

William James's Undivided Self and the Possibility of Immortality

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WILLIAM JAMES'S UNDIVIDED SELF AND THE POSSIBILITY OF
IMMORTALITY

by

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ABSTRACT
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The dissertation explores William James's conception of the self and his belief in the possibility of immortality. In *The Divided Self of William James*, James scholar Richard M. Gale argues that James unwittingly advanced two incompatible types of selves: a self-assertive "Promethean" self who maximizes desire-satisfaction and a passive mystic self who favors conceptless, mystical intuition. I argue that Gale's dichotomy of James is incorrect and that James's conception of the self is better understood through his growing belief in the possibility of immortality. I develop this idea by considering relevant aspects of both James's personal and philosophical development. I discuss the personal crises of James's youth as well as the dilemmas he encountered as his philosophy evolved. I argue that one of the keys to understanding James's conception of the self was his long-term involvement with psychic research and his association with the psychic medium Leonora Piper. These interactions compelled James to envision possibilities for the self beyond this life. In the final analysis, I believe my alternative account to Gale results in a more accurate and unified understanding of James, i.e., one in which the possibility of immortality played a central role in James's evolving vision of the self.

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Anthony G. Karlin, B.F.A.

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Introduction: The Divided-Self and Possibility

In *The Divided Self of William James*, Richard M. Gale argues that James “was a highly divided self throughout his life,” and throughout “his career James was of several minds about everything.”¹ According to Gale’s analysis, James unwittingly advanced two incompatible types of selves: a bold, creative “Promethean” self who maximizes desire-satisfaction and a mystic self who renounces the self-assertive Promethean quest in favor of a passive state of conceptless, mystical intuition that results in an intimate union with the universe. Gale suggests that these two selves are incompatible because of how they interact with the world and, more importantly, because of how each self conceives the nature of reality, i.e., their ontological commitments. The Promethean self, on this account, has an active will and is committed to ontological relativism, while the mystic self has a passive will and is committed to some form of absolutism. Consequently, so long as one attempts to realize both types of selves (which Gale claims James attempted to do), self-integration will remain impossible. Thus, concludes Gale, James and his philosophy remained perpetually divided.

Since Gale’s book came out in 1999, two noteworthy attempts to re-unify James and his philosophy have already appeared. In *The Unity of William James’s Thought*, published in 2002, Wesley Cooper attempts what Gale would later characterize as a “doctrinal integration” of James’s thought.² In brief, Cooper’s main idea, what he calls his “Two-Levels View,” is that James’s philosophy is not divided into two incompatible

¹ Richard M. Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 258.

² Richard M. Gale, “The Still Divided Self of William James: A Response to Pawelski and Cooper,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* XL, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 159.

worlds, but, rather, reflects two different perspectives or dimensions of the same world.³ James O. Pawelski followed Cooper's attempt to unify James in 2007 with his work, *The Dynamic Individualism of William James*. Unlike Cooper, Pawelski is primarily concerned with what Gale refers to as an “*existential* integration” of James.⁴ That is, Pawelski attempts to unify not only James's philosophy, but also his mind by arguing that his ideas became increasingly more integrated as his thought developed.⁵

Like Cooper and Pawelski, I do not accept Gale's divided-self thesis, but my attempt to re-unify James is unlike either of theirs. The thesis that I will argue for and defend in this paper is that James's understanding of the self was shaped and unified by his desire for and growing belief in the possibility of immortality. Like Pawelski, therefore, my account may be labeled “existential” insofar as I argue against a “several minds” interpretation of James. However, my account will differ from Pawelski's insofar as the unity I identify in James is not the success of reconciling competing beliefs, but, rather, a unity of vision and ambition, so to speak, for a conception of the self compatible with the possibility of immortality.

In order to present this account my task will be two-fold, part critical and part constructive. First, I will begin in Chapter 1 with a critique of Gale's claim that James was himself a mystic. In particular, I will consider Gale's claim that James had a number of mystical experiences which licenses him to attribute a mystical self to James. Using the examples Gale provides, I will then evaluate each experience according to the criteria

³ Wesley Cooper, *The Unity of William James's Thought* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), 6.

⁴ Gale, “Still Divided,” 159.

⁵ James O. Pawelski, *The Dynamic Individualism of William James* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), chap. 5.

for mystical experience which James set out in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.⁶ I will argue that only one of these experiences comfortably meets the criteria and, thus, Gale's portrayal of James as mystic is unwarranted. Following this initial critique, Chapters 2-5 will be used to construct my positive thesis that James rallied his views of the self around his desire for and growing belief in the possibility of immortality. The development of this idea will not only encompass the entire range of James's philosophical works, but it will additionally take into consideration relevant aspects of his personal life. More specifically, Chapter 2 will consider important aspects of James's biography such as the personal crises of his mid-20's and his subsequent interest and involvement in psychical research. It will be shown how James's interest in immortality was largely borne out of these events. Next, in Chapter 3, I will wholly turn to James's philosophical writings beginning with his magnum opus, *The Principles of Psychology*. There I will argue that, despite surface appearances, his novel conception of the self in *Principles* is compatible with and favors the possibility of immortality. In the fourth chapter I will examine James's discussion of the self in his Ingersoll Lecture, "Human Immortality," and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. I will contend that in these two works we once again find James concerned with immortality as he defends the doctrine against popular objections and advances a field-theory of consciousness which substantially expands the notion of the self found in *Principles*. In Chapter 5, I will turn to James's later, more explicitly metaphysical works, namely, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, *A Pluralistic Universe*, and *Some Problems in Philosophy*. James's interest

⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, all references to works by William James refer to *The Works of William James*, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, 19 Vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975-1988); *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1897.

in the possibility of an afterlife becomes even more apparent in these works as indicated by his rejection of dualism in favor of a metaphysics approximating panpsychism.

With my interpretation of James in place, in the final chapter I will be able to more sharply critique Gale's claims regarding the clash between selves he believes exists in James's philosophy. There I will argue that Gale's characterization of the mystical self runs against the current of James's thought and, in addition, directly conflicts with James's claims regarding mystical experience. In the end, with Gale's supposed clashes diffused and my alternative account in place, the result will be a more accurate and unified understanding of James, i.e., one in which the possibility of immortality played a central role in James's evolving vision of the self.

Until now, although there have been a handful of publications that touch on the issue of immortality in James's thought, no one has made a case for the pervasiveness of the idea in James's life and work. For example, in *Self, God, and Immortality: A Jamesian Investigation*, Eugene Fontinell draws upon James's work in order to formulate a plausible conception of the self that is open to the possibility of personal immortality.⁷ Fontinell makes it clear from the outset that he is not concerned with explicating James's metaphysics "but rather to utilize his language and ideas, as well as that of others."⁸ "What is of primary importance is not whether I present a fundamentally correct interpretation of James," writes Fontinell, "but whether there emerges from my reading of James, supplemented by a number of other thinkers, an intrinsically reasonable doctrine

⁷ Eugene Fontinell, *Self, God, and Immortality: A Jamesian Investigation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

⁸ *Ibid.*, xi.

of the self that is open to personal immortality.”⁹ Indeed, Fontinell utilizes James’s language about the self as a “field” in order to construct his own model of a self fit for personal immortality but neither attempts to connect the issue to James’s personal life nor to his work as a whole. Unlike Fontinell, I will not be using James’s writings as a means to *personally* advocate for personal immortality. Rather, what I want to argue is that William James hoped for and believed in the possibility of immortality and this led him to novel theorizing about the nature of the self and reality.

Nonfiction science writer Deborah Blum’s recent work, *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death*, is another work that calls attention to James’s concern with the afterlife.¹⁰ Blum very informatively chronicles James’s collaboration with members of the American and British Societies for Psychical Research, providing a compelling narrative of his dedication to psychical research, as well as the professional risks that arose as a consequence of such interests. Unlike the task of this paper, Blum’s narrative stays near the surface of James’s life, focusing on James’s unrelenting quest to *legitimize* psychic research in the scientific community. Blum does not (and did not intend to) connect the issue of immortality to James’s philosophy in a comprehensive or systematic way. Rather, her goal she says, was to “explore the supernatural” from the perspective of a “career science writer anchored in place with the sturdy shoes of common sense.”¹¹

⁹ Fontinell, op. cit., xii.

¹⁰ Deborah Blum, *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

¹¹ Ibid., 323.

Michel Ferrari's article, "William James and the Denial of Death," states that James believed in a personal afterlife but Ferrari finds it surprising that he rarely addresses the issue directly in his popular writings.¹² As mentioned above, James's Ingersoll Lecture, "Human Immortality," is one of these rare writings which explicitly takes up the issue and Ferrari dutifully summarizes James's responses to objections to immortality advanced in the lecture. As my paper will argue, although James directly addresses the issue of immortality only a handful of times in his writings, the topics he does repeatedly address, e.g., the self, the nature of consciousness, religious belief, free-will, and metaphysics in general, reflect this concern and have immediate bearing on the issue. Ferrari does not treat these issues in any significant detail, opting, instead, to argue that belief in an afterlife as a useful fiction--a story we create for ourselves in order to deny what may be psychologically devastating:

Religious narratives embody hopes about subjectivity and about the afterlife that deny death in ways that satisfy our ideals for this life. This explains why stories denying death, or trying to deny it, stories of Gilgamesh failing the test to remain awake forever and being forced to return to the land of the living; Orpheus losing his love to death because at the last moment he doubted Eurydice's full return; Jesus being buried and his resurrection after three days; living on in a computer or a clone—are so perennial and powerful reshaping themselves in every culture for every new generation.¹³

These types of death-denying stories persist, according to Ferrari, because they "embody memes that sustain themselves by giving us hope."¹⁴ Thus, Ferrari uses James as a foil, more or less, to expound upon what he calls "the tragedy of death."¹⁵

¹² Michel Ferrari, "William James and the Denial of Death," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, No. 9, (2002): 117-141.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

Sami Pihlström presents a more sympathetic interpretation of James in his article “William James on Death, Mortality and Immortality.”¹⁶ Unlike Ferrari, Pihlström argues that James did not firmly believe in personal immortality, only *feeling the practical need* for such a belief.¹⁷ Thus, James, in Pihlström’s view, only empathized with the need for life after death, himself uncommitted to such a belief. Pihlström places James within the Kantian project of “drawing limits to reason in order to make room for faith.”¹⁸ According to Pihlström’s reconstruction of James, the ethical demand for immortality grounds his metaphysics. Pihlström claims that, “death, for James, is ultimately something that ought to be overcome in our moral struggles that aim to make the world a better place to live a genuinely human life.”¹⁹ In his view, James’s pragmatism warrants our belief in either mortality or immortality--whatever best fits our vital needs and purposes. In this paper I will take issue with Pihlström’s interpretation on two different fronts. First, although I wouldn’t refer to James with the loaded label of “believer,” I wouldn’t label him as a “nonbeliever” either—James, as revealed to us through his letters and other biographical evidence, firmly believed in the possibility of immortality. Admittedly, I wouldn’t characterize James as absolutely assured of his personal immortality but James would also admit that the issue is inherently vague and mysterious, not allowing for air-tight, logical proofs. Thus, James’s beliefs and

¹⁵ Ferrari, *op. cit.*, 127.

¹⁶ Sami Pihlström, “William James on Death, Mortality, and Immortality,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, XXXVIII, No. 4 (Fall 2002): 605-628.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 606.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 607.

philosophical posturing on the subject fittingly reflected these qualities. Second, I don't believe James's concern with immortality arises out of an ethical demand. Instead, I see the belief becoming better grounded as James continued to explore the nature and possibilities of consciousness largely suggested to him by mystical experience and psychical research. By focusing on the moral or ethical angle of immortality, Pihlström fails to consider the connection with James's conception of the self and his metaphysics in general. Thus, although Pihlström presents an interesting juxtaposition of James and Kant regarding the practical need of believing in immortality, I don't believe he does justice to the issue.

In "The Religious Dimension of Individual Immortality in the thinking of William James," Laura Westra looks to James in her search for a conclusive proof that human beings can survive bodily death.²⁰ According to Westra, such a proof requires an account of a person or self that will allow it to subsist--in a meaningful way--once separated from the body. Westra insists on the importance of *personal* immortality:

It is not immortality in general we want to believe in, or immortality of the species, or indestructibility of material or non-material components, in whatever form the might enjoy their respective continued existence. It is personal immortality we seek, the survival of you and me and the people we know and love.²¹

Westra believes James fails to achieve this in his discussions of human immortality. She views James's varying accounts of the self in *The Principles of Psychology* as irreconcilable and unable to guarantee a personal afterlife. Specifically, Westra claims that the individual stream of consciousness initially described in *Principles* as "thoughts

²⁰ Laura Westra, "The Religious Dimension of Individual Immortality in the Thinking of William James," *Faith and Philosophy* Vol. 3, No. 3 (1996): 285-297.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 286.

doing the thinking,” is irreconcilable with a willing, creating self, which is both knower and known, which James also wants.²² Further, she argues that James’s speculation about an all-encompassing *anima mundi* is just as unhelpful regarding her goal of proving *personal* immortality. Westra wonders how individual integrity is preserved once we revert back to our original source, the *anima mundi*.²³ In the end, she concludes that James’s positing of “something larger than ourselves” is the best hope we have for salvation insofar as the higher probability that there is a God, the likelier our chance to survive bodily death.²⁴ I agree with Westra that James does not present a detailed or systematic account of personal immortality. However, I will argue that James goes much further than Westra gives him credit for. Particularly, Westra fails to appreciate James’s rejection of dualism in his later metaphysics. Additionally, she claims that James’s belief in a wider reality, “God,” is grounded purely on faith, but, as we shall see, such a reality was suggested to James by his investigations into religious and mystical experience. In short, Westra raises legitimate concerns and I agree that James does not strictly prove the truth of personal immortality; however, I will argue that his thinking on the topic is more sophisticated than Westra acknowledges.

In sum, the secondary literature that recognizes James’s interest in immortality either misrepresents the matter or simply fails to offer a complete account of it—which is one of the main tasks in this paper. But before I begin setting out my interpretation of James, a couple of issues concerning James’s belief in the possibility of immortality should be discussed at the outset.

²² Westra, *op. cit.*, 290-91.

²³ *Ibid.*, 292-93.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 295.

First and foremost, for obvious reasons, I will not be able to nor do I intend to strictly *prove* that James's developing views of the self were a direct result of his growing belief in immortality. If introspection into my own psyche is liable to error, as James believed it was, so much the worse it must be when one attempts to decipher the underlying motivations of others. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a friend of James's father and one of James's intellectual influences, begins his essay "Pray Without Ceasing" with the following remark: "It is the duty of men to judge men only by their actions . . . Our faculties furnish us with no means of arriving at the motive, the character, the secret self [of others]." ²⁵ By offering my interpretation of James I am supposing Emerson has slightly overstated the case. Indeed, I do believe that my interpretation of James will reveal some of the motives and character behind his philosophy. Nonetheless, I offer my interpretation as a hypothesis which, to use one of James's favorite phrases, must "run the gauntlet" of James's life and work. The extent to which my account comports with the available evidence, offers new insights, and enriches our understanding, will be, in Jamesian fashion, the extent to which it proves its worth.

The second issue which needs to be addressed is more significant and concerns the very notion of "possibility." That is, what does it mean to claim that James had a growing belief in the *possibility* of immortality? The issue of possibility was, William Gavin argues, a challenging one for James. ²⁶ Gavin suggests that there are two problems concerning possibility which James could have dealt with more satisfactorily--one

²⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*, ed. Robert D. Richardson, (New York: Bantam Dell, 1990), 59.

²⁶ William J. Gavin, *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 35-55.

regarding the range of applicable use and another which concerns whether it is logically coherent.²⁷

The first problem, according to Gavin's analysis, involves making a distinction between "possible possibility" and "actual possibility."²⁸ This is a problem that arises whenever one denies the fundamental reality of generals or universals and, instead, adopts some type of "particularist" position. Due to what Ralph Barton Perry calls his "taste for the particular and concrete,"²⁹ James often appears to adopt such a position. The consequence of denying the reality of universals, notes Gavin, is that "all generalizations are, as such, mere empty concepts. They deal only with abstract possibility, not with reality."³⁰ Therefore, any statement that is made about future tendencies or possibilities must "deal only with the *possible* possibility—about the logical probabilities of something that might happen."³¹

Actual possibility, on the other hand, writes Gavin, is exemplified by scientific laws that accept universals and thus involve statements "concerning what *would* happen if such and such were to be done," i.e., contrary-to-fact conditionals.³² In other words, if one does not believe that there are regular and fixed aspects of reality which are accurately accounted for and described by scientific laws, then it seems impossible to predict what is *actually* possible.

²⁷Gavin, *op. cit.*, 36.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1935), I:287.

³⁰ Gavin, 36.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

Although James does not explicitly mention this issue, Gavin argues that James “somewhat” acknowledges the difficulty and resolves it, “at least to his own satisfaction.”³³ Obviously, James *does* want to deal with actual possibility, viz., he wants an understanding of possibility that is rooted in and reflective of reality. Thus, James’s approach to possibility involves connecting it to actuality through subjecting the idea to the pragmatic test which he famously describes as follows:

To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all.³⁴

In short, James believes that in order to understand possibility, it is necessary to consider the practical effects of conceiving something as “possible.” James asks, “When you say that a thing is possible, what difference does it make?” and answers: “It makes at least this difference that if any one calls it impossible you can contradict him, if any one calls it actual you can contradict *him*, and if any one calls it necessary you can contradict him too.”³⁵ Gavin observes that James’s response here only spells out the “*logical* meaning of the term ‘possible.’”³⁶ So far, then, James has not conceived possibility in a way that brings it into contact with concrete actuality or a factual state of affairs. James, himself, realized this shortcoming and pushed the analysis further:

When you say a thing is possible, does that not make some farther difference in terms of actual fact?

³³ Gavin, *op. cit.*, 37.

³⁴ James, *Pragmatism*, 29.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

³⁶ Gavin, 37.

It makes at least this negative difference that if the statement be true, it follows that *there is nothing extant capable of preventing* the possible thing. The absence of real grounds of interference may thus be said to make things *not impossible*, possible therefore in the *bare* or *abstract* sense.³⁷

In this passage, as he works out his conception of pragmatic possibility, James does make reference to an actual state of affairs, i.e., the *absence* of particular conditions, which has moved the analysis beyond what is simply *logically* possible. Thus, Gavin writes, “Just being *logically* possible is insufficient for an idea to be *pragmatically* possible. . . . Pragmatic possibility thus entails more than logical meaningfulness; it entails a factual situation.”³⁸ And yet, according to James, most of the things that we believe are possible are not bare possibilities, but, rather, they are concretely grounded or well-grounded possibilities. Using the example of a chicken and an egg, James illustrates the idea of a grounded possibility:

This means not only that there are no preventive conditions present, but that some of the conditions of production of the possible thing actually are here. Thus a concretely possible chicken means: (1) that the idea of chicken contains no essential self-contradiction; (2) that no boys, skunks, or other enemies are about; and (3) that at least an actual egg exists. Possible chicken means actual egg—plus actual sitting hen, or incubator, or what not. As the actual conditions approach completeness the chicken becomes a better-and-better-grounded possibility. When the conditions are entirely complete, it ceases to be a possibility, and turns into an actual fact.³⁹

Pragmatic possibility therefore requires, according to James’s account, both negative and positive conditions which are *actual* or reflect the factual state of affairs. In this way, through his pragmatic methodology, James moved from *possible* possibility or *logical*

³⁷ *Pragmatism*, 136.

³⁸ Gavin, *op. cit.*, 40.

³⁹ *Pragmatism*, 136.

possibility and into the realm of *actual* possibility. But doesn't James's example of the chicken and egg depend upon law-like generalizations regarding the conditions under which actual chickens come into being? In his account of pragmatic possibility, James seems to have betrayed the "particularist" position.

I believe a partial answer to this concern lies in identifying a faulty assumption-- that James was a "particularist," i.e., a nominalist who didn't recognize the reality of concepts, abstract objects, universals, etc. According to Perry, James "never became a nominalist. In one way or another he always found a way to provide for universals, generals, and concepts, however much he might disparage them."⁴⁰ Gerald Myers makes the same observation, pointing out that James, at the end of his life, argued against nominalism.⁴¹ In *Some Problems of Philosophy*, a work intended to be a widely distributed introduction to philosophy, James writes:

What I am affirming here is the platonic doctrine that concepts are singular, that concept-stuff is inalterable, and that physical realities are constituted by the various concept-stuff of which they "partake." It is known as "logical realism" in the history of philosophy; and has usually been more favored by rationalists than by empiricist minds.⁴²

Using his pragmatic methodology in order to determine what counts as "real," James draws the conclusion that concepts should be considered just as real as percepts:

The best definition I know is that which the pragmatist rule gives: 'anything is real of which we find ourselves obliged to take account in any way.' Concepts are thus as real as percepts, for we cannot live a moment without taking account of them.⁴³

⁴⁰ Perry, op. cit., 2:407

⁴¹ Gerald E. Myers, *William James* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 286.

⁴² *Some Problems of Philosophy*, 58.

⁴³ *SPP*, 56.

Thus, according to James, because concepts figure into our experience so prominently, we must acknowledge their reality. James fully appreciated the fact that concepts play an essential and irreplaceable role in shaping human experience:

The universal and the particular parts of the experience are literally immersed in each other, and both are indispensable. Conception is not like a painted hook, on which no real chain can be hung; for we hang concepts upon percepts, and percepts upon concepts interchangeably and indefinitely. . . . 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. . . .

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.⁴⁴

Yet, although James grants that concepts are real and important for human experience, he fundamentally disagrees with the view of rationalism which maintains that “concept-stuff is primordial and perceptual things are secondary in nature.”⁴⁵ Unlike the rationalist position, James admits to holding the “somewhat eccentric” view that concrete percepts are primordial and concepts are secondary. James describes this as an “attempt to combine logical realism with an otherwise empiricist mode of thought.”⁴⁶

Concepts have a secondary status, James argues, because of the “‘eternal’ kind of being which they enjoy is inferior to the temporal kind, because it is so static and schematic and lacks so many characters which temporal reality possesses.”⁴⁷ However, this “does not mean that concepts and the relations between them are not just as ‘real’ in

⁴⁴ *SPP*, 58-59

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

their ‘eternal’ way as percepts are in their temporal way.”⁴⁸ Simply put, James was convinced that reality was too profuse for words and outstripped all possible conceptual schemes:

Properly speaking, concepts are post-mortem preparations, sufficient 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.⁴⁹

As James suggest here, concepts can only provide us with an “abstract outline” or “approximate sketch” of reality and are, as Myers puts it, “only substitutes for the original flux-reality from which they have been abstracted.”⁵⁰ Again, this is not to say that concepts are not genuinely real or useful. Concepts are “useful but not sovereign,” James writes, “Philosophy, like life, must keep the doors and windows open.”⁵¹ Regarding the use of concepts or universals in science, James accepted the validity of laws which have proved “potent for prediction;”⁵² yet, at the same time, he continually stressed the limited and fallible nature of science. In *The Principles of Psychology*, James had already highlighted some of these perceived shortcomings:

Science thinks she has discovered the objective realities in question. Atoms and ether, with no properties but masses and velocities expressible by numbers, and paths expressible by analytic formulas, these at last are things over which the mathematic-logical network may be flung, and by supposing which instead of sensible phenomena science becomes more able to manufacture for herself a world about which rational propositions may be framed. Sensible phenomena are pure delusions for the

⁴⁸ *SPP*, 55-56.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

⁵⁰ Myers, *op. cit.*, 286.

⁵¹ *SPP*, 55.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 102.

mechanical philosophy. The “things” and qualities we believe in do not exist. The only realities are swarming solids in everlasting motion . . . whose expressionless and meaningless changes form the history of the world, and are deducible from initial collocations and habits of movement hypothetically assumed.⁵³

Commenting on this passage, as well as James’s general attitude towards science, Myers writes:

In James’s eyes, scientists talk as if they have discovered thing in which the ideal and real coincide, and they often act as if their laws and hypotheses are rational propositions, knowable a priori, about which only an imbecile could harbor doubts. But their knowledge applies to such a stripped-down world, describable in abstract, quantitative terms but lacking qualitative content. . . .⁵⁴

In sum, although he did not believe that science had the ultimate say in defining reality, James did respect the empirical method and verifying procedures of science. He believed that the laws discovered and utilized by science were real and useful to the extent that they tapped into some aspect of reality. Thus, insofar as James believed that concepts were able to capture some particular aspects of reality, however limited, he could legitimately use them to speak meaningfully about *actual* possibility.

