

*Streams  
of  
William James*

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*A Publication of the William James Society  
Volume 6 • Issue 3 • Fall 2004*

*“Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?”  
and the Story of William James’s  
Philosophy of Mind  
Jacob Lynn Goodson • Guest Editor*



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*"The purpose of the William James Society shall be to encourage study of, and communication about, the life and work of William James (1842-1910) and his ongoing influence in the many fields to which he contributed."*

—Article I,  
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ISSN 1541-4647

Randall H. Albright • Editor • *Streams of William James* •  
423 Marlborough Street • Boston, MA 02115-1209 • USA

Published by the Philosophy Department • 308 Hanner Hall •  
Oklahoma State University • Stillwater, OK 74078-5064 • USA

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## *A Time of Change*

It is a time of change in the William James Society (WJS) as we complete our third full calendar-year as a constitutionalized professional association. In particular, the WJS Executive Committee has decided to rethink the modes of communication and scholarship used and supported by the Society's funds. With *Streams* approximately \$2500 per year to publish, such a cost projects out to become a prohibitive amount in the near future. To address this issue, several moves have been made and initiatives launched.

**First:** It must be stated upfront that this will be the final issue of *Streams of William James*. (Last year founder Randall Albright offered his resignation as editor, and this spring the Executive Committee accepted his offer effective the end of 2004.) In 1999, Randall's initiative and leadership took an idea that brought together a group of persons interested in the "thought and character of William James" and gave it voice through this printed medium. That group has grown and solidified over the years almost single-handedly through his efforts. Randall remains involved with WJS as a Fellow of the Society and a valuable asset to our efforts in the future. The Executive Committee, on behalf of the entire membership, wants to thank him for his efforts in shepherding us through the earliest stages of the development of WJS.

**Second:** We have chosen to divide the current functions of *Streams* more cleanly and clearly so that they may be better addressed through the multiple media available to us. These functions as we see them are: scholarship & essay contests; news & notes; musings, art, poetry, and so forth. It is our desire to approach each of these functions with tools best suited for their distribution. In the case of scholarship, we have started the process of developing an annual publication entitled *William James Studies* under editor-in-chief and former WJS president, Linda Simon (Skidmore). Prof. Simon will be aided by Mark Moller (Denison) as managing editor and an expansive editorial board of well-known James scholars. Meanwhile, news and notes about the Society will be handled through an annual postal mailing and periodic e-mailings (as well as postings on the WJS website). All other functions are to be more thoroughly developed on the Society's webpage (or other appropriate media).

We hope that you will find the changes, while significant, to be as exciting as we do. Please let us know what you think and whether you would be interested in helping in the development of these new initiatives by contacting us at <wjs@pragmatism.org>. Thank you.

## *WJS Executive Committee Election*

During the first week of December, an e-mail ballot was sent to all members with valid e-mail address. We regret the partial disenfranchisement this causes, but have decided the medium is more expedient than postal ballots and the coverage far greater than the annual business meeting. Upon the identification by the Nominating Committee of potential candidates, those who agreed to be considered for open positions on the Executive Committee are as follows. Since Volume 6, Issue 3 of *Streams* is going to press in the midst of the election, by the time you read this the results will already be in, but we thought it important that you have a(nother) chance to see the original slate of nominees.

### **Vice President (2005)/President (2006)-elect**

Peter H. Hare is State University of New York Distinguished Service Professor of Philosophy Emeritus

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Douglas Anderson teaches in the Philosophy Department at the Pennsylvania State University

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### **Secretary-Treasurer (2005-2007)**

D. Micah Hester is Assistant Professor of Medical Humanities at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences

# *Introduction to “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” and William James’s Philosophy of Mind*

*by Jacob Lynn Goodson*

This collection of essays was presented originally at the Fourth Annual Donald G. Wester Philosophy Conference at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Oklahoma in April of 2004. The authors of these essays came together to celebrate the centennial of the publication of William James’s famous essay “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” The topic of the conference was broadly conceived as “William James’s Philosophy of Mind,” and that topic better describes the essays in this collection.

This collection begins with Russell Goodman’s “James on the Nonconceptual.” Goodman tells us a story about how the nonconceptual has functioned in James’s philosophy. In this story, Goodman connects James’s use of the nonconceptual with that of the philosophy of mind of Bergson, Hume, and McDowell. Goodman concludes with three different sets of questions that can and should be asked after such an important story on James on the nonconceptual is told.

Through the play of Jamesian word games, Raphael C. Allison’s “Reading Material: William James and the Language of Consciousness” argues that James gave considerable attention to language in describing human consciousness. Allison shows the creative and humorous ways that James employs to describe consciousness. Contrary to those who think that James’s philosophical psychology does not give enough attention to language, Allison shows how James in fact gives careful attention to language in his attempts to describe how consciousness works.

In his essay, “In Cold Blood: James and Wittgenstein on Emotions,” Mathew A. Foust places himself amongst scholars such as Russell Goodman, Stanley Hauerwas, James McClendon, Hilary Putnam, and Everett Tarbox who find the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein useful as a tool for understanding James’s philosophical psychology. Foust argues that James and Wittgenstein have similar understandings of emotions and the body. Foust argues that Wittgenstein does have some criticisms of James’s understanding of the emotions, but Foust rightly concludes that James’s *Varieties* does subvert some of those criticisms.

In his “Was James a Reductionist?” Stanley Harrison answers this important question “yes” and “no.” James is not a reductionist, according to Harrison, in the sense of reducing mind to matter. James is a reductionist, though, in the sense of reducing metaphysics to pure experience. Harrison uses James’s friend C. S. Peirce to show that James does not reduce mind to matter in his “Does ‘Con-

sciousness’ Exist?” because James’s denial of consciousness as an entity is not a denial at all since no one in the history of philosophy argues that consciousness is an entity. Following Wesley Cooper and Owen Flanagan, Harrison shows that James does reduce all of metaphysics to that of pure experience. Again following Peirce, Harrison concludes that James’s use of pure experience does not describe experience at all and thus James should have used a different name for his doctrine of pure experience. But, following Cooper, Harrison also concludes that James’s use of pure experience is ironically what James uses as his defense for the possibility of the divine.

In his essay, “On Habit and Consciousness: A Peircean Critique of James’s Conception of Habit,” Tamba Nlandu also uses Peirce to critique James’s philosophy of mind. Nlandu focuses specifically on the difference between the use of habit in James and Peirce. Nlandu argues that James’s use of habit is insufficient because James has a nominalist use of habit and thus does not take into account the general law that habits are.

Francesca Bordogna gives us the historical context for James’s uses of both communities and selves. Bordogna shows how the body is politicized for James, and thus his philosophy of mind assumes his political convictions. The two issues cannot be separated, according to Bordogna, and understanding how he thought about politics helps in interpreting his philosophy of mind.

Jonathan Mathys’s “The Paradigm of Consciousness and William James’s Conception of the Self” is the last essay in this collection. Like Goodman’s essay, Mathys tells a story concerning James’s philosophy of mind. The story that Mathys tells is one that makes an early James/latter James distinction in the context of what Mathys calls the “paradigm of consciousness.” According to Mathys, the early James is in the “paradigm of consciousness” whereas the latter James is not. The early James is in the “paradigm of consciousness” in that he prioritizes the role of consciousness in the individual above that of a dialogical understanding of consciousness. The latter James, namely in his denial of consciousness as an “entity,” does not have this individualistic use of consciousness and thus has a more dialogical use of consciousness.

This collection of essays begins and ends with stories concerning James’s philosophy of mind. Furthermore, the story of James’s philosophy of mind makes some important and interesting turns. This collection of essays celebrates the centennial of one of those turns entitled “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?”

*—Jacob Lynn Goodson finished his Masters in Theological Studies degree at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary at Northwestern University in 2004. He plans to begin a Ph.D. program in 2005. He is grateful to Randall Albright, John Shook, and the William James Society for the opportunity to be guest editor for this issue. E-mail = jacob\_goodson@hotmail.com*

# James on the Nonconceptual

by Russell B. Goodman

It pays to read James as someone having something genuinely new to say, but nowhere is this a more challenging task than in two works he composed near the end of his life, *A Pluralistic Universe* and *Some Problems of Philosophy*. Certainly in these works James himself had the feeling that there was something new and important to say about the limitations of concepts. Yet he struggled to express what this was. It is in hopes of catching a glimpse, or even more, of what James might have been about, that I undertake this essay of gathering and commentary. Part of the interest of this enterprise is that it concerns James in the second half of his most productive philosophical decade, a decade that saw the publication of *Varieties of Religious Experience*, *Pragmatism*, and the essays defining what came to be known as “radical empiricism.” Another point of interest is that James’s discussion takes us to the heart of his relationship with Henri Bergson, for by the time of *A Pluralistic Universe* (1907-8) James had become convinced that Bergson’s philosophy held the key to his own research on nonconceptuality.

1. James’s views about the non-conceptual have their sources in his original masterpiece, *The Principles of Psychology*.<sup>1</sup> Consider his famous statement that: “The baby, assailed by eyes, ears, nose, skin, and entrails all at once, feels it all as one great blooming, buzzing confusion.” (*Principles*, p. 462). About the baby’s state we may ask: 1) How does James know the baby is in such a state? Like many statements in *The Principles*, this one is based on no empirical evidence except James’s own introspection (and of course he is no longer a baby). 2) Is this a state attained only by babies or can adults attain it also? 3) Is this state in any way non-conceptual? Answers to all these questions occur in an earlier passage in *The Principles*, to which James refers his readers in his discussion of the baby:

millions of items of the outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter my experience. Why? Because they have no *interest* for me. *My experience is what I agree to attend to*. Only those items which I *notice* shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos. Interest alone gives accent and emphasis, light and shade, background and foreground—intelligible perspective, in a word (*Principles*, pp. 380-1).

This passage illustrates James’s voluntarism—I “agree” to attend to certain things, though this agreement need not be conscious or explicit. There is also some tension in the statement. On the one hand, without attention experience is said to be “an utter chaos.” I take this to mean that its

“parts are undistinguished,” or that it is a formless void or abyss.<sup>2</sup> But on the other hand, James claims that “millions of items” are present to his senses without entering into his experience. How can the chaotic, unformed pre-experiential content of experience nevertheless contain countable, hence separable, “items”? There is a similar tension in the idea that for the baby experience is “a blooming, buzzing confusion.” “Confusion” is the equivalent of “chaos,” but “blooming” and “buzzing” suggest *some* structure. It seems to me better to say not that the confusion has no structure but that it, as it were, has too much structure, that it is—as James will say in *Some Problems of Philosophy*—a “much-at-once.” But I am getting ahead of my story.

James refers to the baby’s state of blooming, buzzing, confusion in a footnote to his chapter on “Attention” in *The Principles*. The context is a remarkable passage in which he states that the condition of the baby is not only attained by adults, but that it is attained “several times a day.”

We all know this latter state, even in its extreme degree. Most people probably fall several times a day into a fit of something like this: The eyes are fixed on vacancy, the sounds of the world melt into confused unity, the attention is dispersed so that the whole body is felt, as it were, at once, and the foreground of consciousness is filled, if by anything, by a sort of solemn sense of surrender to the empty passing of time. In the dim background of our mind we know meanwhile what we ought to be doing: getting up, dressing ourselves, answering the person who has spoken to us, trying to make the next step in our reasoning. But somehow we cannot *start*; the *pensée derrière la tête* fails to pierce the shell of lethargy that wraps our state about. Every moment we expect the spell to break, for we know no reason why it should continue. But it does continue, pulse after pulse, and we float with it, until—also without reason that we can discover—an energy is given, something—we know not what—enables us to gather ourselves together, we wink our eyes, we shake our heads, the background-ideas become effective, and the wheels of life go round again (*Principles*, p. 382).<sup>3</sup>

Such passages of exquisite phenomenological description are one of the pleasures of reading William James, and this one illustrates many of the main themes of *The Principles of Psychology*. The concept of the foreground and background, for example, runs through James’s philosophy from start to finish—with the foreground that which we are most attentive to, but with the background present

1. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1981/83). Originally published in 1890. Hereinafter cited as *Principles*.

2. *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1991)

3. This seems to be the passage Wittgenstein has in mind in characterizing introspection as a form of vacant staring. However, this is not the way James presents the case. See my discussion in *Wittgenstein and William James* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 2002).

also, and with no sharp line between one and the other. In this passage the background consists of knowledge and ideas about what we ought to be doing, what someone has said to us, and so on. So it is clear that the experiences James describes here are at least partially conceptualized. But in the foreground of attention is “the empty passing of time,” “eyes...fixed on vacancy,” sounds melted into “confused unity,” and a “dispersed attention.” This foreground consciousness has many of the marks of the non-conceptual: emptiness, lack of form, interpenetration of elements (“melt”).

James’s ideas about interpenetration are based on his discussion in “The Stream of Thought” chapter in *The Principles*, where he holds that:

Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead (*Principles*, p. 246).

These dying echoes and dawning senses are part of the background of consciousness. Although the stream of thought is James’s metaphor for normal consciousness, not for the abnormal state of vacancy described above, we can now see that the interpenetration and melting of that abnormal state only continues, or perhaps intensifies, standard features of consciousness.

James characterizes the state of vacant staring as a “confused unity.” According to James, even confused or chaotic consciousness forms a unity, a position which is fundamental to James’s disagreement with the Kantian school. For Kant, consciousness is originally a manifold that is unified through the application of synthesizing structures such as the category of causality. For James, on the contrary, consciousness is originally a unity, although a flowing differentiated one. The separation or distinction of its parts, rather than their synthesis or unification, is the achievement of the intellect. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “confusion” as a “mixture in which the distinction of the elements is lost by fusion, blending, or intimate intermingling,” and “confused” as “blended so that the distinction of elements is lost.” James sees us as starting with an original confusion or blending, the separation of which is the function of concepts.

2. James again takes up the question of the nonconceptual nature of consciousness in *Pragmatism*,<sup>4</sup> published seventeen years after *The Principles of Psychology* and just three years before James’s death. This is James’s most clearly epistemological work, where he considers, for example, the relation between “reality” and “truth.” Now it is “reality” under the heading of which James discusses a non-conceptual element, for James sees truths as

requiring concepts, which are human constructions: “heirlooms” as he sees them, passed from one generation to another. Reality, on the other hand, is simply “what truths have to take account of.” The greatest part of what we have to take account of is the body of already accepted truths, but, in keeping with the basic empiricism of his entire oeuvre, James sees truths as ultimately anchored in “the flux of our sensations.” Sensations are “forced upon us, coming we know not whence. Over their nature, order, and quantity we have as good as no control. They are neither true or false; they simply *are*” (*Pragmatism*, p. 117).

Now are these sensations conceptual? Merely saying that they are not under our control does not mark them as nonconceptual, for they may come to us in virtue of a faculty of receptivity—as McDowell<sup>5</sup> puts it—that is nevertheless conceptual as well: “when we enjoy experience conceptual capacities are drawn on in receptivity, not exercised on some supposedly prior deliverances of receptivity” (*Mind and World*, p. 10). In the passage just cited, James could well be agreeing with McDowell that sensations *are* conceptualized, for he states they have a “nature, order, and quantity.” It is this nature, one might say, that permits true or false statements to be made about them.

In *Pragmatism*’s chapter on “Pragmatism and Humanism,” however, James states that sensations are “dumb.” “A sensation,” he states, “is rather like a client who has given his case to a lawyer and then has passively to listen in the courtroom to whatever account of his affairs, pleasant or unpleasant, the lawyer finds it most expedient to give” (*Pragmatism*, pp. 118-19). Although the client may not speak, the metaphor suggests that the client does have “affairs,” and “a case”—which must have a conceptual shape or they would not be material for the lawyer to work up or interpret. Returning from the metaphor to the facts of sensation, James again suggests that we interpret something that has some particular character:

even in the field of sensation, our minds exert a certain arbitrary choice. By our inclusions and omissions we trace the field’s extent; by our emphasis we mark its foreground and its background; by our order we read it in this direction or that. We receive in short the block of marble, but we carve the structure ourselves (*Pragmatism*, p. 118).

In most of this passage, James writes as if the field of sensation has definite things in it—which may be omitted or included, experienced as in the foreground or background, ordered in this way or that. But at the end, he suggests that the sensational material, though it has a nature, has no conceptual form. Despite his attraction to the humanistic thesis that “the trail of the human serpent

<sup>4</sup> William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1975). Originally published in 1907. Hereinafter cited as *Pragmatism*.

<sup>5</sup> John M. McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1994)

is over everything”—or as he also puts it, that “you can’t escape the human touch”—James is also gripped by the idea that sensation is not only in its origins but in its nature beyond the human touch—and hence, perhaps, beyond the conceptual altogether.

According to James, the “fraction” of sensation that comes “without the human touch...has immediately to become humanized in the sense of being squared, assimilated, or in ways adapted, to the humanized mass already there.” The question is whether this fraction has a character? Is there something about it that, like the client with her specific case, lends itself to this or that interpretation? Or is it more like the block of marble which has no form at all until given one by the sculptor? “When we talk of reality ‘independent’ of human thinking,” James states:

it seems a thing very hard to find. It reduces to the notion of what is just entering into experience, and yet to be named, or else to some imagined aboriginal presence in experience, before any belief about the presence had arisen, before any human conception had been applied. It is what is absolutely dumb and evanescent, the merely ideal limit of our minds. We may glimpse it, but we never grasp it; what we grasp is always some substitute for it which previous human thinking has peptonized and cooked for our consumption (*Pragmatism*, pp. 119-120).

Notice, first, that the reality independent of human thinking is “very hard to find.” So it is not the same reality as the state of “confusion” or “chaos” that, according to *The Principles*, we experience two or three times a day. That would be “easy to find.” Second, James doesn’t even want to say that he can find it the “reality ‘independent’ of human thinking,” for it is described as “evanescent,” perhaps “imagined,” an “ideal limit.” Here in *Pragmatism*, he contrasts his position with that of those like Bergson who think they can define or experience the “core” of reality without its “man-made wrappings.” He is quite close to Kant and McDowell here, for both of whom experience is conceptualized “all the way down.” Indeed James appreciates the relationship to Kant, if somewhat defensively, for he writes that his position sounds “[s]uperficially...like Kant’s view; but between categories fulminated before nature began, and categories gradually forming themselves in nature’s presence, the whole chasm between rationalism and empiricism yawns.” (*Pragmatism*, p. 120).<sup>6</sup> This is to admit, however, that he posits something like Kantian categories, and it is not far from James’s position therefore to that of a Kantian pragmatist such as C. I. Lewis, who posits empirically evolving a priori structures to experience and knowledge.

Much as he maintains his humanist position that “you can’t escape the human touch,” however, James does think an “aboriginal presence” exists in experience,

“before any human conception had been applied.” He therefore falls on the wrong side (according to McDowell anyway) of McDowell’s distinction between concepts as drawn on in receptivity and concepts exercised on some prior deliverance of receptivity. McDowell argues that a mere causal relation between sensation and our beliefs, rather than a conceptual relation within “the space of reasons” or “space of concepts” ends by denying any *justificatory* role to experience. James’s position is in this respect like that of Donald Davidson, whom McDowell criticizes for depicting “our empirical thinking as engaged in with no rational constraint, but only causal influence, from outside” (*Mind and World*, p. 14). It is open to James to reply that he *experiences* a nonconceptualized given—that the facts include such states of consciousness whether they have a justificatory role or not. For McDowell, judgment is central to experience, whereas for James it is not.

3. I want next to consider some examples of the non-conceptual in the “Mysticism” chapter of James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*.<sup>7</sup> According to James there are two main characteristics of mystical experiences: ineffability and a noetic or knowing quality. Regarding ineffability, James states: “No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists. One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one’s self to understand a lover’s state of mind.” (*Varieties*, p. 343). This is not the assertion that these experiences are non-conceptual, only that they can’t be explained. Following a line taken by McDowell, one might say that to have them is to have at once a new concept, not a non-conceptual experience. If one had never tasted coffee, for example, one would not have the concept of coffee, except as a caffeinated drink that people typically take in the morning. Once one tastes coffee, one “knows what it tastes like,” and therefore has a different concept of coffee—the genuine concept of coffee, one might want to say. Still, this is not to posit a nonconceptual experience, but only perhaps a conceptual experience one couldn’t explain satisfactorily to someone who hasn’t had it (“it’s more like chocolate than like lemon” and the like will take you only so far). In this respect it is ineffable—perfectly definite, but inexplicable to someone without the requisite sensitivity/experience.

Regarding the noetic quality of mystical experiences, James states: “Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain;”

<sup>6</sup> A philosopher who closes the gap is C. I. Lewis. See for example his “A Pragmatic Conception of the A Priori,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1923, pp. 169-77.

<sup>7</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* in *William James, Writings 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987). Originally published in 1902. Hereinafter cited as *Varieties*.



James makes a claim about the nonconceptual in this last sentence, for these states—and not just those who have them—are said to be “inarticulate” and not knowable by “the discursive” –i.e. separating or categorizing intellect. Yet for all their nonconceptuality they are said to be, or at least appear to be, states of knowledge.

James finds that there are varieties of mystical experience, some of which are not even religious (*Varieties*, p. 370). There is, for example, the feeling of having been somewhere before, which is a perfectly describable feeling, accessible in some way even to someone who has not had it. (*Varieties*, p. 345). There are the visions and sensorial images of Christian mysticism, which can be described and reported to normal human beings. But the preponderance of James’s examples are states in which structure and articulation fall away. James cites J. A. Symonds’ discussion of an abstract Self, “without form and void of content” (*Varieties*, p. 347), St. John’s description of a state of “neither form nor impression” (*Varieties*, p. 367), and states described by Buddhists, in which “there are neither ideas nor absence of ideas.” (*Varieties*, p. 362).

*Varieties* has a pragmatist side, according to which the concepts that guide us profitably through the world are ingredients in truths. But it also has the mystical side we have been considering, in which James considers the possibility of nonconceptual “knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> Such mystical knowledge would neither be an “ideal limit” of experience, as in *Pragmatism*, nor an original confused state to which everyone reverts two or three times a day, as in *The Principles of Psychology*. In *Varieties*, James reports on those who claim to have such knowledge, but he does not present himself as among them. Five years later, in lectures given at Oxford on “The Present Situation in Philosophy” and then published as *A Pluralistic Universe*, James is prepared to make claims to mystical knowledge, not in special religious states, but in our ordinary life.

