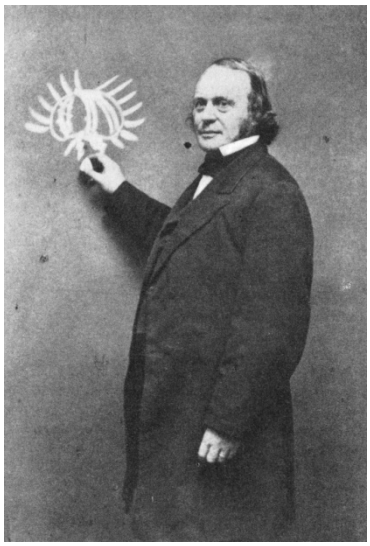
Menand, The Metaphysical Club, 97-148

These crucial chapters hinge on the challenge Darwin's On the Origin of Species (1859) posed to traditional and Christian ways of thinking about creation. The second of the two chapters then examines the influence of Darwin on the development of pragmatism.

Menand, "Agassiz," 97-116

1. What was "the most interesting thing" (101) about Louis Agassiz? How did Morton's research on human skulls illustrate the flaw in Agassiz's scientific methods? (This is a matter of induction and the comparative approach, on the one hand, and concepts and preferences, on the other.)

The Most Interesting Thing About the Fabulous Louis Agassiz: Louis Agassiz was a Swiss scientist for whom Boston manufacturers endowed the Lawrence Scientific School where William James enrolled in the fall of 1861. The discoverer of the Ice Age, Agassiz came to the United States in



1845. Already a famous scientist (thanks to the support of two leading European scientists, Alexander Von Humbolt and George Cuvier, the latter of whom left Agassiz in charge of a collection of fish fossils upon which Agassiz made his name), Agassiz came to the United States to recoup his fortune after a failed business and marriage. A large and handsome man, something of a showman, Agassiz gave a series of successful lectures (the Lowell lectures) and became a celebrated member of Boston society. The most interesting thing about Agassiz was how he used modern scientific practices to reach reactionary conclusions.

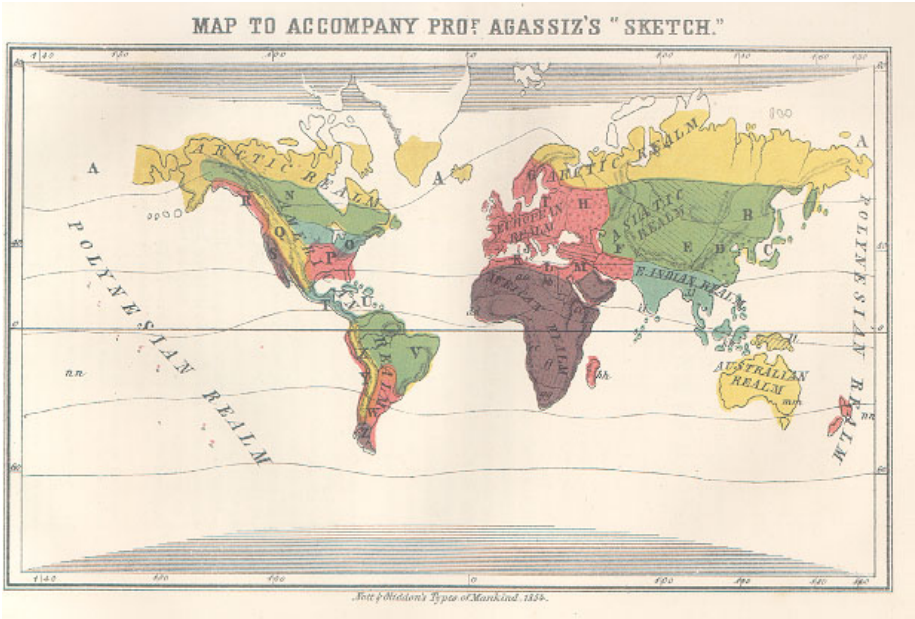
Induction and the Comparative Approach vs. Concepts and Preferences: As a scientist, Agassiz proceeded by induction and the comparative approach. He collected facts and encouraged his students to do the same, to engage in hands-on observation of natural phenomena, as with the grasshoppers or dead fish in his classrooms. Then he compared those facts to other facts and explored the relationships among them. These practices put him in the forefront of modern science as it moved away from abstract concepts and philosophical speculation. But, as Menand points out, when we use our senses to collect and observe data we are inevitably governed by concepts that make the data intelligible and preferences that shape what we collect (not unlike what I've said about researching and writing history). James recognized this too and came to the conclusion that we had best be aware of our guiding interests, concepts, and preferences.