Setting aside the issue of actual possibility, Gavin suggests one other problem for James regarding the issue of possibility. As Gavin rightly observes, subjunctive conditionals, at least for empiricists, seem to lead to a dilemma in which they are construed as either self-contradictory or repetitive.⁵⁵ The problem, according to Gavin, is succinctly summarized by R.B. Braithwaite in his essay “Laws of Nature and Causality”:

The problem which they [subjunctive conditionals] present to a Humean is the following dilemma. The constant conjunction analysis leaves two

⁵³ James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2:665

⁵⁴ Myers, op. cit., 289.

⁵⁵ Gavin, op. cit., 42.

choices open for the analysis of “If a thing is *A*, it is *B*.” One choice is “Every *A* is *B*” taken, as traditional logic would say, “existentially,” i.e., understood in such a way as to assert the existence of at least one thing which is *A*. The other alternative is “Every *A* is *B*” taken non-existentially, i.e., understood as not to assert the existence of an *A*.⁵⁶

A subjunctive conditional is defined by Braithwaite as “an assertion of the form:

‘Although there are no *A*’s, if there were to be any *A*’s, all of them would be *B*’s.’”⁵⁷

Consequently, if we understand “If a thing is *A*, it is *B*” existentially, i.e., as asserting that “Something is *A*,” then it contradicts with the very definition of a subjunctive conditional which states that there are no *A*’s. Conversely, if we understand “If a thing is *A*, it is *B*” non-existentially, i.e., as asserting that “There is nothing which is *A*,” then it follows that “Nothing is both *A* and non-*B*”—since, after all, there is nothing which is *A*. But the statement “Nothing is both *A* and non-*B*” is logically equivalent to the subjunctive conditional “If a thing is *A*, it is *B*,” thus, it is simply repetitive. Therefore, says Gavin, “we have at least an apparent dilemma: subjunctive conditionals are either self-contradictory or repetitive.”⁵⁸ He concludes:

I believe that James, acting as empiricist, did not reject the contrary-to-fact conditional but did reject that interpretation of it which viewed subjunctive conditionals as repetitive. In other words, James gave up logic as being completely capable of dealing with possibility. . . . James chooses the self-contradictory. . . .⁵⁹

I agree with Gavin’s assessment. James account of pragmatic possibility and his assessment of logic as insufficient is evidenced by his description of the “faith ladder” in

⁵⁶ Gavin, op. cit., 42; R. B. Braithwaite, “Laws of Nature and Causality,” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Science*, ed. Baruch Brody (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1970), 57.

⁵⁷ Braithwaite, 57.

⁵⁸ Gavin, 42.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

A Pluralistic Universe. James claims that the faith ladder is a description of how we come to choose one conceptual theory over another:

A conception of the world arises in you somehow, no matter how. Is it true or not? you ask.

It *might* be true somewhere, you say, for it is not self-contradictory.

It *may* be true, you continue, even here and now.

It is *fit* to be true, it would be *well if it were true*, it *ought* to be true, you presently feel.

It *must* be true, something persuasive in you whispers next; and then—as a final result—

It shall be *held for true*, you decide; it *shall be* as if true, for *you*.

And your acting thus may in certain special cases be a means of making it securely true in the end.⁶⁰

Immediately following this account, James admits: “Not one step in this process is logical. . . . It is life exceeding logic, it is the practical reason for which the theoretic reason finds arguments after the conclusion is once there.”⁶¹ According to James’s ladder, logical possibility is just the incipient stage of practical reasoning; it leads one to ask whether it *may* be true, which leads one to further ask if it is *fit* to be true, etc., etc. Gavin points out that when James writes, “it would be *well if it were true*,” he is dealing with actual possibility, i.e., at that point one is making a claim about the current factual state of affairs.⁶² “It shows that participation, response to a situation, can take place only if actual possibility is affirmed.”⁶³ James illustrates these points in his discussion of the

⁶⁰ *A Pluralistic Universe*, 148.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁶² Gavin, *op. cit.*, 53.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 53.

possibility of salvation in *Pragmatism*, where he conceives salvation as contingent upon each person doing their “level best” within a “social scheme of co-operative work.”⁶⁴

James argues that “In the end it is our faith and not our logic that decides such questions, and I deny the right of any pretended logic to veto my own faith. I find myself willing to take the universe to be really dangerous and adventurous, without therefore backing out and crying ‘no play.’”⁶⁵ Thus, James comes to view logic in the same way he views science--both have their legitimate uses, but, insofar as each relies on abstract or conceptual schematization, compared to primordial reality, they are of only secondary importance.

Concerning James’s “faith” and his rejection of logic as the final arbiter of belief, much more will be said in later chapters; consequently, I wish not to belabor the point at this time. The important point to make here is that I will be using the term “possibility” in the same pragmatic sense as James. Therefore, when I speak of James’s growing belief in the possibility of immortality, I am suggesting that the more James believed in a reality that was suited for personal immortality, the better grounded the possibility became for him. Of course, due to our obvious limitations in determining whether all the right conditions for immortality are in place, James was never absolutely certain about the final truth of the matter. With these important preliminaries out the way, let us now turn to Gale’s account of James’s mystical self.

⁶⁴ *Pragmatism*, 139.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

Chapter 1

William James's Non-Mystical Self

In this chapter I want to challenge Gale's basic assumption that James was himself a mystic. I will argue that, based on what we know about James's life, there is not enough evidence to support Gale's claim. In particular, I will contend that nearly all of the so-called mystical experiences which Gale cites do not fit James's own criteria for mystical experience. Moreover, whatever mystical experiences James might have had were so few and far between that these types of experiences should not be considered characteristic of James's life. I will conclude that, although he had an intense interest in mystical experience and will develop a conception of the self open to mystical experiences, James himself was not a mystic. In order to demonstrate this, let us first consider Gale's account of James's mystical self.

According to Gale, James's mystical self desires to "achieve a deep intimacy, ultimately a union, with the inner life of other persons, both natural and supernatural, even with the world at large."¹ James's approach, Gale claims, involves experiencing the other person as a *Thou* rather an *It*. Although James does speak of religion as turning the "dead blank *it* of the world into a living *thou*" in his 1881 essay "Reflex Action and Theism,"² Gale principally utilizes the language and ideas of Martin Buber. What Gale finds particularly useful is Buber's distinction between an I-It and an I-Thou relation. What distinguishes these two types is that in an I-Thou relation, rather than the two relata remaining apart, the two relata are understood to exist within the relation in the sense of

¹ Gale, *Divided Self*, 246.

² James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 101.

entering into each other.³ As Buber describes it, within an I-Thou relation a partial fusion of two originally separate consciousnesses is achieved upon their entering into “relational processes and states.”⁴ Gale suggests that an example of an I-Thou-ing process occurs in James’s essay “What Makes a Life Significant.” In this essay, James describes the process by which two lovers, Jack and Jill, become aware of each other’s special uniqueness. In what Gale describes as possibly his most profound passage, James writes:⁵

Every Jack sees in his own particular Jill charms and perfections to the enchantment of which we stolid onlookers are stone-cold. And which has the superior view of the absolute truth, he or we? Which has the more vital insight into the nature of Jill’s existence, as a fact? Is he in excess, being in this matter a maniac? Or are we in defect, being victims of a pathological anaesthesia as regards Jill’s magical importance? Surely the latter; surely to Jack are the profounder truths revealed; surely poor Jill’s palpitating little life-throbs *are* among the wonders of creation, *are* worthy of this sympathetic interest; and it is to our shame that the rest of us cannot feel like Jack. For Jack realizes Jill concretely, and we do not. He struggles towards a union with her inner life, divining her feelings, anticipating her desires, understanding her limits as manfully as he can, and yet inadequately, too; for he also is afflicted with some blindness, even here. Whilst we, dead clods that we are, do not even seek after these things, but are contented that that portion of eternal fact named Jill should be for us as if it were not. Jill, who knows her inner life, knows that Jack’s way of taking it—so importantly—is the true and serious way; and she responds to the truth in him by taking him truly and seriously, too. May the ancient blindness never wrap its clouds about either of them again! Where would any of *us* be, were there no one willing to know us as we really are or ready to repay us for *our* insight by making recognizant

³ Gale, *op. cit.*, 246.

⁴ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 70.

⁵ Gale, *op. cit.*, 247.

return? We ought, all of us, to realize each other in this intense, pathetic [empathetic or sympathetic], and important way.⁶

James's main point here, according to Gale, is that "there are features of another person's consciousness that can be known in the full-blooded existential sense only through an act of sympathetic intuition."⁷ That is, to *really* know someone, to know what-it-is-like to be Jill, one must enter into her inner life and experience the world as she does; consequently, one must *love* her. Gale, channeling James, remarks, "To miss the joy of this inner consciousness in another person is to miss all, for it is this that makes her life significant. . . ."⁸ Thus, on Gale's account, James's mystical self craves this sympathetic union with another because it is the only way to genuinely know and appreciate another human being as they *really* are.

Assuming that an act of sympathetic or empathetic intuition is the means by which James's mystical self forges a partial union with another, how exactly is this accomplished? Because James finds the inner life, the object of the intuition, to be mysterious and ineffable, Gale argues, so is the act of intuition; thus, James is prevented from giving a straightforward account.⁹ Gale suggests that what is required is a type of indirect communication, the kind of communication used by mystics. As Gale puts it:

Maybe the best that can be done is to write a novel or play or, better yet, a typical Tin Pan Alley song. Jack takes one look at Jill and "Whammo! Zing Went the Strings of His Heart." As he peers deeply into her eyes he feels as if he has known her all his life. His focus of orientation has radically altered so that now he perceives the whole world through her.

⁶ James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, 150-51.

⁷ Gale, *op. cit.*, 248.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 250-51.

He locks in on her inner joy and tingles, which is what bestows meaning and value on her life. Jack's I-Thou-ing of Jill is reciprocated by Jill, thus bringing about a mutual partial merging of their consciousnesses.¹⁰

According to this description, when an individual makes a concerted attempt to connect with another consciousness, there can occur something like a mystical-union-at-first-sight. Gale suggests that this is no more mysterious than Sartre's experience of the "glance" in *Being and Nothingness*. In both cases a mysterious sort of direct awareness of one conscious being by another is involved, the crucial difference being that Sartre perceives this as an intrusive threat and restriction on his freedom whereas James views the merger as an opportunity to expand his consciousness. As Gale succinctly puts it, "James likes people and Sartre doesn't."¹¹

According to Gale's account, in addition to wanting to I-Thou other *people*, James also desired to I-Thou *non-human animals*.¹² In support of this claim, Gale cites the following lines from a letter James wrote in 1873:

Sight of elephants and tigers at Barnum's menagerie whose existence, so individual and peculiar, yet stands there, so intensely and vividly real, as much as one's own, so that one feels again poignantly the unfathomableness of ontology, supposing ontology to be at all.¹³

What James finds so alluring during the circus is the "unfathomableness" of these animals' *being*—if only he could catch a glimpse into what it is like to be an elephant or a tiger. As any pet owner will attest to (James himself was very fond of dogs), the desire to

¹⁰ Gale, *op. cit.*, 251.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *The Letters of William James*, vol. 1, ed. Henry James (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 224.

know what these creatures are thinking as they stare back so marvelously is a recurring curiosity. Going even further than our animal friends, Gale claims that James expressed a desire to I-Thou the entire universe when he writes: “The Universe is no longer a mere *It* to us, but a *Thou*, if we are religious; and any relation that may be possible from person to person might be possible here.”¹⁴ Gale proposes that James’s own mystical experiences of personality throughout the universe should be conceived as less heightened or intense forms of I-Thou types of mystical experience. What is involved in these mystical experiences is a direct, nonsensory awareness of what James calls a “More” or “Unseen” supernatural reality.¹⁵ It is just these extraordinary experiences that, for James, form the basis of institutional religion, theology, and personal religious feelings and beliefs.¹⁶ These are the types of personal experiences that James famously chronicles in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James claims that through such experiences the subject typically receives “an assurance of safety and a temper of peace, and, in relations to others, a preponderance of loving affection.”¹⁷ Accordingly, as a result of having such experiences, many believe they have identified a source of personal redemption beyond our ordinary awareness.

Given James’s description of the foregoing experiences as religious and Gale’s claim that James was a religious mystic, one would expect to discover that James himself had such experiences. However, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* James denies having mystical experiences. James reports that “my own constitution shuts me out from

¹⁴ James, *Will to Believe*, 31; Gale, op. cit., 252.

¹⁵ Gale, 253.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 383.

their enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand.”¹⁸ Thus, the obvious question arises: Can James be counted as a religious mystic without having mystical experiences? Gale answers the question affirmatively and gives a two-fold reply.

First, Gale argues, even if it *were* true that James did not have any mystical experiences, he could still have had a deep sensitivity to and appreciation of them. Gale compares this kind of situation to someone who can appreciate an *Eroica* Symphony without having the requisite talent to compose one.¹⁹ Additionally, Gale recommends that we consider someone like Walter Stace, who was “a virgin to mystical experience” but was “nevertheless one of the great expositors and defenders of mysticism.”²⁰ Stace, according to Gale, would agree with James’s claim that “we all have at least the germ of mysticism in us.”²¹ Thus, on Gale’s account, having a mystical experience is not a necessary condition for being a religious mystic.

Gale’s second response to James’s disavowal of mystic experience is that the author is simply not being honest with his readers. Gale explains:

Mystical experiences for [James] cover a broad spectrum of cases, ranging from the relatively undeveloped experiences of a heightened sense of reality, an intensification of feeling and insight such as occurs under the influence of alcohol, drugs, nitrous oxide, art, and even the raptures of

¹⁸ *VRE*, 301

¹⁹ Gale, *op. cit.*, 254;

²⁰ See Stace, Walter T. *Mysticism and Philosophy*. (London: MacMillan, 1960); Gale, *Divided Self*, 254.

²¹ For example, in *Mysticism and Philosophy*, Stace writes: “It has often been suggested that all men, or nearly all men, are in some sense or other rudimentary or unevolved mystics, although in most of us the mystical consciousness is so far buried in the unconscious that it appears in the surface levels of our minds merely in the guise of vague feelings of sympathetic response to the clearer call of the mystic,” p 21; James, *Pragmatism*, 76.

nature, to the fully developed monistic experience of an undifferentiated unity in which all distinctions are obliterated.²²

Although, admits Gale, James never had mystical experiences of the fully developed kind, he did have many of the less developed kind, namely, a number of episodes in which he experimented with nitrous oxide and mescal. Additionally, in a letter James wrote to his wife in 1898, he reported a mystical experience he had during an evening he spent in the Adirondack Mountains.²³ Furthermore, in his 1910 essay, “A Suggestion about Mysticism,” James relates an episode involving a series of dreams in which he apparently became aware of some experiences not his own. James reported that he could not tell whose experiences they were, only that they were utterly foreign and not his own.²⁴ Thus, concludes Gale, in denying having had mystical experiences, James was less than forthright---and for understandable reasons.

As Gale correctly notes, James’s interest in mystical experiences and psychic research was, on the whole, considered disreputable by the wider academic and scientific community. Such contempt caused James to be especially sensitive to how his “tough-minded” colleagues would perceive and receive him. In particular, James sometimes seems to make a concerted effort to appear as cold-bloodedly scientific and unaffected as they, commonly downplaying his lively interest in religion, mystical experience, paranormal psychology, and the like in order to gain a more receptive hearing as well as to protect his reputation. For example, in his 1898 Ingersoll Lecture, “Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine,” James tries at the outset to

²² Gale, *op. cit.*, 254.

²³ *The Correspondence of William James*, ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkley, 12 vol. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992-2004), 8:380-81.

²⁴ James, *Essays in Philosophy*, 160.

distance himself from “individuals with a real passion for the matter”—only then to proceed to counter two objections to immortality and make a case in support of its possibility.²⁵ Suffice it to say that James never failed to take the predispositions of his audience into account when he was pitching his ideas, thus giving credence to the duplicity Gale identifies in James’s testimony regarding mystical experience. All of this considered, Gale concludes that “James had every right to be a sympathetic expositor and defender of mysticism.”²⁶

I think Gale’s conclusion, that James had the right to exposit and defend mysticism, is entirely correct. However, whether James had the *right* to exposit and defend mysticism is not what is directly at issue. What is at issue is whether or not James himself was a mystic. As a student of psychology and psychical researcher, James was familiar with a wide variety of abnormal and paranormal states of consciousness which qualified him to speak on the subject—irrespective of whether or not he had mystical experiences himself. But the question remains: Was James himself a mystic? This question is important because if James was not a mystic, then we must reject part of Gale’s divided-self thesis which claims that James had a mystical self.

In order to answer this question we must first determine, as Gale attempts to do, if James had any mystical experiences. Recall that Gale’s first response to the question was that it doesn’t matter if James had mystical experiences or not as long as he had a deep sensitivity to and appreciation of them. Gale compares this to someone who can appreciate an *Eroica* Symphony but lacks the talent to compose one. However, if Gale wants to argue that James had a mystical self, it certainly *does* matter whether he had

²⁵ James, *Essays in Religion and Morality*, 78.

²⁶ Gale, *op. cit.*, 255.

mystical experiences. We wouldn't call someone who merely appreciates a symphony a composer nor would we call someone who merely appreciates mysticism a mystic. What may be helpful here is a distinction James sometimes draws between knowledge-about and knowledge-by-acquaintance. For example, one may have conceptual knowledge *about* symphonies without ever having a direct *acquaintance* with the composing of a symphony. That is to say, I can conceptualize and appreciate a certain activity or a way of life, but this is no substitute for being genuinely conditioned through a direct experience of it. Thus, to establish whether James had a mystical self we need to determine if he had mystical experiences. Gale believes James did.

According to Gale, James's description of Jack and Jill in "What Makes a Life Significant?" his experimentation with drugs and alcohol, his unusual experience in the Adirondack Mountains, and even his report of having a dream not his own, all belong to the category of mystical experience. If one were to attribute mystical experiences to James, I believe, following Gale, these are the best candidates. The next question to be addressed, then, is whether these were in fact genuine mystical experiences. Curiously, though Gale uses these examples to press the claim that James was a mystic, he adds, "Whether these experiences should be called 'mystical' will be broached later."²⁷ But Gale never returns to these examples for the purpose of determining whether or not they warrant classification as mystical experience. No further doubts about whether James was a mystic are raised within the book. In any event, I will broach the topic now.

Unlike some of the other supposed mystical experiences cited by Gale, the description of Jack and Jill in "What Makes a Life Significant?" is obviously not a direct

²⁷ Gale, *op. cit.*, 255.

reporting of some particular experience in James's life. Still, I take it to be a generic account of a relatively common bonding experience between two people that surely James was familiar with: love. As James describes it, through love we struggle to forge a union between our consciousness and the consciousness of another, and only through this process do we really come to understand and appreciate the "magical importance" of another person. This sympathetic or empathetic process of understanding is not something reserved exclusively for romantic couples, but, rather, "We ought, all of us, to realize each other in this intense, pathetic [empathetic or sympathetic], and important way."²⁸ Thus, Gale's description of this event as the Tin Pan Alley song "Whammo! Zing Went the Strings of His Heart," overlooks the egalitarian aspect of James's account. The union James describes in the Jack and Jill example is not confined to romantic love. James is more concerned with describing and championing a universal, agape-type of love rather than the romantic type which hardly needs promoting. That is, James wants to promote the idea that every individual possesses a "magical importance" that is worthy of some degree of reverence and can only be discovered through a process of intense sympathetic or empathetic attention. More than likely, James used romantic love as an example because it is the most common occasion for this kind of sustained attention and is an example his readers could readily relate to.

So, assuming that there are these Jack and Jill instances of two partially merging consciousnesses, are they to be counted as *mystical* experiences for the subjects involved? Clearly we are in need of some criteria in order to determine what differentiates a mystical experience from any other type of experience. Since we are trying to determine if James had any mystical experiences, it seems fair to use his own

²⁸ James, *Talks to Teachers*, 151.

criteria in *Varieties*. According to James, there are at least four distinguishing marks of mystical experience: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. I will briefly recapitulate what James means by these qualities, then I will return to the experiences in question and determine the extent to which they successfully meet or fail to meet the criteria.

James claims that the first two qualities listed, ineffability and noetic quality, are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for classifying an experience as mystical. He writes, “These two characters will entitle any state to be called mystical, in the sense in which I use the word.”²⁹ By “ineffability,” James means that the experience “defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. . . . It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others.”³⁰ Thus, a mystical experience for James was not only a “you had to be there” type of experience, but, an even more particular “you had to be me” type of experience. To put it another way, if you weren’t the subject undergoing the mystical experience, then you can never adequately know what that experience was like. The second distinguishing mark, “noetic quality,” refers to the fact that mystical experiences seem to be states of knowledge to those who have them. James describes these experiences as, “. . . 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; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of

²⁹ *VRE*, 302.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

authority for after-time.”³¹ All James is claiming here is that, despite their inherent opaqueness, mystical experiences, at minimum, *seem like* a direct intuition of some truth or knowledge to the person having the experience. For James, then, a mystical experience is always felt to be a “teachable moment”--even though what is being taught isn’t entirely clear.

According to James, the other two qualities of mystical experience, transiency and passivity, are “usually found” but are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions of mystical experience.³² That is, transiency and passivity are very common in mystical experiences but James does not view either as *essential* for mystical experience. Regarding “transiency,” James points out that mystical states usually do not last long: “Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day.”³³ As for “passivity,” James explains how it is common for someone in a mystic state to “feel as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.”³⁴ He adds that even if one is able through voluntary behavior to induce a mystic state, once one is in such a state, one usually becomes passive.³⁵

Now, with these four distinguishing marks of mystical experience in hand, let us return to the experiences from James’s life we were previously considering and determine to what extent they may be categorized as mystical. In the case of Jack and Jill, does the

³¹ *VRE*, 302.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

act of sympathetic or empathetic intuition that James describes meet both of the necessary criteria? Let us first consider ineffability. Is Jack's experience of getting to know Jill and what-it-is-like to be Jill an ineffable experience? If someone were to ask Jack what happened during his date with Jill that left him so smitten with her, would he be forced to respond, "I can't really say," and shrug his shoulders? Or would Jack be more likely to begin describing Jill—that she grew up in Texas, she was raised by her grandparents, she speaks fluent Spanish, she has a great sense of humor, she loves cooking, she doesn't like big cities, she knows a lot about sports, she's learning to play the piano, etc., etc.? I am not claiming that any one of these seemingly prosaic facts about Jill would, by themselves, begin to capture the uniqueness or "magical importance" of her, but I am suggesting that one can begin to enumerate the unique *combination* of qualities she possesses which directly speaks to the uniqueness of Jill's self. Consider, for the sake of comparison, how Walt Whitman attempts to communicate the uniqueness of New York in his poem "Mannahatta":

Numberless crowded streets, high growths of iron, slender, strong, light,
splendidly uprising toward clear skies,
Tides swift and ample, well-loved by me, towards sundown,
The flowing sea-currents, the little islands, larger adjoining islands, the
heights, the villas,
The countless masts, the white shore-steamers, the lighters, the ferry-
boats, the black sea-steamers well-modelled,
The down-town streets, the jobbers' houses of business, the houses of
business of the ship-merchants and money brokers, the river-streets,
Immigrants arriving, fifteen or twenty thousand in a week,
The carts hauling goods, the manly race of drivers of horses, the brown-
faced sailors,
The summer air, the bright sun shining, and the sailing clouds aloft,³⁶

Of course, Whitman cannot completely capture the unique experience of New York in poetry; however, by highlighting some of the remarkable aspects of the city, one can

³⁶ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004), 390.

begin to get a feel for the city's singularity. The same can be done, I am suggesting, in the case of describing those with whom we have a personal or intimate relationship. It would seem rather strange, after all, if we are supposed to discover the "magical importance" of other people, but have nothing substantial to say about them when asked why we hold them so dear. Again, this is not to say that Jack's description of his experience of Jill would be exhaustive of their encounter but I would argue that it is *possible* to give an *adequate report of it*, viz., I believe it is possible to adequately communicate what one finds special about someone. Surely, there is no shortage of love letters or poetry that could attest to this. If I am correct, this is all that is needed for the Jack and Jill example to run contrary to James's ineffability condition.