4. The nonconceptual becomes a fixation, a central concern, in the last six years of James’s life: in his essays on “radical empiricism,” and on Bradley and Bergson; and in his two books: *A Pluralistic Universe*<sup>9</sup> and the posthumously published *Some Problems of Philosophy*<sup>10</sup>. In these works, to which we now turn, James harps on the following themes:

1. There is a nonconceptual element in experience that is widespread or ordinary.

2. That element is known by a kind of acquaintance.

<sup>8</sup>. For the thesis that the pragmatic/mystical distinction is fundamental to James’s fundamental way of seeing things, see Richard Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 1999).

<sup>9</sup>. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1977). Originally published in 1909. Hereinafter cited as *Pluralistic*.

<sup>10</sup>. William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1979). Originally published in 1910. Hereinafter cited as *Problems*.

3. Conceptual knowledge is shallower than acquaintance. It is “merely pragmatic,” whereas acquaintance lets us see into the life of things.

4. Nonconceptual knowledge cannot be described, but it can be indicated or pointed to.

5. Nonconceptual knowledge *can* be described, as a flow, confusion, profusion, particularity, animal life, the full self, whole field, a “much-at-once.”

6. Concepts cut rather than synthesize.

7. Concepts are made out of the same material as perception.

8. Philosophy should seek a return from a life in concepts to a thicker life of intuition, empathy, and activity.

In *A Pluralistic Universe*, James maintains that there is a nonconceptual element not (just) in special states such as states of vacant staring or mystical experiences, but in all experiences, in the “distributed and strung-along and flowing sort of reality which we finite beings swim in. That is the sort of reality given us, and that is the sort with which logic is so incommensurable.” (*Pluralistic*, p. 97). James’s metaphors of flow recall the idea of “the stream of thought” from *The Principles of Psychology*. And just as in that earlier work he had emphasized that water flows between the areas of emphasis, so in these later works James holds that “in the real concrete sensible flux of life experiences copenetrate each other so that it is not easy to know just what is excluded and what not.” (*Problems*, p. 114).

Why is it that logic and its concepts are incommensurable with this reality? At times James seems to hold simply that concepts are static and clear-cut, whereas reality is intermingled, interpenetrated, and flowing. He writes, for example that “the conceptual scheme, consisting as it does of discontinuous terms, can only cover the perceptual flux in spots and incompletely” (*Problems*, p. 46). Hence, the argument would seem to be, concepts cannot describe reality because they do not share all its features. But this would be to conflate description with substitution or reproduction. It is like maintaining that I cannot say that the light has turned green without producing something green. James does seem, sometimes, to make this confusion.<sup>11</sup> The question is whether James also has something more interesting to say.

Logic is incommensurable with the flow of experience, James argues, because it uses concepts, and concepts are retrospective snap-shots of a more complete and active process. Here is a representative passage from the chapter on “Bergson and Intellectualism” in *A Pluralistic Universe*:

What really *exists* is not things made but things in the making. Once made, they are dead, and an infinite number of alternative conceptual decompositions can be used in defining them. But put yourself *in the making* by a

<sup>11</sup>. Other bad arguments appear in *Problems*, p. 50, and *Problems*, p. 54. James confuses the “is” of predication with the “is” of identity.

stroke of intuitive sympathy with the thing and, the whole range of possible decompositions coming at once into your possession, you are no longer troubled with the question which of them is the more absolutely true. Reality *falls* in passing into conceptual analysis; it *mounts* in living its own undivided life—it buds and burgeons, changes and creates. Once adopt the movement of this life in any given instance and you know what Bergson calls the *devenir réel* by which the thing evolves and grows. Philosophy should seek this kind of living understanding of the movement of reality, not follow science in vainly patching together fragments of its dead results (*Pluralistic*, pp. 117-18).

The major claims of *A Pluralistic Universe*, indeed of much of his entire later philosophy, are expressed in this passage. First, James asserts a metaphysics of process, a metaphysics not of things but of things in the making. Second, this “making” is in some way preconceptual, offering a “range of possible decompositions into conceptual analysis,” but not actually decomposed into any of them. The unity, one might say, has not yet been cut or articulated; yet, tantalizingly, there is something about it that *fits it to be cut*, that allows it to “*fall*” in various ways. So James’s statements leave us with a by now familiar Jamesian puzzle: how is it that we can understand the range of possible decompositions and yet not be employing concepts in that understanding? Third, James holds that reality is creative, growing, living. In his claim about a budding, burgeoning life and in the contrast with the frozen, dead concepts, we glimpse James’s romanticism.<sup>12</sup> Fourth, James asserts that we can achieve a “living understanding” of reality, as opposed to the dead understanding achieved in conceptual analysis and “science” (an example of his characteristic ambivalence about science). Fifth, James asserts that philosophers should seek such nonscientific understanding.

Why cannot concepts grasp the nonconceptual core of reality? We briefly considered the unsatisfactory argument that simply because concepts are static, they cannot grasp reality’s moving core. But James offers another, less problematic, line of argument: that concepts, being universal, cannot capture the particularity of a state of affairs. Hilary Putnam<sup>13</sup> considers this argument in his paper, “James’s Theory of Perception.” Putnam reminds us of James’s Darwinism, and that Darwinian species are really evolving collections of individuals. Species, like Jamesian concepts “slide into one another” (*Realism with a Human Face*, p. 236). For a Darwinian, Putnam argues, no two individuals are identical, so that although “there is a ‘central tendency,’ this tendency is simply an average; Darwin would say that it is a mere abstraction” (*Realism with a Human Face*, p. 235). For Darwin, then, “the reality

is the variation,” not the kind. Does this explain, however, why James thinks concepts are inadequate? If they don’t capture the particular, why can’t we just create new concepts? Perhaps the point is that if we did create new ones, they would overwhelm us, and be useless to boot, for by the nature of the particularity they would describe they would have no further use (except to record our memories). Developing the point in this manner points not to the falsity but to the limitations of conceptual description, and it is along these lines that Putnam draws his conclusion: “James wants to remind us that even though the rationalistic type of thinking has its place—it is sometimes pragmatically effective—once it becomes one’s only way of thinking, one is bound to lose the world for a beautiful model.” (*Realism with a Human Face*, p. 236).

Consider one of James’s most explicit treatments of the particularity of perception, in *Some Problems of Philosophy*. He writes:

The percepts are singulars that change incessantly and never return exactly as they were before. This brings an element of concrete novelty into our experience. This novelty finds no representation in the conceptual method, for concepts are abstracted from experiences already seen or given, and he who uses them to divine the new can never do so but in ready-made and ancient terms.... Properly speaking, concepts are post-mortem preparations, sufficient only for retrospective understanding; and when we use them to define the universe prospectively we ought to realize that they can give only a bare abstract outline or approximate sketch, in the filling out of which perception must be invoked (*Problems*, p. 54).

James thus proposes two answers to the question of what concepts miss: flux and particularity. A third answer to the question is: a set of possibilities and vague feelings that are always part of our experience, an answer James offers in *A Pluralistic Universe*:

My present field of consciousness is a centre surrounded by a fringe that shades insensibly into a subconscious more. I use three separate terms here to describe this fact; but I might as well use three hundred, for the fact is all shades and no boundaries.... What we conceptually identify ourselves with and say we are thinking of at any time is the centre; but our *full* self is the whole field, with all those indefinitely radiating subconscious possibilities of increase that we can only feel without conceiving; and can hardly begin to analyze (*Problems*, p. 130).

The metaphors of the field and the fringe originally appear in *The Principles of Psychology*, where they articulate the depths of the stream of thought. The stream is not one-dimensional and not uniform in clarity. The background, the fringes are “vague,” and it is “the reinstatement of the vague to its proper place in an account of human nature” that James identifies as one of his tasks. However, James does not claim in the *Principles* that the

<sup>12</sup> Cf. my *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 1990), Chapter 3.

<sup>13</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1990).

background of thought is less conceptual than the foreground.

James's account continues with a discussion of the power concepts bring. It is, he writes,

no wonder that earlier thinkers, forgetting that concepts are only man-made extracts from the temporal flux, should have ended by treating them as a superior type of being, bright, changeless, true, divine, and utterly opposed in nature to the turbid, restless lower world.... Intellectualism in the vicious sense began when Socrates and Plato taught that what a thing really is, is told us by its *definition*" (*Pluralistic*, pp. 98-99).

In distinction from his position in *Pragmatism*, where the nonconceptual was a "vanishing" "ideal," here the nonconceptual becomes a desired goal, and James waffles on whether sympathetic understanding of the nonconceptual is superior to or coequal with the conceptual understanding explored by pragmatism.

James tells a story of alienation and oppression, in which the useful practice of conceptual understanding becomes a "method, then a habit, and finally a tyranny that defeats the end it was used for" (*Pluralistic*, p. 99). He calls for a return of our lives and thought from the powerful abstractions of the intellect to the sympathetic understanding of the "turbid" and "restless" "temporal flux." When he is in a more evenhanded mood, he calls for a proper balance between the two, a position that Ralph Barton Perry<sup>14</sup> sees as the final view of both Bergson and James: "James and Bergson agree, as against Peirce and Dewey, in assigning a cognitive role both to concepts and to immediate experience" (*Thought and Character*, p. 602).

5. I now want to consider *Some Problems of Philosophy*, a book James was bringing to completion when he died in 1910., and to begin with a thesis we have not yet discussed (although it is present in *A Pluralistic Universe* as well): that concepts and percepts are made of "the same kind of stuff." James writes:

*Concepts and percepts are consubstantial.* I mean by this that they are made of the same kind of stuff, and melt into each other when we handle them together. How could it be otherwise when the concepts are like evaporations out of the bosom of perception, into which they condense again whenever practical service summons them? No one can tell, of the thing he now holds in his hand and reads, how much comes in through his eyes and fingers, and how much, from his apperceiving intellect, unites with that and makes of it this particular 'book'.... The world we practically live in is one in which it is impossible

(except by theoretic retrospection) to disentangle the contributions of intellect from those of sense. They are wrapt and rolled together as a gunshot in the mountains is wrapt and rolled in fold on fold of echo and reverberative clamor. Even so do intellectual reverberations enlarge and prolong the perceptual experience which they envelope, associating it with remoter parts of existence. And the ideas of these in turn work like those resonators that pick out partial tones in complex sounds. They help us to decompose our percept into parts and to abstract and isolate its elements.

The two mental functions thus play into each other's hands. Perception awakens thought, and thought in turn enriches perception. The more we see, the more we think; while the more we think, the more we see in our immediate experiences, and the greater grows the detail, and the more significant the articulateness of our perception" (*Problems*, pp. 58-59).

James's position here is reminiscent in some respects of *Pragmatism*, for he holds that we cannot distinguish a pure nonconceptual element in experience. He continues to hold that experience consists of a mixture of our concepts and something else, but here the "something else" is apprehended not by sympathetic intuition, but by "perception," for example, through our "eyes and fingers." Indeed he sounds a Humean note in holding that concepts are "like evaporations out of the bosom of perception." They are derivative, therefore, and much less substantial—or as Hume says, they are "faint." It is here that James's position is most unsatisfactory, for along with Hume and others in the sensationalist tradition of British empiricism, James offers no account of the normativity of concepts, and so, it may be maintained, no real account of thought or concepts at all.<sup>15</sup>

James's claim that concepts and percepts are consubstantial can be taken in two ways: the empiricist way of saying that concepts are faint echoes and gatherings of essentially non conceptual material; but also the Kantian, rationalist way of regarding both concepts and percepts as in some sense "conceptual." And James seems to take the claim in a more Kantian direction when he speaks of intellectual reverberations *enlarging* and *prolonging* the perceptual experiences they envelope, and associating those experiences with "remoter parts of existence." For it would seem that it must be in virtue of some character or features of those perceptual experiences that such associations, enlargings and prolongings are established. However, James does not draw this conclusion. For he continues to think that because experience is undivided it cannot be "conceptual." His position, we can now see, is another version of the statements about "interpenetration and melting" in his discussion of the stream of thought twenty years earlier. Indeed, in the key passage from *Some Problems of Philosophy* to which I now turn, he

<sup>14</sup>. Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James, as Revealed in Unpublished Correspondence and Notes, Together with His Published Writings* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1935). Hereinafter cited as *Thought and Character*.

<sup>15</sup>. See my discussion in *Wittgenstein and William James*. Cf Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1997).

revives his earlier discussion of the “blooming, buzzing, confusion”:

The great difference between percepts and concepts is that percepts are continuous and concepts are discrete. Not discrete in their *being*, for conception as an act is part of the flux of feeling, but discrete from each other in their several *meanings*....The perceptual flux as such...*means* nothing, and is what it immediately is; and no matter how small a tract of it be taken, it is always a much-at-once, and contains innumerable aspects and characters which conception can pick out and isolate, and thereafter always intend. It shows duration, intensity, complexity or simplicity, interestingness, excitingness, pleasantness, or their opposites. Data from all our senses enter into it (*Problems*, p. 32).

One may well again think that James is not talking about the nonconceptual at all, since the flux or “much-at-once” contains all these “aspects” and “characters.” James is thinking the flux is nonconceptual for two reasons: 1) the characters in the flux bleed into each other, whereas concepts are distinct; 2) the characters’ much-at-onceness amounts to a confusion or chaos that is incompatible with the orderliness of conceptual experience. This becomes clear as the passage continues:

Yet all these parts leave its unity unbroken. Its boundaries are no more distinct than are those of the field of vision. Boundaries are things that intervene; but here nothing intervenes save parts of the perceptual flux itself, and these are overflowed by what they separate, so that whatever we distinguish and isolate conceptually is found perceptually to telescope and compenetrates and diffuse into its neighbors. The cuts we make are purely ideal. If my reader can succeed in abstracting from all conceptual interpretation and lapse back into his immediate sensible life at this very moment, he will find it to be what someone has called a big blooming buzzing confusion, as free from contradiction in its ‘much-at-onceness’ as it is all alive and evidently there (*Problems*, p. 32).

James not only returns (with a curious loss of memory) to his metaphor of the blooming buzzing confusion, but to the claim of *The Principles of Psychology* (and *A Pluralistic Universe*) that we can avail ourselves of the nonconceptual by returning (“lapse back”) to a state of absorption in our “immediate sensible life.” Unlike the “cuts” we make, the confusion is “free of contradiction,” intensely “alive.” We again encounter James’s Romanticism here, and are reminded of Wordsworth’s claim in “The Tables Turned,” where he writes that “Our meddling intellect Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things;— We murder to dissect.”

James is of two minds about this dissection or cutting. As a pragmatist, he finds it useful, but as a “radical empiricist” and as a “mystic” or “Romantic” he finds this cutting to obscure rather than reveal nature: “Conceptual knowledge is forever inadequate to the fulness of the real-

ity to be known” (*Problems*, p. 45). Here again we encounter what Gale calls “the divided self of William James.”

One question that will occur to many of you is whether all this talk of the nonconceptual is not just that—talk, using concepts. James’s practice, it may be alleged, shows his own commitment to the superiority or ineliminability of the conceptual for determining truth. The point may be illustrated with the standard empiricist example of “blue,” which for James as for Hume is a quality that cannot be known to someone who cannot see—grasping the concept “blue” presupposes the experience of blue. The illustration raises a further question, however: to what degree is James’s point about the nonconceptual merely a reformulation of his empiricist distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and by description that he had formulated twenty years earlier in *The Principles of Psychology*, where he writes:

I know the color blue when I see it, and the flavor of a pear when I taste it; I know an inch when I move my finger through it; a second of time, when I feel it pass; an effort of attention when I make it; a difference between two things when I notice it; but *about* the inner nature of these facts or what makes them what they are, I can say nothing at all. I cannot impart acquaintance with them to anyone who has not already made it himself. I cannot describe them, make a blind man guess what blue is like, define to a child a syllogism, [curious example, RG] or tell a philosopher in just what respect distance is just what it is, and differs from other forms of relation. At most, I can say to my friends, Go to certain places and act in certain ways, and these objects will probably come. All the elementary natures of the world, its highest genera, the simple qualities of matter and mind, together with the kinds of relation that subsist between them, must either not be known at all, or known in this dumb way of acquaintance without *knowledge-about* (*Principles*, p. 217).

We are reminded of the “dumb” client of *Pragmatism*, who had to listen to his conceptual attorney make his case. Notice that, as in *Pragmatism*, there is a case to be made, for James writes of “qualities” and “relations” being known in this “dumb way of acquaintance.” Acquaintance shows us differences—as sharp as that between blue and yellow. How can these *not* be (to some degree) conceptual? Are concepts not, as James will say in *Some Problems*, already present in some fashion in “the bosom of perception”?

6. One might feel at this point that in James’s many remarks about the nonconceptual we are confronted with a veritable blooming, buzzing profusion or confusion of doctrines and questions. Let us take stock.

First, James uses the idea of something that escapes or precedes concepts in at least four ways:

1) in his empiricism, both in *The Principles of Psychology* and in such late works as *Some Problems of Philosophy*,

where James asserts a nonconceptual, sensational core of experience;

2) in his Bergsonian mysticism, where he asserts the existence of a living flux known by sympathetic intuition;

3) in his discussions of religious experience, where nonconceptual states appear as some of our most profound encounters with reality but are not available to everyone;

4) in *The Principles of Psychology*, where nonconceptual states are both the standard experience of babies, and a particular state of distraction or vacancy that adults enter two or three times a day.

Notice that 4) and 3) clash with 1), for 1) claims that the nonconceptual exists in normal empirical experience, and 4) and 3) take it to be a special or unusual experience.

Notice also that the issues raised by the nonconceptual are both metaphysical and epistemological: James tells us different if related stories both about what the nonconceptual is (sensation, the *elan vital*, *devenir réel*), and about how we know what it is (perception, sympathetic intuition).

Finally, James offers a variety of characterizations of the nonconceptual: as a flux, particularity, living reality, a much-at-once, a confused, blooming, buzzing unity. The conceptual is just the reverse in each case: static, abstract or ideal, dead, partial. In this fundamental distinction, James shows his allegiance both to empiricism and to romanticism.

I conclude with some questions raised by the preceding discussion:

1) Does James have one basic narrative, consistent position all the way from *Principles* onwards? Is it a basic insight that he keeps refining or a succession of related doctrines? To what degree is James's position merely a

version of his distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and by description?

2) In considering McDowell's criticisms of a nonconceptual given element in experience, would James be able to successfully argue that he is not interested mostly in justification but in experience, and if experience contains the nonconceptual so much the worse for a structure of justification? Would James wish to maintain that McDowell offers an over intellectualized account of knowledge? How much of James's position is in fact compatible with McDowell's conceptually loaded empiricism?

3) To what degree is the idea of *reception* in romantic writers such as Emerson and Wordsworth (as in Wordsworth's injunction to "bring with you a heart that watches and receives") a mode of the nonconceptual and to what degree a different mode or inflection of the conceptual? And how is it related to Jamesian/Bergsonian ideas of "sympathetic intuition"?<sup>16</sup> I hope these questions invite or elicit further thought about the intriguing philosophy of William James.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>. Thanks to Sandra Laugier for this suggestion, and for the invitation to present this paper in Amiens at the Université de Picardie Jules Verne.

<sup>17</sup>. An earlier version of this paper appears in the special issue of *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* devoted to American Philosophy (2004). This version of the paper is published with the permission of *Midwest Studies*.

# Reading Material: William James and the Language of Consciousness

by Raphael C. Allison

I was first drawn to the topic of William James's literary style and the forms of attention and consciousness it provokes by the way his metaphorical examples often perform, rather than represent, their subjects. A case most likely familiar to all is the description of "dried human heads" James uses to depict an "empiricist universe" in "A World of Pure Experience." "The skull," he says, "forms a solid nucleus; but innumerable feathers, leaves, strings, beads, and loose appendices of every description float and dangle from it, and, save that they terminate in it, seem to have nothing to do with one another."<sup>1</sup> How perfectly this metaphor mediates its subject: dangling grotesquely from an essay in academic philosophy, the image of a shriveled head "floats" in alienation from its terminal object much like the trinkets and "loose appendices" surrounding the skull appear alienated from the human consciousness once lodged within. The metaphor thus dramatizes the pluralism of "pure experience" for readers who are forced to grapple with the image's unexpectedness.

In *Pragmatism*, James illustrates his discussion of "possibles" with a "concretely possible chicken."<sup>2</sup> The delicacies of his argument are not important here. But the calculated effects of the phrase "possible chicken" are, especially since it is succeeded by the portentousness of the following sentence: "Let us apply this notion to the salvation of the world" (P 128). By juxtaposing chickens and salvation James generates a discordant effect that conditions readers to perspicacity: beyond simply assenting to (or dissenting from) this argument, one also can't help questioning the relationship between fowls and human fate. The incongruity coaches us to carefully regard terms of argument; we read ahead engaged by the proposition that the pluralist entanglements sponsored by pragmatism must be met on the very grounds of their fabrication.

There are other examples, like a description of George Santayana's literary style as the "cooling spray" of "nose disinfectant from an atomizer."<sup>3</sup> James even theorized upon them, as in this passage from *Principles of Psychology*:<sup>4</sup>

Usually the vague perception that all the words we hear belong to the same language and to the same special vocabulary in that language, and that the grammatical sequence is familiar, is practically equivalent to an admission that what we hear is sense. But if an unusual foreign word be introduced, if the grammar trip, or if a term from an incongruous vocabulary suddenly appear, such as 'rat-trap' or 'plumber's bill' in a philosophical discourse, the sentence detonates, as it were, we receive a shock from the incongruity, and the drowsy assent is gone (*Principles*, p. 253).

Shrunken heads, possible chickens, and atomized nose-spray—not to mention rat-traps and plumber's bills—serve to pluralize philosophical discourse by "shocking" readers from their nodding consents. They perform this work, rather than report it.

This is a reliable, if limited way to read James's use of *outré* metaphor. James regularly deployed estrangements of language to combat readerly enervation and to foster what Jonathan Levin has called James's "metaphorics of transition," the reader's sense of "haloes" and "penumbras" of, as Levin explains, "the thing-itself-in-transition, its new form being created with reference to its past forms and in anticipation of its unfolding future forms."<sup>5</sup> Ideally, tropes draw readers to brinks and edges of not only discourse, but consciousness itself by courting liminal experiences that constitute intellectual renewal. "It is, in short, the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention," James famously says in *Principles*. The difficulties involved in grappling with figurative, or even strange language foster transitional dissociations. "The significance, the value, of the image," James says, "is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it," not in the image itself (*Principles*, p. 246).