Morton and His Skulls: Agassiz's fascination with Samuel George Morton's collection of human skulls illustrates the flaws in the scientific methods of Agassiz and his colleagues. Morton collected and measured human skulls (induction and the comparative method) in order to verify and demonstrate his belief in the hierarchy of races (concepts and preferences). So far, so good, as something of the sort is inevitable. But instead of keeping his concept and preferences, his prejudices, foremost in mind and guarding against them, Morton ignored all the shortcomings of his evidence and even fudged it when necessary to support his preferred conclusions. For example, he could not even know for sure if the skulls came from the "races" that those who sent them said they came from. Nor could he

control for gender or age or body size. Worse, he adjusted his "Caucasian" measurements upward to account for a disproportion of criminals in the sample while dropping Hindu skulls from the Caucasian measures because they drew the average down and keeping Peruvian skulls because they lowered the Native American average. But Morton's work circulated widely and passed for cutting edge science at the time.

2. How did Agassiz's preference for polygenism over monogenism both defend slavery and reinforce belief in a divine intelligence? What had Agassiz meant when he despaired that "they will Mexicanize the country"?

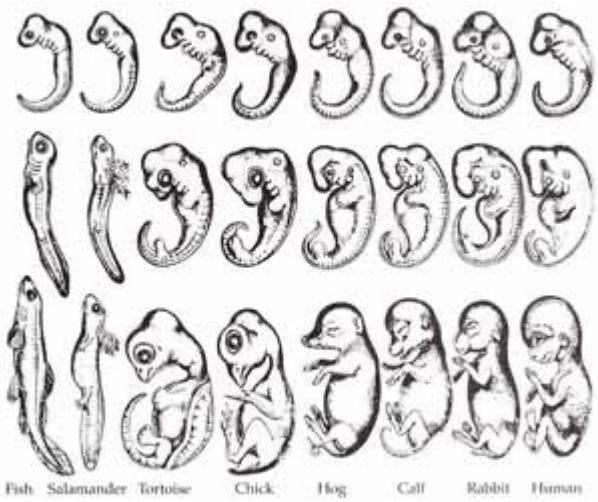
Monogenism and Polygenism: Not Much to Choose From: Agassiz's reaction to the start of the Civil War was to fear that "they" (the abolitionists) "will Mexicanize the country." To clarify what Agassiz meant, Menand explores the political implications of Morton's work. Morton was a polygenist and he converted Agassiz to that position. Monogenists postulated that all humans descended from a common source and that a process of degeneration accounted for racial differences. Polygenists believed that the races had been created separately and endowed with different characteristics from the start (by showing no change, no degeneration, in skulls over time, Morton's work supported the polygenists). Neither position is egalitarian but polygenism is more radical in suggesting the races are different species.