The objection I am dealing with here is the idea that maybe, at least in the case of romantic love, something indescribable is experienced that flies over and above all the usual facts of life--something indescribable which mysteriously marks out another person as "different," or "special," or as my "soul mate." Even if this were the case, in the Jack and Jill example James describes this union as something all of us should seek with each other. Thus, to repeat, James does not appear to have romantic love exclusively in mind but, rather, something more generally applicable when he speaks of this sympathetic union. James writes that "as a matter of fact, certain persons do exist with an enormous capacity for friendship and for taking delight in other people's lives; and that such persons know more of truth than if their hearts were not so big."³⁷ Put in proper context, James's description of Jack and Jill is meant to be a practical remedy to social, religious,

³⁷ James, *Talks to Teachers*, 151.

and political intolerance, human injustice, and cruelty--not a reporting of an elusive mystical experience. James writes:

Our inner secrets must remain for the most part impenetrable by others, for beings as essentially practical as we are necessarily short of sight. But, if we cannot gain much positive insight into one another, cannot we at least use our sense of our blindness to make us more cautious in going over the dark places? Cannot we escape some of those hideous ancestral intolerances and cruelties, and positive reversals of the truth?³⁸

Accordingly, the point of the Jack & Jill example was meant to encourage sensitivity to the inner life of others, not to seek a mystical union with them. In sum, ineffability doesn't seem to belong to the Jack and Jill experience and thus would disqualify it as a mystical experience.

Even if the ineffability condition did not disqualify the Jack and Jill experience, the noetic quality requirement surely would. To be brief, although we do gain knowledge in a Jack-and-Jill type of experience, nowhere in the description does James refer to either person becoming aware of some inarticulate revelation or truth unavailable in normal states of consciousness. Through his effortful attention Jack deepens his knowledge of Jill and begins to understand what-it-is-like to be Jill, but he is not in an unspeakable confrontation with some completely mysterious reality (like perhaps we are with our pets). If this were not the case, i.e., if we are being encouraged to make judgments about others on the basis of some esoteric and inarticulate intuition, it seems to follow that we would also be permitted to devalue another person in the event we experience something like a "bad vibe." I don't believe this is what James was suggesting or encouraging in his example. Therefore, it seems safe to say that James had a Jack-and-Jill type of experience, probably many, but this type of experience, according

³⁸ *Talks to Teachers*, 151.

to his own criteria, fails to qualify as mystical and was likely never thought to be such by James himself.

The next type of experience in line for evaluation is James's experimentation with drugs and alcohol. Gale, following James, considers the effects of drugs and alcohol as falling somewhere within the wide range of mystical experiences.³⁹ In a memorable passage James writes:

The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour. Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no; drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes. It is in fact the greater exciter of the *Yes* function in man. It brings its votary from the chill periphery of things to the radiant core. It makes him for the moment one with truth. Not through mere perversity do men run after it. . . . The drunken consciousness is one bit of the mystic consciousness, and our total opinion of it must find its place in our opinion of that larger whole.⁴⁰

Along with alcohol, James also attested to the effectiveness of nitrous oxide and ether for stimulating mystical consciousness. Regarding nitrous oxide James proclaims:

Depth beyond depth of truth seems revealed to the inhaler. . . . This truth fades out, however, or escapes, at the moment of coming to; and if any words remain over in which it seemed to clothe itself, they prove to be the veriest nonsense. Nevertheless, the sense of a profound meaning having been there persists; and I know more than one person who is persuaded that in the nitrous oxide trance we have a genuine metaphysical revelation.⁴¹

If we are to believe James's description, the use of certain drugs and alcohol induce altered states of consciousness that apparently meet James's necessary criteria for a

³⁹ Gale, *op. cit.*, 254.

⁴⁰ *VRE*, 307.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

mystical experience. These experiences are unable to be adequately expressed through language which counts them as ineffable. Additionally, “truth seems revealed” during some of these experiences only to “fade out” when one becomes sober (which also speaks to their transiency). Thus, insofar as the experienced effects of drugs and alcohol involved these specific mystical qualities, James had a genuine mystical experience.

But the notion that getting drunk or high counts as a mystical experience seems to us somewhat absurd. Today, if one were to seriously inquire into the reality of mystical experiences, I assume they would be highly skeptical of the accounts given by people who were under the influence of mind-altering drugs. With the benefit of modern science, we now know more about the influence of particular drugs on the brain and how our perception of reality can be artificially distorted by physically interfering with normal brain functioning. Thus, if one is looking for reliable accounts of mystical experience, one would prefer those accounts which took place during normal brain functioning-- which drug use tends to impede. The very notion of being “under the influence” or “intoxicated” suggests that one’s experiences are being manipulated by the physical effects of the drug as opposed to naturally occurring mystical experiences, assuming they exist. Of course, the precise way in which drugs distort consciousness will depend upon one’s theory of mind/body interaction. Still, assuming that human consciousness requires normal brain functioning to most reliably experience the world and that drugs such as nitrous oxide interfere with normal functioning, then consciousness will be unreliable as it will be prone to error. Thus, I believe James was simply but understandably naïve, given the science of his day, in his overestimation of the potential benefits of drug use,

particularly their ability to supply us with an unhampered, more objective view of reality through mystical experiences.

For the sake of argument, even if one were to grant that drug and alcohol use produced genuine mystical experiences, this was not a theme in James's life, i.e., James did not have a habit of using drugs or alcohol in order to have mystical experiences and so it would still be erroneous to call him a mystic on this basis. In fact, James was fully aware of the deleterious effects of alcoholism as his youngest brother, Robertson "Bob" James, struggled with the disease. Moreover, in 1895 James gave a lecture to the Harvard Total Abstinence League on the effects of alcohol. In his notes James writes:

To *work* on alcohol is a most treacherous business, even where it does stimulate, if it does. . . . In most cases it merely masks the fatigue and makes the work worse. The best way to wean people from intemperance is to fill them with a love of temperance for its own sake. . . . The whole bill against alcohol is its *treachery*. Its happiness is an illusion and seven other devils return—So *far as* it has an appreciable effect. . . . In other words replace the drink idol & ideal by another ideal. What is the other ideal? It is the ideal of having a constitution in perfect health that is as elastic as cork and never creaks or runs rusty or finds any situation that it can't meet by its own buoyancy.⁴²

Additionally, if James were an advocate of drinking, it would have been tremendously ironic, since Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, would later credit James's account of conversion experiences in *Varieties* for the success of his program. But James was no such advocate.

Unlike the Jack and Jill experience and the drug-induced hallucinations, I believe James's description of his night spent in the Adirondack Mountains in 1898 indicates a genuine mystical experience. In a letter to his wife, James wrote:

I spent a good deal of it in the woods, where the streaming moonlight lit up things in a magical checkered play, and it seemed as if the Gods of all

⁴² *Manuscript Lectures*, 50-51.

the nature-mythologies were holding an indescribable meeting in my breast with the moral Gods of the inner life. . . . The intense significance of some sort, of the whole scene, if one could only *tell* the significance; the intense inhuman remoteness of its inner life, and yet the intense *appeal* of it; its everlasting freshness and its immemorial antiquity and decay; its utter Americanism, and every sort of patriotic suggestiveness, and you, and my relation to you part and parcel of it all, and beaten up with it, so that memory and sensation all whirled inexplicably together. . . . In point of fact, I can't find a single word for all that significance, and don't know what it was significant of, so there it remains, a mere boulder of *impression*.⁴³

All the marks of a mystical experience are present. That James is unable to adequately describe his experience speaks to its ineffability. The undeniable appeal and significance he felt indicates a noetic quality. And the transience of this episode and its ineluctable grasp over him rounds out the final two conditions of mystical experience. As with mystical experiences, there isn't much else that can be said. To fully comprehend what happened we had to be there, we had to be in James's place, but we weren't.

The final experience to be considered is an episode in which James had a series of three interconnecting dreams that he could not identify as his. The experience he describes as "the most intensely peculiar experience of my whole life" is recounted in the 1910 article "A Suggestion About Mysticism."⁴⁴ Despite Gale's suggestion that this was yet another mystical experience James had, James largely dismisses the idea:

The distressing confusion of mind in this experience was the exact opposite of mystical illumination, and equally unmystical was the definiteness of what was perceived. But the exaltation of the sense of relation was mystical (the perplexity all revolved about the fact that the three dreams both did and did not belong *in* the most intimate way

⁴³ *The Correspondence of William James*, ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkley, 12 vol. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992-2004), 8:380-81.

⁴⁴ James, *Essays in Philosophy*, 160.

together); and the sense that reality was being uncovered was mystical in the highest degree. To this day I feel that those extra dreams were dreamed in reality, but when, where, and by whom, I cannot guess.⁴⁵

As James describes it, the experience was not ineffable due to its definiteness and neither did it possess a noetic quality due its propensity to confuse rather than illuminate.

Therefore, it was some state of abnormal consciousness but not a mystical experience in any traditional sense. James's worry that his consciousness was being intruded by another personality or consciousness connects it with what James considered other non-mystical phenomena such as prophetic speech, automatic writing, and mediumistic trances. The difference, according to James, is that, "Mystical states, strictly so-called, are never merely interruptive. . . . Some memory of their content always remains, and a profound sense of their importance. They modify the inner life of the subject between the times of their recurrence."⁴⁶ James's experience of the three dreams was primarily interruptive, not possessing the sense of importance for the subject that is the usual upshot of genuine mystical experiences.

We have now canvassed those experiences in James's life that seemed best fit to qualify as mystical. It was Gale's assertion that all of these experiences were in fact mystical and supported his claim that James had a mystical self. However, by applying James's basic criteria for mystical experience we have found that, *pace* Gale, only one of these experiences comfortably meets the necessary requirements. Clearly, this is not sufficient to warrant the claim that James was a mystic or had a mystical self. Even a generous interpretation of these experiences would have to admit that mystical experiences in James's life were few and far between, with the only notable ones coming

⁴⁵ *Essays in Philosophy*, 160.

⁴⁶ *VRE*, 303.

later in life--hardly enough to form a consistent pattern that would indicate a persisting mystical self throughout James's career. Thus, it appears that James is not simply dissembling when he writes in *Varieties* that "my own constitution shuts me out from their [mystical experiences] enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand." Consequently, I think Ralph Barton Perry, James's pupil and incomparable biographer, is correct in his final assessment of James's mysticism:

It is true that he refused to credit himself with the mystical experience, or at most admitted that he had a "mystical germ." But in view of all the evidence it seems more correct to say that he did in fact have experiences of the type called mystical; adding that these experiences were infrequent, lacked the character of overwhelming authority with which they are commonly invested, and played only a minor role in his philosophy as a whole.⁴⁷

Despite James's interest in mysticism, his "mystical germ," and even some mystical experiences scattered throughout his life, taken together they still do not give one the evidence needed, as Gale claims, to describe James as having a mystical self.

For reasons given throughout this chapter, I don't believe James had a mystical self and therefore he was not divided in the way Gale describes. What remains to be explored and evaluated is James's apparently conflicting positions regarding the nature of the self and reality which encourage extreme interpretations of the sort Gale offers. Nevertheless, he was at least convinced enough to encourage others to believe in life after death and, at the end of his life, James braced himself for its eventuality--making a pact with his friend James Hyslop that whoever died first would attempt to communicate with the other. In the next chapter, we will see how this possibility arises out James's personal life and finds its initial grounding through his interest in psychical research.

⁴⁷ Perry, *Thought and Character*, 2:677.

Chapter 2

Death in the Life of James

William James was not a mystic. However, his eventual view of the self provided a conceptual framework that could account for genuine mystical experiences. Although James never arrived at a systematic or settled theory of the self, he was careful not to unnecessarily or prematurely restrict the self to the familiar experiences of ordinary, waking consciousness. James believed that mystical experiences, like other “exceptional mental states,” were capable of illuminating hidden aspects of reality, namely, a transcendent “mother-sea” of consciousness with which we commune.¹ Such an idea suggested to James the possibility of personal immortality, which, as I will argue throughout the following chapters, significantly shaped his views of the self. Although some of James’s ideas may seem fanciful, this way of thinking about the self was not the result of a mind given to idle speculation or an overindulgent imagination; rather, James approached the subject of the self armed with stubborn data yielded from his psychological and psychical research. In this chapter I will address James’s interest in psychic phenomena, considering what personally led James to such research, and how it affected his attitude towards death. Once it is understood how pervasive and personal the prospect of death was in James’s mind, we shall be in a better position to see how it influenced his philosophy. For James, philosophy was, after all, intensely personal.

Richard Gale describes James’s philosophy as “deeply rooted in the blues,” a “soulful expression of someone who has ‘paid his dues’” and has “been through it all.”²

¹ James, *Essays in Morality and Religion*, 94.

² Gale, *op. cit.*, 1.

Gale sees James's philosophy as a way to "keep him sane and non-suicidal" in the short-term and as a means to achieving physical and spiritual health in the long-term.³ Gale's dramatic characterization of James is fitting given the dramatic nature of the man. James biographer Robert D. Richardson quotes John Jay Chapman, an acquaintance of James, as saying: "There was, in spite of his playfulness, a deep sadness about James. You felt that he had just stepped out of this sadness in order to meet you and was to go back into it the moment you left him."⁴ Ralph Barton Perry echoes this sentiment, devoting an entire chapter to James's "morbid traits." According to Perry, these traits included tendencies to hypochondria and hallucinatory experience and abnormally frequent and intense oscillations of mood, among other things.⁵ The most famous aspect of James's "morbid personality" was his crisis in April 1870 during which he read the French philosopher Renouvier's essay on free-will. In a diary entry dated April 30, 1870, James describes what would be a fundamental turning point in his life:

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's second *Essais* and see no reason why his definition of free will—"the sustaining of a thought because I choose to when I might have other thoughts"—need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present—until next year—that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will. For the remainder of the year, I will abstain from the mere speculation and contemplative *Grüblei* [A brooding over-intellectualization or grubbing over subtleties] in which my nature takes most delight, and voluntarily cultivate the feeling of moral freedom, by reading books favorable to it, as well as by acting. . . . Hitherto, when I have felt like taking a free initiative, like daring to act originally, without carefully waiting for contemplation of the external world to determine all for me, suicide seemed the most manly form to put

³ Gale, op. cit., 1.

⁴ Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 236.

⁵ Perry, op. cit., chap. 90.

my daring into. Now I will go a step further with my will, not only act with it, but believe as well; believe in my individual reality and creative power. My belief to be sure can't be optimistic, but I will posit it, life (the real, the good) in the self-governing resistance of the ego to the world. Life shall [be built in] doing and creating and suffering.⁶

Perry diagnoses James's spiritual crisis as "the ebbing of the will to live, for lack of a philosophy to live by—a paralysis of action occasioned by a sense of moral impotence."⁷ For James, "moralism," the moral life, required one to believe that evil can be overcome or, if not overcome, one at least can bravely confront and protest against evil, refusing to be subdued by it. James describes this as having the "vigor of will enough to look the universal death in the face without blinking."⁸ Thus, in either case what is required to meaningfully deal with evil and preserve the "moral business" is for one to have a free will—either to overcome evil or to bravely confront it. Myers observes:

Although James never asserted, as Albert Camus would, that suicide is the only important philosophical issue, he understood from personal experience that suicidal fantasies bring forth questions about the meaning of life. Such questions fuel the search for a philosophy of life, and in that context the question arises whether we are justified in incorporating optimism into a factual description of the universe.

James's reading of Renouvier would have life-long consequences. James dedicated his last book, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, to Renouvier. In this work James attributes his belief in the superiority of pluralism to his reading of Renouvier in the early 1870's. Pluralism, as James describes it in the chapter "The One and the Many" (which first appeared in 1907 as lecture four of *Pragmatism*), is the view of empiricism which claims reality exists distributively insofar as it consists of disconnected parts which

⁶ *Letters*, 1:148.

⁷ Perry, *op. cit.*, 1:322.

⁸ *Letters*, 1:147.

collectively constitute the whole.⁹ The alternative to pluralism is monism. Monism, says James, is the view of rationalism which claims “that the whole is fundamental, that the parts derive from it and all belong with one another, that the separations we uncritically accept are illusory, and that the entire universe, instead of being a sum, is the only genuine unit in existence. . . .”¹⁰ “Pluralism stands for the distributive, monism for the collective form of being,” and represents, in James’s view, “the most pregnant of all the dilemmas of philosophy.”¹¹ One of the reasons James remained a pluralist throughout his life was because it avoided the problem of evil in a way monism could not. Monism, as it was typically espoused, assumes that the whole or “Absolute” is perfect, which raises the obvious question of imperfection, i.e., evil. James asks, “Why all the inferior finite editions of the Absolute?”¹² The notion of a universe perfect on the whole, but seemingly imperfect in detail, is extremely difficult to reconcile. On the other hand, in the case of pluralism, “evil presents only a practical problem on how to get rid of it.”¹³ In other words, if the Absolute is *everything*, it must be responsible for evil, but if the universe is pluralistic, evil may be construed as a contingent, non-essential outlier that can potentially be subdued or eliminated. Moreover, a monistic universe, according to James, is fatalistic in that it doesn’t allow for genuinely novel possibilities.¹⁴ That is to say, if everything in existence is a necessary part of the whole, there is no room for free

⁹ *SPP*, 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 72.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

will or novelty. Thus, for James, the issue of free will and the problem of evil were inextricably bound up with the larger dilemma between pluralism and monism--the views of empiricism and rationalism, respectively. In much the same way as James's desire for a moral universe committed him to pluralism, I am suggesting James's desire for immortality would continue to shape his conception of the self. In any case, as we go along we will see more fully how James's commitment to pluralism is continually borne out in his philosophy.

Returning to the issue of James's early personal struggles, the resolve to adopt Renouvier's philosophical position and begin asserting his will according to the belief that it is free, gave James a temporary reprieve, but was not an immediate cure-all. James continued to struggle throughout the early 1870's, chronically wrestling with his moods and worries about where his life was heading. It was not until James began teaching at Harvard in 1872 that his moods and ambitions became more aligned, resulting in a steadier trajectory of recovery. Recounting this time in James's life, his son Henry III wrote: "After some years Father himself felt and knew he was a man renewed. He had sloughed off the morbid personality of the latter sixties and early seventies."¹⁵ The consistency and dependability of his teaching career and his marriage to Alice Gibbens in 1878 surely evened out some of James's rougher emotional terrain—or at least kept him safely away from the precipice.

As was stated above, the crisis of 1870 arose partly because of James's dread of insurmountable evil in the world. This concern became especially compelling to James due to two major events that led up to the crisis. The first event James reported in *The*

¹⁵ Richardson, op. cit., 237.

Varieties of Religious Experience and falsely attributes it to an anonymous French correspondent. This important passage must be quoted at some length:

Whilst in this state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirit about my prospects, I went one evening into a dressing-room in the twilight, to procure some article that was there; when suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, or rather shelves, against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over them, inclosing his entire figure. He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human. This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. *That shape am I*, I felt, potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him. There was such horror of him, and such a perception of my own merely momentary discrepancy from him, that it was as if something hitherto solid within my breast gave way entirely, and I became a mass of quivering fear. After this the universe was changed for me altogether. I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since. It was like a revelation; and although the immediate feelings passed away, the experience has made me sympathetic with the morbid feelings of others ever since. It gradually faded, but for months I was unable to go out into the dark alone.

In general I dreaded to be left alone. I remember wondering how other people could live, how I myself had ever lived, so unconscious of that pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life. My mother in particular, a very cheerful person, seemed to me a perfect paradox in her unconsciousness of danger, which you may well believe I was very careful not to disturb by revelations of my own state of mind. I have always thought that this experience of melancholia of mine had a religious bearing. . . . I mean that the fear was so invasive and powerful that, if I had not clung to scripture-texts like *The eternal God is my refuge*, etc., *Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy-laden*, etc., *I am the Resurrection and the Life*, etc., I think I should have grown really insane.¹⁶

¹⁶ *VRE*, 135.

As James biographer Linda Simon points out, the epileptic patient could not be cured by strengthening his will—he was at the mercy of his own biology, i.e., at the mercy of nature.¹⁷ This is what so shook James to the core of his being, “*That shape am I, I felt, potentially.*” That James was also experiencing excruciating back pain at the time might have also contributed to his increasing feeling of vulnerability. Up to this point in his life, James idealized the heroic attitude of Stoicism—an ideal that now seemed flimsy as James was bending under the weight of an imagined fate.

In the previous year, 1869, James had earned his medical degree from the Harvard Medical School. It was a culmination of eight years of schooling at Harvard, including three years spent at the Lawrence Scientific School and fifteen months spent on an expedition to the Amazon with the famous naturalist Louis Agassiz. James was steeped in the science of his day and the science of the day was a mechanistic materialism aptly described by Jacques Barzun as “the great push-pull system of the physical universe by which every event was deemed to be completely determined in an endless chain of previous events, with ‘not a wiggle of our will’ taking part.”¹⁸ Thus, if science was correct and determinism was true, the epileptic youth was simply a frighteningly dreadful and inevitable product of an uncaring universe. James understood and felt the powerlessness and impotency that this “scientific” view of the world implied for him and others. What took place in the asylum seemed to have brought into sharp focus for James the issue of evil and whether, given the truth of determinism, the moral life has any legitimacy. James understood the stakes and he made his choice known in that April 30th

¹⁷ Linda Simon, *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 125.

¹⁸ Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll with William James* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 16.

diary entry. He believed that to live meaningfully meant having to deny determinism and place his bet on the reality of free-will. If anything was to be done about evil, James thought, it required freedom to do so. Concerning James's completion of his M.D. degree, Richardson calls attention to a letter James wrote to Henry Bowditch in which James describes the accomplishment as "one epoch of my life closed."¹⁹ Richardson claims that James saw the degree not so much as a beginning but as the end of something—and as the crisis of 1870 suggests, it surely was.

The vision of the epileptic youth played a major role in cultivating the morbid feelings which spun James into his crisis but there was another major event that is less well-known though it was probably more responsible for James's morbid mindset that Spring. On March 8th, 1870 James's cousin Minnie Temple died. The following day James drew in his diary a tombstone marked with a cross, the initials "M.T.", and the date of her death. James's relationship with Minnie, like every aspect of his life, was extremely complicated. Richardson describes their relationship as something more than love and something less than love.²⁰ Both Richardson and Simon portray James as deeply in love with Minnie although a typical romance was out of the question since James firmly opposed first-cousin marriages, not to mention that Minnie was very ill and suffering from tuberculosis during the time their friendship blossomed. If this wasn't enough to prevent the two from a romantic relationship, James's habitual self-doubting and self-loathing provided him with an ample amount of reluctance and hesitation when

¹⁹ Richardson, *op. cit.*, 103.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

it came to dating. Rumor and innuendo aside, Minnie's death devastated James. Simon goes so far as to say "Minnie would haunt James forever."²¹

In what still remains of their correspondence, James and Minnie shared a common inability for traditional religious belief as well as an affinity for Stoicism. When it came to Stoicism, both were evidently aware of the somber outlook it can occasion. In a letter James kept tucked behind a picture of Minnie for his entire life, Minnie writes:

The more I live the more I feel that there must be some comfort somewhere for the mass of people, suffering and sad, outside of that which Stoicism gives—a thousand times when I see a poor person in trouble, it almost breaks my heart that I can't say something to comfort them. It is on the tip of my tongue to say it and I can't—for I have always felt myself the unutterable sadness and mystery that envelop us all—I shall take some of your Chloral tonight, if I don't sleep—Don't let my letter of yesterday make you feel that we are not very near to each other—friends at heart. Altho' practically being much with you or even writing to you would not be good for me—too much strain on one key will make it snap—and there is an attitude of mind, (not a strength of Intellect by any means) in which we are much alike. Goodbye.²²

The comfort "outside of that which Stoicism gives" is the comfort James sought after Minnie's death and after the terror he felt in the face of the epileptic youth. Ralph Barton Perry remarks that, in his youth, James was especially interested in the writings of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius and preached the "gospel of Stoicism."²³ As Richardson reveals, as early as 1863 James was reading and taking notes on Epictetus's *Encheiridion*.²⁴ Though obviously enthusiastic about Stoicism early in his life, after

²¹ Simon, op. cit., 118.

²² *Correspondence*, 4:401.

²³ Perry, op. cit., 2:353.

²⁴ Richardson, op. cit., 53.