Having validated this argument, I would like to suggest something a little different about James's use of tropes, as well as language itself. According to the above narrative, figures of speech play a liberating role, cracking the procrustean hold of ossified, intellectualized form. This narrative follows a modernist myth of emancipatory contingency and renewal, for which James has historically been such an accommodating figure. "With Nietzsche and Emerson, and in anticipation of Foucault and Deleuze," argues Richard Poirier, "James was essentially trying to release himself and the rest of us from any settled, coherent idea of the human, from the conceptual systems and arrangements of knowledge by which man has so far defined himself. In his work and in his life, he was drawn to the marginal, the transgressive."<sup>6</sup> This suits the

1. William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1996), p. 46. Hereinafter cited as *ERE*.

2. William James, *Pragmatism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), p. 127.

3. William James, *The Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James. 2 Vols. (Boston: Atlantic Monthly P, 1920), Vol.2, p. 234. Hereinafter cited as *Letters1* or *Letters2*.

4. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1981), 246. Hereinafter cited as *Principles*.

5. Jonathan Levin, *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism* (Durham: Duke U P, 1999), p. 53.

6. Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New Haven: Yale U P, 1988), p. 65.

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description above, yet as an emancipatory model it fails to recognize how deeply suspicious and despairing James was of tropes, not to mention language itself. For James's language often reveals a mind struggling within the confines of its medium of exchange. By harboring a linguistic skepticism, James wasn't necessarily "releasing himself" from the demands of logocentrism; he was confronting the inarticulate nature of consciousness itself.

For example, here is James referring to a series of tropes to describe the persistence of habit in a passage from *Principles*: "A lock works better after being used some time"; "It costs less trouble to fold a paper when it has been folded already"; "The sounds of a violin improve by use in the hands of an able artist"; "Water, in flowing, hollows out for itself a channel, which grows broader and deeper"; "A scar anywhere is...more liable to be abraded" (*Principles*, pp. 110-111). As this swelling replication of analogies suggests, metaphors are insufficient for representing habitual experience, which remains silent and ineffable behind this welter of comparison. James comments: "our usual scientific custom of interpreting hidden molecular events after the analogy of visible massive ones enables us to frame easily an abstract and general scheme of processes which the physical changes in question *may* be like" (*Principles*, p. 112). *May* be like, but not necessarily *will* be like. This isn't liberating. It's frustrating.

In this counter-narrative, then, James's attempts to "liberate" sclerotic consciousness through figures of speech are in turn freighted with doubt and frustration over the restrictions imposed by the liberating medium. While figurative language may presage liminal forms of cognizance, it is also an index to the poverty of speech in the face of a fuller practice. Tropes, and eventually language itself, provide the landscape on which these anxieties are mapped. To be locked within the dictates of a linguistic framework creates maddeningly finite restrictions on consciousness.

One way to frame this problem is with James's antagonistic relationship to the English language. A letter to his parents from Germany shows him ruminating on the "wonderful impression of the strange difference between the whole German way of thinking and ours," one which

seems to be connected with the grammatical structure of the sentences...the expression corresponds much more closely to the spontaneous and impromptu mode of thought than in our Latinized tongues.... As soon as the first glimmering of an idea has dawned upon you, there is no reason why you should not begin to inscribe.... While with us you will, as a rule, come to grief if you begin your sentence without a pretty distinct idea of word-multiplication by composition. In English one is forced "to fix in a most homely, pregnant form, a host of evanescent shades of meaning...as fast as they flash upon the mind" (*Letters1*, pp. 87-88).

This early letter anticipates his later, more rarefied theories of linguistic flux, like that found in his 1905 essay

"The Thing and Its Relations," in which "conjunctive" words like "in,' 'on,' 'beside,' 'between,' 'next,' like" rather than "fixed" or "substantive" nouns cleave more faithfully to the streaming holism of radical empiricism (*ERE*, p. 95). In the above letter, English itself embodies that problematically substantive drive toward "fixing" more "evanescent shades."

This sentiment gets replicated throughout *Principles*. Here James complains about the lack of English declension as compared to Greek and Latin:

Names did not appear in them inalterable, but changed their shape to suit the context in which they lay. It must have been easier then than now to conceive of the same object as being thought of at different times in non-identical conscious states (*Principles*, p. 230).

Most often, James depicts language as a blunted instrument that fails the bearer's requirements: "our psychological vocabulary is wholly inadequate to name the differences that exist" (*Principles*, p. 243), he complains. Or he concludes, "large tracts of human speech are nothing but *signs of direction* in thought, of which direction we nevertheless have an acutely discriminative sense" (*Principles*, p. 244). Tropes, it seems, are not his only concern.

It should be no great surprise that James harbored such conflicted skepticism, or that these anxieties would surface during moments of linguistic stress, as with trope use. James's style is perhaps best known for its figurative sumptuousness, and the question of the effectiveness of figurative language, not to mention James's attitude toward it, has been raised and left profitably unsettled before. Thus I want to demarcate one specific cluster of associations James sustained in regards to this problem as a way to better understand the nature, rather than the fact of this skepticism. Throughout his career James dwelt on the failures of language in the contrasting terms of materiality versus immateriality, the seen and the unseen, the "thing" and its aura. That is, the material or thing-like quality of language conflicts with the immaterial, "auratic" consciousness that provokes it. Thus James articulates this problem of language in agonistic terms of solid, material forms groping after the un-quantifiable, diaphanous fringe. And this problem was associated with the act of reading itself, for reading stages the encounter between material instantiations of language (texts) and the mental or oral rendering of that material. The act of reading de-materializes text, transforming a series of marks on paper into spoken words, and in doing so suggests the very problem of language James is so concerned with throughout his career.

We've already seen the dyad of concrete/abstract in James's mention of metaphor's failure to describe "hidden molecular events after the analogy of visible massive ones." The primal scene of this linguistic materialism derives from a passage in *Principles* in which he describes a three-dimensional model to illustrate the correspon-

dence between the duration of a word's existence in speech and its effect on the conscious mind:

If we make a solid wooden frame with the sentence written on its front, and a time-scale on one of its sides, if we spread flatly a sheet of India rubber over its top, on which rectangular co-ordinates are painted, and slide a smooth ball under the rubber in the direction from 0 to 'yesterday,' the bulging of the membrane along this diagonal at successive moments will symbolize the changing of the thought's content in a way plain enough (*Principles*, pp. 272-273).

The example of this physical model goes out of its way to emphasize its tactile qualities, including the "wooden frame," "a sheet of India rubber," and the "smooth ball" and "membrane" of its surface. Graphing speech patterns in three solid dimensions thus offers a schematic representation of the spoken life of language, and suggests how a mind may "ride," or even "surf" the wave-crest of speech. More importantly, it catches James at a materialist paradox, employing a metaphor of "solid wood" to represent the transitory nature of speech and consciousness. That is, at the moment of promoting the immaterial, transitive nature of speech he resorts (or clings?) to the concrete substance of wood, paint, and India rubber.

This paradoxical drive to represent the ephemeral in concrete form recurs in the cognitive dissonance saturating the following passage from a letter to Henry. The letter is inflected with a sense of the link between the act of reading and this materialist paradox:

You know how opposed your whole 'third manner' of execution is to the literary ideals which animate my crude and Orson-like breast, mine being to say a thing in one sentence as straight and explicit as it can be made, and then to drop it forever; yours being to avoid naming it straight, but by dint of breathing and sighing all round and round it, to arouse in the reader who may have had a similar perception already...the illusion of a solid object, made wholly out of impalpable materials, air, and the prismatic interferences of light, ingeniously focused by mirrors upon empty space.... As air, by dint of its volume, will weigh like a corporeal body (*Letters*<sup>2</sup>, pp. 277-278).

This passage marks an important conflation of reading activity—the moment of physical engagement with language while reading Henry's trope-laden texts—and the anxiety of disjunction between the material and the immaterial, the experience and the word. It is as if reading Henry's prose has animated William's conflict between "solid objects" and "impalpable materials." What is the connection? That by writing down, or materializing "empty space," Henry risks destroying it; that textualizing experience means "turning substantive," as it were. The act of reading discloses the nature of linguistic disappointment, its grasping nature and its imminent failure, and James articulates this frustration *with* language by refer-

ence to acts *of* language. A straight line may be drawn between the wooden block in *Principles* and the letter to Henry above.

This phenomenon has deeper roots in *Principles*, as when James describes reading as directly related to memory and cognition in the story of the "statesman" who told James "that a certain hesitation in utterance which he has at times, is due to his being plagued by the image of his manuscript speech with its original erasures and corrections" (*Principles*, p. 702); or in the historical anecdote James relates of one Colonel Moncrieff, in which American Indians "who, visiting occasionally his quarters, interested themselves greatly in the engravings which were shown them. One of them followed with care with the point of his knife the outline of a drawing in the Illustrated London News, saying that this was to enable him to carve it out the better on his return home" (*Principles*, p. 708). In such narratives, physical texts take on a totemic significance both awesome and debilitating: because of the hard facts of text, the statesman is reduced to yammers, the Native American to a condescending anthropologist's gaze. Scenes of reading like these dramatize the aspirations and subsequent failures of speech, the text itself haunting full articulation by its deceptive solidity.

As a way of finishing off this rather large and unwieldy topic, let me try to say more precisely what I mean. In his third Gifford lecture, called "The Reality of the Unseen,"<sup>7</sup> James suggests that there is a "sense" of an "unseen" reality so plangent and powerful that it cannot be apprehended by the senses or by normal routes of logic. Those who experience this phenomenon are "haunted" and "diffused" (*VRE*, p. 63) with a "sense" of what they eventually term "spirit" or "God," or "a consciousness of a presence" (*VRE*, p. 59). Many of the anecdotes James cites are marked by frustration with an inability to say exactly what the authors mean. "[T]he more I seek words to express this intimate intercourse, the more I feel the impossibility of describing the thing by any of our usual images," complains one (*VRE*, p. 68). "It is impossible fully to describe the [religious] experience," avers another (*VRE*, p. 66). Language fails ineffable consciousness.

The narrators of such inarticulate certainties further characterize their experiences as catalyzed by reading. Their encounters are, that is, textual in nature. One says such an experience occurred while, as he describes it, "my mind was absorbed in some lectures which I was preparing; and I was still absorbed in these when I became aware of the actual presence...of the thing that was there" (*VRE*, p. 60). The same writer relates another such experience in ways similar to Jamesian vagueness, yet these vagaries are attached to something palpably "sure." It was "[n]ot vague either," the writer says of his apparition, "not like the emotional effect of some poem, or scene...but the

<sup>7</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Penguin, 1982). Hereinafter cited as *VRE*.



### Reading Material by Raphael C. Allison

sure knowledge of the close presence of a sort of mighty person" (*VRE*, p. 60). In both instances, this writer finds a direct analog for the toggle between the "vague" and the "sure," "concrete" and "immaterial," in comparisons to taking notes and reading poems—textual experiences, all. These experiences attain so well they obliterate the distinction between matter and ephemera: "something was present with me," he says, "and I knew its presence far more surely than I have ever known the presence of any fleshly living creature" (*VRE*, p. 60). Bizarrely, the conviction of "reality" or "presence" is made more "real" by its inexpressible, "unreal" nature.

Most writers James chose for this lecture deploy similar narratives, all of them yoking the act of reading and/or writing to the experience of a definite, virtually material—but maddeningly ineffable—presence, much like his own experience with Henry's novels. "I had read...some twenty minutes or so," begins one, "was thoroughly absorbed in the book...and I was aware, with an intensity not easily imagined...that another being or presence was not only in the room, but quite close to me. I put my book down" (*VRE*, p. 61). Another, directly after she "read the Bible," felt that "the plan of salvation flashed upon her" so strongly it was "almost like talking with God" (*VRE*, p. 69). One such witness describes himself *as* a virtual text, so enlightened that God's "laws [are] written in my body and mind" (*VRE*, p. 70).

What to these many examples reveal? For one thing, reading and writing seem to provoke, not reflect, crises of definition for James. Working with language seems to create for him a simultaneous and coextensive mingling of the vague and distinct, the concrete and abstract. It does not serve liberating vagueness; rather, rendering texts into language dramatizes the sustaining agon between language and consciousness, and James's continual struggle to perform the work of knowing. For all his effective tropes and belief in "conjunctive" relations to reach the transformative outskirts of consciousness, James also felt a competing frustration over linguistic limitation, and his unresolved skepticism over verbal collapse froths over precisely at the most intense moments of readerly engagement. This may in the end simply indicate a literary provenance for James's concerns over ineffability and articulation, over the "vague," the "substantive" and "conjunctive," "material" and "immaterial" nature of thought, and the haunting traditions of indeterminate experiences—religious, mystical, hallucinogenic, neurasthenic, etc.—that lead to palpable realities. It may be, in other words, that language not only provides James a medium for working through consciousness and experience; language may actually help to create these forms of attention in the first place.

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# *In Cold Blood: James and Wittgenstein on Emotions*

by Mathew A. Foust

## 1. Play Longing and Real Longing: An Introduction

At §726 of the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Volume 1,<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein writes:

...one might very well say of someone who plays longing on the stage of a theatre, that he experiences, or has, a picture of longing: for this is not given as an *explanation* of his proceedings, but as part of a description.

Wittgenstein is saying here that one might say that the actor has in his mind a picture of what it is like to long, and, in his office as an actor, he gives animation to this picture on stage. This picturing in the mind of what it is like to long is not the explanation for his carrying out the longing on stage. Rather, it is a part of the description of what he does when he acts.

Suggesting that the behavior of the actor can be described more robustly than the conjunction of private picturing and public playing, Wittgenstein then asks:

But wouldn't I say that the actor does experience something like real longing? For isn't there something in what James says: that the emotion consists in the bodily feelings, and hence can be at least partially reproduced by voluntary movements (*RPP1*, §727)?

In this paper, these questions about the actor serve as motivation toward an investigation into the accounts of emotions provided by both James and Wittgenstein. Specifically, I will be concerned with what James and Wittgenstein have to say about the relation between emotions and the body. Upon examination of James's *The Principles of Psychology*<sup>2</sup> (the text with which Wittgenstein was familiar) and Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, I will argue that there is indeed for Wittgenstein "something in what James says." However, I will also claim that for Wittgenstein, there are important features of emotions about which James misspeaks or is altogether silent. Finally, I will contend that James is able to subvert at least some of Wittgenstein's criticisms with remarks that he makes in his later *The Varieties of Reli-*

*gious Experience*.

## 2. Locating Wittgenstein's Feelings about James's Theory of Emotions

According to James, "Common sense says, we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike" (*PP*, p. 1066). James suggests that this sequence of events is incorrect; in actuality, we feel sorry because we weep; we are frightened because we run; we are angry because we strike. This sequence is consonant with what one may properly call his theory of emotions:

...that the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion (*PP*, p. 1065).

James has no qualms about admitting that his theory is "sure to meet with immediate disbelief" (*PP*, p. 1066). Wittgenstein, however, is one reader who does not appear to be instantly repelled by the theory. In this section, I will try to determine what aspects of James's theory Wittgenstein appreciated, as well as those about which he had reservations.

### 2.1 Feeling Fear and Sensing Pain

It is counterintuitive, to be sure, to think that one is sad because one cries and not vice versa. Such a theory seems susceptible to charges of incoherence; however, Malcolm Budd cites the following passage from the *Brown Book*, in which Wittgenstein seems sympathetic to James's theory:

Remember at this point that the personal experiences of any emotion must in part be strictly localized experiences; for if I frown in anger I feel the muscular tension of the frown in my forehead, and if I weep, the sensations around my eyes are obviously part, and an important part, of what I feel. This is, I think, what William James meant when he said that a man doesn't cry because he is sad but that he is sad because he cries (Wittgenstein, *Brown Book*, §103).<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, it seems that James meant something like this. In support of his claim that nothing remains when the feelings of the bodily symptoms of an emotion are abstracted from the emotion, James makes the following commentary regarding the feeling of rage. It appears largely consistent with Wittgenstein's above commentary on anger:

Can one fancy the state of rage and picture no ebullition in the chest, no flushing of the face, no dilatation of the

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Vol. 1, G.E.M. Anscombe, Ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980). Hereinafter referred to as *Remarks*. The first volume is cited as *RPP1*; the second volume is cited as *RPP2*.

2. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1981); originally published in 1890. Hereinafter referred to as *Principles* and cited as *PP*. Wittgenstein makes frequent reference to claims made by James explicitly in *Remarks*.

3. Malcolm Budd, *Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 159. Hereinafter cited as *Budd*.

nostrils, no clenching of the teeth..., but in their stead limp muscles, calm breathing, and a placid face? The present writer, for one, certainly cannot. The rage is as completely evaporated as the sensation of its so-called manifestations... (*PP*, pp. 1067-1068).

James and Wittgenstein seem to agree that the feeling of emotions such as anger is at least partly composed of bodily sensations. The two disagree, however, as to the extent of this composition. Wittgenstein holds that the muscular tension in his forehead when he frowns is *part* of the experience of anger. One can imagine abstracting this localized feeling and still have some part of the emotion “left over.” James states that rage is *evaporated* with the loss of the sensations of its bodily manifestations. This remark suggests that no part of the emotion is “left over” after abstracting the localized feelings that occur when one is in rage. A commitment to such a suggestion is apparent upon consideration of this statement of James’s, which he describes as the “vital point” of his theory:

If we fancy some strong emotion, and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its bodily symptoms, we find we have nothing left behind, no ‘mind-stuff’ out of which an emotion can be constituted, and that a cold and neutral state of intellectual perceptions is all that remains (*PP*, p. 1067).

Indeed, James is claiming here that a localized feeling just *is* the emotion. Here, then, is one point of contention between James and Wittgenstein.

As Budd points out, “feeling” is a prime example of “an everyday psychological concept...of an indefinite nature, accommodating phenomena of radically different kinds” (*Budd*, p. 146). One feels determined, one feels as if one has seen that person here before, one feels distraught, and one feels a pain in one’s stomach. There are many sorts of “feelings,” each quite different in nature. But according to Wittgenstein, only the last “feeling” on this list is a sensation, or a localized, bodily feeling. Wittgenstein presents this view in the following passages:

Is it so disagreeable, so sad, to draw down the corners of one’s mouth, and so pleasant to pull them up? What is it that is so frightful about fear? The trembling, the quick breathing, the feeling in the facial muscles?—When you say: “This fear, this uncertainty, is frightful!”—might you go on “If only I didn’t have this feeling in my stomach!” (Wittgenstein, *RPP1*, §728)?

The expression “This anxiety is frightful!” is like a groan, a cry. Asked “Why do you cry out?”, however—we wouldn’t point to the stomach or the chest etc. as in the case of pain; rather, perhaps at what gives us our fear (*RPP1*, §729).

Wittgenstein recognizes with James that certain sensations such as quick breathing and feelings in one’s stom-

ach often accompany the feeling of fear. Indeed, when one feels very afraid, one might say “I cannot bear this feeling in my stomach.” Wittgenstein points out, however, that when one wishes to alleviate fear, one does not have in mind the desire to alter the feeling in one’s stomach. Rather, one wishes to adopt a change in attitude toward the object that arouses the fear. So, the feeling in the stomach accompanies fear, but is not fear itself. Therefore, the imitation of fear involving a mere playing out of the physical manifestations of the emotion is unlikely to generate the “warm” feeling to which James refers.

Another passage worth considering is *RPP2*, §148, in which Wittgenstein compares emotions and sensations:

Distinction from sensations: they are not localized (nor yet diffuse!)

Common: they have characteristic expression-behaviour. (Facial expression.) And this itself implies characteristic sensation too. Thus sorrow often goes with weeping, and characteristic sensations with the latter. (The voice heavy with tears.) But the sensations are not the emotions.

It is one thing to feel acute fear, and another to have a ‘chronic’ fear of someone. But fear is not a sensation.

‘Horrible fear’: is it the *sensations* that are so horrible?

The distinction between acute fear and chronic fear holds the answer to Wittgenstein’s question about “horrible fear.” I can conceive of myself feeling an acute fear of someone—perhaps because she has jumped out at me with a knife in hand. This instance of fear may very well have a sensational correlate, such as a chill in my spine. For Wittgenstein, I feel at least two distinct things here—fear and a chill in my spine. I can also conceive of myself having a chronic fear of someone. Perhaps she has a penchant for stabbing people with the initials, “M.F.” If asked what I feel about her, I am *always* telling the truth when I say “I am afraid of her.” However, I do not *always* feel a chill in my spine. In fact, I may always be afraid of her but *never* feel a chill in my spine.

The experience of the woman jumping out at me with a knife might stimulate an acute “horrible fear,” but the concurrent sensation would not be *horrible* (perhaps, of course, the sensations that I would feel if she were to stab me would). Likewise, my chronic fear of the woman might be a “horrible fear,” but any sensations that I feel along with this emotion might perhaps be unpleasant, but they are hardly horrible.

The example of fear appears in *RPP2*, §161, in which Wittgenstein furnishes yet another feature distinguishing emotions from sensations:

To the utterance: ‘I can’t think of it without fear’ one replies: ‘There’s no reason for fear, for...’ That is at any rate one way of dismissing fear. Contrast with pain.

One need not know what words Wittgenstein has in mind as belonging in place of the ellipses. The contrast between fear and pain is evident as long as one recognizes

that the dismissal of fear can be achieved by the hearing of the uttered sentence. While this state-of-affairs is certainly imaginable, it is harder to conceive of a dismissal of pain upon one's hearing, "There's no reason for pain, for..." Perhaps hearing such an utterance puts one in a better mood with respect to one's pain, but the pain persists nonetheless. One can conclude, then, that perceived words can alter emotions, but they are incapable of altering sensations.

Similarly, emotions (such as fear) can "color" thoughts (such as "I am afraid") while sensations cannot:

I am inclined to say: emotions can *colour* thoughts; bodily pain cannot. Therefore let us speak of sad thoughts, but not, analogously, of toothache thoughts. Fear or indeed hope could consist only of thoughts, but pain could not. Above all pain has the characteristics of sensation and fear does not. Fear hangs together with misgivings, and misgivings are thoughts (*RPP2*, §153).<sup>4</sup>

With each of these passages, Wittgenstein extends further blows to the tenability of James's theory. By identifying several features distinguishing emotions from sensations, Wittgenstein undermines James's view that the emotions are identical with their concomitant bodily manifestations.

## 2.2 Onions and Actors

Wittgenstein's disagreement with James finds a slightly different articulation in the following passage:

Possibly one could be sad because he is crying, but of course one is not sad *that* he is crying. It would after all be possible that people made to cry by application of onions would become sad; that they would either become generally depressed, or would start thinking about certain events, and then grieve over them. But then the sensations of crying would not thereby have turned into a part of the 'feeling' of grief (*RPP2*, §323).

Here, Wittgenstein is arguing that if it is the case that emotions *are* the sensations of their bodily manifestations, then one ought to be able to elicit an emotion by bringing about its bodily sensations. For example, crying is a typical physical manifestation of grief. It should follow then, that when one cries, one feels grief.