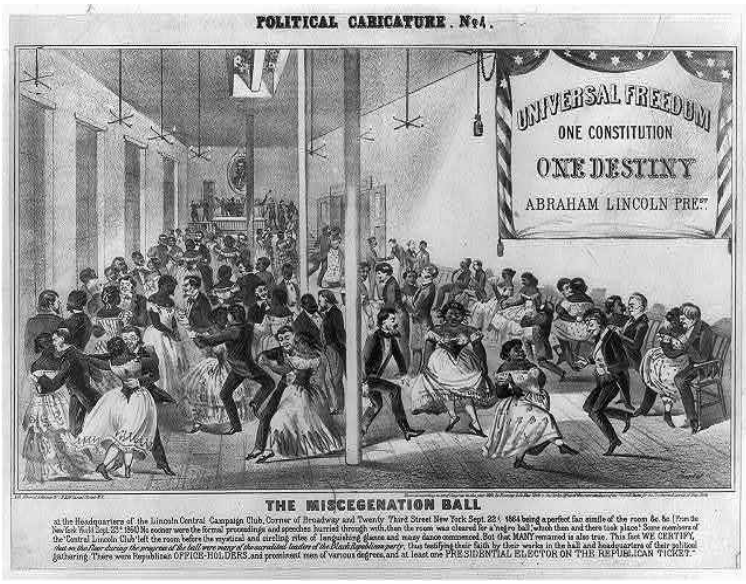


Polygenism and Slavery: An Unalterable Hierarchy: Agassiz found polygenism as a useful explanation and justification of his racial prejudices, almost instinctual and based upon only the most limited contact with the staff of a Northern hotel. He also immediately drew political conclusions, first that abolitionists were wrong to try to make blacks into socially-equal citizens and second that slaveholders were wrong in denying them their human rights. But while Agassiz himself might not have supported slavery (although his later assistance to Nott and Gladden suggests he would have chosen slavery over social equality), slaveholders in Charleston were

eager to hear his lectures and press him on the point of blacks as a separate species because it did support their defense of slavery.

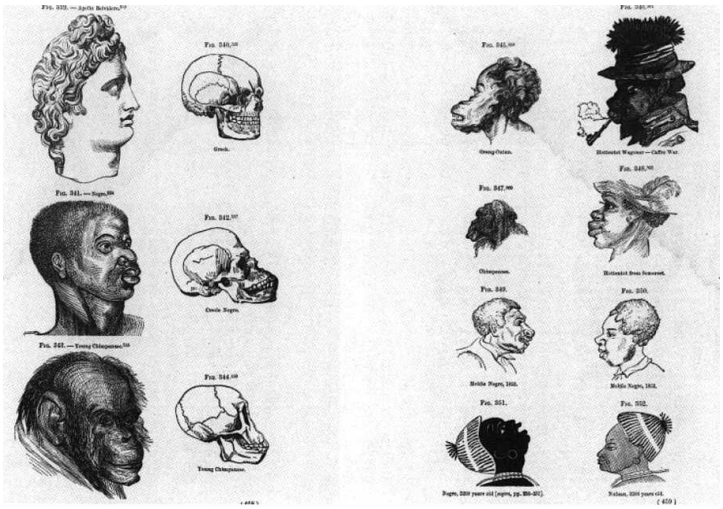
Polygenism and an Intelligent Hierarchy: Idealism vs. Materialism and Recapitulation: Morton's skulls reinforced one of Agassiz's central concepts, the idea that life forms had been created in the numbers and geographic locations where they were now found. Agassiz explained away the fossil record by arguing that God had created life several times over, starting anew after each catastrophe such as the ice age. And each time creation started anew, it started upon a higher plain, ending with the final and highest plain of Caucasian humanity. Since Agassiz denied that life forms multiply, migrate, and mutate over time, Morton's





"evidence" that the races originated in the forms and places where Europeans found them supported his preferences. Agassiz valued Morton's work also because it denied a materialist cause of the differences in nature in favor of an idealist cause – the races were different because of the intentions, the intended hierarchy, of an intelligent creator. Recapitulation, the idea that individual development recapitulates the hierarchical development of the various species, took this even deeper. Just as a rabbit embryo goes through a stage where it resembles a fish, so the brain of an adult negro is like the brain of a seven-month old Caucasian embryo. This horrific idea implied that the relations between the races could never be altered; they were not the product of circumstances but the working out of a divine idea. No wonder the Charlestonians loved Agassiz.