Minnie's death James's enthusiasm would not last long. In a confession written in 1876, James begins to express his dissatisfaction:

The hardness of my Stoicism oppresses me sometimes. My attitude towards religion is one of deference rather than adoption. I see its place; I feel that there are times when everything else was to fail and that, or nothing, remain; and yet I behave as if I must leave it untouched until such times come, and I am drawn to it by sheer stress of weather. I am sure I am partly right, and that religion is not an every day comfort and convenience. And yet I know I am partly wrong.²⁵

The inner conflict between religion and the Stoicism James vaguely alludes to here eventually becomes more clarified in his mind. In *The Principles of Psychology*, within a broader discussion about the selective nature of the Self, James quotes Epictetus:

I must die; well, but must I die groaning too? . . . I will speak what appears to be right, and if the despot says, 'Then I will put you to death,' I will reply, 'When did I ever tell you that I was immortal? You will do your part, and I mine: it is yours to kill and mine to die intrepid; yours to banish, mine to depart untroubled.' . . .²⁶

Commenting on this passage, James remarks that Stoic renunciation, "though efficacious and heroic enough in its place and time, is . . . only possible as an habitual mood of the soul to narrow and unsympathetic characters."²⁷ James explains that it relies on "protecting the Self by exclusion and denial" and has the tendency to cause one to treat others who are not under one's control with "chill negation, if not with positive hate."²⁸ Being a sympathetic person, James states that he prefers "the entirely opposite way of expansion and inclusion" which affirms and embraces positive goods regardless of the

²⁵ Perry, 2:353.

²⁶ *Principles*, 1:297.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:298.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

beneficiary. The magnanimity of such persons, says James, “is often touching indeed.”²⁹ James repeats this preference for a “mood of welcome” ten years later in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In Lecture II, “Circumscription of the Topic,” James contrasts the “drab discolored way of stoic resignation to necessity” with the “passionate happiness of Christian saints.”³⁰

If we compare stoic with Christian ejaculation we see much more than a difference of doctrine; rather it is a difference of emotional mood that parts them. When Marcus Aurelius reflects on the eternal reason that has ordered things, there is a frosty chill about his words which you rarely find in a Jewish, and never in a Christian piece of religious writing. The universe is ‘accepted’ by all these writers; but how devoid of passion or exultation the spirit of the Roman Emperor is!³¹

Accordingly, James observes that the *anima mundi* of the Stoic elicits respect and submission, while the “Christian God is there to be loved; and the difference of emotional atmosphere is like that between an arctic climate and the tropics. . . .”³² The practical effect of these differing postures is the difference between “passivity and activity” and “the defensive and the aggressive mood.” That is to say, the Stoic’s acquiescence and “disposal of his own personal destiny” tends to stifle creative and active impulses while the Christian God, thought to love and redeem His believers, inspires religious and moral striving. According to Perry, Stoicism could not satisfy James’s deeply felt “longing for safety and security,”³³ In sum, Perry remarks, although he “was touched and stirred by

²⁹ *Principles*, 1:298.

³⁰ *VRE*, 41.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Perry, *op. cit.*, 2:353.

the uncomplaining fortitude of others” throughout his life, Stoicism became “the least characteristic part” of James’s gospel.³⁴

For James, the comfort of religion would never arrive completely and any relief was to be hard-earned. The search process began in earnest with Renouvier, with James reasserting himself as a free moral agent--a view of human consciousness that opened up previously obstructed possibilities for the human mind. A mind irreducible to the brute forces and laws of nature became infinitely more interesting to James than the mind of the scientific community, the mind of mechanistic materialism. Thus, his dissatisfaction with science’s reductionistic account of the mind which denies free-will combined with his desire for human redemption takes hold of James after his crisis. These concerns set up a number of issues regarding the nature of reality and the Self which James would grapple with for the remaining four decades of his life.

By 1880, James’s life, though never trouble-free, was more settled than at any previous time. That year he was appointed assistant professor of philosophy at Harvard after eight years of teaching anatomy, physiology, and physiological psychology. Two years earlier, in 1878, James signed a contract for a book on psychology (what would be published as *The Principles of Psychology* some twelve years later), married Alice Gibbens, and, in 1879, had their first child, Henry III. Although his family life and career were largely in good order, unfortunately James suffered the loss of his mother, Alice, in January of 1882, followed by the loss of his father in December of the same year, and the death of his brother, Wilky, the following year. Thus, in the span of two years, James lost three family members.

³⁴ Perry, op. cit., 2:352.

When his father passed away, James was in London and it was during this time that he met Edmund Gurney who had recently founded the British Society for Psychical Research with fellow Englishmen Frederic W.H. Myers and the philosopher Henry Sidgwick. Gurney and James struck up an immediate friendship and James was easily recruited into taking up the Society's cause of applying modern scientific methods to psychic phenomena such as mediums, thought transference, extrasensory perception, and even ghost sightings. This was the beginning of James's direct involvement with psychical research--an involvement that would continue for the remaining twenty-eight years of his life. James and his fellow researchers hoped that psychical investigations, though disreputable in the scientific community, would eventually provide novel insight into the human mind as well as the order of nature. By October of 1884 James was already working to set up a formal organization of psychical researchers in America and on December 18, 1884 the American Society for Psychical Research held its first meeting.

James was insistent that the founding members of the American Society for Psychical Research were trained researchers who operated with purely scientific methods.³⁵ For James, the problems with science did not lie in its methods, but in the prejudices of scientists who have ruled out the reality of certain phenomena beforehand. While James and his colleagues rejected a scientific bias against "spiritualism," they equally rejected the sentimental bias of those who uncritically accepted the phenomenon after being "emotionally touched at hearing the names of their loved ones given, and

³⁵ Blum, *op. cit.*, 86.

consoled by assurances that they are ‘happy.’”³⁶ James’s circle of psychical researchers was fully cognizant of the human-all-too-human temptation to revel in this kind of sentimentalism and they self-consciously guarded against it. They were equally aware of the ubiquity of fraud “throughout the range of physical phenomena of spiritism” and “false pretense, prevarication and fishing for clues . . . in the mental manifestations of mediums.”³⁷ In fact, as a matter of policy, the British Society for Psychical Research dismissed as fraudulent mediums who were caught cheating at any time. James thought the “once a cheat, always a cheat” policy was tactically wise, though he acknowledged that “as a test of truth I believe it to be almost irrelevant.”³⁸ James recognized that particular incidents of human deception were insufficient to disprove a larger truth, i.e., the reality of psychic phenomena.

So, after more than a quarter-century of psychic research what *did* James conclude about the reality of psychic phenomena? In *Confidences of a “Psychical Researcher,”* written in 1909, James admits:

. . . I am theoretically no ‘further’ along than I was at the beginning; and I confess that at times I have been tempted to believe that the creator has eternally intended this department of nature to remain baffling, to prompt our curiosities and hopes and suspicions all in equal measure, so that although ghosts, and clairvoyances, and raps and messages from spirits, are always seeming to exist and can never be fully explained away, they also can never be susceptible of full corroboration.³⁹

³⁶ *Essays in Psychical Research*, 365-66.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 365.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 362.

James acknowledged that the results of the research were not definitive enough to satisfy “your genuinely scientific inquirer.”⁴⁰ However, that there are “real natural types of phenomena ignored by orthodox science,” says James, “I am not baffled at all, I am fully convinced of.”⁴¹ Among the phenomena ignored by orthodox science, claims James, is “the presence, in midst of all the humbug, of *really supernormal knowledge*.”⁴² James elaborates:

By this I mean knowledge that cannot be traced to the ordinary sources of information—the senses namely—of the automatist. In really strong mediums this knowledge seems abundant, though it is usually spotty, capricious and unconnected. Really strong mediums are rarities; but when one starts with them and works downwards into less brilliant regions of the automatic life, one tends to interpret many slight but odd coincidences with truth, as possibly rudimentary forms of this kind of knowledge.⁴³

One of these rare mediums James had in mind, possibly the only one, was Boston resident Leonora Piper. In his 1896 address to both the American and British Society for Psychical Research, regarding Mrs. Piper’s authenticity, James stated his position unequivocally:

If you will let me use the language of the professional logic-shop, a universal proposition can be made untrue by a particular instance. If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you mustn’t seek to show that no crows are; it is enough that you prove one single crow to be white. My own white-crow is Mrs. Piper. In the trances of this medium, I cannot resist the conviction that knowledge appears which she has never gained by the ordinary waking use of her eyes and ears and wits. What the source of this knowledge may be I know not, and have not the glimmer of an explanatory suggestion to make; but from admitting the fact of such knowledge I can see no escape. So when I turn to the rest of our evidence, ghosts and all, I cannot carry with me the irreversibly negative bias of the

⁴⁰ *Essays in Psychical Research*, 362.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 371.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 372.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

rigorously scientific mind, with its presumption as to what the true order of nature ought to be.⁴⁴

James's sittings with Mrs. Piper first began around September of 1885, thirteen years prior to this address, three years after his initial meeting with Edmund Gurney. That June, James was busily attending séances and reporting on mediums. On July 9th, James's third son, Herman, died from pneumonia at only eighteen months of age. Though James deeply grieved the sudden loss of his child, he evidently did not seek out mediums for supernatural comforts.⁴⁵ It was only a few months later that word came to James from his wife, Alice, who had been hearing remarkable accounts from her sisters and mother about a local medium, that James learned about Mrs. Piper. James was naturally intrigued and set up an anonymous sitting for him and his wife. The sitting would take place at the twenty-six year old medium's home where she lived with her husband and year-old daughter. As James instructed his wife to do, the pair passively listened as she went into a trance and began to make out different names of Alice's family members. Eventually Mrs. Piper made out a name that sounded like "Herrin," which the Jameses took to be the name of their recently lost son. James was naturally skeptical. It was only after several further sittings that winter and a deepened personal acquaintance with her that James became convinced of her unorthodox abilities.⁴⁶

James wasn't the only believer in his circle. Mrs. Piper was also supported by Frederic Myers and Sir Oliver Lodge who brought her to England on multiple occasions in order to be studied under the supervision of the Society. Along with James, one of

⁴⁴ *Essays in Psychical Research*, 131.

⁴⁵ Richardson, *op. cit.*, 256.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 261.

Mrs. Piper's staunchest supporters in America was James Hervey Hyslop, professor of logic and ethics at Columbia University. There was also the British researcher Richard Hodgson, who served as secretary of the American Society for Psychological Research, and would become a close friend of James. Nonetheless, I think it is fair to ask whether James should be commended for his open-mindedness in his dealings with Mrs. Piper, or whether his involvement was evidence of an embarrassing gullibility and naiveté.

In his trenchant essay, "How Mrs. Piper Bamboozled William James," Martin Gardner argues the latter, scolding James for being too easily deceived by the wily Boston medium.⁴⁷ According to Gardner, there are a variety of ordinary means by which Mrs. Piper could have obtained the information that was used in sittings to convince James and others of her supernatural abilities. One of the most obvious techniques she used was what James referred to as "fishing" or what is known as "cold reading." Cold reading, as Gardner describes it, works by making vague statements that "would be followed by more precise information based on how the sitters reacted."⁴⁸ Gardner suggests that Mrs. Piper would make suggestions and then carefully observe the physical reactions of the sitters--both by watching through half-closed eyelids and habitually holding the sitters hand, feeling for responses.⁴⁹ Thus, by reading the body language of her clients, Mrs. Piper could tell when one of her suggestions struck a nerve, so to speak, which would clue her in as to which direction to take the discussion. As indicated above, James was aware of this tactic, calling it a "vague groping, characteristic also of control-

⁴⁷ Martin Gardner, "How Mrs. Piper Bamboozled William James," in *Are Universes Thicker than Blackberries?* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 252-262.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

cunning.”⁵⁰ Yet, says Gardner, James “argued foolishly,” stubbornly convinced “that there must be something to it.”⁵¹ As evidence of this “foolishness,” Gardner refers us to what he calls “the most stupid remark in all of James’s writings.”⁵² In “The Confidences of a ‘Psychical Researcher,’” James writes:

When a man’s pursuit gradually makes his face shine and grow handsome, you may be sure it is a worthy one. Both Hodgson and Myers kept growing ever handsomer and stronger-looking.⁵³

Gardner’s characterization of this passage is unfortunate for a couple of reasons. First, James’s was offering a defense of and paean to his deceased friends in response to the allegation that involvement with psychic phenomena “reduces us to a sort of jelly, disintegrates the critical faculties, liquefies the character.”⁵⁴ James, in his characteristically affectionate manner, takes the opportunity to defend his collaborators who could no longer speak for themselves. Second, and more relevant to Gardner’s concerns, immediately following the above passage, James writes:

Such personal examples will convert no one, and of course they ought not to. Nor do I seek at all in this article to convert anyone to my belief that psychical research is an important branch of science. To do that, I should have to quote evidence. . . .⁵⁵

Clearly, pace Gardner, James was not attempting to justify psychic research on the basis of whether one grows “handsomer and stronger-looking.” James realized that to

⁵⁰ Gardner, *op. cit.*, 266.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Essays in Psychical Research*, 370.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

convince scientists it was necessary to use or appeal to their own standards of evidence. At any rate, in addition to Mrs. Piper's technique of cold reading, Gardner claims that James failed to appreciate the "other tricks up her sleeves."⁵⁶

These other "tricks" actually turn out to be rather mundane. For example, Gardner points out that Mrs. Piper could have acquired personal information about her sitters by visiting with their friends and relatives prior to their scheduled meeting. Also, he says, she could have gathered information by listening in to conversations between her clients before or even during one of her séances. Gardner suggests that the sitters, falsely assuming Mrs. Piper was in a deep trance, would drop their guard and converse more or less freely.⁵⁷ Moreover, obituaries, courthouse records, and reference books, Gardner writes, contain "biographical data that sitters often swear a medium could not possibly know."⁵⁸ Lastly, Gardner is quick to point out that Mrs. Piper could have received information by way of other acquaintances such as house servants, nurses, and other mediums in Boston who formed "a network of scoundrels who passed information freely back and forth."⁵⁹

Regardless of whether you are sympathetic or unsympathetic with the reality of psychic phenomena, I think there is much to be said in response to Gardner on James's behalf. For instance, every one of the "tricks" which Gardner suggests Mrs. Piper used, James was consciously aware of. In *Ghost Hunters*, Blum highlights the fact that in 1890 a how-to manual and exposé of spiritualism was published by an anonymous author

⁵⁶ Gardner, op. cit., 256.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

calling himself “A. Medium.”⁶⁰ In this book, *Revelations of a Spirit Medium*, the author painstakingly explains all the tricks of the fraudulent profession of spiritualism--including all of the methods Gardner accuses Mrs. Piper of using. James and his colleagues, particularly Richard Hodgson, actively used this book as one of their references when trying to expose frauds. One of the claims the author makes, for instance, is that the people who come into a séance believing that they know all of the tricks are the easiest to fool. The reason for this, he says, is that in talking with a client a good medium realizes the kinds of things the client is looking to expose and is then able to thwart those expectations.⁶¹ Maybe this explains why Mrs. Piper was, curiously, often willing to be a test subject by the Society and even outspoken critics such as psychologist Stanley Hall, president of Clark University.

While in her trance state, Hall and his assistant Amy Tanner would subject Mrs. Piper to various physical testing in order to determine if she was, indeed, unawake. On one occasion, after determining that Mrs. Piper’s breathing and pulse had indeed dropped significantly, Hall and Tanner put into her mouth a spirit of camphor which they expected would startle her awake. To their amazement, she didn’t respond at all until she later gradually awoke from the trance and complained that her mouth was numb.⁶² Hall and Tanner would continue with these seemingly cruel testing procedures and Mrs. Piper would continue to suffer through them--and pass each one. So, did Mrs. Piper simply outfox the “experts” through amazing acts of self-control? Hall and Tanner didn’t

⁶⁰ Blum, op. cit., 175; A. Medium, *Revelations of a Spirit Medium*, ed. Harry Price and Eric J. Dingwall (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922).

⁶¹ A. Medium, 15.

⁶² Blum, 304.

believe so; yet, rather than believing she had psychic powers, they concluded that Mrs. Piper had developed a number of secondary personalities. Thus, they believed her condition was pathological, not paranormal. Commenting on these events, Blum writes: “Leonora Piper was weary of being a mystery, most of all to herself. She clung to the hope that this highly respected psychologist would be able to give her some answers.”⁶³ By all accounts, there was indeed something genuinely strange about Mrs. Piper that went beyond psychic parlor tricks. Thus, if James was “bamboozled” it wasn’t because he didn’t know all of the “tricks,” but, rather, it was because he believed that it was highly improbable that any of these tricks could account for the phenomenon that was Mrs. Piper.

This is most clearly evident in James’s “Report on Mrs. Piper’s Hodgson Control” which he presented to the Society in 1909. Shortly after Richard Hodgson’s death in 1905, the discarnate Hodgson supposedly started communicating through Mrs. Piper during her trances. James sat with and reported on Piper during this period until January 1908. Some of the information that was communicated by the Hodgson control seemed to be things only Hodgson would have known. In order to rule out any “natural” explanation, James lists the possible ways in which Mrs. Piper could have successfully communicated this information:

- (1) Lucky chance-hits.
- (2) Common gossip.
- (3) Indications unwarily furnished by the sitters.
- (4) Information received from R.H., during his lifetime, by the waking Mrs. P. and stored up, either supraliminally or subliminally, in her memory.

⁶³ Blum, *op. cit.*, 304.

- (5) Information received from the living R.H., or others, at sittings, and kept in Mrs. Piper's trance-memory, but out of reach of her waking consciousness.
- (6) 'Telepathy,' *i.e.* the tapping of the sitter's mind, or that of some distant living person, in an inexplicable way.
- (7) Access to some cosmic reservoir, where the memory of all mundane facts is stored and grouped around person centres of association.⁶⁴

From this list, it is readily apparent that James was aware of all of the "tricks" Gardner identifies. James describes the first five of these explanations as "natural." The last two explanations he describes as "mystical" and comments: "It is obvious that no mystical explanation ought to be invoked so long as any natural one remains at all plausible."⁶⁵

Moreover, regarding the proper attribution of causes, James writes:

The common-sense rule of presumption in scientific logic is never to assume an unknown agent where there is a known one, and never to choose a rarer cause for a phenomenon when a commoner one will account for it. The usual is always more probable, and exceptional principles should be invoked only when the use of ordinary ones is impossible.⁶⁶

James's eyes were wide open, but so was his mind; and so when some the facts didn't comfortably fit natural explanations, he was open to other, unconventional, mystical possibilities. In the case of the Hodgson control, there was information disclosed that caused James to believe that a mystical explanation was in order, though, as Robert A. McDermott puts it, James continued to "struggle with the 'ever not quite' character of the evidence for an independent Hodgson-spirit."⁶⁷ Because Hodgson and his colleagues had

⁶⁴ *Essays in Psychical Research*, 255.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

spent so much time with Mrs. Piper, James concludes: “That case is an exceptionally bad one for testing spirit-return, owing to the unusual scope it gives to naturalistic explanations.”⁶⁸ Thus, James is not willing to draw any definite conclusion from the Hodgson control:

Although this Hodgson-case, taken by itself, yields thus only a negative, or at the best a baffling conclusion, we have no scientific right to take it by itself, as I have done. It belongs with the whole residual mass of Piper phenomena, and they belong with the whole mass of cognate phenomena elsewhere found. False personation is a ubiquitous feature in this total mass. It certainly exists in the Piper-case; and the great question there is as to its limits.⁶⁹

McDermott writes that there were “instances of Mrs. Piper’s knowledge that James regarded as convincing—that is, he felt that only Richard Hodgson could have been the source of these disclosures.”⁷⁰ If we take James at his word in the Hodgson report, this seems incorrect. James writes that he is “quite ready to admit that my own denials in this present paper may be the result of the narrowness of my material, and that possibly R.H.’s spirit has been speaking all the time, only my ears have been deaf.”⁷¹ Additionally, should further evidence “corroborate the hypothesis that ‘spirits’ play some part . . . I shall be quite ready to undeafen my ears, and to revoke the negative conclusions of this limited report,” James writes.⁷² Thus, although he was sympathetic to mystical explanations of the Hodgson-control, James realized that there was not enough

⁶⁸ *Essays in Psychical Research*, 277.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁷² *Ibid.*

evidence to rule out the natural alternatives. Nevertheless, McDermott is correct to point out the more general truth that James *did* believe in the psychic abilities of Mrs. Piper, which is plainly evident in the following letter James wrote to Charles Lewis Slattery in 1907:

Mrs. Piper has supernormal knowledge in her trances; but whether it comes from “tapping the minds” of living people, or from some common cosmic reservoir of memories, or from surviving “spirits” of the departed, is a question impossible for me to answer just now to my own satisfaction. The spirit-theory is undoubtedly not only the most natural, but the simplest, and I have a great respect for Hodgson’s and Hyslop’s arguments when they adopt it. At the same time the electric current called *belief* has not yet closed in my mind.

Whatever the explanation be, trance-mediumship is an excessively complex phenomenon, in which many concurrent factors are engaged. That is why interpretation is so hard.⁷³

As this letter makes clear, James’s did believe in Mrs. Piper abilities--though this belief did not come as easily or without great reservations as Gardner seems to suggest. The probability of mystical explanations, says James, “depends on the forms of dramatic imagination of which his mind is capable. The explanation has *in any event* to be dramatic. Fraud, personation, telepathy, spirits, elementals, are all of them dramatic hypotheses.”⁷⁴ “Either I or the scientist is of course the fool, with our opposite views of probability here; and I only wish he might feel the liability, as cordially as I do, to pertain to both of us.”⁷⁵ It is possible that James was the fool; however, as we shall see, given James’s conception of reality, we may better understand why he believed that the spirit-theory is the “most natural” and the “simplest” explanation.

⁷³ *Letters*, 2:287.

⁷⁴ *Essays in Psychological Research*, 284.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 372.

By the end of his life, James conceded that his conclusions about Mrs. Piper and about psychic phenomena in general rely upon “our own instinctive sense of the dramatic probabilities of nature.”⁷⁶ That is, without demonstrative proof either way, “one has to follow one’s personal sense, which of course is liable to error.”⁷⁷ With the caveat that he still remains “a psychical researcher waiting for more facts before concluding” James offers up the following vision:

Out of my experience, such as it is (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, and Conanicut and Newport hear each other’s fog-horns. But the trees 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 minds plunge as a mother-sea or reservoir. Our ‘normal’ consciousness is circumscribed for adaptation to our external earthly environment, but the fence is weak in spots, and fitful influences from beyond leak in, showing the otherwise unverifiable common connexion.⁷⁸

Though James does not overtly raise the issue here, the “continuum of cosmic consciousness . . . into which our minds plunge as a mother-sea or reservoir,” gave James a probable basis for what Perry describes as his “hopeful half-belief”⁷⁹ in personal immortality—one of the dramatic probabilities suggested to him through psychic research. At the end of *Varieties*, James more plainly states that “the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come.”⁸⁰ However, like

⁷⁶ *Essays in Psychical Research*, 373.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 371.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 374.

⁷⁹ Perry, *op. cit.*, 2:359.

⁸⁰ *VRE*, 405.

the psychic phenomena that suggested its possibility, James understood the issue of personal immortality as a baffling mystery that seemed almost destined to escape scientific corroboration. In a 1908 letter to his dying friend Charles Eliot Norton, James wrote:

I am as convinced as I can be of anything that this experience of ours is only a part of the experience that is, and with which it has something to do; but *what* or *where* the other parts are, I cannot guess. It only enables one to say “behind the veil, behind the veil!” more hopefully, however interrogatively and vaguely, than would otherwise be the case.⁸¹

Thus, despite James’s insistence on not *knowing* what waits for us after death, he was convinced that we are, in an essential way, connected to something *more*. Twenty-six years prior, in 1882, James had expressed a similar sentiment in his letter to his dying father. James’s heartfelt goodbye from London ends:

. . . my sympathy with you is likely to grow much livelier, rather than to fade -- and not for the sake of regrets. -- As for the other side, and Mother, and our all possibly meeting, I can't say anything. More than ever at this moment do I feel that if that were true, all would be solved and justified. And it comes strangely over me in bidding you good-bye how a life is but a day and expresses mainly but a single note. It is so much like the act of bidding an ordinary good-night. Good-night, my sacred old Father! If I don't see you again -- Farewell! a blessed farewell!⁸²

The lighthearted tone of James’s letter is seemingly incongruous with the desperate condition of his father. The reason for this is that, on his deathbed, James’s father did not believe the situation *was* desperate. “He wished to die,” Henry Jr. wrote William ten days after their father’s death, “There was no dementia except a sort of exaltation of belief that he had entered into ‘the spiritual life.’”⁸³ Describing the last days of James’s

⁸¹ Perry, *op. cit.*, 2:359.