One can be in the presence of onions, feel the sensations associated with the physical manifestations constitutive of crying, and feel no grief at all. Still, Wittgenstein allows that one might begin to grieve upon crying, even if the crying is a purely physical response to something with which one has no sentimental attachment. In the case

above, the sensations of crying precede the feeling of grief. So, there is time in which there is sensation but there is no emotion—and this duration defies James's theory. In addition, it would be queer to say that the sensation *becomes* grief (or a part of grief), but it seems that consistent adherence to his theory forces James to adopt this position.

This discussion of onions comes to bear on the issue of acting, raised at the beginning of this paper. It is part of the job of the actor to exhibit the bodily expressions typical of certain emotions, so as to convey to the audience what emotion his character is feeling. Though actors give the appearance of feeling emotions, we usually do not believe that they actually *feel* those emotions. In this way, the actor who cries is much like the person who cries in the presence of an onion. Both individuals exhibit the bodily manifestations of sadness, but at least in most cases, neither is sad. It seems that for James, the opposite is true. Because he holds that the bodily manifestation of an emotion requires the feeling of that emotion, it seems that James must insist that every actor who plays sadness feels sadness.

James's reaction to this objection is that many of the bodily manifestations of emotions are in organs over which we have no voluntary control. Thus, James would contend that it is simply wrong to assume that actors can perfectly simulate the bodily manifestations of an emotion while void of the feeling of that emotion. James writes:

The immense number of parts modified in each emotion is what makes it so difficult for us to reproduce in cold blood the total and integral expression of any one of them. We may catch the trick with the voluntary muscles, but fail with the skin, glands, heart, and other viscera. Just as an artificially imitated sneeze lacks something of the reality, so the attempt to imitate an emotion in the absence of its normal instigating cause is apt to be rather 'hollow' (*PP*, p. 1066).

For James, the actor is not able to produce within himself an *exact* version of the emotion that he feigns on stage *because he is not able to duplicate the bodily manifestations of the emotion*. Presumably, if the actor were to achieve this duplication, he would feel the emotion that he pretends to feel, to the degree in which he pretends to feel it. Instead, the actor is liable to feel only a "hollow" version of the emotion, despite outer appearances indicating the contrary. Real grief can only be perfectly mimicked by real grief, stemming from a genuine "exciting cause." The actor who undertakes to exhibit grief while "in cold blood" can bring it about that he feels that emotion, but his grief will not be marked with the same "warmth" that it would be if it were not pretended.

## 3. On the Reconciliation of James and Wittgenstein

In this final section, I will argue that James's thought

<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein alludes to toothaches in efforts to distinguish between emotions and sensations in other places. At §747 of *RPP1*, he states, "Thoughts can be care-laden, but not toothache-laden." See also *RPP1*, §804.

about emotions underwent some change during the course of the twelve years separating 1890's *Principles* and 1902's *Varieties*. I will draw from the latter text to show that James and Wittgenstein had more in common with regard to thought about emotions than Wittgenstein was aware.<sup>5</sup>

In *Principles*, James claimed that an emotion can be described as our sensational feeling of our bodily changes as they occur. In *Varieties*, however, James describes "religious rapture, moral enthusiasm, [and] ontological wonder" (*VRE*, p. 279) as "cosmic" emotions, and contends that with each of these:

The best thing is to describe the condition integrally as a characteristic affection to which our nature is liable, a region in which we find ourselves at home, a sea in which we swim; but not to pretend to explain its parts by deriving them too cleverly from one another (*VRE*, p. 279).

James's reference to "a sea in which we swim" suggests the possibility that there is more to emotions than merely the sensations of bodily expressions, as he holds in *Principles*. Bodily sensation might be an element in this sea, but at least in the case of these religious emotions, bodily sensations do not exhaust their descriptions. James offers clues as to what other elements might constitute this sea in the following remark:

Now there may be great oscillation in the emotional interest, and the hot places may shift before one almost as rapidly as the sparks that run through burnt-up paper. Then we have the wavering and divided self...Or the focus of excitement and heat, the point of view from which the aim is taken, may come to lie permanently within a certain system; and then, if the change be a religious one, we call it a conversion, especially if it be by crisis, or sudden (*VRE*, p. 196).

James mentions here the importance of the self. This is a salient feature of emotions that goes ignored in the chapter on emotions in *Principles*. It seems that any emotion one has is intimately tied to the self. If one feels fear,

for instance, the self is threatened; if one feels grief, the self is diminished. A change in one's emotions often indicates a change in one's self, not just a change in one's sensations. Conversely, a change in one's self often indicates a change in one's emotions, not just a change in one's sensations. Including the self among the contributing features of emotional states helps James subvert criticisms of his view that the emotions are identical to the sensations of their bodily manifestations.<sup>6</sup>

Though I do not suggest that James is able to eschew all of Wittgenstein's criticisms of his theory of emotions, I do contend that James's thought on emotions in *Varieties* is marked by what Wittgenstein would consider important maturation. Like his endorsement of James's theory in *Principles*, Wittgenstein's endorsement of James's theory in *Varieties* would be incomplete. James gives substantive accounts to support his "new"<sup>7</sup> views on emotions when it comes to those of the religious type, however, it may be alleged that he treats too small of a portion of the varieties of emotions that humans feel. The effort to completely reconcile the thought of James and Wittgenstein would likely be futile, however, it is important to recognize the differences in the conceptions of emotions had by the thinkers and judge for oneself in what ways each is more accurate than the other.<sup>8</sup>

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5. I assume that *Varieties* did not spark much interest for Wittgenstein during this time, despite his having access to it when he was compiling *Remarks*, thirty or more years after it was published. Had he re-read *Varieties*, his remarks about James's theory of emotions may not have changed at all, as Wittgenstein may have felt it necessary to expose the flaws of *Principles*, for it enjoyed popularity for fitting the emerging trend of behaviorism in psychology.

6. The difficulty of defining "the self" is a problem. James might have defined it in *Principles* as one's set of felt sensations. It seems that the notion he uses in *Varieties* is more sophisticated, involving one's self-perception and attitude toward the world.  
7. In her insightful commentary of this paper, Jennifer McKellar gave a convincing case for the suggestion that the account of emotions in *Varieties* is nothing new; rather, it is simply a more detailed rendering than that furnished by James in *Principles*.  
8. It is also important that I give thanks to Heather Gert and Gunther Tanksley for their counsel and support; without their contributions, this essay would not have come to fruition.

# Was James a Reductionist?

by Stanley Harrison

## Introduction

William James's views concerning the nature of mind or, more narrowly, his writings about consciousness have received in recent years a good deal of close, penetrating, and sometimes conflicting analyses. The question which originally prompted this essay was whether James was a reductionist in the manner of a physicalist who identifies acts or states of consciousness with brain states. This query was prompted in part by his provocative remark at the conclusion of "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" that the truth about the "I think" or one's experience of the "stream of thinking" could be converted without loss essentially into the "the stream of my breathing."<sup>1</sup> But, ultimately, James was not attracted to a physicalism in the sense of an identity theory, any more than he was attracted to Cartesian dualism, even though he had adopted a methodological dualism in his *The Principles of Psychology*.<sup>2</sup> Nor does he endorse epiphenomenalism, since one of his pivotal beliefs is in acts of will by which we continuously and, sometimes, dramatically set our course of action. His target, as his thought developed, became Cartesian dualism and any remnant thereof. But while James's long struggle to find a way around dualistic thinking was not one where he embraced a reductive materialism, it also was not one which left 'spirit' in any privileged ontological place. James was convinced as he began writing "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" that philosophically we had reached a period where the status of consciousness as immaterial spirit had been weakened to the point of vanishing. Indeed James tells us in 1904 that he had been doubting the existence of consciousness as an 'entity' for twenty years, thus even in the early stages of writing *The Principles*. By 1904, the seemingly robust Cartesian spiritual principle was in "a thoroughly ghostly condition."<sup>3</sup>

James's *Essays in Radical Empiricism* constitute a bold effort to deconstruct immaterial consciousness, and in particular to divest it of any honored place in epistemology. Consciousness was, he said, nothing but "the name of a nonentity, and has no right to a place among first principles. Those who still cling to it are clinging to a mere echo, the faint rumor left behind by the disappearing 'soul' upon the air of philosophy."<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite James's

*tour de force*, the question of whether he really did vanquish altogether the ghostly spiritual principle of consciousness remains. Indeed, in other writings James seems to endorse the notion of a realm of spirit or consciousness which transcends or circumscribes us all, and with which we may have vital intimate relations. Such texts make it more difficult to settle on James's final position. What sort of reality, if any, did James finally grant to consciousness? To pursue this, I consider some important aspects of James's argument, looking not only at what he said but also recalling the commentary of others, notably Charles S. Peirce and, more recently, Owen Flanagan and Wesley E. Cooper.

## Consciousness as an "Entity"— A Dispute with Peirce

James was quite aware that his denial of consciousness sounded preposterous to common sense and probably to many of his contemporary philosophers. As is well-known, he begins his essay "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" with a denial that consciousness is an "entity." Not everyone, however, found the meaning of this denial clear, not least his friend Charles S. Peirce. Soon after receiving the essay, Peirce told James that he was driven to consult nearly two dozen books, plus dictionaries, to try to figure out what James could mean. Peirce claimed that he had never read or heard anyone ever refer to consciousness as an entity. He wrote: "But your paper floors me at the very opening and I wish you would do me the favor...of explaining what you mean by saying that consciousness is often regarded as an 'entity'" (8.279),<sup>5</sup> a "terrible word," that only caused unnecessary confusion. (8.293) Peirce then proceeded to explain what *he* meant by consciousness, discoursing at some length on the meaning and status of simple feelings, dyadic reactions and "the whole world of triadic relations." (8.280-8.285). James expressed his own exasperation two days later when he wrote: "I have to confess that I don't understand a word of your letter," but added, "As for what entity may mean in general I know not, except it be some imperceptible kind of being. In my article it meant a constituent principle of all experience, as contrasted with a certain function or relation between particular parts of experience. The distinction seems to me plain enough" (8.285n.31).

This dispute is of some importance. Peirce was right to press James because it is crucial to know exactly what James is renouncing. It is one thing to deny substance dualism and quite another to deny that human consciousness exhibits any spiritual nature. For most English-

1. William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1976), p. 19. Hereinafter referred to as *ERE*. James went on to stress that "breath, which was ever the original of 'spirit',...is...the essence out of which philosophers have constructed the entity known to them as consciousness."

2. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 volumes (New York: Dover Publications, 1950). Photo reproduction of original Henry Holt & Co. edition, 1890. Hereinafter referred to as *Principles*.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

5. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP). Vols. 1-6 edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (1931-1935); Vols. 7-8 edited by Arthur W. Burks (1958). References will be by volume and paragraph number; thus, 8.279 refers to Volume 8, Paragraph 279.

James's Deconstruction of Consciousness

speakers, both then and now, "entity" likely does connote "individual thing or substance," be it a soul-thing or a physical thing. But James clearly intends to deny more than individual soul-substances. His rejection of dualism involves an equally strenuous denial of any non-physical or *spiritual act* in human thinking. James writes: "There is, I mean, no aboriginal stuff or quality of being, contrasted with that of which material objects are made, out of which our thoughts of them are made."<sup>6</sup> James's critique was like that of a physicalist in that he wanted to exorcise any significant vestige of immateriality as an ontologically independent factor in human knowing. This was at the core of his deconstruction of consciousness.

There is no space here to pursue Peirce's critique. Suffice it to say that he argued that a careful analysis not only did not lead to a denial of consciousness but rather to recognizing three *modes* of consciousness. Since all three were, for Peirce, omnipresent, it was puzzling why James began with a denial of consciousness as a "constituent of all experience."<sup>7</sup> Peirce also did not like James's use of "pure experience:" "What you call 'pure experience' is not experience at all and certainly ought to have a name."<sup>8</sup> In a remark which likely irritated James, Peirce added: "It is downright bad morals so to misuse words, for it prevents philosophy from becoming a science" (8.301).

Peirce's response helps reveal the strangeness of denying that consciousness exists. James, as noted above, did recognize how odd his position would sound. He also knew that a central argument for dualism in the history of philosophy had to do with the explanation of thinking and human knowing, that reflection required an act radically disparate from physical events. James's attack on dualism required a different view of the nature of human knowing, the relation which in *Principles* he had called "the most mysterious thing in the world."<sup>9</sup> But, by the time he finished "The Idea of Consciousness" his view has utterly changed. There he said of knowing, "It is not at all the transcendent mystery in which so many philosophers have taken pleasure."<sup>10</sup> What James saw Berkeley having done to matter, namely deconstructing its ontological status, James aimed to do with consciousness. He was not denying that we think, only that "thought-stuff" was so different from "thing stuff" that we needed a dualistic metaphysics to mark the divide. James summarized his solution this way: "...physical' and 'mental' are words of sorting, not two different kinds of intrinsic nature."<sup>11</sup>

In "The Idea of Consciousness" we find a clear statement of the view which James wants to dissolve: "I believe that consciousness, as it is commonly understood, either as an entity or pure activity but in any case as fluid, without extension, diaphanous, empty of any content proper to itself, in short, spiritual—this consciousness, I believe, is a pure phantasm."<sup>12</sup> Thus, not only are spiritual substances a fiction, but human consciousness reveals no pure spiritual activity, no "bare diaphaneity" intuitively or immediately known whenever we are thinking.<sup>13</sup> For James, "consciousness," including reflective awareness, was only the name invoked for the *function* of something being known, not the revelation of an ontologically unique mode of being.<sup>14</sup> If we, he said, "grasp reality naively and, as it is given to us directly," then the "inner duplicity" between consciousness and content is not given as an ontological fact. Instead, both consciousness and the world of physical objects emerge as the result of relations among various elements of what James came to call "pure experiences." No irreducible heterogeneity is given in experience taken naively. James did not deny that there are real differences between "inner" and "outer," but they are not of the sort to justify ontological dualism. The same holds, he said, of our dreaming of a mountain: "Are not the physical and the psychic realities identical? If I dream of a golden mountain, it certainly does not exist outside the dream, but within the dream it has its completely physical nature or essence. I see it as something physical." Physical objects and ideas, despite their obvious and important *practical* differences, are not "absolutely dissimilar in nature."<sup>15</sup> The unusual properties of thoughts such as privacy, being owned, inwardness, et.al., which he had stressed in *Principles*, are not denied in his later work, but they are not taken as marks of anything irreducibly spiritual.<sup>16</sup>

6. *ERE*, p. 4.

7. For example, Peirce argued that "there is a certain tinge or tone of feeling connected with living and being awake, though we cannot attend to it, for want of a background" (8.293). As an omnipresent factor, it would qualify as a constituent of all experience.

8. Peirce reserved the term 'experience' for those beliefs about the universe which we were gradually constrained to accept.

9. *Principles*, I, p. 216.

10. *ERE*, p. 117.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.

13. The issue, however, is not about "intuition." Peirce was also in agreement that there were no good arguments supporting the claim to an intuitive faculty. See his well-known essay of 1867/1868, "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed For Man" (5.213-5.263).

14. See also "The Experience of Activity" where James responded to an earlier criticism that in his explanation of a sense of self in *Principles* (Vol. I, pp. 299-305) he had reduced spiritual activity to the experience of certain muscular feelings of intracephalic movements, by saying: "I sought to show that there is no direct evidence that we feel the activity of an inner spiritual agent as such. (I should now say the activity of 'consciousness' as such)" *ERE*, pp. 85-86, n. 8.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 108; James's discussion of affectional facts is meant to bring out the same kind of ambiguity between the 'subjective' and the 'objective'. For example, we do not know whether we should say that objects are vile or that we have a vile feeling. Which placement we make is a matter of context.

16. See *Principles*, Vol. 1, "The Stream of Thought," pp. 225-226 and his discussion of "the Spiritual Self," pp. 296ff.

The Metaphysics of Pure Experience and the Philosophy of Mind

To fully appreciate how James understood “mind” and consciousness, one must consider further what he meant by pure experience and the relation it bears to human subjectivity or consciousness. This is more difficult than it might seem because there does not appear to be clear agreement on how to interpret the notion of pure experience. We begin with a passage from James in which indicated its importance: “The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the ‘pure’ experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality, or existence, a simple *that*.”<sup>17</sup> And later, he adds: “...there is no general stuff of which experience at large is made. There are as many stuffs as there are ‘natures’ in the things experienced. If you ask what any one bit of pure experience is made of, the answer is always the same. ‘It is made of that, of just what appears, of space, of intensity, of flatness, brownness, heaviness, or what not.’...Experience is only a collective name for all these sensible natures; save for time and space (and if you like, for ‘being’)...there appears no universal element of which all things are made.”<sup>18</sup>

Such passages display the unusual character of pure experience. James’s denial of any general stuff, for example, would seem to mitigate against a monistic interpretation. Here he restricted himself to a description of what is given in the immediacy of consciousness, “of just what appears.” If one stays strictly with the immediate then, all we have are the qualia (the “brownness, heaviness, or what not”), examples of what Peirce called the firstness of consciousness, the felt immediacy of whatever was present considered out of all relation to anything else, and thus, as Peirce argued, is devoid of cognition. Modes of connectedness constitute those relations which form the basis for cognition. James agreed that what we call something is a matter of what relations are involved. One of his best examples of this occurs near the end of “The Idea of Consciousness” where he wants to give an account of knowing without invoking consciousness as “an ontological fact.” To do this he appeals to pure experience as a form of neutral monism. He writes: “Let us imagine, then, that the primary reality is of a neutral nature, and let us call it by some still ambiguous name like phenomenon, datum, Vorfindung. I myself like to speak of it in the plural and call it *pure experiences*.”<sup>19</sup> Then, to explain how the all-important distinction between knower and known, experiencing subject and content known, grows up inside experience, James hypothesized further: “These pure experiences exist and succeed one another, enter into infinitely varied relations with one another, relations that are

themselves essential parts of the fabric of experience.”<sup>20</sup> His point is that groups or sets of relations form and that because of the fecundity of these combinations of pure experiences, that “one and the same experience...can play a role in several fields at the same time.”<sup>21</sup> Like the drop of ink which can be at the intersection of two lines, James argued that the same experience can be in two fields of associations simultaneously. The example he used was the ordinary experience of perceiving the room as *physical* with its various parts (walls, table, chairs, other rooms, etc.) and of that same experience taken as a *thought* within one’s mind. He continued: “In this complete, concrete, and undivided experience, just as it is there given, the objective physical world and the inner and personal world of each of us meet and fuse as lines fuse at their intersection. This sensible reality...and the sensation it produces in us are, at the moment the sensation occurs, absolutely identical. Reality and apperception are one.”<sup>22</sup> In this James explicitly agreed with Berkeley, that *esse est percipi*, meaning that “our sensations are not little inner copies of things, they are the things themselves insofar as those things are present to us.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus, we have two worlds present simultaneously, the physical world of the room with its distinctive relations to other physical things, and the context of personal experience with these same contents “as something ‘reported,’ known, conscious...” James acknowledged that in this latter context, “this room is linked with things of a radically different nature,” namely, with other thoughts, perhaps only a fleeting item in one’s biography, as a psychic fact with very different properties (e.g., without weight, incombustible, etc.), “and yet it is exactly the same room we are dealing with in both instances.”<sup>24</sup> This led James to ask: “What are we speaking of then, if not of *that*, of the same part of material nature that our minds at this very moment embrace, which takes its place, exactly as it is, in the private experience of this moment for each of us, and which our memory will preserve as an integral part of our history? It is absolutely one and the same stuff that appears simultaneously, according to its context, as something material and physical, or as an element in our inner consciousness. I believe, therefore, that we cannot treat consciousness and matter as if they were different in essence.”<sup>25</sup> Considering this room as something fleeting, physically inert, linked to emotional interests, etc., such traits are what James means by the grouping of experiences. Then he added: “It is by entering at this moment into a great number of these psychic groups that this room now becomes something conscious, something related, something known.”<sup>26</sup> James maintained that “experiences...become conscious in their entirety, they

17. *ERE*, p. 13.

18. *ERE*, pp. 14-15.

19. *ERE*, p. 114. James calls it an “an altogether rudimentary monism.”

20. *Ibid*.

21. *ERE*, p. 115.

22. *Ibid*.

23. *ERE*, p. 108.

24. *ERE*, p. 115.

25. *ERE*, p. 116.

26. *Ibid*.



become physical in their entirety; and it is," he continued, "by means of addition that this effect is achieved."<sup>27</sup> The addition of which he speaks is the process whereby a physical thing (a desk) gets connected with its typical associates and the process whereby we experience that same thing getting connected with other very different associates, namely, those we locate in a mental world.

Understanding this conclusion is not easy, and James knew this. Part of the difficulty is due to an equivocation in the use of the term "experience." As I understand James, the pure experiences of which he spoke are "events" which, taken in their purity, are not to be thought of as conscious states or as physical. This is so because for James consciousness or awareness is something which *happens to us* (and continues to happen) as a result of something more basic going on, namely, the growing together of non-conscious events (the pure experiences), processes of an all-at-onceness which are out of sight of any of us. This is why he said that "the knowledge of things *happens to them*" and is not due to "a transcendental ego, or a Bewusstheit, or an act of consciousness..."<sup>28</sup>

But is there not a serious ambiguity here? The claim that we achieve insights is not, according to James, the consequence of any immaterial act of consciousness. While it is true that we speak of insights coming to us or happening to us, our gaining, for example, the new insight which James seeks to convey, it also seems impossible to explain except as an achievement requiring a radically interior act, a type of act which also makes it possible for us to name what we have achieved. No one need deny that there are two different contexts involved. The issue remains: do human insight, understanding, naming and judging involve irreducible immaterial processes? What James seems to have done with his description of cognition is to freeze the process at the phase of immediacy, where indeed there is no cognition (as Peirce had stressed) and then simply declare that no immaterial act is necessary. It seems that James has eliminated the "spiritual" or non-physical activity from human cognition by fiat.

### "Pure Experience"—A New Metaphysics or Metaphysical Agnosticism?

Understanding the relation between pure experience and consciousness has been integral to some recent attempts to come to grips with James's philosophy of mind. When James wrote *Principles* he was strongly interested in the correlation between brain events and states of consciousness. He did not argue for their identity. Owen Flanagan recently has discussed how James considered and rejected epiphenomenalism, parallelism, and the idea of consciousness as some kind of Chief Executive Officer, materialist or spiritualist, as viable explanations of the undeniable interaction between mind/consciousness and

brain. Flanagan's essay is particularly noteworthy because it is prompted in large part by his own shift from previously interpreting James as a naturalist to defending him as a non-naturalist, thus as some kind of dualist, because he came to see that "there are parts of James's overall philosophy that require him to resist naturalism."<sup>29</sup> Some aspects of Flanagan's discussion merit special attention here.