Miscegenation and Segregation from Nott/Glidden through Agassiz to Howe: Sadly, the end of slavery did not end the notorious career of this specious science. Nott and Glidden's Types of Mankind (1854), a defense of white supremacy and a screed against interracial mixing, went



through ten editions before 1871. Although abundant evidence undercut the argument that racial interbreeding would lead to sterility, Agassiz – no less than Nott and Glidden – feared that interbreeding would destroy American civilization and that, short of slavery, everything must be done to keep the races separate. The depressing fact is that the correspondence between Agassiz and Samuel Gridley Howe (Lincoln's choice to head the Freedmen's Inquiry Commission in 1863) suggested that even a forthright abolitionist and philanthropist could embrace shoddy science as a cover for racial prejudice (this despite the charges of promoting miscegenation hurled at abolitionists in the post-Emancipation Proclamation election of 1864, see broadside on previous page).

3. Why did Agassiz set out to find evidence of glaciers in Brazil? Menand argues that Darwin was not so much advancing an evolutionary argument in <u>On the Origins of the Species</u> (the word hardly appears in the book and evolution had already achieved considerable support in the scientific world) but trying to debunk some concept and introduce a new radical idea. What was the concept he debunked and the idea he introduced (see 120-121)?

Finding Glaciers in Brazil: Natural Selection versus Supernatural Intelligence: In April 1865, just as Grant concluded his horrific campaign against Lee in front of Richmond, Agassiz set off on his well-financed and -supported trip to Brazil with William James aboard. (Whatever Agassiz had not gotten for his expedition ahead of time, he would accept from others as his right once underway.) Agassiz hoped generally to refute Darwin's theory of natural selection and specifically to find evidence of glaciers in Brazil. Glaciers in the Southern Hemisphere would provide support for Agassiz's argument that the Creator had started life off from scratch several times in the past, and would thus erase or refute evidence in the fossil record that suggested the mutability of species.

Agassiz thought the species were "categories of thought embodied in individual living forms" and that natural history therefore involved "the analysis of the thoughts of the Creator of the Universe, as manifested in the animal and vegetable kingdoms" (128). Darwin advanced the idea of natural selection as a refutation of the belief that the species had resulted from an idea, as a result of some divine intelligence. Instead he thought the species had evolved as part of a chance, blind, directionless process that did not involve mind at all.

THE

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THE SUPPOSED GLACIATION OF BRAZIL.[1]

THE inquiries I have received from time to time regarding the supposed glaciation of Brazil in Pleistocene times, the doubts sometimes expressed regarding it, and the occasional appeals made to it,[2] induce me to state briefly what I know about the matter.

Strangely enough the errors of Agassiz, Hartt and Belt regarding glaciation in Brazil have been turned to account both by those who have theories that need the support they think the glaciation of Brazil would give them, and also by those who seek by means of these errors to throw discredit on the subject of glacial geology.

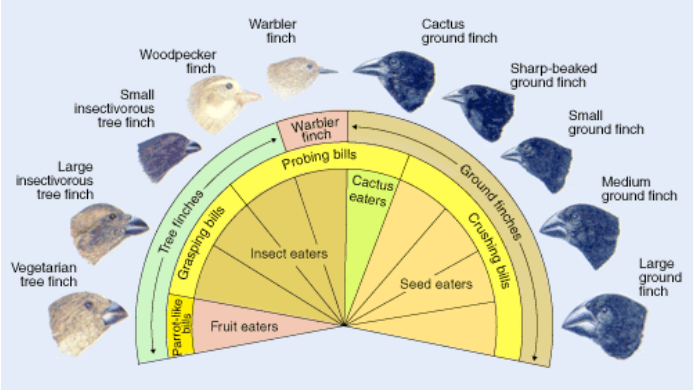
I believe the case has been generally dropped by geologists as not proven, but I am confident that no one wishes to ignore the evidence "merely because it runs counter to all his preconceived opinions."[3]

EARLY VIEWS OF AGASSIZ AND HARTT.