⁸² *Correspondence*, 5:227-28.

⁸³ Perry, 1:113.

father, his mother wrote to him: “Unflinching he claimed his right to the spiritual life, and most characteristically and consistently refused to nourish what he called death, saying *life* is fed by God Almighty.”⁸⁴ Believing in life after death, James’s ill father refused food, accelerating the process. James was cognizant of his father’s convictions and his letter indicates a son no longer wishing to challenge those convictions.

Henry Sr.’s life and death would leave a definite impact upon his son. Robert D. Richardson characterizes James’s father as “imperious” and “mercurial,” “the author of a long procession of unwanted and unread books, published at his own expense.”⁸⁵ Henry James Sr. was a follower of the religious mystic Emanuel Swedenborg and was consumed with religious questions—or, more accurately, religious answers. Although it is commonly mentioned that Henry Sr. encouraged William to study science and abandon his interest in art, the elder James himself had no patience for science--or any type of systematic argumentation. James would call his father a “religious genius” but did not consider him to be a metaphysician or philosopher.⁸⁶ In this vein, James wrote to his friend, Shadworth Hodgson, that his father “was like Carlyle in being no *reasoner* at all, in the sense in which philosophers are reasoners. Reasoning was only an unfortunate necessity of exposition for them both. . . . As you say, his world of thought had a few elements and no others ever troubled him.”⁸⁷ Although James would become more sympathetic to his father’s mysticism, Perry points out a noteworthy difference between the two men:

⁸⁴ Perry, *op. cit.*, 1:113.

⁸⁵ Richardson, *op. cit.*, 11.

⁸⁶ Perry, 1:146.

⁸⁷ *Letters*, 1:241-242.

[William James] was fundamentally an empiricist, pledging his fidelity to given facts, while his father was governed by an equal and opposite loyalty to the affirmations of his own inner consciousness. . . . Although he took liberties with science, he had scientific scruples. To the father science was anathema . . . ⁸⁸

In short, says Perry, James felt that “his father did not earn his beliefs, but freely helped himself to them.”⁸⁹ Thus, if James did eventually hold some of the same ideas of his father, it was “only after years of painstaking analysis and with their meanings scrupulously guarded and defined.”⁹⁰ This was the main line of division between William and his father.

Nevertheless, James respected his father greatly. James said of this father: “He was the humanist and most genial being in his impulses whom I have ever personally known, and had a bigness and power of nature that everybody felt.”⁹¹ And right after his father’s death James wrote: “For me, the humor, the good spirits, the humanity, the faith in the divine, and the sense of the right to have a say about the deepest reasons of the universe, are what will stay with me.”⁹² Perry writes: “This insistence on having his ‘say about the universe’ is the profoundest motive of William James’s thinking, as well as of his filial gratitude.”⁹³

In the letter to his dying father, just days before he was recruited by Edmund Gurney into psychical research endeavors, James acknowledges that he “can’t say anything” regarding the mystery of death. Not ruling anything in nor out, James is

⁸⁸ Perry, *op. cit.*, 150-151.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁹¹ *Letters*, I: 241-2.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 1:221.

⁹³ Perry, 1:152.

clearly open to the bare possibility and, very tellingly, claims that *if* life after death *were* true, “all would be solved and justified.” James clearly believed much was at stake. The day after his father was buried, James wrote to his wife that he was feeling:

. . . the sweetest sense of stability and balance . . . at the thought of him & Mother being in the same place, apart no longer. . . . [I have come to feel] as I never began to do before, the tremendousness of the idea of immortality. *If only he could be joined to mother.* One grows dizzy at the thought.⁹⁴

This revelation directly coincided with the beginning of James’s relationship with Gurney and recruitment into psychical research. It’s hard to imagine James not making a connection between this new research and “the tremendousness of the idea of immortality.” The possibility of immortality may have been for James only a bare possibility at this point, but we know it became more probable to him as the “dramatic probabilities” in *Confidences of a “Psychical Researcher”* suggest. Perhaps the clearest testimony of James’s increasing enthusiasm for the possibility of immortality was his letter to his dying sister, Alice, in 1891:

Your fortitude, good spirits and unsentimentality have been simply unexampled in the midst of your physical woes; and when you're relieved from your post, *just* that bright note will remain behind, together with the inscrutable and mysterious character of the doom of nervous weakness which has chained you down for all these years. As for that, there's more in it than has ever been told to so-called science. These inhibitions, these split-up selves, all these new facts that are gradually coming to light about our organization, these enlargements of the self in trance, etc., are bringing me to turn for light in the direction of all sorts of despised spiritualistic and unscientific ideas. Father would find in me today a much more receptive listener -- all *that* philosophy has got to be brought in. And what a queer contradiction comes to the ordinary scientific argument against immortality (based on body being mind's condition and mind going *out* when body is gone), when one must believe (as now, in these neurotic cases) that some infernality in the body *prevents* really existing parts of the mind from coming to their effective rights at all, suppresses them, and

⁹⁴ *Correspondence*, 5:227-28.

blots them out from participation in this world's experiences, although they are *there* all the time. When that which is *you* passes out of the body, I am sure that there will be an explosion of liberated force and life till then eclipsed and kept down. I can hardly imagine *your* transition without a great oscillation of both "worlds" as they regain their new equilibrium after the change! Everyone will feel the shock, but you yourself will be more surprised than anybody else.⁹⁵

Here James states a position he would later take up in his 1898 Ingersoll Lecture, "Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine," in which James denies the mind's dependence on the body. Like Socrates in the *Phaedo*, except with someone else's life in the balance, James claims that the evidence suggests that the body is an obstruction to the mind and the mind is not dependent on the body. In the Ingersoll Lecture, James develops this idea, arguing that the brain has a transmissive function but is not necessary for consciousness. More will be said about this idea in chapter four. In any case, James's evolving and expanding view of human nature contributed to a stronger belief in immortality, but, as he tells his friend Carl Stumpf, other factors were at work as well. James writes, "I never felt the *rational* need of immortality . . . ; but as I grow older I confess that I feel the practical need of it much more than I ever did before; and that combines with reasons . . . to give me a growing faith in its reality."⁹⁶ Regardless of any scientific justification that could be had for human immortality, James reasoned that the idea seemed more plausible because, practically speaking, he was "just getting fit to live."⁹⁷

It should now be apparent that from the time of his crisis in 1870 to the end of his life, James was acutely concerned with the prospect of human immortality and, through

⁹⁵ *Correspondence*, 7:177-78.

⁹⁶ *Letters*, 2:214.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

his interest in psychical research, his belief in the probability of an afterlife became quickly and increasingly strengthened. Ralph Barton Perry remarked that James's interest in 'psychical research' was not one of his vagaries, but was central and typical."⁹⁸ Agreeing with Perry, McDermott, in his introduction to James's *Essays in Psychical Research*, writes, "The interpretation between James's psychical research and his philosophy is so general and pervasive that it can be easily missed, but it seems clear that there is a positive relationship between these two early and enduring intellectual passions which includes several shared attitudes and positions."⁹⁹ For example, McDermott suggests that James's philosophy and psychical research are both committed to reconciling science and religion; both attest to James's commitment to radical empiricism; both admit to provisional conclusions on ultimate questions; both emphasize the personal and subjective character of knowledge; and, finally, both play a role in James's willingness to reject dualism.¹⁰⁰ I couldn't agree more. It is the governing thesis of this paper that James's belief in the possibility of immortality was encouraged by his psychical research and subsequently pervaded and informed his philosophy of the self from *Principles* onward. Thus, to fully appreciate James's writings on the self, one must recognize that he had in mind the possibility of immortality the whole time. James's first and only sustained discussion of the self occurs in *Principles*, to which we will now turn.

⁹⁸ Perry, op. cit., 2:155.

⁹⁹ *Essays in Psychical Research*, xxxi.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxi-xxxii.

Chapter 3

The Passing Thought and Immortality in *Principles*

In 1886 James wrote “The Consciousness of Self,” which was published in 1890 as Chapter 10 of his magnum opus *The Principles of Psychology*. This chapter is, somewhat surprisingly, James’s only sustained treatment of the self. This is surprising since James was avowedly interested in the nature of the self, but it is also misleading because, as Gerald Myers points out, the concept of the self is implicit in discussions of human consciousness—a topic that pervades James’s work.¹ James’s conception of the self is inextricably tied to his theory of the mind, which is an area of intense debate amongst James scholars. In *The Unity of William James’s Thought*, Wesley Cooper suggests that James has been interpreted in almost every philosophically conceivable way: as a neutral monist, a naturalistic physicalist, a pan-psychist, and a phenomenologist.² Of these various positions, I will be particularly concerned with John Dewey’s and Owen Flanagan’s interpretation of James as a naturalistic physicalist, i.e., as one who effectively reduced consciousness to the physical world. For, if a naturalistic reading of James’s theory on consciousness is correct, my thesis that James’s work was shaped around his desire for immortality would be dealt a mortal blow. Not surprisingly, I will argue that a naturalistic reading of James is fundamentally incorrect. Specifically, I will argue that James was, for all intents and purposes, a dualist in *Principles*. Moreover, I will argue that his conception of the self turns out to be not only consistent with immortality, but better suited for it than traditional philosophical conceptions of the self.

¹ Myers, op. cit., 344.

² Cooper, op. cit., 37.

By the end of the chapter, although some issues will remain unresolved, we will have a more accurate understanding of James's conception of the self in *Principles* and how some of the main features of his account directly reflect his concerns regarding the possibility of immortality.

John Dewey was a friend of William James and a fellow pragmatist. In James's writings, especially *Principles*, Dewey identified a "biological psychology" which he adopted for himself, leading him to abandon his early roots in Hegelian philosophy. Although laudatory and likely well-intentioned, it appears to be the case that Dewey's interpretation of James was significantly skewed to align with his own philosophical project. According to Dewey's biological behaviorism, the mental is reducible to particular ways in which an organism interacts with its surrounding environment. Thus, Dewey's naturalism rejects mind/body dualism. In his 1940 essay, "The Vanishing Subject in the Psychology of James," Dewey argues that James, too, was a fellow naturalist who similarly rejected mind/body dualism. Of particular relevance here is Dewey's argument that, within *Principles*, the concept of self is "whittled down" to the "passing Thought," and eventually vanishes. Dewey argues that the nature of consciousness is, ultimately, no more mysterious than the nature of the physical world:

In principle there is no difference between discovering the cerebral conditions involved in a hallucinatory or a veridical perception and the chemical conditions involved in occurrence of water. The difference is one of greater complexity. But our comparative ignorance of concrete conditions in the case of situations, as matters of experience, does not make a "mystery" out of them.³

If Dewey is correct, then James's conception of the self in *Principles*—or lack thereof—would not be one fit for immortality and would directly contradict my interpretation of

³ John Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, 17 vols. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981-90), 14:161.

James. Thus, against Dewey, I will argue that James's self in *Principles* is not physical through-and-through and, therefore, does not vanish. However, before we directly consider James's positive conception of the self, we need to treat the broader question of whether James was dualist.

One of Dewey's critical assumptions is that James's dualism in *Principles* was *only* methodological. In Chapter 8, "The Relations of Minds to Other Things," James describes this provisional starting point for the psychologist:

The psychologist's attitude toward cognition will be so important in the sequel that we must not leave it till it is made perfectly clear. *It is a thoroughgoing dualism.* It supposes two elements, mind knowing and thing known, and treats them as irreducible. Neither gets out of itself or into the other, neither in any way *is* the other, neither *makes* the other. They just stand face to face in a common world, and one simply knows, or is known unto, its counterpart. This singular relation is not to be expressed in any lower terms, or translated into any more intelligible name. . . . The dualism of Object and Subject and their pre-established harmony are what the psychologist as such must assume, whatever ulterior monistic philosophy he may, as an individual who has the right also to be a metaphysician, have in reserve.⁴

Thus, James intended his methodological dualism in *Principles* to provide a neutral, scientific base for research, remaining committed only to common empirical data and unaffiliated with any more basic metaphysical position. It is, therefore, understandable how Dewey could assume James's use for dualism was *only* strategic. According to Dewey, the primary motive behind James's insistence on methodological dualism was his sensitivity to familiar traditions of his readers, which made James hesitant "to carry his scepticism to an even more radical extreme."⁵ That is, if James had been concerned with

⁴ *Principles*, 1:215-16.

⁵ Dewey, *op. cit.*, 157.

his analyses within *Principles*, solely, Dewey believed, he would have jettisoned methodological dualism.

In his essay “John Dewey’s Naturalization of William James,” Richard Gale rejects Dewey’s dismissal of dualism within the *Principles*. Gale argues that, not only did James take methodological dualism seriously, but, in addition, James himself was a dualist within the work. According to Gale, what cannot be overlooked are passages in which James directly argues for the truth of dualism.⁶ For example, in Chapter 5, “The Automata-Theory,” James writes: “Everyone admits the entire incommensurability of feeling as such with material motion as such. ‘A motion became a feeling!’—no phrase that our lips can frame is so devoid of apprehensible meaning.”⁷ Commenting on this passage, Gale writes: “. . . it looks like he is arguing for the nonidentity of the mental and physical on the basis of their necessarily not having all their properties in common.”⁸ It does look this way; however, once the passage is considered in its proper context, I think James is making a different point altogether. Immediately following the above remarks, James adds: “Accordingly, even the vaguest of evolutionary enthusiasts, when deliberately comparing material with mental facts, have been as forward as anyone else to emphasize the ‘chasm’ between the inner and the outer worlds.”⁹ James is making the point that even materialistic evolutionary theorists admit the “chasm” between the mental and the physical, yet, this only means that an account of the *continuity* between the two is

⁶ Gale, op. cit., 336.

⁷ *Principles*, 1:149.

⁸ Gale, op. cit., 341.

⁹ *Principles*, 1:149.

required—not that an account is in principle impossible. Thus, regarding James’s commitment to dualism, I don’t believe this passage is as conclusive as Gale believes.

There is, however, another passage Gale cites which I believe is more telling. In Chapter 5, prior to the above passage, James writes:

The study *a posteriori* of the *distribution* of consciousness shows it to be exactly such as we might expect in an organ added for the sake of steering a nervous system grown too complex to regulate itself. The conclusion that it is useful is, after all this, quite justifiable. But, if it is useful, it must be so through its causal efficaciousness, and the automaton-theory must succumb to the theory of common-sense. I, at any rate (pending metaphysical reconstructions not yet successfully achieved), shall have no hesitation in using the language of common-sense throughout this book.¹⁰

Here James is arguing that, given that an evolutionary process did occur (and James believed it did), we are justified in concluding that consciousness likely played some useful role in sentient creatures. That is to say, consciousness must be, in some way, causally efficacious. James was tempted to believe that consciousness “loaded the dice,” as it were, “bringing a more or less constant pressure to bear in favor of *those* of its performances which make for the most permanent interests of the brain's owner.”¹¹

Marcus Ford writes that:

In James’s eyes Darwin’s theory of evolution not only allows for the possibility of free wills, it requires them. Without the originality and spontaneous productivity introduced by free wills, evolution would proceed at too slow a pace. Natural selection alone would take far longer to produce organisms as complex as human beings than nineteenth-century geology could justify.¹²

¹⁰ *Principles*, 1:147.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹² Marcus Ford, *William James’s Philosophy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 27.

Evolutionary theory was never threatening to James. In his youth, James was “carried away with enthusiasm”¹³ for Herbert Spencer’s book *First Principles* and the evolutionary materialism it espoused. “In Spencer’s schema,” Marcus Ford writes, “everything physical, biological, and social evolved or is evolving according to a single, fixed, progressive pattern.”¹⁴ What James came to find deeply problematic about Spencer’s theory was that it failed to adequately account for was the emergence of consciousness and it denied free will which nullified ethical claims. Concerning the emergence of consciousness, James writes: “Spencer seems to be entirely unaware of the importance of explaining consciousness. Where he wants consciousness, he simply says, ‘A nascent consciousness arises.’ . . . Notice the terms ‘incipient’ and ‘nascent.’ Spurious philosophers of evolution seem to think that things, after a fashion, as it were, kind of ‘grewed.’”¹⁵ The problem here, as Ford points out, is that a “nascent” experience is no experience at all if it is not experienced. And if a “nascent” experience is experienced then “one is still left with the problem of experiential actualities evolving out of nonexperiential entities.”¹⁶ In sum, writes Ford, “Without experience there can be no free will or self-determination, and without free will there can be no ethical requirements.”¹⁷

In his 1876-1877 lecture notes, James writes that Spencer’s account leaves out the “active originality and spontaneous productivity” which James conceives as free will.

¹³ *Essays*, 116.

¹⁴ Ford, *op. cit.*, 26.

¹⁵ Perry, *op. cit.*, 1:490-91

¹⁶ Ford, 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

This is why, according to James, the Darwinian model of evolution is superior. Darwin emphasizes “the truth that the regulator or preserver of the variation, the environment, is a different part from its producer.” James argues that free wills produce original and spontaneous events which are needed to account for the pace at which evolution has occurred.¹⁸ James draws out one of the social implications of this view in his 1880 essay, “Great Men and Their Environment.” There James argues, *contra* Spencer, that communities change from generation to generation because of the “accumulated differences of individuals, of their examples, their initiatives, and their decisions.”¹⁹ As Ford succinctly puts it:

James makes a distinction between the causes that *produce* novelty and the causes that *maintain* novelty after it is produced. He then uses this distinction on two levels: on the individual level it is free will that is the cause of novelty and the physical environment that either maintains or squelches it; on the societal level it is the “great men” who are the causes that produce novelty and the society that either supports it or fails to support it. In both cases, what is affirmed is the openness of the future.²⁰

As Myers observes, James could “accept apes as ancestors, but he could not abide dogmatic extensions of Darwinism which denied free will, the efficacy of consciousness, or the value of the individual.”²¹

What is important to note in all of this is James’s ultimate belief in the efficacy of consciousness. This is an issue that is directly relevant to a larger topic within *Principles* which Gale correctly accuses Dewey of overlooking: James’s belief in free will. Like

¹⁸ Perry, *op. cit.*, 1:478.

¹⁹ *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 164.

²⁰ Ford, *op. cit.*, 29.

²¹ Myers, *op. cit.*, 409.

Gale, I believe that once one acknowledges James's account of free will in the *Principles*, Dewey's case for a naturalistic reading of James becomes untenable.

For Dewey, the issue of James being a naturalist "is clinched" by the way James handles the specific topic of the "nature of the self and our consciousness of it, in which the 'subject' of dualistic epistemology disappears and its place is taken by an empirical and behavioral self."²² The crucial passage for Dewey reads:

In a sense, then, it may be truly said that, in one person at least, *the 'Self of selves', when carefully examined, is found to consist mainly of the collection of these peculiar motions in the head or between the head and throat.*²³

Here James, infamously, describes the experience of the self as due to a group of "peculiar motions in the head"--clearly an idea Dewey is sympathetic with. However, Dewey fails to consider these comments within James's broader discussion. Immediately following the above remarks, James adds some important qualifications:

I do not for a moment say that this is *all* it consists of, for I fully realize how desperately hard is introspection in this field. But I feel quite sure that these cephalic motions are the portions of my innermost activity of which I am *most distinctly aware*. If the dim portions which I cannot yet define should prove to be like unto these distinct portions in me, and I like other men, *it would follow that our entire feeling of spiritual activity, or what commonly passes by that name, is really a feeling of bodily activities whose exact nature is by most men overlooked.*²⁴

The first line of this passage makes it sufficiently clear that James was not providing a materialistic reduction of the self. Dewey fails to observe what Gale refers to as James's "phenomenological materialism" which runs throughout the *Principles*.²⁵ In other words,

²² Dewey, op. cit., 165.

²³ *Principles*, 1:288.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Gale, op. cit., 340.

when James describes his “self” as motions in the head, he is attempting to give a phenomenological description of the self as he experiences it, which invariably leads to the reporting of bodily sensations. Gerald Myers astutely notes that if we find James’s descriptions obscure “we should try to verbalize for ourselves the experience of self-introspection; no simple literal formulation is available.”²⁶ Moreover, given James’s medical training, it was typical for him to suffuse his analyses with physiological references. In any case, I think the most conclusive evidence that James refused to banish the self were his fervent defenses of free will in the chapters “Attention” and “Will.”

In the chapter on “Attention,” James describes the importance of our ability to selectively focus our consciousness:

Millions of items of the outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter into 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.²⁷

Without attention or selective interest, we would be in the position of an infant who, according to James, experiences the world as “one great blooming, buzzing, confusion.”²⁸ For James, that ideas enter our consciousness and that we inevitably pay attention to some ideas rather than others, is causally determined. The role of an

²⁶ Myers, op. cit., 346.

²⁷ *Principles*, 1:381-82.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:462.

autonomous will, according to James, is to control how much or how little effort is expended in attending to an idea:

*The essential achievement of the will, in short, when it is most 'voluntary,' is to attend to a difficult object and hold it fast before the mind. The so-doing is the fiat; and it is a mere physiological incident that when the object is thus attended to, immediate motor consequences should ensue. . . . Effort of attention is thus the essential phenomenon of will.*²⁹

Thus, according to James, *that we attend* to ideas is involuntary, we can't help it;

however, James wonders if the *amount of effort to attend* to particular ideas is also

involuntary. In James's view, the answer to this question has momentous consequences:

When we believe that our autonomy in the midst of nature depends on our not being pure effect, but a cause,—we must admit that the question whether attention involve such a principle of spiritual activity or not is metaphysical as well as psychological, and is well worthy of all the pains we can bestow on its solution. It is in fact the pivotal question of metaphysics, the very hinge on which our picture of the world shall swing from materialism, fatalism, monism, towards spiritualism, freedom, pluralism, —or else the other way.³⁰

Throughout his adult life James believed we possessed this autonomous will—an irreducible “spiritual force”³¹ within consciousness that is not causally determined. As to why he believes, James simply says here that his reasons are “ethical,” and notes how:

The whole feeling of reality, the whole sting and excitement of our voluntary life, depends on our sense that in it things are *really being decided* from one moment to another, and that it is not the dull rattling off of a chain that was forged innumerable ages ago.³²

As we saw in the previous chapter, what helped James through his emotional crises was his belief in free will which he felt allowed him to lead a meaningful moral life.

²⁹ *Principles*, 2:1166.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:429.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

In his article, “William James’s Attitude Toward Death,” William Gavin suggests James’s attitude towards death is analogous to his attitude towards the issue of free will. That is to say, although James can prove neither that the will is free nor that biological death is not final, he vividly perceives the dramatic practical consequences that follow from taking one side or the other. Thus, given that the truth of the matter in each case is largely vague and mysterious, Gavin claims James chose to fight the good fight in each case.³³ In *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague*, Gavin insists that James’s use of the “vague” should not be construed pejoratively:

When James talks of the need to preserve the vague, he is arguing against certainty, that is, against the usurping of the privileged position of center stage once and for all by any formulation of the universe.

Gavin contrasts this fallibilistic attitude of James with what he calls “bumbling”:

“Bumbling” is a term I shall use to refer to a situation wherein one seeks certainty, seeks the apodictic, the fundamental Archimedean point as a necessary desideratum in life, but *fails* to find it. Bumbling, then, refers to a depressing state of affairs in which one allows the goal to be defined in terms of certainty and then cannot manage to achieve it—or at least to pretend to have achieved it. The vague, in contrast, refers to a situation that has not degenerated into an overly false clarity, and to one that does not intend to come up with final certainty.³⁴

Thus, vagueness for James, according to Gavin, was not so much a liability as it was an opportunity to choose from competing ideas about a reality too profuse for complete comprehension—and this makes life ineluctably *intense*. “Life presents a challenge to which we must respond,” writes Gavin, “To decide not to decide is in itself to make a

³³ William J. Gavin, “William James’s Attitude Toward Death,” *Journal of Thought*, 11 (1976): 202-03.

³⁴ Gavin, *Reinstatement of the Vague*, 2-3.

decision. In this sense, we are all artists carving out experience.”³⁵ Thus, for James, free will was needed in order to meet the challenges of life.

In his 1884 essay, “The Dilemma of Determinism,” James had expounded on his moral reasons for accepting free will.³⁶ Though interesting in its own right, it is not important to delve into here. What is important is that, in *Principles*, James was committed to free will as an “original” and “spiritual force” whose “effort seems to belong to an altogether different realm, as if it were the substantive thing which we are.”³⁷ Thus, far from a materialistic reduction of the self, James insisted that one of its distinguishing features is its seeming transcendence of the physical. To borrow a term from Gale, Dewey’s attempt to “despookify” James in the *Principles* neglects all of this.