Flanagan acknowledges that one of the potentially most serious inconsistencies is James's lecture on "Human Immortality." In that talk James argued that despite accepting as a postulate that "thought is a function of the brain" one could still coherently conceive of human consciousness as being metaphysically capable of existing apart from the brain, if it were the case that the brain was more like a conduit for thought than the actual producer of thought. By distinguishing three different kinds of functions,<sup>30</sup> James argued for the possibility of human consciousness having its metaphysical basis in, and being continuous with, some larger form of consciousness.<sup>31</sup> Flanagan does not endorse this view, but only says that James was right in claiming that it is *logically* possible, not that it is probable, let alone true. In other words, admitting thought as a function of the brain does not settle the issue as to the exact nature of this relation since there may be a 'function' which escapes the assumptions of the physicalist. One cannot conclude, therefore, that James had endorsed a physicalism or any other view which would make consciousness radically dependent on the brain.

But Flanagan also acknowledges that the potentially more serious charge to his own thesis concerns the position James presents in *ERE*. These seem to show that James gave up the postulated dualism of *Principles* and strove for an original metaphysical position which offered a new non-dualist view of knowing. To save James from the charge of inconsistency, Flanagan argues that James's embrace of pure experience does not justify a metaphysical shift, notably to the neutral monism endorsed by some interpreters. When James writes that "'Pure experience' is the name (for)...the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories...an experience pure in the literal sense of a that which is not yet a definitive what,"<sup>32</sup> he need not be committed to a neutral monism, despite what James himself said. To declare for neutral monism is to convert illicitly a

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> *ERE*, pp. 116-117.

<sup>29</sup> See "Consciousness as a Pragmatist Views It" by Owen Flanagan in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, Ruth Anna Putnam, ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 1997), pp. 25-48, especially, pp. 30-34.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 26. Now Flanagan argues that, despite appearances to the contrary, James held an essentially consistent position about the nature and function of consciousness throughout his writings.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. See p. 41 for a brief discussion of the brain possibly serving as a "releasing" function or as a "transmissive" function for consciousness as ontologically autonomous, rather than thinking of the brain as *producing* consciousness.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-42.

phenomenological description into a metaphysical view. Flanagan thinks that James's descriptions of primordial experience as prior to the subjective-objective distinction we eventually invoke should just be taken *epistemologically*. And if James or anyone else goes beyond this, then each errs by assuming that "*ontology recapitulates ontogeny*."<sup>33</sup> In other words, it can be true that the immediate flux of life is always already prior to our conceptualizations and categories, that human consciousness arises for each of us out of something beyond the reach of our insight, etc., and yet we are not justified in making *metaphysical* claims about these foundational conditions or events. Thus, Flanagan does not endorse the move to a neutral monism. He opts for a metaphysical agnosticism. Flanagan thinks that James should stick with a Humean skepticism and say, "We just don't know" what is metaphysically basic.

Flanagan does like James's rejection of consciousness as a thing, substance or entity, "either as immaterial substance or as a *faculty* of the brain."<sup>34</sup> But then it seems that Flanagan makes the same error that Peirce attributed to James. Like James, Flanagan also apparently thinks that there are people who consider consciousness an "entity." But I think Peirce was right in objecting to this as an accepted usage, and so to applaud James is to applaud a mistake. Flanagan goes on to agree also that "James's belief that things get reported and are known does not require positing a faculty of consciousness, immaterial or material. Experiences will do."<sup>35</sup> These remarks are less than clear. But James was not trying to eliminate *consciousness* altogether from epistemology but only wanting to avoid any appeal to a *faculty*. What remains unsettled and unacceptably vague, however, is whether James's functional distinction between "mind" and "matter" is, as Flanagan claims, "like the distinction between up and down, in and out, and the like."<sup>36</sup> Presumably, he means that he endorses James's talk about mind and matter is only a question of changing "contexts." But the question begging which goes on here has been noted above. The issue is not whether there are two contexts, but whether the context of mind involves irreducible immateriality.

### From Metaphysical Agnosticism to Protomentality

The ultimate status of mind or the mental in James's metaphysics is actually pursued more effectively, I think, in an article by W. E. Cooper<sup>37</sup> which in fact induced Flanagan to change his mind about James. Unlike Flanagan's adoption of metaphysical agnosticism concerning the basis for human subjectivity, Cooper argues that the

most viable position points to a view of pure experience which he calls "protomental." Recognizing the conflicts among interpreters of James, Cooper aims to reconcile aspects of James's neutral monism and his panpsychism by taking seriously "James's distinction between scientific and metaphysical levels of inquiry."<sup>38</sup> The result, he says, is a Jamesian metaphysics which is "very different from the physicalist and dualist accounts which dominate discussion of the mind-body problem."<sup>39</sup> At the risk of oversimplifying the discussion, the central issue has to do, paradoxically, with the "nature" of pure experience.<sup>40</sup> Unlike Flanagan, Cooper argues that "the Neutral Monist reading is fundamentally correct at the metaphysical level...but it must concede to the panpsychist account that pure experience is protomental."<sup>41</sup> Cooper seeks a "middle way" between neutral monism and panpsychism. But this, he says, requires that we distinguish between "the protomental and the essentially mental."<sup>42</sup> What Cooper means by the essentially mental is experience characterized "as necessarily private, inner, and subjective."<sup>43</sup> But experiences with these traits, which are central to self-awareness, are not primordial because mind as self-aware is an achievement, a result of experiences gradually becoming known in a special way.<sup>44</sup> Cooper sees other traits as more basic in James's original description of the stream of consciousness in *The Principles*. These are flux or changingness, continuity and, most importantly, purpose. Cooper treats these traits as 'protomental', and, therefore, as prior to mind taken in the narrower sense of human subjectivity with its privacy and inwardness. According to Cooper, James failed to distinguish these two levels of mentality.

By trimming a robust panpsychism one gets, he says, an attenuated form of it, namely, the protomentality of pure experience, and this explains why James denied that the mental was metaphysically ultimate. What he didn't deny and, claims Cooper, should have affirmed, is that pure experience is protomental. The key points of Cooper's argument have to do with how James defends the claim that pure experience, while not yet truly subjective or inward, is already *purposive* and owned, that is, has the trait of "my-ness" (Cooper's term). He writes: "There is no purposive agent that unifies and directs pure experience, according to James's radical empiricism; rather, pure

33. Quoted by Flanagan on p. 43.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 44-45.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

37. Wesley E. Cooper, "William James's Theory of Mind," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 28.4 (October): pp. 571-593.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 571.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 593.

40. I say "paradoxically" because one of James's fundamental claims is that our talk of the natures of things is itself already the result of "taking" pure experiences in certain ways; in other words, it is an added element. But one can hardly avoid asking about the "nature" of pure experiences.

41. Cooper, p. 572.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 574.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 575.

44. Indeed, self-awareness is subsequent to and, in life as we know it, dependent on the outer world of physical events, objects, and especially other persons. James stressed this, for example, when he described the development of infant awareness.

experience natively contains the sense of being personally owned and purposefully directed by such an agent."<sup>45</sup> Traits which James had ascribed to personal consciousness in *The Principles*, namely, its native selectivity, intentionality, and being owned by someone, Cooper locates in the more primordial pure experiences. By doing so, he can claim that "James's universe was ultimately teleological, but it was not ultimately private, subjective, and inner, just as it was not ultimately physical, intersubjective, and outer."<sup>46</sup> What is striking about this is the attribution of purpose or telos as a metaphysically ultimate feature out of all relation to an agent. It is not apparent that such a claim is coherent. Purposiveness has been separated from the one context, namely personal agency, which renders it fully intelligible. Now it is alleged, by Cooper, as a brute fact characterizing the protomentality.

Of equal interest is Cooper's defense of James's view of consciousness in *The Principles* as a non-physical causal force. He argues that for James "Consciousness is not an irruption into the physical universe of a new nature, because both consciousness and the physical universe are different arrangements of the *same* nature, namely, *pure experience*."<sup>47</sup> But on this view, it seems that nothing at all counts, or could count, as a new nature, particularly since James has said that there isn't any general stuff constituting pure experiences. There is an unlimited plurality of stuffs, namely, all those natures which just do make their appearance. The emergence of self-consciousness and our radical capacity to name and to know would only be serendipitous outcomes, abetted in some mysterious way by a deep telic process working on (according to Cooper) protomentality experience. Surprisingly, Flanagan had argued that even the emergence of immaterial mind from the realm of pure experiences, mediated by evolutionary processes, would not count as metaphysically troublesome or inconsistent for James with his Darwinian commitments.<sup>48</sup> Does it not seem inconsistent to accept the possibility of immaterial mind and yet deny this as metaphysically novel?

Cooper requires that pure experience "has some features which are characteristic of the mental... (Indeed)...these protomentality features may be understood as characterizing the physical world as well as the essentially mental, since both are constructed out of the purposive material of pure experience."<sup>49</sup> But while one might agree that to say the universe is purposive is not to say that it is populated by egos, souls, or substantial minds, still it is to commit oneself to a metaphysics in which Mind is pri-

mary. In addition, Cooper's use of 'purposiveness' is so extensive, that it accounts for the objectivity of the *physical* world of objects. Thus, he ends up claiming that "as well as being protomentality,...original experience is protophysical."<sup>50</sup> At this point, it becomes difficult to see why he had been arguing for the primacy of the protomentality.

### Conclusions

It is noteworthy that both Cooper and Flanagan allow for the immateriality of consciousness, even going so far as to argue (Flanagan) that evolution could generate immaterial mind. This admission certainly seems to count in favor of some form of panpsychism, as well as admit that immateriality which James set out to deny in his *Essays*. The interpretation of protomentality offered by Cooper is strained to the breaking point, particularly in his puzzling assignment of the trait of "ownership" to pure experience. Minimally, both Flanagan and Cooper agree that James was not a reductionist in the sense of converting mind into matter. The reduction is to something more basic, namely, to pure experience which in the hands of Cooper becomes protomentality, but for Flanagan metaphysically unknowable. Cooper recognizes that mentality in the strong sense requires an adequate metaphysical basis. With him we return, then, to the primacy of mind and are led toward the issue of theism and the consciousness of God which we know James defended. His reduction to pure experience opens out into the mystery of the divine.

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<sup>45</sup>. Cooper, p. 576. It is also worth noting that, on this view, James's theism is affected. Pure experience with its purposive character as simply given would be primordial for the gods as well. Thus, purposiveness, a defining trait of persons, including personal gods, threatens to become a metaphysical surd, a brute fact without explanation.

<sup>46</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>. Ibid., p. 581.

<sup>48</sup>. Flanagan, pp. 36-37.

<sup>49</sup>. Cooper, p. 589.

<sup>50</sup>. Ibid., p. 590.

# *On Habit and Consciousness: A Peircean Critique of William James's Conception of Habit*

by Tamba Nlandu

## 1. Introduction

This paper aims at discussing some insights and oversights of William James's conception of habit as well as some implications of such a conception in his view of human consciousness. It aims at showing that to conceive of habit as a physical fact may not only lead to the same type of mind-body dualism that James hopes to refute but also turn habit into a conservative, not dynamic, agent of society, in which case the concept of habit seems to be exclusively associated with sheer regularity. Such an account of mind would, indeed, entail that the relationship between mind and body is one of interaction, not transaction, as most of the so-called classical American pragmatists would want to claim. While this conception of habit may help explain the distinction James makes between the conscious and the unconscious, it does at the same time obscure his ability to provide a sound explanation for the basis of human moral conduct.

Provided these difficulties, which appear to be inherent in James's view, we shall argue, in the light of Charles S. Peirce, that to conceive of habit as a general, that is, a "tendency toward generalization," to use Peirce's own terms, is to construe it to be the dynamic, not conservative, agent of society. Such an account of habit carries more explanatory power for elucidating the relationship between human reason, consciousness, and self-control, thus providing a more reasonable explanation for the basis of human moral conduct.

According to Peirce, the concept of habit presents itself here as the bridge between compulsive experience and acquisition of information, between behavior and meaning. As such habit is essentially a medium of representation. It is the instance, within the process of cognition, whereby meaning attains the degree of generality necessary for meaningful communication. Since perception is a process of information acquisition through the mediation of some representations, it appears necessary at this point to assume the existence of a mechanism of translation of empirical data into a symbolic code understandable by the mind. In order for our assumption to make sense, it appears that we have to suggest that if such a mechanism exists, it has to reside in both the perceiving mind and the things perceived. Peirce finds such a mechanism in the concept of habit. Accordingly, the concept of habit presents itself as the medium that "bridge[s] the gap between the inner world of mental signs which in themselves offer no criterion for meaning and the outer world where the meaning of a sign or a complex sign can be established through the criterion of the behavior

which follows upon the use of the sign in question."<sup>1</sup>

Habit, we shall see, is the instance of mental representation whereby the interpretant of a sign becomes a general<sup>2</sup> (2.315). It is only at this point that thought becomes generative, inferential, and expectative. For, as Peirce notes, "thought must live and grow in incessant new and higher translations, or it proves itself not to be genuine thought" (5.594). The function of habit is, thus, to supply the mind with these translations. Such a view supposes a conception of human nature, which defies traditional characterizations. Here, the concept of habit is no longer just another unit of behavior. It is rather a process of assigning meaning to empirical data. Before examining Peirce's view, let us succinctly introduce James's conception and discuss some implications of a view construing habit to be just another unit of behavior.

## 2. Habit Is a Physical Fact

According to William James, a habit is to be regarded, first of all, as a "physical fact," that is, as an overt and observable fact. It is a disposition of man's central nervous system that provides a basis for the development of his mental life. Hence, James believes that it would be absurd to talk of habit if it were not something founded in "the fundamental properties of matter." Among those properties is the plasticity that allows it to change and at the same time conserve some of its basic elements. This means, although he accounts for a world of evolution, James believes that at first the laws of nature are mere "immutable habits" of matter.<sup>3</sup> But he soon realizes the complexity of such an idea. Because while some elements and structures of matter are endowed with extreme resistance to change, the world is also equipped with elements endowed with sufficient plasticity that enables men and all the other living beings to survive the multiple changing conditions of their environment.

Man as a product of evolution is equipped from birth with organs that possess potential instinctive patterns of action, which quickly become part of the evolutionary process. Because of the plasticity of his central nervous system, and because of his actions and reactions on the environment, new habits tend to be formed. As one would suspect, here James tries to reject the traditional mind-body dualism which, by holding that the body is, so to say, dead matter without the mind, seems to claim that the body is not as essential as the mind in man's life. For experience teaches us that the fixation of new regular pathways through the central nervous system has many

1. John Joseph Buckley, *Peirce and Cassirer: Language and Perception* (M.A. Thesis, Tulane University, 1979), p. 23.

2. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P. Vols. 1-6 edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (1931-1935); vols. 7-8 edited by Arthur W. Burks (1958). References will be by volume and paragraph number; thus, 8.279 refers to Volume 8, Paragraph 279.

3. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1890), p. 109. Hereinafter cited as *Principles*.

implications on man's daily activities. First, it "simplifies our movements, makes them accurate, and diminishes fatigue."<sup>4</sup> Second, it reduces the conscious attention in the accomplishment or execution of our acts. In fact the process of acquisition of habits shows that the body is as involved as is the mind. Thus, for James, both the body and the mind are essential to man. This type of epitomized form of the mind-body interaction appears to be characteristic of American pragmatists. For mind is said to emerge from bodily activity, so "interaction" is a poor word reminiscent of Descartes insofar as to claim that organisms interact with their environment would entail, in the spirit of radical empiricism, some type of transaction between the mind and its object.

Another very important point that is worthy of notice in James is that habit is present in every single act of man's life. The fact that it diminishes consciousness does not mean that man becomes an automaton. It is true, he maintains, that habit is "the enormous fly-wheel of society, [thus] its most precious conservative agent."<sup>5</sup> But it is also true that it is because of it that man is able to notice and control any changes, which occur in his actions. Take the case of a typist. When he begins his training, every single key requires full attention. As the training goes on, most of his actions become automatic. He can even get involved in a conversation while typing correctly. In addition, he is still capable of detecting an error as soon as he touches the wrong key. As a result, this we know from experience, the typist's immediate reaction is a quick check of what he has just typed. In fact consciousness is latent in every habitual act. It emerges as soon as it is called upon for help.

James's treatment of habit provides some fundamental hints for understanding two major concerns of his thought, namely, (1) the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious, and (2) the basis for moral conduct. As has been pointed out above, James's rejection of the traditional mind-body dichotomy results in a new conception of experience and a new perspective of the knowing process. He no longer accepts the view that the only way we can know our mental states is by introspection, that is, through observation of our own internal states. In other words, he rejects the traditional claim that meaning is a product of our conceptualization of the world rather than a result of our being first of all a concrete part of it. Hence, as Wild is right to point out, James's reply to the traditional view consists in saying that "men first become acquainted with this world not by conceptualizing it but by actively living in it", because "there is a logic of life quite distinct from that of conceptual understanding."<sup>6</sup> Provided this new conception of experience and of the knowing process, a new conception of the distinction

between the conscious and the unconscious is thus needed. James believes that such a conception essentially relies on the law of habit. Because, he argues, if it is reasonable to say that any increase in degree of habit causes a decrease in consciousness, then it is right to assume that habit and consciousness are opposite forces. This opposition can be understood in terms of their inverse variability since "where habit is fixed and firm, consciousness is at low ebb, where intense, habit is unstable."<sup>7</sup> All these processes of variation occur as the result of the activity of our central nervous system. James's account of consciousness has several complexities and difficulties of its own. But it is worth noting that, for James, the greater the complexity of the nervous system the lesser living creatures are capable of reacting "with firmness and certainty" in various circumstances. This is particularly true of the so-called lower animals whose nervous system, because of the regularity and "predictability" of its patterns of action, allows them to react unconsciously but, say, with assurance and firmness where human beings cannot.

Men and the higher animals are, however, capable of something the lower animals cannot accomplish, namely, of choosing a specific thing among multiple alternatives. But it is only in man that consciousness plays its full role of stabilizing patterns of actions and reinforcing the formation of new habits while it allows him at the same time to invent new patterns of meaning. In fact, for James, "consciousness is at all times primarily a selecting agency,"<sup>8</sup> which, in the case of man, involves reflection, hesitation, deliberation, and a choice that ought to be meaningful. For, he goes on to claim, "where indecision is great, consciousness is agonizingly intense."<sup>9</sup>

What are the practical effects of the law of habit on man's moral conduct? As a conservative agent of society, habit serves as the vehicle by means of which bad as well as good moral patterns of action are passed from generation to generation. Hence, every society must provide its members the appropriate education or training for the formation of good habits, that is, habits, which will allow them to make meaningful and useful choices. Indeed, as James notes in his *Talks to Teachers of Psychology*, "All our life, so far as it has definite form, is but a mass of habits—practical, emotional, and intellectual—systematically organized for our weal or woe, and bearing us irresistibly towards our destiny, whatever the latter may be."<sup>10</sup> However, one wonders about the logical consistency of such a position insofar as there appears to be no attempt at some sort of "thirdness" which would provide the basis for construing habit as a rule of action. This said, let us now turn

4. William James, *Psychology: The Briefer Course* (Gordon Allport, ed., Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1985), p. 5.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 10

6. John Daniel Wild, *The Radical Empiricism of William James* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), p. 23.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

8. James, *Principles*, p. 139.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

10. William James as quoted by Stanley Hauerwas in his *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos P, 2001), p. 54.

our attention to Peirce's attempt at a solution to this problem.

### 3. Habit Is Always a General

Contrary to James who deals with the concept of habit in terms of subjective or individual reaction, Peirce stresses the fact that every act man accomplishes must be defined in terms of its communicability. For, man being at bottom social, each of his acts is a habit of action that is public and general, that is, cannot be thought of without the mediation of signs. Although both James and Peirce regard thought as essentially inferential, predictive, and expectative, it is worth noting that James reasons from the individual, that is, from the particular, and Peirce from the general. Peirce maintains that thought is always symbolic, that is, general insofar as it is always communicable.

Habit, for Peirce, is a "tendency toward generalization", a tendency that, so to say, resides in everything that is endowed with plasticity and capacity of evolution. Although it may be found in the organic world, habit is essentially an element of the human mind. For, he claims, the mind is "the most plastic of all things" (7.515). However, it is not clear whether Peirce considers a habit as a natural disposition or something that is acquired only through experience, that is, by means of signs and symbols. In most cases, he recognizes the existence of innate potentialities that have to be informed and developed by the acquisition of habits through experience. This means that man has a natural, innate disposition to take habits and to exercise a certain control over them. For a habit is at bottom a disposition of the mind. However, Peirce may still be regarded as a behaviorist of some sort. In fact he maintains that thought fundamentally involves the general laws of nervous action. In other words, he believes that a habit arises through its reactions to various stimuli of the natural and social world as soon as the nervous system forms patterns of reactions that tend to become easier on repetition, and opens the possibility for new reactions to take place. Therefore, habit is "the leading principle" of all human action.

Hence a habit is to be regarded not as an action, but rather as the guide of thought. According to Peirce, thought grows through three essential processes, namely, (1) the formation of habits, (2) the breaking up of some of the old habits, and (3) the replacement of old broken habits by new ones which, by the way, get reinforced in accordance with the laws of evolution (7.268, 7.270). Since the purpose of thought is the settlement of "a belief, a rule of action, a habit of thought", a habit can be distinguished from action by the fact that it involves generality, whereas an action involves singularity. An action is simply an instance of a habit. Thus, insofar as Peirce considers a habit as a general principle, and because generality, by being of the essence of mind, is not something reducible to mere physical regularity, a habit must be regarded as "a disposition or readiness to act which will, or would, be

carried out if the proper conditions are, or were to be realized."<sup>11</sup> In other words, because the principle of chance is really operative in nature beside that of mechanical regularity we experience, a habit may be either a "will-be" or a "would-be". It involves, Peirce maintains, a real continuity because it regulates both actual and existent happenings that occur according to it.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, a habit is a real general law that is active in nature, and that is derived from experience. The law of habit, for Peirce, governs not only all physical but also psychical action. Thus the question: what are its practical effects on man's conduct?