When Professor Louis Agassiz made his trip to Brazil in 1865, on board the steamer going out he gave a series of

[1] Advance quotations are made from this article by Dr. Alfred R. Wallace in Nature, Vol. 48, No. 1251, Oct. 19, 1893, 589–590.

[2] The Glacial Nightmare and the Flood, by Sir HENRY H. HOWORTH, London, 1893. MARSDEN MANSON, in the Trans. of the Geol. Soc. of Australasia, I., pt. VI., 155–170, and in the Trans. of the Tech. Soc. of the Pacific Coast, VIII., No. 2, 19. Geological and Solar Climates; their Causes and Variations, by MARSDEN MANSON, University of California, May, 1893. Ragnarok, by IGNATIUS DONELLY.



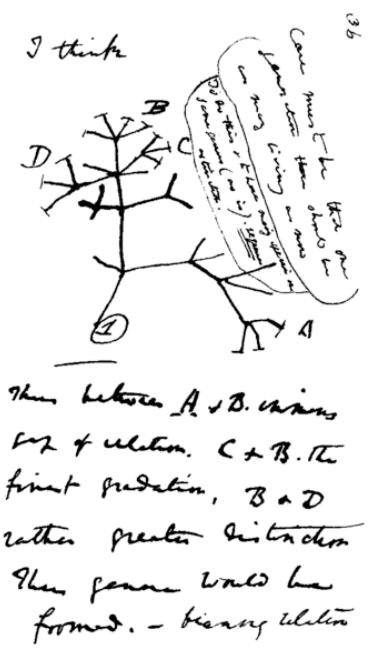
4. Agassiz thought the species were "categories of thought embodied in individual living forms" (128). How did Darwin's understanding of "finchness" challenge this and introduce a new way of scientific thinking?

Variation over Commonalities and the (Non-Progressive) Meaning of "Finchness": Scientific thinking, like any thinking, involves making generalizations. One form of generalizing focuses on the commonalities of things, whether horses or poems, and enables us to categorize things are either horses or not – by bracketing out the variations. Darwin believed that to understand biology our generalizations had to focus on variations, for these variations gave individuals a greater or lesser chance of surviving and thus, over time, changed the characteristics of the group. Thus "finchness" represented not a fixed type, much less a divine idea, but a variable changing over time in response to changes in the environment. Darwin believed that variations occurred simply by chance, not because the organisms need them (much less because some divine intelligence anticipated this need). The "selection" process thus had no direction nor progressive intent or result. Darwin began to develop these ideas after reading Malthus on population growth, seeing that if all individuals were equally well adapted, a species would quickly exceed environmental capacity. And so some individuals must die and natural selection helps to explain why and how chance variations lead to different survival chances, but it does not suggest what those variations

> "A way of thinking that regards individual difference as inessential departures from a general type is therefore not well suited for dealing with the natural world." Menand, 123.

will be (there is no "mind" involved).

New Ways of Thinking: Statistics and Probabilities over Types and Essences, Relations over Categories, Functions over Purposes, Transitions over Boundaries, and Sequences over Hierarchies: So biologists must look more at individuals than types and must develop new ways of thinking about those individuals, particularly about their relationships with one another. They need to move from types and essences (prescriptive generalizations that tell us what things should be) to statistics and probabilities (predictive generalizations that tell us what things, under specific conditions, are likely to be). Relations are more important than categories, functions (variable) more important than purposes (fixed), transitions more important than boundaries, and sequences more important than hierarchies.