Owen Flanagan, twenty-five years after Dewey’s death, revitalized Dewey’s naturalistic interpretation of James in his essay “Naturalizing the Mind: The Philosophical Psychology of William James.” In this essay, Flanagan calls James’s *Principles* “the first formulation of the naturalistic position in the philosophy of mind.”³⁸ Two points are worth making about Flanagan’s position. First, at the end of the essay he concludes that James’s doctrine of free will is indeed the “snag” that prevents James from going all the way with the naturalistic direction of his own thought. The best Flanagan can do is chastise James for not giving up a libertarian conception of free will and going

³⁵ Gavin, *Reinstatement of the Vague*, 19.

³⁶ According to James, the “dilemma of determinism” turns out to be a choice between pessimism or subjectivism, neither of which he finds satisfactory. James opts to believe in indeterminism which is pluralistic, thus allowing for free will and the possibility of improving the world.

³⁷ *Principles*, 2:1181.

³⁸ Owen J. Flanagan, *The Science of the Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 24.

the route of soft determinism.³⁹ The second important point is that Flanagan changed his mind about James being a naturalist a few years later. In “Consciousness as a Pragmatist Views It,” Flanagan concludes:

In *Principles* James was a dualist. His dualism involved a commitment to interaction between the mental and the physical. It follows that all the statements about psycho-physical correlations need to be taken, not as support for any kind of parallelism, but as involving the belief that for each token mental event, there will be a corresponding brain event (probably the other way around). Finally, the sort of dualistic interactionism that James accepts in *Principles* is ambivalently Cartesian, an ambivalent form of substance dualism.⁴⁰

Flanagan credits the criticism of Wesley Cooper for his reversal. Cooper argues that, although “James was a naturalist in psychology to the extent that he wanted psychology to become a law-seeking natural science,” these laws linked brain states to mental states, which James “construed as irreducibly different, as far as psychology is concerned, from physical states.”⁴¹ Again, for the purposes of natural psychology, James believed that we should treat the mental as we experience it, i.e., non-physically. As Cooper points out, James thought the nature of consciousness and its causal relationship with the brain were largely issues that fell outside the scope of scientific inquiry and into metaphysics.⁴² James was content in *Principles* to leave aside many of the mysteries of psycho-physical dualism, later referring to psychology as the “antechamber to metaphysics.”⁴³ Thus, I

³⁹ By “soft determinism,” I mean the idea that determinism is compatible with individual freedom. In “The Dilemma of Determinism,” James calls soft determinism a “quagmire of evasion,” arguing that it fails to resolve the problems of the deterministic world-view.

⁴⁰ Owen J. Flanagan, “Consciousness as a Pragmatist Views It,” *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 37-38.

⁴¹ Cooper, op. cit., 45.

⁴² Ibid., 46.

⁴³ *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 296.

think we can safely conclude that in *Principles* James was a dualist, from both the perspective of empirical psychology and from the perspective of a moral agent who believed in free will.

It is, therefore, accurate to say that insofar as consciousness constitutes the self, it remains for James irreducible to the physical world. But in the passage from Flanagan cited above, Flanagan refers to James's substance dualism as "ambivalent," implying James was not a committed substance dualist. I believe this is correct. Although James is a methodological dualist in the *Principles*, he nevertheless rejected the idea that the self is essentially an unchanging, substantive entity. Instead, James views the self as constituted by the contents of an ever-changing stream of thought. Before we arrive at James's conclusions, let us first follow James's development of the self in the chapter "The Consciousness of Self."

James begins by broadly conceiving the self as:

*The sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account. All these things give him the same emotions. If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down,—not necessarily in the same degree for each thing, but in much the same way for all.*⁴⁴

Thus, James is attempting to determine what we practically mean by the term "self," how the term cashes out in experience. James surmises that what one "can call his" falls into four different categories which mutually constitute the self: the material self, the social self, the spiritual self, and the pure ego. Each of these selves represents a different aspect of the self, although the material self, social self, and spiritual self all refer to the

⁴⁴ *Principles*, 1:280-81.

“Empirical Me,” what *I* am *about*, so to speak. By contrast, the pure ego refers to just the first person pronoun, *I*, the “bare principle of personal Unity,” and its nature.⁴⁵

The material self, according to James, is mostly our body, which is what we feel most intimately connected with. What follows the body in order of importance, in James’s view, are our clothes, our immediate family, our home, and, lastly, all our other property.⁴⁶ The social self, by contrast, is “the recognition which he gets from his mates.”⁴⁷ According to James, because we are deeply social beings, getting noticed by others (preferably favorably) is one of our fundamental needs. Regarding the importance of being noticed by our peers, I think James demonstrates tremendous insight into human nature when he writes:

No more fiendish punishment could be devised . . . than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met 'cut us dead,' and acted as if we were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruelest bodily tortures would be a relief; for these would make us feel that, however bad might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all.⁴⁸

There may be no better confirmation of this hypothetical situation than our present culture in which many people would rather be a disreputable “reality” television star than

⁴⁵ *Principles*, 1:283

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:280; It is rather curious that James believes we view our clothes as a more important part of our material self than our own family! James adds that, “there are few of us who, if asked to choose between having a beautiful body clad in raiment perpetually shabby and unclean, and having an ugly and blemished form always spotlessly attired, would not hesitate a moment before making a decisive reply.” Though I doubt that people identify with their clothes to the extent James is suggesting, it does seem to be the case that, when we think about our self, our clothes seem to factor in, especially when we try to literally picture our self. In any case, the more general point James is making is that our material self reflects any and all the worldly *stuff* we care about.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:281

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

to remain a “nobody”--to say nothing of the acts of violence committed by neglected or marginalized members of society against others and sometimes even themselves. Thus, James was certainly correct to emphasize the role of social recognition, or lack thereof, in our self-makeup. In discussing our social self, James makes the further point that, because we are recognized differently by different groups of people, we have multiple social selves:

Many a youth who is demure enough before his parents and teachers, swears and swaggers like a pirate among his 'tough' young friends. We do not show ourselves to our children as to our club-companions, to our customers as to the laborers we employ, to our own masters and employers as to our intimate friends.⁴⁹

In James’s view, these differences amongst our social selves are not necessarily burdensome. For example, in some instances people have different social selves which they want to keep forever separate, e.g., a President of a country who does not want the citizens to know how he behaves in private settings with his closest friends. There can also be “harmonious” social selves, e.g., the social self of a basketball player while playing a game and their social self after the game as they return home to their family. Therefore, our multiple social selves need not conflict.

The final aspect of our “Empirical Me” is the spiritual self which James describes as “a man's inner or subjective being, his psychic faculties or dispositions, taken concretely.”⁵⁰ James calls this subjective being the “most enduring and intimate part of the self, that which we most verily seem to be.”⁵¹ Rejecting the “abstract way” of dealing with this spiritual self, James does not attempt to dissect it into separate faculties

⁴⁹ *Principles*, 1:282.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:283.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

to be independently analyzed. Instead, James insists that we treat the spiritual self according to a “concrete view,” just as it is experienced, with all of our faculties working simultaneously.⁵² Thus, he proposes that this self is either identified with the entire stream of consciousness or some segment of it, “both the stream and the section being concrete existences in time, and each being a unity after its own peculiar kind.”⁵³

Reflecting on this issue, James notes that he is no longer considering the content of thought but, rather, thinking about ourselves as *thinkers*. According to James, this “momentous” and “mysterious” aspect of our self, as a matter of fact, exists.⁵⁴ Regarding whether the thinker is identified with the whole of or only a segment of the stream of consciousness, James remarks that:

*A certain portion of the stream abstracted from the rest is so identified in an altogether peculiar degree, and is felt by all men as a sort of innermost centre within the circle, of sanctuary within the citadel, constituted by the subjective life as a whole. Compared with this element of the stream, the other parts, even of the subjective life, seem transient external possessions, of which each in turn can be disowned, whilst that which disowns them remains.*⁵⁵

Thus, the thinker of the spiritual self within the stream of consciousness seems to stand apart and consequently resists identification with the entirety of the stream. James writes:

They would call it the *active* element in all consciousness; saying that whatever qualities a man's feelings may possess, or whatever content his thought may include, there is a spiritual something in him which seems to *go out* to meet these qualities and contents, whilst they seem to *come in* to be received by it. It is what welcomes or rejects. It presides over the perception of sensations, and by giving or withholding its assent it influences the movements they tend to arouse. It is the home of interest,—

⁵² *Principles*, 1:284.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:285.

not the pleasant or the painful, not even pleasure or pain, as such, but that within us to which pleasure and pain, the pleasant and the painful, speak. It is the source of effort and attention, and the place from which appear to emanate the fiats of the will.⁵⁶

What James is describing here is what many people have traditionally called the “Soul,” the active substance which is the engine of our conscious life. It is here that James proceeds to describe what he *feels* regarding this “central nucleus” of our mental life which leads him into those odd descriptions of “bodily processes . . . taking place in the head.”⁵⁷ Regarding these phenomenological introspections, James concludes:

That (in some persons at least) the part of the innermost Self which is most vividly felt turns out to consist for the most part of a collection of cephalic movements of 'adjustments' which, for want of attention and reflection, usually fail to be perceived and classed as what they are; that over and above these there is an obscurer feeling of something more; but whether it be of fainter physiological processes, or of nothing objective at all, but rather of subjectivity as such, of thought become 'its own object,' must at present remain an open question, — like the question whether it be an indivisible active soul-substance, or the question whether it be a personification of the pronoun I, or any other of the guesses as to what its nature may be.⁵⁸

Again, it is clear that James did not want his descriptions of his felt, phenomenal self to be misconstrued as conclusions about the ontological status of the self—it was left an open question here. It is a question, however, that James takes up in the later sections “The Pure Ego” and “The Pure Self or Inner Principle of Personal Unity.”

⁵⁶ *Principles*, 1:285.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:288.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:292.

In “The Pure Ego,” James calls the issue “the most puzzling puzzle with which psychology has to deal.”⁵⁹ Moreover, he claims that any position that one holds must be held “against heavy odds.” James has a clear sense of the traditional difficulties:

If, with the Spiritualists, one contend for a substantial soul, or transcendental principle of unity, one can give no positive account of what that may be. And if, with the Humians [sic], one deny such a principle and say that the stream of passing thoughts is all, one runs against the entire common-sense of mankind, of which the belief in a distinct principle of selfhood seems an integral part.⁶⁰

Characteristically, James attempts to cut a middle path through the Spiritualist and Humean positions—neither completely reducing the self to a simple train of associations nor elevating it to the status of a permanent, substantive entity. Instead, James argues that, for the purposes of psychology, a succession of perishing thoughts is adequate to fully describe consciousness.

What is important about this “passing Thought” is that it has the function of appropriation or rejection; it is the “hook” in every present state of consciousness which is able to “knit on” thoughts from one moment to the next.⁶¹ This appropriative feature of the passing Thought is what sustains continuity and personal identity. What has been appropriated conveys a sense of “warmth and intimacy” to the subject which is continually recognized as *me* or *mine*.⁶² James compares the passing Thought to an owner of a herd of cattle who is able to herd them because he is able to recognize his own “brand.” Just as there is a “herd-brand,” James suggests there is a “self-brand” that is

⁵⁹ *Principles*, 1:314.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1:324.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 1:316.

instantiated through the appropriative function of the passing Thought.⁶³ Thus, according to James, the substantial soul of the Spiritualists does not need to be posited to explain the continuity of personal identity-- it's superfluous for the purposes of science and psychology. Still, James adds the important caveat that "there *may* be another non-phenomenal Thinker behind [the passing Thought]."⁶⁴

An important question that now arises is whether James's account of self-identity over time is compatible with the possibility of immortality. Is it reasonable to believe that the conditions for self-identity James identifies will remain after death and, if so, will anything be lost in transition? To begin answering these difficult questions, let us first admit that much of what constitutes what James refers to as our "Empirical Me" would lose relevance for us upon bodily death. That is to say, the body that we now inhabit and care for, the material possessions we value, the opinions of our co-workers, and our routine, day-to-day concerns in general, would surely lose some importance or value after we pass on--assuming this is possible. Unless one supposes that our consciousness jumps into a new body and environment very similar to this one, it seems safe to say that our self would undergo some redefinition according to the novel context in which we would find ourselves. Gale rightly notes that, in James's philosophy, "the essence of consciousness is to be selectively attentive on the basis what is interesting or important."⁶⁵ Therefore, the extent to which our self becomes redefined after death will directly depend upon how much of what we find to be interesting or important resembles

⁶³ *Principles*, 1:320.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:324.

⁶⁵ Richard M. Gale, "James on Self Identity Over Time," *Modern Schoolman* LXXI (March 1994): 165.

what we now find interesting or important. This aspect of self-identity reflects what Gale identifies as James's shift away from a bare numerical understanding of self-identity to a qualitative understanding. Thus, Gale writes:

When a person, upon undergoing a psychological upheaval that results in radical difference in the way in which they remember and evaluate the importance of things, says "I am no longer the same person," it is not to be parsed in its ordinary manner of "I am numerically one and the same person throughout but have just changed in my psychological traits." Rather, that person bears little if any numerical identity to the past person.⁶⁶

This is, of course, a departure from common sense. As Gale points out, we typically count an individual as one and the same person throughout their life, regardless of wild variations in behavior, as long as there is basic bodily continuity. For example, if somebody commits a serious crime and subsequently becomes "converted," we still consider them to be the same person and hold them responsible. According to James's account, however, it would be wrong to make this assumption. For, James believes people can fundamentally transform themselves and become an altogether different person. In any case, the important point here is that the Empirical Self that one now identifies with would change according to what becomes of interest and importance after bodily death. Therefore, unless one were to believe that there is a complete "psychological upheaval" and total reevaluation of values immediately upon death, there is no reason to assume that there wouldn't be some noticeable continuity between the two worlds or perspectives—that some aspects of our self-identity would remain the same.

The more interesting and crucial issue here is not the fate of the Empirical Me, but, rather, the fate of the *thinker* actually doing the attending and, consequently,

⁶⁶ Gale, *op. cit.*, 167.

contributing to the fashioning of the Empirical Self. Fontinell is quick to describe this distinction between the “objective *me*” and the “subjective *I*” as “a distinction of focus and function.”⁶⁷ Thus, Fontinell argues, the self in *Principles* is not *really* divided between a thinker and the objects of thought; rather, these are two functions of the same self that are identified separately according to different emphases. Fontinell’s interpretation of the self in *Principles* along functional lines takes into account James’s eventual rejection of dualism and later metaphysics. Although I do not want to follow Fontinell’s method here, I do believe it is helpful and legitimate to raise this issue of function in regard to the subjective *I*. That is, we can speak of the function of the subjective *I* within the dualistic framework of *Principles*, without illicitly importing ideas from James’s later philosophy. We can say then that the main function of the subjective *I* is to appropriate those “warm” and “intimate” thoughts, resulting in a unified and continuous self. Further, as was mentioned above, James understands the self to be, in actuality, the passing Thought—a temporary pulse of consciousness, perpetually changing and in process from one moment to the next. In other words, each pulse of thought features the subjective *I* which continuously identifies itself more or less with previous pulses of thought. It seems then, because James does not believe the passing Thought is reducible to the body, that the subjective *I* could carry on its distinctive function without the body. However, upon closer analysis we immediately run into at least two problems concerning self-identity and the possibility of immortality.

The first problem concerns the role of feeling in establishing self-identity. James writes that, “*Whatever* the content of the ego may be, it is habitually felt *with* everything else by us humans, and must form a *liaison* between all the things of which we become

⁶⁷ Fontinell, op. cit., 82.

successively aware.”⁶⁸ Thus, as Fontinell correctly suggests, “The self, insofar as it is an identity-in-diversity, a sameness-amidst-differences, a unity-within-plurality, must be ‘felt.’”⁶⁹ Concerning the establishment of self-identity, Perry writes, “In James, the personal subject loses all of its special privileges. It must submit to the common test. If it is there at all it must give evidence of its existence, and this evidence furnishes, so far as it goes, the only clue to its nature and character.”⁷⁰ Fontinell adds, “The ‘ground’ evidence, for James, is what is felt or presented in conceptual experience.”⁷¹ If one assumes dualism, as James does in *Principles*, the problem for immortality then becomes: How does one maintain the necessary *feeling* of self-identity when one becomes dissociated from one’s body? Regarding the functioning of a subjective *I*, what would it then mean to appropriate on the basis of “warmth” and “intimacy” once disembodied? More generally, what would it mean for consciousness to be selective on the basis of *interest* and *importance* without the usual bodily manifestation of related emotions? I find this very difficult if not impossible to imagine.

The second problem is partly related to the first; namely, if dualism is assumed, then consciousness considered apart from the body and all things “material” seems to become undesirably diaphanous and barren. The issue is only exacerbated by James’s “whittling down” of consciousness to the momentary pulses of a passing Thought and arguing that the *I* functions only as a liaison and is not a substantive entity. In his classic essay, “The Reappearance of the Self in the Last Philosophy of William James,” Milic

⁶⁸ *Principles*, 1:235.

⁶⁹ Fontinell, op. cit., 82.

⁷⁰ Ralph Barton Perry, *In the Spirit of William James*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1938), 86.

⁷¹ Fontinell, op. cit., 83.

Capek asks, “was it logical for James to claim that ‘the passing thought is the only thinker,’ or, in other words, that the stream of thought is nothing but a mere multiplicity of successive perishing pulses?”⁷² Capek refers to these pulses of thought as James’s “psychical molecules” which seem to differ from his atomistic and associationist predecessors only in respect to their “larger temporal span.”⁷³ Recall that James describes the unifying link, the *I*, between pulses of thought as “something not among things collected, but superior to them all, namely, the real present onlooking, remembering, ‘judging thought’ or identifying ‘section’ of the stream.”⁷⁴ Capek properly points out that James’s account is, ironically, very similar to John Stuart Mill’s postulate of an “inexplicable tie” which was supposed to account for the connection between successive feelings and which James denounces.⁷⁵ About Mill, James writes:

This ‘inexplicable tie’ which connects the feelings, this ‘something in common’ by which they are linked and which is not the passing feelings themselves, but something permanent, . . . what is it but metaphysical substance come again to life?⁷⁶

I think Capek is correct here in claiming that James failed to notice how his own criticism applied to his account.⁷⁷ James struggles in *Principles* to give an account of the *I* that was substantial enough to perform the necessary functions of self-hood, yet unpretentiously confined to experience and introspection. We must keep in mind,

⁷² Milic Capek, “The Reappearance of the Self in the Last Philosophy of William James,” *Philosophical Review* 62, no.4 (October 1953): 535.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ *Principles*, 1:320-21.

⁷⁵ Capek, 536.

⁷⁶ *Principles*, 1:340.

⁷⁷ Capek, 536.

however, that James's goal in *Principles* was not to provide a metaphysical account of the mind, even if his descriptions of psychological states frequently bleed into metaphysical territory.

That said, given James's account here, what are we to make of these problems in regards to self-identity and the prospect for immortality? If we assume dualism, accounting for the role of *feeling* in self-identity once the mind is free of the body becomes highly problematic; moreover, once separated, it is puzzling just how much substantive reality the *I* actually possesses. Fortunately, and somewhat tellingly, James's thinking after *Principles* works to address these issues. Not only will James eventually reject dualism, denying any ultimate difference between the mental and the physical, he will also enlarge the scope of the self beyond that of the momentary passing Thought. As we will see in the following chapters, the passing Thought will remain at the center of our experience, but James will argue that it is not our *full self*--it is not the whole field of consciousness. The upshot of all of this will be a conception of a self that is neither mental nor physical *simpliciter*, but is continuous with *both*, and it will be conceived as essentially related to wider, more inclusive fields of consciousness. Thus, given these modifications to his theory, it becomes increasingly conceivable how the conditions for self-identity over time identified in the *Principles* may be realized in the event of bodily death. But to eventually appreciate these changes, we will need to first return to James's account of the self in *Principles* and consider further features of his account.

The particular question of whether there is a soul substance underlying the passing Thought is directly addressed by James in the section "The Pure Self or Inner Principle of Personal Unity." According to popular accounts of the soul, James observes,

the soul is typically thought to be immaterial, simple, and substantial. As a result, the soul is thought to be incorruptible and *naturally* immortal. By contrast, “the Thought is a perishing and not an immortal or incorruptible thing.”⁷⁸ According to James, the issue of soul is relevant in determining whether one believes in immortality. For the purposes of science, however, it has no explanatory power:

We ought certainly to admit that there is more than the bare fact of coexistence of a passing thought with a passing brain-state. But we do not answer the question 'What is that more?' when we say that it is a 'Soul' which the brain-state affects. This kind of more *explains* nothing. . . . The Spiritualists do not deduce any of the properties of the mental life from otherwise known properties of the soul. They simply find various characters ready-made in the mental life, and these they clap into the Soul, saying, "Lo! behold the source from whence they flow!" The merely verbal character of this 'explanation' is obvious.⁷⁹

Thus, unless the Spiritualists are able to demonstrate why their conception of a soul is necessary to explain our mental life, James sees no reason to invoke it for the purposes of psychology. That is to say, as long as the minimal notion of a passing Thought is sufficient for scientific purposes, there is no need to locate its source in an arcane, non-material substance. Why unnecessarily muddle science with metaphysical speculation? Thus, in James’s view, science has no use for the soul and, if it weren’t for practical demands, he says, “the case would rest here.”⁸⁰ Of course, James does not let the case rest there.

One of the practical demands James acknowledges is the question of immortality. As was mentioned previously, the simplicity and substantiality that traditionally are said

⁷⁸ *Principles*, 1:327.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:328-29.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:329.

to characterize the soul make it immortal *by nature*. However, James argues, this account of the soul,

. . . guarantees no immortality of a sort *we care for*. The enjoyment of the atom-like simplicity of their substance *in sæcula sæculorum* would not to most people seem a consummation devoutly to be wished. The substance must give rise to a stream of consciousness continuous with the present stream, in order to arouse our hope, but of this the mere persistence of the substance *per se* offers no guarantee.⁸¹

A cosmos full of simple, soul-pellet substances--the sedimentary remains of human life--was not the kind of immortality James cared for. James suggests that an immortality that *we care for* must ensure some continuity with our current stream of consciousness and an absolutely simple substance fails to make that guarantee. But rather than arguing for immortality on the basis of atom-like simplicity, James suggests that a moral grounding may be more compelling:

The demand for immortality is nowadays essentially teleological. We believe ourselves immortal because we believe ourselves *fit* for immortality. A 'substance' ought surely to perish, we think, if not worthy to survive; and an insubstantial 'stream' to prolong itself provided it be worthy, if the nature of Things is organized in the rational way in which we trust it is.⁸²

What I think James is getting at here is that immortality makes more sense in the context of being able to realize ideals which exceed our ability to realize in this natural life, e.g., as Gale suggests, realizing a deeper union with the universe, or the ultimate elimination of evil. To put it another way, if humans have certain needs or ideals that must be met in order to flourish, and these require a belief in immortality to realize, it is rational to hope the universe (assuming it is rational) will be responsive to our demands. Sami Pihlström taps into this idea in his 2002 essay, "William James on Death, Mortality, and

⁸¹ *Principles*, 1:330.

⁸² *Ibid.*

Immortality.” Pihlström writes that, “From a Jamesian (or, equally clearly Kantian) point of view, ethics grounds metaphysics, not vice versa, although even ethical needs are not any absolute grounding for anything, because they can and should be revised in the course of changes that may take place in our lives.”⁸³ Although I am largely sympathetic to Pihlström’s view, I would have to add the caveat that James’s conception of reality does not *simply* fall back on ethical demands. For James, if one felt an ethical demand which contradicted our immediate, lived experience, it would be better to renounce the demand than base a metaphysics upon it. In other words, James considered himself an empiricist first and foremost. In any case, James gives the final word on immortality to the German philosopher Hermann Lotze:

We have no other principle for deciding it than this general idealistic belief: that every created thing will continue whose continuance belongs to the meaning of the world, and so long as it does so belong; whilst everyone will pass away whose reality is justified only in a transitory phase of the world's course. That this principle admits of no further application in human hands need hardly be said. *We* surely know not the merits which may give to one being a claim on eternity, nor the defects which would cut others off.⁸⁴

The insight here, which James endorses, is that our best hope for immortality lies in living our lives as meaningfully as possible, striving for our ideals, and trusting that our active efforts merit preserving in the world’s course. Thus, James’s rejection of a soul as a substantive entity with a natural guarantee of immortality, does not, in any way, undermine his hope for immortality. As was the case with free will, James so far makes a case for immortality on *primarily* moral grounds—that the good in the universe shall prevail and shall remain.