To answer this question, it seems necessary to begin with a short account of the nature of man. Man, Peirce claims, lives in two worlds, an "inner" and an "outer" ones. The interaction between the two worlds is achieved by his acquired habits and his natural dispositions (5.487). Man is part of a natural world in which he finds himself as endowed with the power of reason. Reason, according to him, is the capacity for critical review and control of actions and habits of action. In other words, it is the source of man's power of self-control. It is because man is a rational animal that he can be regarded as different from the other animals. For reason essentially involves the freedom to choose among various alternatives of his actions, though there is no doubt that that freedom does not allow him to choose his own nature or even his own freedom. It also allows for symbolizing those alternatives in the present.

Along with his reason, man has another distinctive power: consciousness. Although consciousness does not always imply the capacity of self-control, Peirce maintains that every being that possesses the power of self-control is necessarily endowed with consciousness. Hence, consciousness is a criterion of man, but it is not a sufficient one. It requires reason if man is to be regarded as a being that fundamentally differs from others because of his capacity of control and self-control. Thus, consciousness is, so to say, mere spontaneity that needs to be supplemented by reasoning and habits. However, it is worth noting that in most of its degrees, consciousness is something man has no control over, except in the case of reflexive consciousness.

Man is, therefore, a being of actions and ideals. His conduct is shaped according to the rules provided, on the one hand, by his natural environment, and, on the other hand, by his consciousness and reason. Each of his ideals becomes an ideal of conduct, which turns to be a real potentiality for future action. Then under the law of evolution (regularity and chance), it becomes a habit, that is, a law of conduct. Now since man is endowed with the power to review, criticize, and control his ideals, he

11. Murray G. Murphey, *The Development of Peirce's Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1961), p. 162.

12. For a more detailed account of this view see John Boler's "Habits of Thought" in E. C. Moore & R. S. Robin (Eds.) *Studies in the Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Second Series. (Amherst, MA: U of Massachusetts P, 1964), p. 385, and Peirce (5.436).

becomes in the long run capable of reviewing, criticizing, and controlling his own review, criticism, and control. Thus, from his habits emerges self-control.

According to Peirce, through the process of habit-taking, every individual ideal tends to become an ultimate end applicable to every rational being. First of all, for Peirce, human behavior is explicable and understandable in terms of the categories of thought, because “all there is, is, First, Feelings; Second, Efforts; Third, Habits” (6.201). Firstness is the category of sheer possibility, Secondness, of actuality, and Thirdness, of the necessary in the sense of a “would-be.” These three categories are really distinct and irreducible, but they cannot be separated in experience. Thirdness is the category of thought, law, and regularity. Now, since an action is particular and existent, it is a second. But as soon as it becomes an instance of a habit, in which case it establishes itself as a general, it becomes a third. However, a habit can never become absolutely necessary without becoming “wooden and ineradicable” (6.148), in which case it would no longer be a habit.

Reason, we have seen, is the locus of man’s power of self-control. With the addition of his power of deliberation, man becomes a being of habits, that is, of “rules, norms or general patterns,” that are nothing but “acquired dispositions to act in a certain way rather than in another.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, habits are the foundation of man’s power to control his action, and even to control his own control. Notice that, for Peirce, there are three degrees of consciousness: first, consciousness of feeling, passive consciousness of quality; second, consciousness of an interruption of consciousness; third, consciousness of learning, thought (1.377-382). But it is important to note that consciousness, in all its degrees and in relation to habit, is Firstness, whereas habit is always Thirdness. On the other hand, one must distinguish among the various types of self-control those “inhibitions and coordinations,” which entirely escape consciousness from the instinctive modes of self-control, which, in turn, must be distinguished from the type of self-control that results from training as well as the capacity to control one’s own self-control in virtue of some moral rule and the power to control one’s control of control, that is, when one undertakes to improve his rule in virtue of an esthetic ideal (5.533). Thus, since a human being is rational, he has a purpose, which has to be achieved according to the general laws of nature. He has the power to consciously take habits through reflection. This general tendency to take habits is itself a habit. Provided their natural dispositions and the laws of nature, human beings acquire the power to control and criticize their habits, and then develop, modify, and correct their old patterns of action so that habits can never become totally and ineradicably fixed.

#### 4. Conclusion: Habit, Communication, and Consciousness

We have argued in the present paper that for James habit seems to be exclusively associated with sheer regularity, in which case it would essentially be a physical (neurological) fact, something Peirce would regard as the quality of feeling. As a result James tends to construe habit to be the conservative rather than the dynamic agent of society. Moreover, James’s psychological explanation of human conduct appears to lead him to regard the individual as the basis for ethical laws. By stressing individual actual consequences, he leaves out generality and possibility for general objective conduct.

Peirce, on the other hand, constructs his theory upon the idea that habit is essentially an element of the human mind, and as such it is a disposition of the mind. For human beings have innate potentialities that are informed and developed by the acquisition of habits through experience. When a habit has become a rule of action, it becomes a biological incarnation that can be transmitted from generation to generation. Habit is, thus, always general and dynamic. Under the laws of nature, regularity and chance, certain old habits are broken and new habits formed. In the long run, habit then establishes itself as a real general law governing both physical and psychical actions.

Elaborated from a logical standpoint, Peirce’s account of habit elucidates the nature of man’s power of self-control by clarifying the relation between (1) reason and consciousness, (2) physical and psychical action, and (3) singularity and generality. Although several points remain puzzling, such as the genuine applicability of the law of chance, Peirce’s treatment of habit lays the groundwork for a theory of mind that would construe experience as primarily our conscious encounter with some reality out there. Here Peirce’s theory of habit has much in common with that of John Dewey.

In fact, as Dewey would agree with Peirce, “without habit there is only irritation and confused hesitation. With habit alone there is a machine-like repetition, a duplicating recurrence of old acts. With conflict of habits and release of impulse there is conscious search.”<sup>14</sup>

Accordingly, Dewey writes, “Yet if one starts with the biological-cultural approach to the theory of experiencing, the presence of native and acquired (like habits) *general ways* of behavior is an inescapable datum.”<sup>15</sup> Because of the essence of habit as an acquired predisposition to *ways* or modes of response,<sup>16</sup> the process of habit-formation shows that human beings are endowed with the capacity for accomplishing the “integration of organic-environment-

13. Vincent. G. Potter, *Charles S. Peirce on Norms & Ideals* (U of Massachusetts P, 1967), p. 127.

14. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (Henry Holt & Co., 1922), p. 180.

15. John Dewey, In “Experience, Knowledge, and Value: A Rejoinder,” in Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern U P, 1939), pp. 535-536.

16. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. 43.

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tal connections,” something other animals lack.<sup>17</sup> This capacity of integration is activated by language, communication, discourse, on the basis of which individual experiences are integrated in the social environment. It is through learning and habit-formation that human beings achieve the integration of the past into the present and make future expectations appear real to present experiences. It follows that habit is never mere repetition unless it is taken in isolation, in which case it is a “non-communicating habit”. But insofar as communication is a criterion of human life, it is difficult to think of this type of habit. Thus, the principle of habit-formation is essentially dynamic because,

Communication not only increases the number and variety of habits, but tends to link them subtly together, and eventually to subject habit-formation in a particular case to the habit of recognizing that new modes of association will exact a new use of it. Thus habit is formed in view of possible future changes and does not harden so readily. As soon as a child secretes from others the manifestation of a habit there is proof that he is practically aware that he forms a habit subject to the requirements of others as to his further habit formations.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, consciousness is always present in habit-formation. As one learns, his needs and relationships with the social environment increase. Each acquired habit

requires appropriate conditions for its execution. As habits increase in complexity and number, the organism is forced to find a method of inquiry, a method involving experimentation through trial and error. Consequently, the more an organism is capable of forming new habits, the more it increases its adaptability, sensitiveness, responsiveness, explosiveness, and susceptibility. Human beings are endowed with these powers thanks to their capacity of social discourse, something other animals seem to lack. Habits, as organic acts, are a sort of “fore-action of mind,” for they always appear as deliberate and consciously intelligent. Indeed, habit is of the nature of generals or universals. It is the process of thirdness that gives meaning, the logical interpretant that bridges the gap between behavior and meaning.

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<sup>17</sup>. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Norton & Co., Inc., 1926), p. 228.

<sup>18</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 229.



# Selves and Communities in the Work of William James

by Francesca Bordogna

## Introduction

Late-nineteenth-century America experienced a crisis of the autonomous, substantial, and integrated self that was embodied in the social and economic practices of American democracy.<sup>1</sup> A diverse literature portrayed the human subject as weakened, torn between conflicting social roles, and depending in its essence and trajectory on social networks and economic forces beyond individual control.<sup>2</sup> From opposite ends of the political spectrum social scientists and economists writing about market society relocated agency from the individual to the social group,<sup>3</sup> while socialist utopias painted visions of cooperative societies premised on altruism, sympathy, and the demise of what Edward Bellamy condemned as the “narrow, isolated, and incommensurable individuality.”<sup>4</sup> All the while “mental” physiologists, men of science, and novelists painted the human being as controlled by biological forces and steered by automatic reflex processes.

Still extolled in heroic narratives, the independent and sovereign self appeared to be less and less in control of body and mind, even hardly capable of pulling itself together. A range of mental pathologies and extraordinary phenomena provided concrete expression to the inner divisiveness of the modern self. An incomplete list would include: split personality, hypnotic trance, the trance of a medium, automatic writing—a practice in which the hand of a person, unknown to the mind, would write things of which the subject had no knowledge—and projection of the double, an occult practice during which the subject strove to project a second self, separated from the physical body, in the external space.<sup>5</sup> To many, these phenomena and practices seemed to stem from an alien personality that had taken possession of one’s body. They became central to the modernistic exercise of redefining subjectivity and figured prominently in William James’s account of the self.

In published and unpublished texts spread from the 1880s to the end of his life (1910) and contributing to fields as diverse as normal psychology, clinical psychology, psychical research (what we might call parapsychology), the science of religion, characterology, social psychology, popular philosophy, and technical metaphysics, James assembled a new form of selfhood, one that fully acknowledged the inner divisiveness of the self and the presence of biological driving factors, and yet promised a new sense of self-mastery, self-determination, agency, and unity. It was a type of selfhood compatible with the discoveries of modern physiology and capable of engaging the new situation of the human subject in a fully industrialized society.

This paper suggests that James’s account of the self developed in tandem with his social vision. The Jamesian self promoted social transformation and the creation of a strong and virtuous citizenry that could participate in political action and initiate effective social change in a pluralistic, democratic society. The paper also argues that James’s account of the self represented an attempt to rethink the relationship between individual and society in a way that would allow both for pluralism and for community. It made it possible to imagine a type of social interaction that was fundamentally different from the occasional intersection of the isolated trajectories of the economic men of classical liberal thought—one that was rooted, instead, in intimacy and solidarity. Like a range of political and social thinkers with whom he engaged, with his discourse of the self James explored and promoted visions of solidarity and cooperation that he believed could be opened up within future society. This social vision, as I suggest in the last section of the paper, found expression in James’s panpsychic metaphysics.

## Part 1: Topologies of the Self

### 1.1 The divided self

James’s account of the self fully acknowledged the inner division of the modern subject. Like other psychologists of the time, James challenged the dogma of the unity and simplicity of the self. In Chapter Ten of *Principles of Psychology* (1890)—the only text in which James ever dealt systematically with the notion of the self—James famously split the self into two parts: the Ego, that is the principle of felt personal identity, and the Me, or “empirical self.”<sup>6</sup> He immediately split the Me into a variety of sub-selves which could occasionally live peacefully next to each other, each practicing its own social role, but could also be at odds.<sup>7</sup> These included the “material self,” a per-

<sup>1</sup> On the crisis of autonomous selfhood in late-nineteenth-century America see, e.g., T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace. Anti-modernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); Robert Wiebe, *Self-Rule, a Cultural History of American Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); Jeffrey Sklansky, *The Soul’s Economy. Market Society and Selfhood in American thought, 1820-1920* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p. 142.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., W. D. Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, (New York: the Modern Library, 2002; first published in *Harper’s Weekly* in 1889).

<sup>3</sup> See Sklansky, *Soul’s Economy*.

<sup>4</sup> E. Bellamy, in *The Religion of Solidarity*, Arthur E. Morgan, ed. (Yellow Springs, Ohio: Antioch Bookplate Company), 1940, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> On occult practices see Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment. British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of this text see also Rand B. Evans, “Introduction. Historical Context,” in *The Principles of Psychology. The Works of William James*, F. Burkhardt gen. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1981), esp. pp. liv-lvii; R. Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 1999), ch. 8, and E. Fontinell, *Self, God, and Immortality: A Jamesian Investigation* (Philadelphia: Temple U P, 1986).

son's various social selves, and a spiritual self which James famously identified with certain perceived motions in the head.<sup>8</sup>

Like the Me, the second pole of the self, the Ego—or the principle of personal identity and personal unity—was not immune from division. While aimed at accounting for the *feeling* that each of us has of his/her own personal unity, James's labyrinthine discussion of the Ego fully acknowledged the fundamental divisiveness of the Ego. James's multi-layered metaphor of the herd of cattle, collected together at spring by the herdsman, dissolved the principle of personal identity into a "mixture of unity and diversity."<sup>9</sup>

The self described in *Principles* was traversed by even deeper fault lines. James was fascinated by hysteria, a disease which, following the French philosopher and psychologist Pierre Janet, he took to stem from a lack of synthesizing power.<sup>10</sup> The hysterical woman, James wrote summarizing Janet's theory, was a person who, because of nervous weakness, was not able to hold her self together. In such patients, the self fell apart, and some of the fragments occasionally coalesced, giving raise to "secondary," "parasitic selves."

In the 1880s and early 1890s James studied both pathological and artificially induced productions of dissociation in a series of experiments on automatic writing, hypnotic trance, and post-hypnotic suggestion.<sup>11</sup> Like other contemporaries, James took some of these experiments to indicate that the dissociated, parasitic self could not only "alternate" with the primary self (as in classical cases of split personality), but could also "coexist" with it.<sup>12</sup> The question that James, like many other psychologists of the time, asked himself was whether this type of dissociation was always necessarily a mark of pathology, or whether separation between a normal and a 'subliminal' self could be a normal human feature. James came cautiously to lean towards a positive answer. By the early 1900s he had accepted the idea that each individual was endowed with a more or less developed "subliminal" self.

## 1.2 Stretching the boundaries of the self

"Where does the self end?", Madame Merle asked Isabelle Archer, the heroine of Henry James's *The Por-*

*trait of a Lady* (1882).<sup>13</sup> William James asked himself the same question. What do the boundaries of the self look like? How far do they stretch? To James these were the important questions raised by automatic writing and other "psychic" phenomena.<sup>14</sup> Through an investigation of mental pathologies and supernormal phenomena James came to question the dogma of the "insularity" of the self and the belief that an impenetrable fence separates the selves belonging to different individuals.

Sometime by the late 1890s James found himself leaning toward the hypothesis that the self could no longer be understood as an enclosed, insular unit, but instead might merge, at its margins or beyond the margins, into a larger self.<sup>15</sup> In his essay on "Human Immortality" (1898), James visualized that idea resorting to an image that German physiologist and mystical writer Gustav Theodor Fechner had deployed to illustrate the notion of "threshold of consciousness." The sinusoidal graph—which James borrowed from Fechner's *Elemente der Psychophysik* (1860-1862), represents a "wave of consciousness."<sup>16</sup>

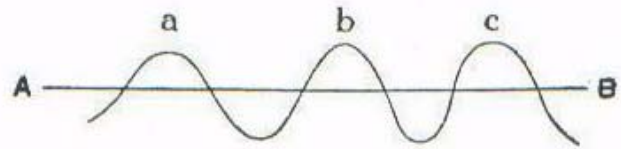


Figure by Gustav Fechner shown in note 7 of William James's "Human Immortality" (*Essays in Religion and Morality*, p. 92).

The threshold of consciousness—visualized by the horizontal straight line—is the boundary separating what we are conscious of (everything above the straight line) from what we are not conscious of (everything below the line). The horizontal line can move down or up, as we become more alert, or more drowsy; thus things of which we are not aware at one moment, can enter our field of consciousness at another, and vice-versa. The portion below the threshold represents a larger self (possibly God, or possibly an individual self), of which one's conscious self is

7. James, *Principles*, p. 282.

8. James, *Principles*, pp. 280-282, and 291. Fourteen years later James reasserted this position. See *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1976), p. 19.

9. James, *Principles*, pp. 317-322.

10. Pierre Janet, *The Mental State of Hystericals* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1901; first French edition: 1893-4), pp. 489-496.

11. For a discussion of these experiments see E. Taylor, *William James on Consciousness beyond the Margin* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1996).

12. See, e.g., Edmund Gurney, "Peculiarities of Certain Post-hypnotic States," *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 4, (1886-1887), pp. 268-323. Gurney was a British psychical researcher and a close friend of William James. For James's discussion of these experiments see *Principles*, p. 206 and p. 1213.

13. Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (W. W. Norton: 1995), p. 175.

14. James, "Notes on Automatic writing," (1889), reprinted in James, *Essays on Psychical Research* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1986), pp. 37-55. Quotation on p. 45.

15. For a discussion of James's notion of consciousness beyond the margins see E. Taylor, *William James*. Taylor, E. Fontinell, G. Myers, and, more recently, R. Gale have emphasized the uncertainty of the margins surrounding the Jamesian self. See, Fontinell, *Self*, G. Myers, "Introduction," in James, *Principles*, esp. pp. xxxi-xxxii, and Gale, *The Divided Self*.

16. See James, "Human Immortality," in *Essays in Religion and Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982), p. 92. James extensively praised Fechner in *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909). James owned copies of several works by Fechner, including *Elemente der Psychophysik*, *Zend-Avesta* and *Das Büchlein der Leben nach dem Tode*. On Fechner's mystical and religious side see Isabelle Dupéron, *G. T. Fechner, le parallélisme psychophysique* (Paris: Puf, 2000).

part. Based on Fechner, however, James's discussion of the graph conveyed a more complex hypothesis, one that commentators have seldom noticed. The separate portions of the curve surfacing above the threshold line represented the (normal) consciousnesses of *different* individuals. Thus the image shows that these different, individual selves, each of which takes itself to be isolated from the others, may not be really separated: they could communicate and merge into each other below the threshold.

This conclusion was reinforced by evidence concerning mystical experiences and psychical phenomena. Particularly relevant to James was the work of his friend the British psychical researcher F. W. H. Myers. Myers had taken the phenomena of telepathy (a word that he invented), telekinesis, projection of the double, bilocation, and traveling clairvoyance to indicate that the subliminal self, far from being confined within the boundaries of the body, could step out of the body, invade physical space, and communicate with the spirits of the departed and with a wider "cosmic environment." While skeptical about Myers' generalizations, James came to look at the hypothesis of extra-marginal communication between different selves as a proven fact.

In an article that he published one year before his death James wrote:

Out of my experience...(and it is limited enough) one fixed conclusion dogmatically emerges, and that is this, that we with our lives are like islands in the sea, or like trees in the forest. The maple and the pine may whisper to each other with their leaves...But the trees also commingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the islands also hang together through the ocean's bottom. Just so there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother-sea, or reservoir.<sup>17</sup>

Circumscribing and insulating the self from external influences was part of the individual process of adaptation to the "external earthly environment." Yet the fence surrounding the self remained "weak in spots, and fitful influences from beyond leak[ed] in, showing the otherwise unverifiable common connexion."<sup>18</sup> But how did distinct subliminal selves communicate? Were they "continuous" with each other, or did they remain separate from one another, "their intercourse [being] transacted across an isolating interval?"<sup>19</sup> What would a topology of the margins and of the extra-marginal region look like?<sup>20</sup>

These are questions which James began to address

within the panpsychist metaphysics that he articulated in the last years of his life. I will come back to that in the last section of the paper.

## Part 2: Individuals and Community

James wrote little on politics and only in an unsystematic way. Nevertheless, while scholars disagree on the exact nature of James's political position, few still resist the notion that he developed a social vision. In response to the mounting American imperialism under the presidency of McKinley, James found himself to be growing "more individualistic," even "anarchistic." He engaged in a passionate defense of self-governance both for ethnic groups, like the Filipinos, and for the individual, against the corrupting force of big institutions: "big national destinies," "political parties, newspapers, trade combines," big department stores.<sup>21</sup> However, James's individualism was never anti-social and never translated into a gospel of selfishness. James Kloppenberg, Charlene Seigfried, and others pointed out that the individualistic strain so evident in James's social philosophy was tempered by a complementary emphasis on solidarity and community.<sup>22</sup> Seigfried, in particular, has shown the importance of what she calls "sympathetic apprehension" of other people's points of view.<sup>23</sup> James argued that, when we look at other people, as we ordinarily do, from the position of the "external spectator," we are bound to remain "blind" to the inner significance of their lives.<sup>24</sup> This blindness was the source of social conflicts, including that between labor and capital, which, in part, James famously ascribed to the inability of workers and capitalists to "sympathize" with the point of view of the other. Nevertheless, James observed that sometimes the vision of that inner meaning comes on us, suddenly, as in a mystical revelation, and we enter into a sympathetic relation with other people. The lesson that James explicitly drew from his discussion of this "ancestral blindness"—something he made central to his "pluralistic, individualistic philosophy"—was one of democratic tolerance, respect for individuality, and non-interference with other people's "own peculiar ways of being happy." Yet, implicit in his discussion was also an invitation to sympathize with other people and engage with them in more intimate ways.<sup>25</sup> Indeed in his social thinking James constantly sought to mesh two apparently contradictory elements: a pluralistic defense of the autonomy of the indi-

17. James, "Confidences of a 'Psychical Researcher,'" in *Essays in Psychological Research*, pp. 361-375. Quotation on p. 374.

18. *Ibid.*

19. James, Review of *Human Personality*, *Ibid.*, p. 208.

20. James raised again these questions in "Confidences of a 'Psychical Researcher,'" *Ibid.*, p. 374.

21. See D. J. Coon, "Courtship with Anarchy: The Socio-Political Foundations of William James' Pragmatism." (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1988), p. 160 ff.

22. C. Seigfried, "James: The Point of View of the Other," in S. B. Rosenthal, C. R. Hausman, and D. R. Anderson, *Classical American Pragmatism: Its Contemporary Vitality* (Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1999), pp. 85-98.

23. *Ibid.*

24. James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1983), p. 132.

25. See James, "Preface," *Talks to Teachers*, pp. 4-5. See also *Ibid.*, p. 149.

vidual and insistence on communal values and “cooperation.”<sup>26</sup>

In articulating his conception of the self, James mediated between the goal of attaining a democratic, moral social order that made wide ranges of people happy and conduced to social cooperation, and the goal of maintaining the individuality and spontaneity that was being crushed, on both individual and local communal levels, by modernizing society. The self that James articulated, especially in the late 1890s and afterwards, was the site where it became possible to reconcile these two apparently contradictory poles of his social vision.