Gray and Agassiz on the Distribution of Species and the Sources of Order: Statistics, Probabilities vs. Types, Essences (No Scientific Explanation): Agassiz's reputation declined

because he could not recognize what Darwin was doing as science. Unused to statistical and probabilistic ways of thinking, he could not imagine an order that was not the product of mind but of chance. So when Gray used statistics and probabilities to hypothesize about the migration of plants in response to glacial activity and the movement of the earth's crust, Agassiz could only reassert that God put the species where they now are. That was not science.

(types or relations?) Agassiz's Brazilian Circus and

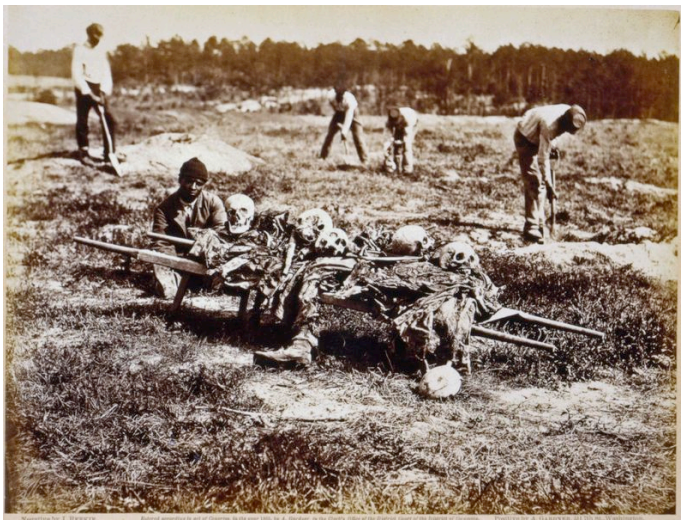
Racial Amalgamation: "Is it race or is it circumstances?" Much of the next section is taken up by a discussion of the clownish aspects of Agassiz's expedition. He found what he came looking for, no matter what. One of the things he was looking for (beyond glaciers, fish that didn't migrate, and alligator embryos that supported the recapitulationist theory) was evidence of the dangers of racial amalgamation. In a way, he came to the right place. No place had a greater range of – and sensitivity to – racial amalgamation than Brazil. The majority of Brazilians were of mixed "race." That might have convinced Agassiz that racial amalgamation did not lead to sterility or even that racial mixtures are "inextricable" (134). But he was looking for types and so he found them. James, already a convinced Darwinian, moved toward a new way of thinking: "Is it race or is it circumstance that makes these people so refined and well bred?" Race spoke to types, of course, but circumstance spoke to relational thinking.

"Is it race or is it circumstance that makes these people so refined and well bred?"

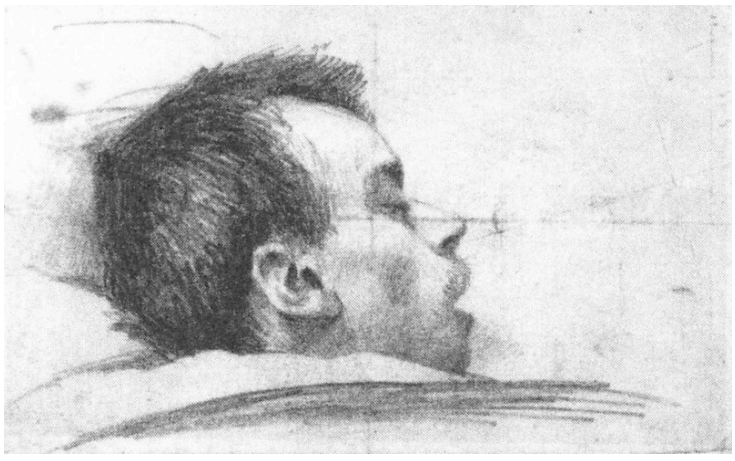
5. Did James think we should treat evolution as a law and a norm or as a hypothesis and a tool? Did James think he found intelligent design in the universe? If so, where?