⁸³ Pihlström, *op. cit.*, 607.

⁸⁴ *Principles*, 1:330; James translates this passage from Lotze’s 1883 work *Grundzüge der Metaphysik*.

Still, even though James makes this shift, discounting the relevance of a substantive soul for immortality, I would argue that James's non-substantive account of the self actually reflects James's hope for an immortality *he cared for*. One of the important metaphysical advantages James's non-substantive self has over its substantive counterpart is its tremendous boundlessness. James writes:

One great use of the Soul has always been to account for, and at the same time to guarantee, the closed individuality of each personal consciousness. The thoughts of one soul must unite into one self, it was supposed, and must be eternally insulated from those of every other soul. But we have already begun to see that, although unity is the rule of each man's consciousness, yet in some individuals, at least, thoughts may split away from the others and form separate selves. As for insulation, it would be rash, in view of the phenomena of thought-transference, mesmeric influence and spirit-control, which are being alleged nowadays on better authority than ever before, to be too sure about that point either. The definitively closed nature of our personal consciousness is probably an average statistical resultant of many conditions, but not an elementary force or fact; so that, if one wishes to preserve the Soul, the less he draws his arguments from *that* quarter the better. So long as our self, on the whole, makes itself good and practically maintains itself as a closed individual, why, as Lotze says, is not that enough? And why is the *being-an-individual* in some inaccessible metaphysical way so much prouder an achievement?⁸⁵

Accordingly, even though James's conception of a non-substantive self resulted from scientific parsimony, he saw it offering a model which better fit his findings in abnormal psychology and psychic research. As was shown in the previous chapter, James's work in these fields took him towards a view of the self that was open to mystical experiences—to positing a “mother sea” of consciousness surrounding our own consciousness. In *Principles* James remarks that:

For my own part I confess that the moment I become metaphysical and try to define the more [what is beyond the self], I find the notion of some sort of an *anima mundi* thinking in all of us to be a more promising hypothesis,

⁸⁵ *Principles*, 1:331.

in spite of all its difficulties, than that of a lot of absolutely individual souls.⁸⁶

Clearly, the notion of a self “eternally insulated from . . . every other soul” was not an attractive idea for James. It fit neither his research nor his metaphysical tastes. Whatever the ultimate nature of James’s passing Thought, it was open to change, an aspect of the flowing stream of consciousness--active and alive. Therefore, regarding his hope for immortality, I think James had it both ways in the *Principles*: He stressed the moral justification for immortality while simultaneously engineering a non-substantive model of the self consistent with concrete experience and science, which, because of its indefiniteness, seems a better candidate to realize the “dramatic probabilities of nature.” Accordingly, although James’s discussion of the self in the *Principles* sometimes appears to be reductionistic, I hope it is now more obvious that James was consistently and intently focused on preserving our most meaningful possibilities. In the next chapter, we will move to James’s work regarding the self directly after *Principles*, notably his Ingersoll Lecture, “Human Immortality,” and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Again, I will argue that we find James actively seeking a conception of the self suited for immortality.

⁸⁶ *Principles*, 1:328.

Chapter 4

Expanding the Self: Immortality and James's Field Model

In this chapter, I will consider James's 1897 Ingersoll Lecture, "Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine," as well as his landmark work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, published in 1902. I will argue that each of these works reflects James's desire to better ground the possibility of personal immortality. In *Human Immortality*, specifically, we will see this evidenced by James's belief in the superiority of a non-reductionistic view of consciousness, as well as his profound expressions of regard for the value of human life. In *Varieties*, I will consider how James turns away from dualistic categories and begins to employ a consciousness-as-field metaphor, better suiting both his psychological descriptions and a metaphysics consistent with the possibility of personal immortality. In the end, we will have a better understanding of the direction in which James is taking the self—a direction that is continuously looking to enrich it and expand its possibilities.

In his essay, *Human Immortality*, James appraises immortality as "one of the great spiritual needs of man" yet quickly attempts to distinguish himself from those "with a real passion for the matter."¹ "I have to confess," writes James, "that my own personal feeling about immortality has never been of the keenest order, and that among the problems that give my mind solicitude, this one does not take the very foremost place."² Personal immortality may not have been his "keenest" passion or his "foremost" concern, but James's lecture reveals a man invested enough in the issue to defend its possibility.

¹ *Essays in Morality and Religion*, 78.

² *Ibid.*

James states his goal in the lecture as contributing two “grains of truth” to the debate which take the form of replies to two objections which have robbed “the notion [of immortality] of much of its old power to draw belief.”³

The first objection to the possibility of immortality is founded on the idea that consciousness is nothing but a function of the brain. If consciousness is simply a function of the brain, the argument goes, then it will cease to be whenever the brain ceases to function. Put another way, if consciousness is absolutely dependent upon the brain, it cannot exist apart from the brain. Such is the psycho-physiological view, the reigning view of the scientific community in James’s day as well as our own. James admits that this understanding of consciousness is perfectly consistent with our own experience and the findings of scientific research:

Every one knows that arrests of brain development occasion imbecility, that blows on the head abolish memory or consciousness, and that brain-stimulants and poisons change the quality of our ideas. The anatomists, physiologists, and pathologists have only shown this generally admitted fact of a dependence to be detailed and minute. What the laboratories and hospitals have lately been teaching us is not only that thought in general is one of the brain's functions, but that the various special forms of thinking are functions of special portions of the brain. When we are thinking of things seen, it is our occipital convolutions that are active; when of things heard, it is a certain portion of our temporal lobes; when of things to be spoken, it is one of our frontal convolutions.⁴

Here James grants that the scientific evidence in favor of the reigning theory is compelling and he recognizes that the only persons resisting the theory are thought to be “a few belated scholastics, or possibly some crack-brained theosophist or psychical researcher.”⁵ However, even if this is true, says James, “function can mean nothing more

³ *Essays in Morality and Religion*, 79.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

than bare concomitant variation.”⁶ James maintains that all science has shown is that when brain-states change, consciousness changes, but this does not prove that the brain *produces* consciousness. That is, brains producing thought is one way the functional relationship could work, but it’s not the only way. As James points out, the brain-thought relationship may not be productive, like a tea-kettle producing steam, but, rather, *permissive*, like a crossbow releasing an arrow, or *transmissive*, like a prism through which light is “determined to a certain path and shape.”⁷ Thus, “when we think of the law that thought is a function of the brain,” writes James, “we are not required to think of productive function only; *we are entitled also to consider permissive or transmissive function.*”⁸

Although James uses the example of a lens or prism transmitting light, the transmission of data through radio or electromagnetic waves (which was being researched during James’s lifetime) provides, I think, James with a more compelling analogy. It may be more helpful, that is, to think of the brain’s transmission of consciousness as being akin to a television’s transmission of a satellite broadcast. In this analogy, assuming we are unaware of the satellite transmission, we would know that when certain parts of the television break, the picture is lost. Further, a television repairman (scientist) would know that by manipulating certain parts of the television, one can alter the color of the picture, the contrast, the tint, the sharpness, the lightness and darkness, etc. Thus, they know that only when the television is in working order does

⁶ *Essays in Morality and Religion*, 88.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁸ *Ibid.*

the picture appear and, by manipulating different parts of the device, the picture can be altered. Further, if no one knew about the broadcasting and receiving of electromagnetic waves, it would be natural to assume that the television created the picture on its own. Of course, this would be a mistake, and James believes science may be making a similar error. The latent and unchallenged assumption of science has been that thought can *only* be a *productive* function of the brain—but there are reasonable alternative accounts that do not entail an absolute dependence of consciousness on the brain.

Yet, are these alternative accounts really plausible or are they “thoroughly fantastic,” a “foolish metaphor,” and the “common materialistic notion vastly simpler”? James asks, “Is it not more rigorously scientific to treat the brain's function as function of production?”⁹ His response is two-fold. First, considering the popular scientific view, it is unknown and deeply mysterious how matter, as they conceive it, is capable of creating consciousness. Unlike the steam produced by a tea-kettle, consciousness and matter seem elementally heterogeneous. Thus, insofar as such essential information is lacking, all functional accounts of consciousness are on equal footing and “we can only write down the bare fact of concomitance; and all talk about either production or transmission, as the mode of taking place, is pure superadded hypothesis.”¹⁰ Secondly, James suggests that the transmission theory has “certain positive superiorities.” One way the transmission theory is superior to the productive theory, according to James, is that it begins by assuming that consciousness “already exists, behind the scenes, coeval with the world.”¹¹

⁹ *Essays in Morality and Religion*, 88.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

The productive theory requires that consciousness is always being produced, *de novo*, while the transmission theory, in contrast, “avoids multiplying miracles.” Thus, James argues that it is simpler to assume that consciousness exists in its own right rather than the counter-intuitive assumption that it is produced by something of a seemingly dissimilar nature. Another way the transmission theory seems superior to James is that it is able to account for “those obscure and exceptional phenomena reported at all times throughout human history” such as:

[R]eligious conversions, providential leadings in answer to prayer, instantaneous healings, premonitions, apparitions at time of death, clairvoyant visions or impressions, and the whole range of mediumistic capacities, to say nothing of still more exceptional and incomprehensible things. If all our human thought be a function of the brain, then of course, if any of these things are facts,—and to my own mind some of them are facts,—we may not suppose that they can occur without preliminary brain-action.¹²

According to the production theory, these types of psychic phenomena must be understood as meaningless at best, pathological at worst. The transmission theory, on the other hand, naturally accounts for exceptional psychic states, particularly if we “suppose the continuity of our consciousness with a mother-sea.”¹³ If our brain forms a threshold against an impinging “mother-sea” of consciousness, the “exceptional waves occasionally pouring over the dam” can meaningfully be accounted for.¹⁴ For these reasons, in addition to its consistency with the hope for immortality, James argues the transmission theory is the superior theory, though acknowledging many puzzles remain to be solved.

¹² *Essays in Morality and Religion*, 92-93.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

One underlying issue in play, which James addresses in a footnote, is that he is admittedly working from the “ordinary dualistic point of view of natural science and of common sense” which understands consciousness as a different kind of “stuff or substance” than physical objects.¹⁵ Thus, the dualism assumed here by James, like in the *Principles*, is strategic and methodological, not James’s settled metaphysical position. In fact, James will continuously move away from dualism, explicitly rejecting it in his later works.¹⁶ Self-consciously aware of the drift of his own thought, James remarks that he is “free, of course, on any later occasion to make an attempt, if I wish, to transcend [dualism] and use different categories.”¹⁷ In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James moves further away from dualistic categories through his use of a consciousness-as-field metaphor. Before we turn to that work, however, it remains to consider James’s second “grain of truth” concerning the possibility of immortality.

The second objection to immortality that James wishes to dispute is what Eugene Fontinell calls the “logistical objection.” This is the idea that immortality cannot be true because it would imply that an “incredible and intolerable number of beings” would be immortal. James’s concern, according to Fontinell, is “how could God possibly maintain in existence the billions of people who have existed and who will come to exist?”¹⁸ Indeed, James raises this concern; however, that particular issue neither exhausts nor captures the heart of James’s discussion. The concern for James is not only the

¹⁵ *Essays in Morality and Religion*, 82.

¹⁶ In *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, a series of essays James wrote between 1904-05, he introduces his non-dualistic doctrine of Pure Experience; a pluralistic monism which denies any substantive difference between the mental and physical. This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

¹⁷ James, op. cit., 82.

¹⁸ Fontinell, op. cit., 115.

“logistical problem” concerning overpopulation in the City of God, but, more importantly, the difficulty we have in believing that billions of souls have been *worth saving*. Whatever the philosophical merit of this issue, I think James’s discussion here is valuable at least insofar as it reveals his belief in and appreciation for the dignity of human life--past, present, and future. According to James, the old “aristocratic view” of immortality which claimed only an elite few will be saved is no longer a tenable option. Our evolved sympathetic nature, claims James, has led us to reject the exclusivity of this old view in favor of a more inclusive “democratic view” of immortality.¹⁹ For a man who earlier professed a kind of nonchalance about this issue of immortality, the following eulogistic description of the human plight is surprisingly passionate and inspired:

Bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh are these half-brutish prehistoric brothers. Girdled about with the immense darkness of this mysterious universe even as we are, they were born and died, suffered and struggled. Given over to fearful crime and passion, plunged in the blackest ignorance, preyed upon by hideous and grotesque delusions, yet steadfastly serving the profoundest of ideals in their fixed faith that existence in any form is better than non-existence, they ever rescued triumphantly from the jaws of ever-imminent destruction the torch of life, which, thanks to them, now lights the world for us. How small indeed seem individual distinctions when we look back on these overwhelming numbers of human beings panting and straining under the pressure of that vital want! And how inessential in the eyes of God must be the small surplus of the individual's merit, swamped as it is in the vast ocean of the common merit of mankind, dumbly and undauntedly doing the fundamental duty and living the heroic life! We grow humble and reverent as we contemplate the prodigious spectacle. Not our differences and distinctions,—we feel—no, but our common animal essence of patience under suffering and enduring effort must be what redeems us in the Deity's sight. An immense compassion and kinship fill the heart. An immortality

¹⁹ *Essays in Morality and Religion*, 96.

from which these inconceivable billions of fellow-strivers should be excluded becomes an irrational idea for us.²⁰

What James is drawing our attention to is the tendency to dismiss as insignificant the innumerable lives of our common ancestors as well as a certain blindness we have towards the inner lives of others, unable to appreciate their worth. Although we may be incapable of seeing the value of lives so different than our own, James suggests that the needs of the Universe and God's capacity to love are inexhaustible and know no bounds. "The heart of being can have no exclusions akin to those which our poor little hearts set up," says James.²¹ Thus, despite his earlier remarks, which indicate a modest interest in immortality, James's profuse, emotional exhortations to recognize the sanctity of human life reveals a man who was sensitive to the issue of immortality. James believed we generally are worthy of salvation. But then so are all those "brutes" who preceded us.

Let us now return to the issue of immortality as a metaphysical possibility by considering James's discussion of consciousness in his landmark work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In *Varieties*, lectures 9 & 10 are devoted to the psychology of religious conversion, one of the main themes of the book. In lecture 9 James first introduces the metaphor of a mental field or a field of consciousness. According to James, within our field of consciousness lie a number of diverse aims or interests around which systems of related ideas and objects form. Moving away from ordinary dualistic categories, consciousness is not conceived here as an enduring substantial entity, at least not in any typical sense, as James continually stresses the transitivity and temporality of consciousness.

²⁰ *Essays in Morality and Religion*, 97.

²¹ *VRE*, 101.

In order to illustrate how this field of consciousness operates, James uses the example of the President of the United States on a camping trip. As the President transitions from the Oval Office to the wilderness, James says he “changes his system of ideas from top to bottom.”²² The habits of the President qua camper will hardly resemble those habits he left behind in Washington. James suggests that if this person never returned to political life, “he would be for practical intents and purposes a permanently transformed being.”²³ Such is the dramatic alteration we may undergo simply by changing our aim or center of interest, and “[w]henver one aim grows so stable as to expel definitively its previous rivals from the individual's life” a true transformation takes place.²⁴ According to James, then, a current aim or interest and its associated system of ideas form only a part of the field of consciousness or a sub-field. As James describes it, the sub-field containing our current aim, contains the “excitement,” “hot parts,” and “dynamic energy.”²⁵ Thus, when the President’s aim is camping in the wilderness, firewood, tents, water, wildlife, trees, would be some of the “hot” ideas or objects in his sub-field creating “personal desire and volition,” while the ideas and objects affiliated with unrelated aims would seem “cold” to him, leaving him passive and indifferent. Religious conversions work according to these same general principles. James writes: “[When] the focus of excitement and heat . . . come[s] to lie permanently within a certain system; and then, if the change be a religious one, we call it a *conversion*, especially if it

²² *VRE*, 160.

²³ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

be by crisis, or sudden.”²⁶ James calls such a “hot” place, “*the habitual centre of . . . personal energy.*” For the religious convert, then, “religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy.”²⁷

Psychology, then, recognizes *that* shifts of aims occur and can provide a general psychological description of the process; yet, psychology, says James, is “unable in a given case to account accurately for all the single forces at work.”²⁸ James is claiming that *how* the shifts occur and *why* some peripheral aims become central eludes the purview of the psychologist. He writes: “Neither an outside observer nor the Subject who undergoes the process can explain fully how particular experiences are able to change one’s centre of energy so decisively.”²⁹ The underlying nature of these reorientations remain, for us, largely opaque. “We [repeatedly] have a thought,” observes James, “but on a certain day the real meaning of the thought peels through us for the first time,” growing “hot and alive within us.”³⁰ To take a somewhat ordinary example, consider how, at the end of a class period, a student might finally *get* what the teacher has been trying to communicate and, as James put it, “everything has to re-crystallize about it.”³¹ Maybe it is even several years later when one is struck by a new understanding of an old bit of information. When teachers, in particular, speak of “planting seeds” in the

²⁶ *VRE*, 162.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

minds of their students, it seems they are assuming just such a phenomenon. Teachers realize that the ideas impressed upon their students will remain largely peripheral for them, at least in the short term; but it is their hope that someday these ideas will bloom and fully ripen just as they have in their own mind. As James suggests, new information acts as an accelerant to change while fixed worldviews and habits work as a retardant—and “influences may work subconsciously or half unconsciously.”³² As a result, to the frustration of psychologists, teachers, and students alike, the *how* and the *why* of such alterations seem perfectly impossible to predict.

In lecture 10 of *Varieties*, the concluding lecture on conversion, James picks up on the field-of-consciousness model he introduced in the previous lecture. In this lecture, James turns our attention away from our present “hot” mental field, the habitual center of personal energy, to their periphery—their indeterminate margins. According to James, this margin “lies around us like a ‘magnetic field,’ inside of which our centre of energy turns like a compass-needle, as the present phase of consciousness alters into its successor.”³³ Beyond this margin, says James, float our memories, “ready at a touch to come in” and all of our “residual powers, impulses, and knowledges that constitute our empirical self stretches continuously beyond it.”³⁴ Assuming the general accuracy of this description of consciousness, James believes that psychology had failed to account for it:

The ordinary psychology, admitting fully the difficulty of tracing the marginal outline, has taken for granted, first, that all the consciousness the person now has, be the same focal or marginal, inattentive or attentive, is there in the ‘field’ of the moment, all dim and impossible to assign the

³² *VRE*, 163.

³³ *Ibid.*, 189.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

latter's outline may be; and, second, that what is absolutely extra-marginal is absolutely non-existent, and cannot be a fact of consciousness at all.³⁵

For James, then, psychology has failed to recognize “a set of memories, thoughts, and feelings which are extra-marginal and outside of primary consciousness altogether, but yet must be classed as conscious facts of some sort, able to reveal their presence by unmistakable signs.”³⁶ The “extra-marginal” here is what James also refers to as the “subconscious,” as well as “ultra-marginal” and “subliminal.” James describes the recent discovery of consciousness existing beyond the field “an entirely unsuspected peculiarity in the constitution of human nature.”³⁷ The reality of subliminal consciousness James thought was borne out by the phenomenon of post-hypnotic suggestion. This is the now well-known scenario in which a hypnotized subject is ordered to perform some designated act upon waking, once given the signal. When the subject awakens and performs the act accordingly, James reports that the person will not remember the suggestion and “always trumps up an improvised pretext for his behavior if the act be of an excentric [*sic*] kind.”³⁸ Additionally, James refers to the work of Alfred Binet, Janet, Freud, and others regarding their uncovering of buried memories in hysteric patients responsible for insidiously tormenting their daily life—research which inspired many of the now familiar approaches to psychotherapy.

A more commonplace manifestation of subliminal consciousness at work is the forgotten name example James employs in lecture 9, though, for a different purpose. As

³⁵ *VRE*, 190.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

James describes it, when we try to recollect a forgotten name, we try to draw it out by recalling all the “places, person, and things with which the word was connected.”³⁹ We can sense that the name is there, just beyond our current field of consciousness, but, as James suggests, when we apply more “pressure in its direction” we only seem to keep it from breaking through the surface. Thus, the solution, says James, is often times to take just the opposite tact:

Give up the effort entirely; think of something altogether different, and in half an hour the lost name comes sauntering into your mind, as Emerson says, as carelessly as if it had never been invited. Some hidden process was started in you by the effort, which went on after the effort ceased, and made the result come as if it came spontaneously. A certain music teacher, says Dr. Starbuck, says to her pupils after the thing to be done has been clearly pointed out, and unsuccessfully attempted: "Stop trying, and it will do itself!"⁴⁰

This passage is important, not for its practical advice, but, rather, because of James’s idea that a “hidden process” set forth in the past can continue to be at work--unbeknownst to us. James draws a direct analogy between the forgotten name suddenly appearing after giving up the search and a sudden religious conversion occurring upon self-resignation or self-surrender. In lecture 10, James suggests that such instantaneous conversions are not necessarily more divine or more miraculous but rather the outcome of a particular psychological peculiarity. That is, some people have an ultra-marginal consciousness which is more developed than others, and this creates a more fertile “region in which mental work can go on subliminally, and from which invasive experiences, abruptly

³⁹ *VRE*, 169.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

upsetting the equilibrium of the primary consciousness, may come.”⁴¹ In other words, a vast and rich subliminal field potentially allows for a more substantial and momentous harvest. In any case, whether conversions happen gradually or suddenly, James believes they are best accounted for by the real efficacy of an ultra-marginal consciousness in which hidden processes are ongoing and typically reveal themselves when our present field of consciousness is conditioned in their favor.

Still, even though the psychological description is adequate to explain the phenomenon of religious conversion, James does not believe one must necessarily exclude the possibility that the ultra-marginal consciousness of a religious convert was affected by the presence of an external “higher control,” e.g., “God.” James writes:

Just as our primary wide-awake consciousness throws open our senses to the touch of things material, so it is logically conceivable that *if there be* higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch us, the psychological condition of their doing so *might be* our possession of a subconscious region which alone should yield access to them. The hubbub of the waking life might close a door which in the dreamy Subliminal might remain ajar or open.⁴²

As Richard R. Niebuhr points out, James advances a double hypothesis. First, our subliminal consciousness may be a gateway to another reality. Second, this additional reality may contain higher spiritual agencies. For James, these are only hypotheses, but, as Niebuhr puts it, hypotheses that James “takes with the greatest seriousness.”⁴³ In a letter written to Henry W. Rankin in 1901, James describes the gravity of these ideas as they relate to his own outlook on life:

⁴¹ *VRE*, 193.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 197.

⁴³ Richard R. Niebuhr, “William James on Religious Experience,” *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 229.

I attach the mystical or religious consciousness to the possession of an extended subliminal self, with a thin partition through which messages make irruption. We are thus made convincingly aware of the presence of a sphere of life larger and more powerful than our usual consciousness, with which the latter is nevertheless continuous. The impressions and impulsions and emotions and excitements which we thence receive help us to live, they found invincible assurance of *a world beyond the sense*, they . . . communicate significance and value to everything.⁴⁴

James expresses a similar view regarding the reality and value of the *world beyond the sense* in the final lecture of *Varieties*:

So far as our ideal impulses originate in this [mystical or supernatural] region . . . we belong to it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world, for we belong in the most intimate sense wherever our ideals belong. Yet the unseen region in question is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world. When we commune with it, work is actually done upon our finite personality, for we are turned into new men, and consequences in the way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change. But that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we had no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal.⁴⁵

In this passage James has turned from the task of psychological description to what he terms “spiritual judgment,” or the determination of the *value* of a given idea. For James, as is well-known, the value of an idea or belief is determined by its practical effects, by its “fruits.” Accordingly, considering the apparent effects of communing with this unseen region—that “new men,” i.e., heroic, moral, and saintly men, are made, the value of such communion is immeasurable. Designating this supreme reality “God,” James insists, “We and God have business with each other; and in opening ourselves to his

⁴⁴ *Letters*, 2:149-50.