### 2.1 The cultivation of the self: how to make strong and effective citizens

In 1901 Josiah Royce, James’s colleague and friend, observed that supporters of “extremes forms of ethical individualism” often found it convenient to resort to “realistic” theories of the self, that is, theories that made self into a substance, “logically,” “ontologically,” and “psychologically” independent of the existence of other selves. Such theories, Royce argued, seemed to preserve in a direct way “the dignity, or the freedom, or the rights of the Self.”<sup>27</sup> Despite his self-proclaimed individualism, however, James always resisted the temptation of essentializing the self. In comparison to the robust, substantial selves assumed by most individualists of the time, he portrayed a metaphysically weak self, menaced by inner division, surrounded by uncertain and porous boundaries, and only precariously whole.

Nevertheless, strong, effective individuals were crucial to James’s “melioristic” plan.<sup>28</sup> As James made clear on a number of occasions individual initiative was the engine of social reform: broad-scale social change could only be spontaneously initiated by individual actors. For that reason, individuals had to be protected not only against the external social and economic forces endangering their self-determination and spontaneity. They also had to be protected from inner enemies: inward division, loss of self-mastery, and weakness. James lectured to various audiences on the importance for individuals to cultivate their strength, agency, strenuousness, and integrity through the reinforcement of good habits and the elimination of harmful ones.

It was at this juncture that James’s discourse of the self intersected with the “New Thought” movement and a popular body of literature about the cultivation of the self. Mind curers, Christian preachers, and mental hygienists all advertised techniques that would enable ordinary individuals to achieve self-mastery, eliminate inner division, and obtain confidence, energy, unity, and inner harmony.

James was intensely fascinated by the culture of self-help and thoroughly familiar with the literature and practices of mental healers and spiritual therapists.

James did not share the major premise that underlay the doctrines of many mind curers and mental hygienists: that is, the substantiality of the self. Nevertheless, much of James’s psychology and popular philosophy can be seen to draw from and contribute to this mental therapeutics.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, much of James’s work represented a “moral philosophy,” in the hortatory and practical sense of the term that Pierre Hadot has done much to uncover.<sup>30</sup> Precisely because he did not operate within a metaphysical framework that would automatically guarantee individual rights, moral agency, or even the basic unity of the individual, it became crucial for James to point out techniques that would make the self strong, effective, and whole, and that would enable the individual to make him/herself into a strong, competent, and effective citizen. The practice of such techniques would reinforce individuals’ sense of agency, and provide citizens with the tools necessary to resist the bureaucratic and standardizing forces of society.

In particular, James explored a range of techniques for the unification of the self and the production of inner peace and harmony, including spiritual and physical exercises such as practices of breathing, meditation, and concentration suggested by mental hygienists and yoga teachers.<sup>31</sup> To James the unity of the self remained a medical, moral, and religious goal, one that the individual should endeavor to achieve in a sustained, renewed effort against splintering and dissolution.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, that renewed struggle was what gave the individual his or her strongest sense of self.<sup>33</sup>

James fully appreciated the pluralistic possibilities afforded by a conception of the self that allowed for marginality and difference even within the healthy, unified self. This was particularly clear in the therapeutic approach that he applied to Ansel Bourne, a famous case of split personality. Bourne was an itinerant preacher who, in 1887, had suddenly disappeared from his home. He resurfaced two months later in a different town, and

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., J. Miller, *Democratic Temperament: The Legacy Of William James* (Lawrence, KS: U of Kansas P, 1997), ch. 1.

<sup>27</sup> J. Royce, *The World and the Individual, Vol II: Nature, Man, and the Moral Order* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1901)

<sup>28</sup> James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1975), p. 139.

<sup>29</sup> For a stellar example see James’s address “The Energies of Man” reprinted in *Essays in Morality and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1982), pp. 129-146. For a reading of this address see G. Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1990). See also F. Bordogna, *Negotiating Boundaries: Philosophy and the Human Sciences in the Work of William James* (work-in-progress), Ch. 8.

<sup>30</sup> P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., H. Dresser, *The Perfect Whole* (Boston: G. H. Ellis, 1896) and Swami Vivekananda, *Yoga Philosophy* (New York, London, and Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896). James owned copies of both.

<sup>32</sup> For religious conversion as a process of unification of the divided self see James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1985), Lectures 8 and 9.

<sup>33</sup> As a young friend of James put it, “the fragmentariness and multiplicity of life are, then, the saving of the sense of selfhood.” Ethel Dench Puffer, “The Loss of Personality,” *Atlantic Monthly* 1900 (85), pp. 185-204. Quotation on p. 204.

appeared to have lived under the new name of "A. J. Brown." Brown knew nothing about Bourne, nor could Bourne ever recall anything about Brown. James hypnotized Bourne several times between May 27th and June 7th, 1890.<sup>34</sup> During the hypnotic sessions, James did not try to "kill" the secondary personality, but rather attempted to "introduce" the two personalities to each other, so they could acknowledge each other's presence and live peacefully in the same body.<sup>35</sup> Far from resembling the simple, undivided unit postulated by moral philosophers, the Jamesian unified self remained a "bundle of relations," a pluralistic community of things, one within which relationships between members had to be continually renegotiated and redefined.<sup>36</sup>

## 2.2 Ecstasy and community

James never spelled out all the social and political implications of his account of the self, but alluded to them obliquely with metaphors and poetical language, by shifting to first person narratives in the midst of philosophical arguments and by using quotations which would have evoked dense webs of meanings to his contemporaries. The social vision that James embodied in his account of the self is so "vague" that it can only be retrieved and deciphered by embedding James's text within a context of late-nineteenth-century works which did more explicitly than James, linked visions of selfhood to visions of society. Yet even the vague deserves attention in the work of a writer who like James fully appreciated the expressive potential of vagueness.<sup>37</sup> By placing James's account of the self in the context of wider debates over the social order one can appreciate something that would otherwise escape notice. James's insistence on the fluidity and uncertainty of the boundaries of the self, which he especially emphasized in the last decade of his life, was instrumental to rooting the individual in community.

James was familiar with the work of various thinkers who had mobilized theories positing an unsubstantial, "open" self in order to further visions of community and cooperation. For one thing, he knew well his father's vision of "regenerate society." An unorthodox follower of Swedenborg and of Fourier's utopian socialism, Henry James Sr. had envisioned an ideal society ("the brotherhood of each man with each man in God") in which the

individual would give up his selfish tendencies, indeed, his very self-hood, in order to cooperate with all.<sup>38</sup> William James could hardly miss the point. Discussing his father's social vision, William James wrote: "The individual man, as such, is nothing, but owes all he is and has to the race nature he inherits, and to the society in which he is born."<sup>39</sup> Likewise, James was familiar with the popular books of Ralph Waldo Trine, a self-educated mind curer and an evangelical socialist. Trine declared that the individual self was illusory and he dissolved it into an "infinite spirit" pervading everything. The realization of the insignificance of the individual self was to be the panacea for individual happiness and social health. By banishing all self-seeking attitudes and their petty concerns for their "diminutive" individual self, and by looking at themselves as parts of the infinite self, workers and the common people could effectively unite and bring about a peaceful solution to the grave tensions plaguing a capitalistic society. The result would be a cooperative, sympathetic society in which wealth would be justly redistributed among all members.<sup>40</sup>

Examples of authors conveying similar messages, ones with whom James was familiar, could be easily multiplied, but one merits special mention: the British socialist/anarchist poet Edward Carpenter, whose writings James discovered in the early 1900s.<sup>41</sup> In 1900 James read Carpenter's Whitmanesque mystical poem *Towards Democracy*, and enjoyed it immensely. In the four-hundred-page poem Carpenter had managed to strike a difficult balance between the flourishing of the individual and a rich communal life.<sup>42</sup> In 1903 Carpenter articulated an ambitious theory of the self. Drawing from the Hindu tradition of the Upanishads and the Vedanta, he dissolved the individual self into a universal, cosmic Self.<sup>43</sup> For Carpenter, the basis of social harmony consisted in the sudden, mystical intuition of the illusory character of the individual self and in the sudden revelation of one's oneness with the cosmic self. Carpenter's theory of the self

<sup>34</sup> For a report see Richard Hodgson, "A Case of Double Consciousness," in *Proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research*, 1891-1892 (7), pp. 221-257. See also James, *Principles*, p. 371.

<sup>35</sup> To that end James even staged an encounter between the secondary self and the wife of the primary self in the home of the primary self. The therapy was a failure, and neither of the two personalities ever acknowledged the existence of the other.

<sup>36</sup> J. McDermott, "The Promethean Self and Community in the Philosophy of William James," in *Streams of Experience. Reflections on the History and Philosophy of American Culture* (Amherst, MA: U of Massachusetts P, 1986), pp.44-58. Quotation on p. 57.

<sup>37</sup> C. Seigfried, "Vagueness and the Adequacy of Concepts: In Defense of William James's Picturesque Style," *Philosophy Today*, 26 (1982), pp. 357-367.

<sup>38</sup> H. James, *Society The Redeemed Form of Man* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Co., 1879), pp. 196 and 203. On Henry James's social vision see Dwight W. Hoover, *Henry James Sr. and the Religion of Community* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1969). James's vision of regenerate society did not include women.

<sup>39</sup> James, "Preface," *The Literary Remains of Henry James*, reprinted in *Essays in Religion and Morality*, p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> R. Trine, *What All the World's A-Seeking* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & co., 1899. First ed. 1896). Trine carefully discussed the labor question in *In the Fire of the Heart*, of which James owned a copy.

<sup>41</sup> James read several works by Carpenter, including *Towards Democracy* (1883), *England's Ideal* (1887), *Love's Coming of Age* (1896), and *The Art of Creation* (1904). On the relationship between James and Carpenter see *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 10 (Charlottesville: U Press of Virginia, 2002), pp. 614-615.

<sup>42</sup> D. Barua, *Edward Carpenter* (Burdwan, India: U of Burdwan, 1991), p. 3. On Carpenter see also C. Tsuzuki, *Edward Carpenter, 1844-1929: Prophet of Human Fellowship* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 1980).

<sup>43</sup> E. Carpenter, *The Art of Creation. Essays on the Self and Its Powers* (London: George Allen, Ruskin House, 1907; first edition: 1901).

created the metaphysical and psychological framework for the socialist “brotherhood of workers” that he expressly advocated.<sup>44</sup> And indeed a contemporary observer, the British Fabian socialist Beatrice Webb, praised the book as a full expression of the “metaphysics of the socialist creed.”<sup>45</sup> The link between that Carpenter posited between cosmic consciousness and socialism did not go unnoticed to American observers. Thus, for example, James’s correspondent Richard Maurice Bucke, a follower of Carpenter’s and a member of the circle of Walt Whitman’s intimate friends, linked the mystical revelation of cosmic consciousness to the demise of enclosed, individuated selfhood, and to the inauguration of a socialist era.<sup>46</sup>

Carpenter’s theory was not attractive because it seemed to annihilate the individual self or at least compromise its autonomy. Indeed, in a letter to a friend, the Fabian socialist Sydney Haldane Oliver, James complained that Carpenter had “overdone the monistic business.”<sup>47</sup> To him Carpenter’s theory of the self suffered precisely from the defect that James imputed to other types of socialism: the annihilation of the individual in the collectivity. Nevertheless, Carpenter’s work and, more broadly, this heterogeneous socialist body of literature are important for an analysis of James’s account of the self. They reveal how in discussions of the time—with which James was fully acquainted—attempts to foster cooperation and community often went hand in hand with theories of the self that denied the substantiality of the individual self, weakened the confines of individuality, and rooted—even dissolved—the individual self into a larger self. Indeed, in discussing the weakness and transient nature of the “fence” separating the individual self from other selves and in describing the sympathetic insight into other people’s lives, James used language that echoed the language used by Carpenter and others who associated the mystical stage of “Cosmic Consciousness” with the advent of a socialist millennium.<sup>48</sup> As the social visionary Edward Bellamy had seen back in the mid 1870s, love of others, sympathy, and solidarity rest on ecstatic experiences through which stepping out of the “narrow confines” of our individuality, we become able to

commune with the larger consciousness of the universe.<sup>49</sup>

Scholars have long scrutinized the ways in which James’s account of an open self surrounded by uncertain margins allowed for the possibility of communion with a cosmic, divine self. However, the scholarship on James, including the scholarship dealing specifically with James’s account of the self, has failed to notice that to James—as to Carpenter and other socialist thinkers whom James read—the weakening of the boundaries of the self and the opening up of the self through religious self-discipline and mystical experiences not only created the possibility of communion with the divine, but also allowed for intimate communion among people on earth.<sup>50</sup> In emphasizing how individuals could communicate below the threshold of consciousness and beyond the margins, and how they could realize through experiences of illumination the continuity linking them, James fashioned a psychological theory that promised to eliminate selfishness and isolation. His notion of the open self was tailored to allow for the sharing of experiences, sympathetic understanding, and ultimately for social cooperation and solidarity.

### 2.3 The self-compounding of consciousnesses

James’s social vision required both individual autonomy and cooperation.

Developing a psychology of the self and a metaphysics that would allow individuals to retain their autonomy and unique, defining features, while allowing for exchange and cooperation, was tremendously important for James. To my mind, this is one of the issues that propelled James’s anxious and obsessive attempts to solve the metaphysical problem of “the self-compounding of consciousnesses,” or, as James also described it, the problem of the “compounding of selves.”<sup>51</sup>

How can individual, separate consciousnesses compound into a complex consciousness? For example, how can the feeling of lemon and the feeling of sugar combine in the feeling of lemonade? And, on a higher level, how could individual selves (you and me) “freely” combine or “be confluent” into a higher self (for example, the absolute self of idealist philosophers), while retaining their individual identity? How could each individual consciousness continue to be as *it* felt itself to be, and, at the same time, really be as the *higher* consciousness, of which it

44. Manifesto of the Sheffield Socialist Club, p. 372, cited in Barua, p.95.

45. *Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, Vol. II (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 1978), p. 268. Quoted in Barua, *Edward Carpenter*, p. 158.

46. See R. M. Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness. A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1969; first edition 1901), pp. 4-5. James read this book with great interest. See William James to Alice Howe Gibbens James, Sept. 16 1901, in *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 9, ed. by I. K. Skrupskelis and E. M. Berkeley (Charlottesville and London: U P of Virginia, 2002), pp. 542-543.

47. James to Sydney Haldane Oliver, Feb 10 1905, in *Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 10, p. 547.

48. For example, James’s metaphor of the trees communicating and commingling through the roots echoed a metaphor used by Carpenter (see Carpenter, *The Art of Creation*, p. 124).

49. E. Bellamy, in *The Religion of Solidarity*, A. Morgan, ed. (Yellow Springs, OH: Antioch Bookplate Co., 1940), pp. 17-18. See John L. Thomas, *Alternative America: Henry George, Edward Bellamy, Henry Demarest Lloyd, and the Adversary Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1983), pp. 83-88. See also Mark Pittenger, *American Socialists and Evolutionary Thought, 1870-1920* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1993).

50. An important exception is Gerald E. Myers. See Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale U P, 1986), p. 350.

51. James, *Manuscript Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1988), p. 370.

was a part, felt it to be? To many of the philosophers, psychologists, and biologists who addressed it, the problem carried political implications, and bore directly on the question of the nature of the relationships amongst individuals within society.

At the end of his life, speaking to the large audience attending the 1908 Oxford lectures that would lead to the publication of *A Pluralistic Universe*, James confessed that this problem had tormented him for years and that he had filled pages and pages in an attempt to solve it. For years, James told his audience, he had believed that the problem was insoluble, and indeed, in *Principles* he had sharply criticized those who attempted to solve it by claiming that higher sensations (such as the taste of lemonade) are “compound sensations.”<sup>52</sup> Likewise, he had rejected monistic philosophers’ claim that the absolute self was “constituted” by the individual selves, each of which retained its own identity and self-perceptions. To James that position was untenable for technical reasons which came down to the fact that nothing can be, at the same time, itself and its other.

In a wonderful example of narrative philosophy James confessed to his audience how he had been full of envy and resentment at the idealists, who simply assumed the self-compounding of consciousness, ignoring the objections of logic. All the while, in his “heart of hearts” he had kept hoping that some day he would find a solution that would allow him to accept the self-compounding of consciousnesses as a matter of fact.<sup>53</sup> Now, however, James had come to see the solution. In a metaphysical *tour-de-force* James analyzed the problem once again and sketched the metaphysics that would solve it.

There were only three ways of solving the problem: one could 1) either assume (as traditional psychology and theism do) the existence of unifying factors, such as the soul, and the traditional, external God of theism [but this solution was not attractive to James]; or 2) give up the principle of identity and logic; or 3) admit that the continuity we perceive in life is illusory, and that ultimately life is disjointed and irrational.

As is well known, James decided to go for the second solution. What stood in the way of solving the problem was, simply, intellectualistic logic, and, in particular, the principle of identity. As he told his audience, if you give up the axioms of logic and, following the lead of Henri Bergson, place yourself *d’emblée* into the flux of reality, you will see that no boundaries really separate any bit of experience from its next. Concrete pulses of experience “compensate” each other, “run into each other,” and “coalesce” with each other at their margins. They “telescope” into each other and “interpenetrate.”<sup>54</sup> In short, no bits of experience are really disjointed, and hence normal logic cannot be exactly true about the world. Once this

metaphysics is accepted, there is no real problem in seeing how different consciousnesses (or different selves) could be “confluent” either “in a higher consciousness”—the “mother sea of consciousness,” or, perhaps, God, or simply by virtue of relations of continuity from next to next.<sup>55</sup>

Among the multiple reasons why the metaphysical problem of the self-compounding of consciousnesses was so pressing to James were important ones of a social-political nature. This should come as no surprise, since James informs us that his metaphysics of radical empiricism “frankly interprets the universe after a *social* analogy.”<sup>56</sup> To my mind, in social/political terms problem of the self-compounding of consciousnesses translated into the problem of how it was possible to create a community in which individuals could retain their identities and individual perspectives, and yet have a sympathetic insight into other people’s perspectives and into the meaning of their lives. This is exactly what James insisted was necessary for resolving social conflicts. Recall that in the late 1890s James had identified as the central source of the class tensions flaring between workers and owners a lack of mutual “sympathetic” understanding, one that flowed from the external position that each class took vis-à-vis the other. Similarly, American imperialism, especially in the Philippines, stemmed not only from the ineliminable human instinct towards mastery, but also from the unwillingness and deaf insensitivity that made the dominating imperialists unable to engage the ‘others’ or to perceive the significance of their proposed modes of life. The problem of facilitating a mutual understanding through creating a common consciousness had lain at the very center of James’s social thinking from at least the late 1890s. His new metaphysical approach endowed the “cosmic environment” with a continuous, rather than a discrete topology, allowing for continuity, even interpenetration among neighboring selves along their boundaries. This way, it showed how such sympathetic understanding could arise, and how the otherwise “impenetrable” values and secrets of other people’s lives could become intimately accessible to those sympathizing with them.<sup>57</sup> As Gerald Myers insightfully wrote: “It is a common judgment that James’s *Anschauung* was excessively individualistic and ignored the role of community; on the contrary, he sought notions of self and reality that permit communality of the profoundest sort—in the depths of the most intimate personal experience. He hoped that the metaphysics of radical empiricism and pluralistic universe would indicate that a genuine overlap of many individuals’ experiences might occur at levels of consciousness we do not yet understand.”<sup>58</sup>

52. James, *Principles*, p. 160 ff.

53. James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1977), Lecture 5.

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 121 and 127.

55. James, *Pluralistic Universe*, p. 131. For the latter interpretation see T. L. S. Sprigge, *James and Bradley: American Truth and British Reality* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993), pp. 245.

56. James, “Notes for Philosophy 9: Metaphysics (1905-6),” *Manuscript Lectures*, p. 367.

57. James, “What Makes a Life Significant” in *Talks to Teachers*, p. 151.

58. Myers, *William James*, p. 350.

At a time when philosophers and politicians resorted to monism to legitimate aggressive forms of imperialism, James took great pains to emphasize that his solution was not monistic, but pluralistic.<sup>59</sup> The higher self, the superhuman consciousness embracing the individual selves was nothing like the all-embracing absolute of monistic idealism. The superhuman consciousnesses that he envisioned were finite and *plural*.

In his last Oxford lecture, he clarified the difference resorting to a metaphor that revealed beyond doubt the political nature of his concerns: "The pluralistic world," he wrote, "is...more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom. However much may be collected [within a centre of consciousness or action] something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity."<sup>60</sup> This metaphor embodied the two elements that James continually worked to accommodate into his social vision: individualism (and localism) and community. Elsewhere James was more daring in indicating political associations; as when he described his radically empiricist view that "frankly interprets the universe after a *social* analogy," he described his radically empiricist metaphysics as "the pluralistic, socialistic" view and associated it to the vision of a "cooperative universe."<sup>61</sup>

### Conclusions

James's notion of the self grew in parallel to his social vision. Although it denied the substantiality, the simplicity, and the unity of the self—those very features which nineteenth century individualists had mobilized to defend the rights and priority of the individual—James's account of the self provided the individual with agency, initiative, and self-determination. The individual was responsible for unifying his or her own self through strenuous effort, for continuously negotiating amiable relationships among his/her various social selves, and for sustaining and creating afresh a stable identity. This continuous effort of self-fashioning made individuals into effective centers of initiative and social change, and enabled them to cultivate—even renew minute by minute—the strength necessary to resist the depersonalizing action of the big economic and political organizations and the standardizing forces at work in a capitalist society.

The ecstatic experiences of the precariously bounded self and the region of extra-marginal consciousness provided the ground for the sympathetic apprehension of the point of view of the other, something which was fundamental both to the gospel of tolerance, mutual respect, and pluralism, and to James's vision of an anti-atomistic, cooperative social order. Openness was the most distinctive characteristic of the Jamesian self: the uncertainty of

its boundaries and its expansion beyond the margins of normal consciousness allowed for mystical experiences and also for mutual, constructive understanding: even for the intimate "interpenetration" of what otherwise would remain "impenetrable."<sup>62</sup> It also allowed, crucially, for the spontaneous creation of sympathetic communities, and, on the long run, for a broader piecemeal unification of society.

James's account of the self reflected and furthered his hope for an open, pluralistic, and democratic society, one that would allow for discussion, negotiation, and cooperative action without sacrificing, as did many socialist visions of the time, individual selfhood to the goals of cooperation and solidarity.