Evolutionary theory as Law (Adams) or Subjective Hypothesis for Generating Data About a Chaotic World (James)? Henry Adams (pictured), like a lot of his generation of post-Civil War Americans, embraced evolution well before they abandoned their doubts about it. James also embraced evolution early on, but with a difference. Unlike Adams, he did not see evolution as a law and did not see it as an exclusive truth. Some supporters of Darwin wanted to say that he had simply presented the facts and that his interests and preferences had nothing to do with it. But James disagreed and insisted that we needed a hypothesis to guide our collection of fact. The trouble with scientists like Agassiz is not that they ignored facts in favor of preconceived theories, but that there was a disjunction between their theories and the facts they collected. Agassiz had a theory, of course, but it wasn't a scientific hypothesis, one that could be tested by data and found wanting. His theory never changed and he just propped it up with more and more data. Darwin's hypothesis opened

possibilities for inquiry and set an agenda for gathering data that could refine and improve the theory. The last thing James thought we should do is turn evolution into an unalterable law. Its essence and its plausibility turned on chance, caprice, and variation. The more chaos, the more evolution appeared convincing. But in a chaotic world, why call anything a law?



Evolution as Social Norm (Adams) or a Pluralistic Tool (James)? Survival of the fittest is the phrase that suggests how evolution might be turned into a norm – we should adjust our human institutions to be consistent with the survival of "adaptive" characteristics even if this involves a certain amount of coercion. So Adams, just having played his role in the colossal bloodletting of the war, could embrace evolution as a theory justifying the war as the part of a struggle for survival between two groups. James disagreed. He believed that scientific inquiry was informed by our values and hopes and preferences but – precisely because of this – its conclusions must be understood as provisional and partial as the reasons that first led to the conclusions. A theory, a tool, for explaining the shape and size of birds' beaks might not be good for deciding any other question. No theory should be treated as a trump card that decides every question. There is always a plurality of ways of considering each question. And, in fact, this is how people proceed. James himself had seen how quickly trumps can change, as polygenists scrambled to embrace each new scientific revelation and yet hold to their desired conclusions. Nor can we find any consistency in scientific and religious ideas leading to specific positions on the abolition of slavery (145). People generally did not use ideas as a basis for values, but as a tool for decision-making in certain situations. We should not make evolution an exception, particularly since it is an entirely chance process. Survivors are not necessarily better; they lucked out.



Wilky's Civil War and Intelligent Design in the Universe: But humans are different. We lucked out in the biggest way of all, because the gift of consciousness enabled us make decisions inconsistent with the survival of the fittest, to escape "the

prison of biology" (146). So James looked at the Civil War quite differently than Adams, considering it as "the sum of many individual actions," each a moral choice, rather than simply an elemental struggle between two competing groups. In his commemoration speech before the Shaw memorial in Boston, James argued that we need not commemorate or honor military bravery and courage. That has indeed been breed into us. The "survivors of one successful massacre after another are the beings from whose loins we and all our contemporary races spring." Pugnacity is bred into us. But there is a different sort of courage, a civic courage, not bred into us, that arises from moral choice. These "acts without external picturesqueness; by speaking, writing, voting reasonably; by smiting corruption swiftly; by good temper between parties…." (see the rest, 148) preserve our republic. He said Shaw displayed this civic courage in leading the 54th. But Shaw's actions were quite picturesque and lauded as the product of good breeding and the best Boston had to offer. James was really thinking of his brother Wilky, who suffered and died without honor but had done the right thing.

> "The real lesson of *On the Origins of Species* for James … was that natural selection has produced, in human beings, organisms gifted with the capacity to make decisions incompatible with 'the survival of the fittest.' There is intelligence in the universe: it is ours. It was our good luck that, somewhere along the way, we acquired minds. They released us from the prison of biology" (146).