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### For Further Reading On James's Political Views

James's political vision has been described in different colors. Kloppenberg makes James into a proto "social-democrat" (J. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory. Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920*, [Oxford: Oxford U P, 1986]). Lloyd portrays him as a "petty bourgeois ideologue" and as a supporter of populist small producerism (Brian Lloyd, *Left Out: Pragmatism, Exceptionalism, and the Poverty of American Marxism, 1890-1920* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1997]). Miller ascribes to James a "democratic socialistic individualism," and portrays him as an advocate of radical participatory democracy (Joshua I. Miller, *Democratic Temperament: The Legacy of William James* [Lawrence, KS: U of Kansas P, 1997], esp. pp. 25-32). Lentricchia and Livingston portray James as a socialist. (See F. Lentricchia, "On the Ideologies of Poetic Modernism, 1890-1913: The Example of William James," in S. Bercovitch ed., *Reconstructing American Literary History* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1986], pp. 220-249; J. Livingston, *Pragmatism and The Political Economy of Cultural Revolution* [Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P], p. 166). Both Coon and Cotkin portray James as a "communitarian anarchist." (D. J. Coon, "Courtship with Anarchy: The Socio-Political Foundations of William James' Pragmatism." [Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1988], and "One Moment in the World's Salvation: Anarchism and the Radicalization of William James," *The Journal of American History* 83 (1996): 70-99; G. Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1990]. For a brief discussion of some of these works see J. Sklansky, *The Soul's Economy* [Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2002], pp. 273-274.

<sup>59</sup>. "Damn great empires! Including that of the Absolute." James to Elizabeth Glendower Evans, Feb. 15 1901, in Evans Papers. Quoted by D. Coon, "Courtship with Anarchy."

<sup>60</sup>. James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 145.

<sup>61</sup>. James, *Manuscript Lectures*, pp. 372, 367, and 415.

<sup>62</sup>. James, "What Makes a Life Significant," *Talks to Teachers*, p. 151, and James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 127.



# The Paradigm of Consciousness and William James's Conception of the Self

by Jonathan Mathys

In the first parts of the tenth chapter of *The Principles of Psychology*, William James presents us with a rich and innovative portrait of the self, teeming with psychological and phenomenological insights. In the middle parts of the chapter he gives an analysis of personal identity that makes it difficult to hold onto those insights. I want to recap (1) the rich picture of the self and (2) the analysis of personal identity that James delivers in his text. Then I will turn to a discussion of the difficulties that the analysis of personal identity creates for James's own account of the self, followed by a diagnosis of their etiology that places James within a philosophical tradition I will call the paradigm of consciousness. Finally, I sketch a path that might be followed out of that paradigm, saving James's picture of the self by reformulating it in a different [dialogical] paradigm. Throughout the paper I am relying on a distinction between personal identity and the wider notion of selfhood that is inspired by some of the later work of Paul Ricoeur.<sup>1</sup>

## I.

I turn now to a brief summary of the substance of James's text. James has a fourfold picture of the self. The first three parts are the material self, the social self, and the spiritual self, which James calls the constituents of the Empirical Me. The fourth part is the Pure Ego, or principle of personal identity. The *material self* is composed of the body (which is its "innermost part" according to James), immediate family, the home, and finally property in the widest sense.<sup>2</sup> The *social self* is the recognition we receive from others. "Properly speaking," writes James, "a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind."<sup>3</sup>

The *spiritual self*, the last constituent of the Empirical Me, is first defined by James as one's "inner or subjective being, [...] psychic faculties or dispositions, taken concretely," i.e., as traits of actual individuals.<sup>4</sup> These dispositions are more enduring and intimate parts of our selves,

and vary from individual to individual. Some examples James gives in order to illustrate what he is getting at are an ability to argue and discriminate, moral sensibility and conscience, and an "indomitable will."<sup>5</sup> Now I turn to the Pure Ego.

James calls the Pure Ego the "principle" of personal identity, and after a phenomenological examination of the *sense* of personal identity, or how we experience it, he concludes that all we can practically mean by "the Pure Ego" consists of a stream of holistic mental states James calls "passing Thoughts," "each part of which as 'I' can 1) remember those which went before, and know the things they knew; and 2) emphasize and care paramountly for certain ones among them as 'me.'"<sup>6</sup> These are the two elements of personality or selfhood for James: the passing Thought or I on the one hand, and the objective person or Empirical Me known by the passing Thought on the other. The nucleus of the Me is always the felt existence of the body at the present time, and the Me as a whole is "an empirical aggregate of things objectively known."<sup>7</sup> Those remembered feelings which resemble the present feeling of the body are deemed to belong to the same Me. James says that the salient forms of resemblance here are a certain "intimacy" or "warmth" that past thoughts and feelings have to us. Whatever else is seen as being associated in whatever way with the bodily nucleus of the Me becomes part of that Me's experience.<sup>8</sup> Certain more or less stable elements of that experience compose the constituents of the Empirical Me described earlier, e.g., the material, the social, and the spiritual self. The I which knows these things, however, is not an aggregate at all, but a holistic mental state, "a Thought, at each moment different from that of the last moment, but *appropriative* of the latter, together with all that the latter calls its own."<sup>9</sup> So it is appropriation that binds the successive moments or constituents of the self together into one overall self. But there is a massive problem lurking here.

## II.

The crux of it is this: it seems that there are parts of the Empirical Me that *no passing Thought or stream of passing Thoughts could possibly appropriate*. Consider the example of an "extensive manuscript" that James uses to illustrate his conception of the material self. Perhaps I am a renowned archaeologist working on a manuscript concerning ruins in Syria. My former book on ruins in Lebanon won me the esteem of scholars throughout the world, and also recognition from the Royal Academy. How do I (as a passing Thought) appropriate the high esteem in

1. See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992).

2. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1981/83), p. 280. Hereinafter referred to as *Principles*.

3. James, *Principles*, p. 281. The foci around which these recognized selves cluster are the various *groups* about whose opinion one cares.

4. James, *Principles*, p. 283.

5. *Ibid.* Some other possibilities might be a knack for and appreciation of languages, critical discernment in regards to some art, what we call "being personable," and probably also what Aristotle called the virtues.

6. James, *Principles*, p. 378.

7. James, *Principles*, p. 379.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

which I am held by the Royal Academy? Can one of my passing Thoughts appropriate *my* memories about the manuscript and *thereby* appropriate as well the relationship between that manuscript and the social recognition my former work has garnered which generates the excitement of the scholarly public as it awaits my new publication? Can this forthcoming manuscript, a putative bit of my material self, really possess such value without its relationship to my social self, and to my concern for that self? Put otherwise, how can *I* as my-passing-Thought appropriate the *recognition* I receive from *others*?

At this point, you might wonder if James is giving an account of identity for the social self at all, and perhaps you might conclude that James's analysis is only meant to hold for the spiritual self, as Richard Gale believes.<sup>10</sup> The constituents of the Empirical Me, however, are too interwoven for this to be possible. It seems to me that an account of identity for one part must to a large degree be an account of identity for at least one other part, if not both. Suppose Gale is right that the spiritual self is really what James is talking about when he talks about personal identity. James claims that the body is the innermost part of *the material self*. He also claims that bodily feeling is central to both the "Self of selves" at the core of the *spiritual self* and to "real and verifiable" personal identity.<sup>11</sup> So unless there is some defensible sense in which the material self and the spiritual self can have two different bodies, then the conditions under which we feel ourselves having the same body at the center of our spiritual self are going to be conditions under which we feel ourselves having the same body at the center of our material self. I see no such defensible sense in which we have two different bodies that would lead to anything other than paradoxes, needless complication, and falsification of our experience. That ties the spiritual and the material self together.

The social and the material self also interpenetrate in a fairly thoroughgoing way. Family members are said by James to be part of the material self, but they must also surely be centrally important parts of the social self, considering the dominant role played in the formation of personality by recognition from family members, particularly parents. This importance diminishes later in life for many, yet it never entirely drops out. Strangely, though, James does not mention the family at all in his discussion of the social self. What all of this means is that if James's treatment of personal identity and the appropriations that constitute it cannot incorporate some *part* of the Empirical Me, then it threatens to break up the whole Me altogether. If one of the constituents goes, it can hardly avoid dragging much of the others with it. And the example of the archaeologist above has, I think, at least cast serious doubt about whether James can incorporate the social self. That the actual role of the social self in the makeup of our overall self (identity) cannot be adequately captured

by James's theory can be seen in another way if we turn to consider cases of multiple personality disorder. In these cases several personalities (or spiritual selves, to use James's term) that each respectively have a sense of personal identity clustering around one shared body, and that therefore share material selves to varying degrees depending on which memories they share, are anchored together in one overall self mainly by the stability of the social self they all share. That is, their shared body is recognized by those around it as having an official name that is recorded on its birth-certificate, certain familial relationships also documented, perhaps an occupation, history of employment and education, and so on. Thus the overall self is stably located in social space by all of its social relationships, regardless of how the various personalities may come and go.

What lies at the root of James's inability to hold together the moments of the self he charted out in such pathbreaking ways? My hypothesis is that the main reason James cannot hold the constituents of the self together in a stable way is that his analysis of identity is situated entirely in the medium of consciousness. For this reason James is, despite himself, still within the tradition of the paradigm of consciousness.

### III.

This is a tradition that includes Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, maybe Kant, the Mills, and others as well. James saw himself as standing in this tradition, though he was very critical of it. Especially of its failure to appreciate the place of relations in experience and its consequent single-minded focus on discrete impressions or ideas as the particulate bits out of which all of experience and knowledge is assembled. For this tradition epistemological and psychological inquiries, including those regarding the self and personal identity, are performed within the realm of consciousness, and the general method is one of introspection. Of course these thinkers are not obviously still operating in the paradigm of consciousness when writing about, say, justice or the social contract (Locke and Hume), or cosmopolitan history (Kant), though it is an interesting question whether atomistic conceptions of mind in Hobbes and Locke led to atomistic conceptions of politics. The matter is more complex in regards to Hume's social and political thought. It is in this sense that I will say that this tradition operates within the paradigm of consciousness.

There are a series of paradoxes that arose in discussions of personal identity within the paradigm of consciousness, and James in his own way has gotten caught in one, though where his predecessors were caught up in paradoxes simply with respect to personal identity, we have seen that James is caught up in a paradox with respect to personal identity and its relation to selfhood. James may be vulnerable to paradoxes of the first sort as well, but I will leave that aside. First, a quick sketch of just what personal identity is in the paradigm of consciousness.

<sup>10</sup>. Richard Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 1999)

<sup>11</sup>. James, *Principles*, p. 288 and p. 319.

ness. Predictably, it turns out to consist in suitably related parts of consciousness or conscious states. The classic example here is Locke, who held that "that with which the consciousness of this present thinking thing can join itself makes the same person, and is one self with it...and so attributes to itself and owns all the actions of that thing as its own."<sup>12</sup> What joins together the consciousness of the present thinking thing with something else is pretty clearly memory, or perhaps conscious memory. This gives rise to two classic paradoxes. The first is what we might call a puzzling-case paradox. Suppose a lowly cobbler wakes up one day with the memories of a fine prince, and the prince is either dead, in a coma, or has the memories of the cobbler. Has the cobbler become the prince? Locke says yes. But it's not so clear. Does the cobbler suddenly speak in the cultivated idioms of the court? Does he *move* like the prince does with that practiced, regal, fluid gait? *Can* his body do this? It's not surprising that it's difficult to tell. Locke shifts the criterion for identity away from the physical and into the *mental*, making memory the criterion for identity. But as Butler and others have pointed out, our criteria for whether or not someone's claimed memory of something counts as a *genuine* memory often turn on *physical* criteria for identity, as in a court of law when we are trying to determine whether a person really was (or could have been) a witness to an event. So one of our usual criteria has been put out of play, and we are left floundering around without it, attempting to settle the case.

This brings up a second paradox, of the offense-to-common-sense variety. This is Reid's Case of the Gallant Officer (which I'm varying a bit). A young boy was heartily thrashed for stealing mulberries from the market. He grew up to be a Gallant Officer, and later even a Decorated General. The Gallant Officer remembers the thrashed boy, and the Decorated General remembers the Gallant Officer, but not the thrashed boy. So on Locke's view, the Decorated General was not the thrashed boy. But they're the same person (says common sense)! After all, the boy *grew up to be* the General! We may throw in Hume to get a third paradox of this uncommon-sensical kind. Hume shows what happens when you quite reasonably accept that memory is the only feasible criterion for identity *within* the paradigm of consciousness while *also* realizing its inadequacy. He finds no idea or impression of a self within his consciousness. He reasons that memory *produces* associations between ideas, which yields a *sense* of personal identity. Seeing how unreliable memory is as a criterion, however, he concludes that personal identity is best seen as a fiction or creature of fancy.<sup>13</sup> So there isn't really any identity at all. So much for the paradoxes of the paradigm of consciousness.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Bk. II, Ch. xxvii, par. 17.

<sup>13</sup> This is true at least of Hume when he wrote the *Treatise*, though he realizes some of the problems this claim brings in train in the appendix to that work.

As Gale has pointed out, James's theory of personal identity, while breaking with the psychological atomism of Locke and Hume by discarding the notion of discrete ideas existing independently of each other in the mind in favor of a holistic conception of overall mental states, nevertheless retains two features of the consciousness paradigm that will generate some difficulty for him. Firstly, like Locke, James maintains that the medium in which personal identity is constituted is consciousness. And note the striking similarity between Locke and James's language. Where Locke says the present thinking thing "attributes to itself and owns' the actions of the past thinking thing with which it may join itself, James, de-reifying the Pure Ego, says that the passing Thought "appropriates' past Thoughts to itself. A recent defender of Locke even uses the term "appropriates" when describing the identity-constituting activity that goes on in consciousness according to Locke's theory. Winkler proposes that "Locke is interested in a sense of the word self according to which what the self includes depends upon what the self appropriates."<sup>15</sup> Secondly, like Hume, James conceives of the self along the lines of a bundle of mental items or states; in the case of Hume, ideas and impressions, in the case of James, passing Thoughts. (Now) Hume writes that "the mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass...glide away, and mingle" *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1978) p. 253. James replaces Hume's theater with his own stream, and Hume's ideas with holistic total pulses or states of consciousness, yet we still have a self composed of elements that come and go and are bundled together to create whatever unity it has. See, for instance, James's dismissal of empiricist psychology in his proclamation that "there is no manifold of coexisting ideas; the notion of such a thing is a chimera. Whatever things are thought in relation are thought from the outset in a unity, in a single pulse of subjectivity, a single psychosis, feeling, or state of mind" (*Principles*, p. 180).

The key question any bundle-theory of personal identity must answer is "What is the bundling relation?'. We have seen that for James it is the appropriation of past Thoughts by the present, passing Thought. We have also seen that this act, as conceived by James within the paradigm of consciousness, cannot account for the appropriation of the social self. So I want to turn now to a possible remedy for this, suggested in some ways by James himself, and sketched out by the work of G. H. Mead, Ricoeur and others, that involves a move out of the paradigm of consciousness.

<sup>14</sup> I could mention cases from the more recent writings of Bernard Williams and Derek Parfit, two contemporary representatives of this tradition, that retain the same problematic, "conceptually undecidable" features.

<sup>15</sup> See K. P. Winkler, "Locke on Personal Identity." Reprinted in: Chappell and Vere, eds. *Locke. Oxford Readings* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1998) p. 153.

IV.

Out of the paradigm of consciousness and into what? Into a paradigm which takes as its basic medium linguistically-mediated interaction, and not consciousness; in short, into a dialogical paradigm. A short route to this new paradigm would involve taking James's assertion in *Pragmatism* that "all thinking gets *discursified*" as a major premise, his contention in the *Principles* that personal identity is constituted by appropriative acts of a passing *Thought* as a minor, and concluding that therefore personal identity is constituted by an appropriation that takes place in discourse. As the term discourse implies interlocutors, conversation, dialogue, and intersubjectivity, it would then be easy to link up personal identity with the social self it was in danger of losing in the paradigm of consciousness, as well as the other parts of the Empirical Me, suitably refashioned along dialogical lines. We could even find the basics of such a reformulation in the work of G. H. Mead. In order not to seem too short, however, and perhaps willful or arbitrary, I'll take one other suggestive route as well, hoping that the partial convergence of these two paths will sufficiently reinforce the basic point that it is a dialogical paradigm which is the promised land of our exodus from the paradigm of consciousness. Either way it is the later James who will guide us in rescuing the earlier James.<sup>16</sup>

James explicitly provides us with the opportunity for the step beyond consciousness in his famous article, "Does 'consciousness' exist?" No longer is consciousness an independent medium in which appropriation can take place. Instead, we might say, it is itself a certain kind of functional relation between parts of a wider medium which James calls "pure experience."<sup>17</sup> What I am now going to claim is that James in this article also provides us with an adumbration of the direction in which our move will head. The passage I have in mind comes during James's description of the two processes into which the neutral ontological item he calls a "room-experience" enters. Outside the context of some such process, the "room-experience" is just a bare *that* which may "act in one context as [an object], and in another context figure as [a mental state]."<sup>18</sup> The first process is the *personal biography* of anyone who encounters the room in whatever way and the second is the *history* of the room itself (these are the very terms James uses).<sup>19</sup> In ontological space each of these processes intersect at the "room-expe-

rience', and the total significance of that "room-experience" depends upon which process is under consideration in a given context.

The first process is clearly marked out as a narrative genre, biography. The second process is said to be a type of history. Two further passages from the tenth chapter of the *Principles* reinforce the shift we are making here, and lend credence to the hypothesis that James was proleptically sensitive to these dimensions of the self, at times anticipating, albeit obliquely, the recent development of narrative theories of the self. The first occurs in its opening paragraph, when James says that what will follow is an examination of the salient parts of "[the Self's] history."<sup>20</sup> The second occurs later on when James, in a remarkable passage, speaks of "my historic Me," which he identifies with "my total empirical selfhood," as "a collection of objective facts...an I who has always been treated with respect, who belongs to a certain family and 'set,' who has certain powers, possessions, and public functions, sensibilities, duties, and purposes, and merits and deserts."<sup>21</sup> This passage maps quite perfectly onto the threefold scheme of the Empirical Me—family, possessions going with the material, public functions, duties, powers, merits, and "set" with the social, and sensibilities and purposes with the spiritual self—and explicitly links it with a historical entity.

In what follows, I am painfully aware of being unable to provide an adequate defense of a series of claims I am going to make, for reasons of space. For this reason, the reader may take these claims as a mere sketch of a suggested theoretical move. I assume that history is understood primarily as a mode of narrative, a view Dray and Walsh have ably defended.<sup>22</sup> I also assume that all narrative involves dialogicality, in the form of an author and an implied reader, a view defended by Ricoeur and Booth.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, I hold it self-evident that language is a constitutive feature of dialogicality. If this is true, then moving beyond consciousness, into a realm of personal biography, as James suggests, means moving into a dialogical paradigm. Selfhood in this new, vaguely sketched paradigm is no longer constituted in consciousness, but rather in communication. It is in the process of linguistic interaction that the self arises, that we first come to relate to ourselves as a kind of object, though one perhaps unlike any other in our experience, in such a way as to constitute the peculiar reality we gesture at by means of this unusual, philosophic-sounding noun, "the self." According to Mead, the organized community or social

16. The thought expressed in the quotation from *Pragmatism* used as a "major premise" above is a specimen of James's later, mature reflections on inquiry and its practical, social dimensions. *Pragmatism* is, of course, a late work, *Principles* an early work, considered chronologically.

17. James's position on this is somewhat obscure, but has been called by some "neutral monism," where "pure experience" is the "neutral" stuff of which all things in whatever realm of existence consist.

18. William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1996), p. 15. Hereinafter cited as *ERE*.

19. James, *ERP*, p. 13. "One of them is the reader's personal biography, the other is the history of the house of which the room is part."

20. James, *Principles*, p.280.

21. James, *Principles*, p. 306.

22. See W. H. Dray, *Laus and Explanation in History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957); and W.H. Walsh, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (London: Hutchinson, 1967).

23. See Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*; and Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Penguin: New York, 1983).

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group, in early years preeminently the family, is what gives the individual her unity of self when she internalizes the attitudes that community takes towards her, as well as learning to respond to herself as others respond, and it is the development of language that makes this reflexivity possible, because it allows for significant symbols or gestures to be directed at both others and oneself;<sup>24</sup> when this has occurred, we not only hear ourselves, but also respond to ourselves, as truly as others do.<sup>25</sup> This understanding is also consonant, for better or worse, with the development of the "object-relations" school of post-Kleinian British psychoanalytical theory, especially in the work of W. R. D. Fairbairn and W. D. Winnicott.<sup>26</sup> There is clearly a space in James's account into which this dialogical theory of the self can be inserted: that of the genealogy of the social self.<sup>27</sup> Given the foregoing arguments, the acts of appropriation that constitute the continuity of the social self over time (and perhaps the other components of the Empirical Me) must be intersubjective in nature, though the details of this social construal of appropriation remain to be worked out. I would like to mention

in passing that this kind of account also seems to me to be the one best suited to cope with perplexing questions about identity in cases of multiple personality.<sup>28</sup> In these cases the social dimension of the self, overlaid on its body, is the one that remains most constant during the vicissitudes of the shifting personae of the subject.

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### Further Readings

For contemporary examples of philosophical thinking that attempt to take up the dialogical paradigm and make it fruitful for studies of narrative, personal identity, and ethics, see Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 1* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1990), and *Postmetaphysical Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1993); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1990); Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992), esp. chapters 5 and 6; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1981), esp. chapter 15; and Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1988) for the elaboration of theories of the self and of community that make use of the notion of narrative. From an entirely different angle, that of contemporary analytical philosophy of mind, Daniel Dennett also offers a narrative picture of the self, though one little developed, in his *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1991).

<sup>24</sup>. See George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self & Society* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1972), p. 155.

<sup>25</sup>. See Mead, *Mind, Self & Society*, p. 139.

<sup>26</sup>. See Margaret J. Black and Stephen A. Mitchell, *Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1995). pp. 112-138.

<sup>27</sup>. I leave aside the question of whether James's account of the overall self and its dynamic identity can be transposed into Mead's without remainder. Difficulties arise from the fact that Mead insists that the entire phenomenon of mentality arises from social interaction mediated by language. I'm not sure if James will go that far. For instance, I think James would balk at the suggestion that the self is a process which "does not exist for itself, but is simply a phase of the whole social organization of which the individual is a part. The organization of the social act has been imported into the organism and becomes then the mind of the individual," *Mind, Self, and Society*, *ibid.*, p. 178. My italics.

<sup>28</sup>. See the last few pages of Bernard Williams's essay, "Personal Identity and Individuation" in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 1973) for an interesting discussion of this issue.