⁴⁵ *VRE*, 406.

influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled.”⁴⁶ James wrote that psychology is the “antechamber to metaphysics,” but here we see psychology was also the antechamber to salvation for James.⁴⁷

As for the topic of immortality, James does not officially take up the issue until the final pages, in the postscript. Discussing the practical significance of religion, James claims that most people would cite personal immortality as the first important “difference in natural fact” that follows from God’s existence. James further suggests that religion and immortality have become so intertwined that “for the majority of our own race [religion] *means* immortality” and “whoever has doubts of immortality is written down as an atheist without farther trial.”⁴⁸ James, on the contrary, attempts to downplay the importance of personality immortality, stating that the issue seems to be a “secondary point.” As long as “our ideals are cared for in ‘eternity,’” writes James, “I do not see why we might not be willing to resign their care to other hands than ours.”⁴⁹ Regarding this kind of partial salvation, the salvation of our ideals, James suggests that, “all of us are willing [to make this sacrifice], whenever our activity-excitement rises sufficiently high.”⁵⁰ Surely, however, James must have recognized that the preservation of human relationships, loving ones in particular, is one of our (and James’s) most cherished ideals. Even so, what good is the realization of our ideals if there remain no witnesses? This is a point raised by James’s friend Carl Stumpf:

⁴⁶ *VRE*, 406.

⁴⁷ *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 296.

⁴⁸ *VRE*, 412.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Your sentence: ‘If our ideals are only cared for in “eternity”, I do not see why we might not be willing to resign their care to other hands than ours’ seems to me to contain a sort of inner contradiction. The realization of ideals is only possible on the presupposition of individual immortality. . . . Let the earth become frozen, let no new individuals arise, then where is the realization of ideals to be found, if the spirit does not endure?⁵¹

In response to Stumpf, James admits:

I do not see why there may not be a superhuman consciousness of *ideals* of ours, and *that* would be *our* God. It is all very dark. I never felt the *rational* need of immortality as you seem to feel it, but as I grow older I confess I feel the practical need of it much more than I ever did before; and that combines with the reasons, not exactly the same as your own, to give me a growing faith in its reality.⁵²

Clearly, the issue of immortality for James was a vital one. What is going on here is that, in *Varieties*, James consciously attempted to put his best “tough-minded” self forward in order to offset what may have appeared as excessive sentimentality. In the final lecture of *Varieties*, “Conclusions,” James reveals this worry: “In re-reading my manuscript, I am almost appalled at the amount of emotionality which I find in it.”⁵³ Additionally, in the “Postscript,” after classifying his views as “piecemeal supernaturalism,” James describes his precarious position in light of “reigning intellectual tastes”: “[T]he current of thought in academic circles runs against me, and I feel like a man who must set his back against an open door quickly if he does not wish to see it closed and locked.”⁵⁴ Accordingly, the apparent demotion of personal immortality in favor of the emotionally leaner, stoical hope for the preservation of our ideals should be understood in the context

⁵¹ Perry, *Thought and Character*, 2:343.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2:345.

⁵³ *VRE*, 377.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 411.

of James's concerted attempt to appease those who may question his intellectual discipline and emotional stability. I say this is only an *apparent* demotion of immortality because James immediately adds: "Yet I sympathize with the urgent impulse to be present ourselves, and in the conflict of impulses, both of them so vague yet both of them noble, *I know not how to decide.*" (my italics)⁵⁵ Thus, James views both the immortal preservation of our ideals in some other consciousness and personal immortality as noble ideas but which is more worthy of belief he leaves ultimately undecided. "It seems to me that it is eminently a case for facts to testify," James concludes, "I consequently leave the matter open."⁵⁶ That the matter of immortality remained open for James clearly indicates his belief in its possibility. For James, just as was the case with free will, this lack of certainty hardly made it a trivial issue. That is, like free will, the viability of personal immortality as a possibility is all a person *practically* needs to live accordingly. James writes:

For practical life at any rate, the *chance* of salvation is enough. No fact in human nature is more characteristic than its willingness to live on a chance. The existence of the chance makes the difference, as Edmund Gurney says, between a life of which the keynote is resignation and a life of which the keynote is hope.⁵⁷

Thus, the truth of personal immortality for James was not settled (and never would be), but the possibility remained open, i.e., there is a *chance* it is true and the practical effect is the sustaining of hope. Still, as Fontinell makes clear, the possibility of immortality is not a bare chance for James; rather, it is a reasonable extrapolation from the metaphysics of a field-self that is articulated in *Varieties*:

⁵⁵ James, *Varieties*, 412.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 414.

We may, unknown to us, be already living “within” this larger life, and certain of those fields now constituting the individual self may already be playing a role in and in a sense constituting this larger life. Hence, when *some*, of the fields or relations now constituting personal selves dissolve, it is possible that other presently constituting fields might be continued in existence through the activity of this larger self.⁵⁸

Although, again, James’s account of the self or consciousness as field does not imply a natural immortality, its essential relatedness to an ultramarginal region, suggests that consciousness is, if not more substantial, at least a more robust and pervasive phenomenon than previously imagined in *Principles*. Thus, even though the expressed purpose of *Varieties* is not to conclusively establish the truth of immortality, James’s account does help resolve a related problem identified in the previous chapter, i.e., the seemingly insubstantial and flimsy nature of the passing Thought. Now, if we conceive consciousness to be deeply connected to other fundamental realities, powers, and spiritual agencies, any number of future possibilities are opened up for the self--including immortality. And, for James, “the *chance* of salvation is enough.”⁵⁹ Let us now turn to James’s later works which represent his attempt to form a systematic metaphysics in which the self could finally find a permanent home.

⁵⁸ Fontinell, op. cit., 125.

⁵⁹ *VRE*, 414.

Chapter 5

Radical Empiricism and Immortality: James's Quest for Intimacy

In this chapter I will be considering the nature of the self in James's later metaphysical works, namely the 1909 Hibbert Lectures published as *A Pluralistic Universe*, *Some Problems in Philosophy* posthumously published in 1911, and *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, a collection of essays written in 1904-05 and posthumously published in 1912. James's concern with the possibility of an afterlife, I will argue, is evident throughout these works as his metaphysical thinking steered him away from Cartesian dualism and into an anti-materialistic, pluralistic pantheism bordering on panpsychism. In the 1904-05 essays, James introduces his doctrines of Radical Empiricism and Pure Experience, the latter claiming that both consciousness and so-called physical entities are reducible to the more basic element called "pure experience." The looming issue will be how to understand James's re-conception of the self in light of his radical empiricistic metaphysics. Of particular concern will be James's conception of the self as non-basic, ultimately relational, and continuous with wider fields of consciousness. One of the main issues that will arise for James is how a self can be part of a larger consciousness, yet still exist as a distinct consciousness. James never satisfactorily resolves the matter but the problem moves him in a novel direction, eventually leading him to stress the importance of *intimacy* over intellectualistic logic and so-called rationality. The result, I argue, is that the possibility of life after death becomes even more crystallized in James's thought.

In 1904 James wrote the essay “Does Consciousness Exist?” published in 1912 as part of *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. In this essay James abandons the Cartesian dualism he methodologically and ambivalently adopted in the *Principles*. Throughout his life James expressed reservations and doubts about the adequacy of Cartesian dualism but it wasn’t until the last decade of his life that he proposed his alternative metaphysics featuring the dual doctrines of Radical Empiricism and Pure Experience. As Gale correctly observes, although James discusses them concurrently, these two doctrines are logically independent of one another.¹ James describes Radical Empiricism as his “*weltanschauung*,” a “mosaic philosophy” that, like Humean empiricism, begins with individual “plural facts” which refer “neither to substances in which they inhere nor to an absolute mind that creates them as its objects.”² However, to be *radical*, James writes:

. . . an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, *the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as "real" as anything else in the system.*³

In sum, philosophical inquiry ought to acknowledge everything directly experienced as “real,” and “a real place must be found for every kind of thing experienced, whether term or relation, in the final philosophic arrangement.”⁴ Thus, contra Hume, experienced relations are just as real as their relata. Although James’s doctrine of Radical Empiricism designates everything directly experienced as “real,” it does not go so far as to make

¹ Gale, *Divided Self*, 200.

² James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 22.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

claims about the ultimate nature or ontological ordering of things experienced. For this task, James employed the complementary doctrine of Pure Experience.

The Pure Experience doctrine is an alternative conception of reality in which mind and body are *real* but not fundamental elements--neither is considered to be an irreducible, substantive entity. James suggested that what is more basic or primitive than either mind or body is “pure experience.” Pure experience is the chief ingredient of James’s metaphysics, conceived as constitutive of both mind and body but neither mental nor physical per se. James begins the essay “The Thing and Its Relation,” with an attempt to clarify his concept:

Pure experience is the name which I gave to the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories. Only newborn babies, or men in semi-coma from sleep, drugs, illnesses, or blows, may be assumed to have an experience pure in the literal sense of a *that* which is not yet any definite *what*, tho’ ready to be all sorts of whats; full both of oneness and of manyness, but in respects that don’t appear; changing throughout, yet so confusedly that its phases interpenetrate and no points, either of distinction or of identity, can be caught. Pure experience in this state is but another name for feeling or sensation. But the flux of it no sooner comes than it tends to fill itself with emphases, and these salient parts become identified and fixed and abstracted; so that experience now flows as if shot through with adjectives and nouns and prepositions and conjunctions. Its purity is only a relative term, meaning the proportional amount of unverballed sensation which it still embodies.⁵

Pure experience, then, may be compared to the unconceptualized “blooming, buzzing confusion” in *Principles* used to describe the raw awareness of the infant. It is that which comprises the ever-changing, continuous flux we first encounter as newborn babies and out of which particular aspects become “fixed and abstracted.” Perry observes that,

⁵ *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 46.

“Radical empiricism consists essentially in converting to the uses of metaphysics that ‘stream of consciousness’ which was designated originally for psychology.”⁶ Myers agrees, adding, “Pure experience is the stream of consciousness as it is before any conceptualization of distinction-making is applied to it.”⁷ The stream of consciousness, originating in immediate feeling or sensation, is reconceived by James as pure experience, becoming the mainspring of his metaphysics. The important development here is that James argues that the mind-body dichotomy is not native to immediate or pure experience, but, instead, arises only retrospectively--through conceptualization. Mind and body, in other words, are not two radically opposed entities, but dissimilarities within pure experience, there being no ultimate distinction between them.

The instant field of the present is always experienced in its ‘pure’ state, plain unqualified actuality, a simple *that*, as yet undifferentiated into thing and thought, and only virtually classifiable as objective fact or as someone’s opinion about fact. . . . Only in the later experience that supersedes the present one is the *naïf* immediacy retrospectively split into two parts, a ‘consciousness’ and its ‘content.’⁸

Thus, the mental and physical exist in pure experience “only virtually” or latently.

According to James, what determines whether something appears to be mind or body is the eventual arrangement and contextual relations of pure experience. James writes:

In the essay “Does Consciousness Exist?” I have tried to show that when we call an experience “conscious,” that does not mean that it is suffused throughout with a peculiar modality of being (‘psychic’ being) as stained glass may be suffused with light, but rather that it stands in certain determinate relations to other portions of experience extraneous to itself. These form one peculiar “context” for it; while, taken in another context of experiences, we class it as a fact in the physical world. This “pen,” for

⁶ Perry, *op. cit.*, 2:586.

⁷ Myers, *op. cit.*, 200.

⁸ *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 37.

example is, in the first instance, a bald *that*, a datum, phenomenon, content or whatever other neutral or ambiguous name you may prefer to apply. I call it in that article a “pure experience.” To get classed either as a physical pen or as some one’s perception of a pen, it must assume a *function*, and that can only happen in a more complicated world. So far as in that world it is a stable feature, holds ink, marks paper and obeys the guidance of a hand, it is a physical pen. That is what we mean by being “physical” in a pen. So far as it is instable, on the contrary, coming and going with the movements of my eyes, altering with what I call my fancy, continuous with infrequent experiences of its “having been” (in the past tense), it is the percept of a pen in my mind. Those peculiarities are what we mean by “conscious,” in a pen.⁹

Thus, the distinction between the mental and the physical is only functional. According to James’s analysis, my thought of a particular pen and the pen-as-physical-object I’m thinking *about* is not an indication of two different entitative realities but, rather, different contextual arrangement of pure experience—different arrangements of the “bald *that*.” James’s favorite analogy is to compare the pen to a common point on intersecting lines—even though each line proceeds in a different direction, they share a common point. In the pen example, mental and physical experiences, like the intersecting lines, share the common point of the pen. Moreover, pure experience, the “*that*,” is not to be thought of as a uniform kind of “stuff,” thoroughly homogenous. On the contrary, the signature characteristic of pure experience is pluralism:

Although for fluency’s sake I myself spoke early in this article of a stuff of pure experience, I have now to say that 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.’¹⁰

⁹ *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

Pure experience is pluralistic, heterogeneity is part of its nature. Thus, James is not proposing a neutral monism, as he is sometimes interpreted as doing. Myers points out that James's analysis of reality into different functions fits with his general principle that all conceptualization of experience is a fragmented selection for practical ends, his central thesis being: "Subjectivity and objectivity are affairs not of what an experience is aboriginally made of its classification. Classifications depend on our temporary purposes"¹¹ In *Some Problems of Philosophy*, James writes:

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*.¹²

Myers believes this attempt by James to reduce the mental and physical to functions of pure experience fails. The main problem, according to Myers, is that there is no *that* that we can identify which now functions as a physical object, now as a conscious object. Pure experience is not something we directly experience and as a theoretical construct it makes no practical difference and fails Jamesian pragmatism.¹³ Still, regardless of whether or not James's metaphysics of pure experience is a failure, we can easily see that what James was striving towards was a non-materialistic vision of reality in which the mental and physical are essentially continuous. Myers notes the momentous implications of James's radical vision:

If physical things are nothing but complexes of sensations, then the materialistic view—that everything begins and ends in physical processes differ in character from the felt or noticed details of our sensations—begins to dissolve. All sorts of possibilities emerge: our conscious states

¹¹ *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 71.

¹² *SPP*, 233.

¹³ Myers, op. cit., 310-11.

may not depend totally upon our brains; our sensations and inner lives may coalesce in a larger context which cannot be conceived by analogy to the physical environment; and our own experiences may be part of a larger, godlike consciousness.¹⁴

Indeed, the possibility that our experience “may be part of a larger, godlike consciousness” reaches its height in James’s metaphysical writing and will be discussed shortly. For now, it should not escape our attention that there was more than one casualty in James’s metaphysics. James’s double-barreled assault on dualism eliminated materialism, but it also forced him to reject traditional conceptions of consciousness. Namely, given his functional account of the mental and physical, James was forced to deny that consciousness was a basic, irreducible entity. Myers comments that, in his final years, James became convinced of his earlier reflection in *Principles* that no uniquely psychical or nonphysiological consciousness is detectable by introspection.¹⁵ This was partly responsible for materialistic interpretations of James by Dewey and others. For James, then, consciousness is not an entity or something introspectable but, instead, the ways in which experiences function in relation to one another. He writes:

I believe that ‘consciousness,’ when once it has evaporated to this state of pure diaphaneity, is on the point of disappearing altogether. It is the name of a nonentity. . . . 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. . . . It seems to me that the hour is ripe for it to be openly and universally discarded.¹⁶

Given James’s unequivocal rejection of an entitative conception of consciousness, some obvious questions arise concerning how the self fits into James’s new metaphysical

¹⁴ Myers, op. cit., 335.

¹⁵ Ibid, 308.

¹⁶ *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 4-5.

landscape. In particular, if consciousness is *nothing but* a function of pure experience, what becomes of the prospects for human immortality that, as I've been arguing, James was evidently concerned with?

Eugene Fontinell maintains that the field language invoked in *A Pluralistic Universe* recommends a view of the self and consciousness that is very agreeable with the possibility of personal immortality. One of the main features of James's radical empiricism, notes Fontinell, is a conception of the self and reality in terms of overlapping fields of consciousness—an idea largely inspired by the work of Gustav Fechner.¹⁷ In *A Pluralistic Universe* James devotes the lecture “Concerning Fechner” to his views. James extols Fechner as a rare example of a philosopher who gets at the “thickness” of reality, the concrete, and contrasts his philosophy to thin, rationalistic systems which dissect reality to the point of leaving it stagnant. James agrees with Fechner that the conceptual language employed by most philosophers is incommensurable with lived reality.

Every smallest state of consciousness, concretely taken, overflows its own definition. Only concepts are self identical; only 'reason' deals with closed equations; nature is but a name for excess; every point opens out and runs into the more.¹⁸

Moreover, James was sympathetic with Fechner's view that “the more inclusive forms of consciousness are in part *constituted* by the more limited forms.”¹⁹ Fechner, as described by James, views our relation to the earth as analogous to the relation between

¹⁷ Fontinell, *op. cit.*, 102.

¹⁸ *PU*, 129.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

organs and body—human consciousness here functioning as so many channels of input into the encompassing earth-soul. James explains:

What we are without knowing, it [the earth-soul] knows what we are. We are closed against its world, but that world is not closed against us. It is as if the total universe of inner life had a sort of grain or direction, a sort of valvular structure, permitting knowledge to flow in one way only, so that the wider might always have the narrower under observation, but never the narrower the wider.²⁰

According to this understanding, each human consciousness is comprised of finite fields and relations, each distinct from one another but ultimately coalescing within and partially comprising a wider field (or fields) of consciousness. Thus, as Fechner, James, and Fontinell want to suggest, we may, this very instant, be already living in the midst of a larger life in which some of our fields are already factoring in. This is what James has in mind when he writes that “we finite minds may simultaneously be co-conscious with one another in a superhuman intelligence.”²¹

I firmly disbelieve, myself, that our human experience is the highest form of experience extant in the universe. I believe rather that we stand in much the same relation to the whole universe as our canine and feline pets do to the whole of human life. They inhabit our drawing-rooms and libraries. They take part in the scenes of whose significance they have no inkling. They are merely tangent to curves of history the beginnings and ends and forms of which pass wholly beyond their ken. So we are tangent to the wider life of things. But just as many of the dog’s and cat’s ideals coincide with our ideals, and the dogs and cats have daily living proof of the fact, so we may well believe, on the proofs that religious experience affords, that higher powers exist and are at work to save the world on ideal lines similar to our own.²²

Consequently, it is conceivable that, when some of the fields now constituting personal selves dissolve, other presently constituting fields might be continued in existence

²⁰ *PU*, 129-30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

²² *Ibid.*, 144.

through the activity of this larger “self.” Speculating along with Fechner about the possibility of immortality, James suggests that after death we may enter “into new combinations, being affected by the perceptive experiences of those living then, and affecting the living in their turn.”²³ The notion of an extraordinary context in which such relationships are effected corresponds to the “more” beyond the margin of our present consciousness which plays such a prominent role in *Varieties*. James recapitulates this idea in “A World of Pure Experience,” asserting that “Our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view. Both are fringed forever by a *more* that continuously develops, and that continuously superseded them as life proceeds.”²⁴ Perry stresses that “the idea of consciousness ‘beyond the margin’ or ‘below the threshold’ was a metaphysical hypothesis of the first importance,” affording James “an experimental approach to religion” and providing the “possibility of giving scientific support to supernaturalistic faith.”²⁵ But for the metaphysical hypothesis of overlapping and enveloping fields of consciousness to be viable what is needed is an account of how distinct consciousnesses can compound and yet maintain their distinctness. That is, how can my conscious experience be both *mine* and, at the same time, convergent and constitutive of another consciousness as Fechner and James are suggesting?

The problem of the nature of consciousness and whether it can compound vexed James for his entire professional life. Early in his career, James held that states of consciousness appear as they really are, as indivisible wholes. This position was defended in “The Mind-Stuff Theory,” chapter 6 of *Principles*:

²³ *PU*, 80.

²⁴ *Essays in Religious Experience*, 35.

²⁵ Perry, *op. cit.*, 2:160.

There *are* no unperceived units of mind-stuff preceding and composing the full consciousness. The latter is itself an immediate psychic fact and bears an immediate relation to the neural state which is its unconditional accompaniment. Did each neural shock give rise to its own psychic shock, and the psychic shocks then combine, it would be impossible to understand why severing one part of the central nervous system from another should break up the integrity of consciousness. The cut has nothing to do with the psychic world.²⁶

To illustrate this point, James asks us to consider what is experienced when we receive the taste of lemonade:

The physical lemonade contains both the lemon and the sugar, but its taste does not contain their tastes, for it there are any two things which are certainly *not* present in the taste of lemonade, those are the lemon-sour on the one hand and the sugar-sweet on the other. These tastes are absent utterly.²⁷

In the 1895 essay “The Knowing of Things Together,” James reversed his stance: “In a glass of lemonade we can taste both the lemon and sugar at once. In a major chord our ear can single out the c, e, g, and c’, if it has once become acquainted with these notes apart. And so on through the whole field of experience, whether conceptual or sensible.”²⁸ Myers suggests that what caused James’s turnabout was a realization that some states of consciousness have an inner complexity that can be identified introspectively. He conceded that mental states can be made up of smaller parts of the same sort of “stuff,” and resemble in this respect physical things.²⁹ But introspection was not the only reason James changed course. James was not only compelled by introspection, but additionally by the conceptual difficulty of how two states of

²⁶ *Principles*, 1:157.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:158n

²⁸ *Essays in Philosophy*, 72.

²⁹ Myers, *op. cit.*, 62.

consciousness can have the exact same object in common. For, if two people are simultaneously perceiving the same pen and their states of consciousness are unique and indivisible, we would not be able to claim that they are looking at the same object. James asks, “How can two fields be units if they contain this common part? We must overhaul the whole business of connection, confluence and the like, and do it radically.”³⁰ Such a view goes against common sense, denying any real commonality amongst minds. Thus, James came to the eventual conclusion that states of consciousness must be complex and in his metaphysics of radical empiricism he explicitly rejected the notion of consciousness simpliciter--consciousness as a basic, indivisible, psychic whole. James made consciousness more continuous with the physical, each being complex arrangements of pure experience, itself pluralistic.

Still, it remained for James an open question whether or not consciousnesses themselves may compound. Or, as James puts it: “Whether ‘states of consciousness,’ so called, can separate and combine themselves freely, and keep their own identity unchanged while forming parts of simultaneous fields of experience of wider scope.”³¹ In “The Compounding of Consciousness,” lecture 4 of *A Pluralistic Universe*, James comes to realize that all of these dilemmas regarding consciousness come up against the same logical quandary:

The difficulty seemed to be the same, you remember, whether we took it in psychology as the composition of finite states of mind out of simpler finite states, or in metaphysics as the composition of the absolute mind out of finite minds in general. It is the general conceptualist difficulty of any one thing being the same with many things, either at once or in succession,

³⁰ *Manuscript Essays and Notes*, 66.

³¹ *PU*, 83.

for the abstract concepts of oneness and manyness must needs exclude each other.³²

The “conceptualist difficulty” at issue here is the logic of identity, which James singles out as the culprit responsible for stifling his thinking on the matter:

Sincerely, and patiently as I could, I struggled with the problem for years. . . . How can my consciousnesses be at the same time one consciousness? How can one and the same identical fact experience itself so diversely? The struggle was in vain; I found myself at an *impasse*. I saw that I must either forswear that “psychology without a soul” to which my whole psychological and Kantian education had committed me,—I must, in short, bring back distinct spiritual agents to know the mental states, now singly and now in combination, in a word bring back scholasticism and common sense—or else I must squarely confess the solution of the problem impossible, and then either give up my intellectualistic logic, the logic of identity, and adopt some higher (or lower) form of rationality, or, finally, face the fact that life is logically irrational.³³

James makes the momentous decision to give up the intellectualistic logic, accepting the implication that the universe likely defies logic and so-called rationality. The catalyst for James’s brash declaration was the French philosopher Henri Bergson. Fechner inspired James to envisage the world as alive and in terms of hierarchical, overlapping fields of consciousness, but it was Bergson who finally convinced James that a logically rigorous, abstract conceptualization of the world necessarily distorts and inadequately represents it.

Regarding Bergson’s influence on James, Perry writes that this was “Without doubt the most important philosophical and personal attachment of James’s later years . . .”³⁴ James had read Bergson’s *Matter and Memory* in 1896 but claimed to set it aside because the ideas were “so new and vast that I could not be sure that I fully understood

³² *PU*, 127.

³³ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁴ Perry, *op. cit.*, 2:599.

them.”³⁵ However, when James reread the work in 1902 he was overcome with enthusiasm, prompting him to write to Bergson in order to thank him for his “work of exquisite genius.”³⁶ James included with the letter “a little popular lecture of mine on immortality” as well as his latest book, the *Varieties of Religious Experience*.³⁷ What James found so enthralling was Bergson’s criticism of intellectualism which included a “conclusive demolition of the dualism of object and subject in perception.”³⁸ James agreed with Bergson that conceptual thought can *only* grasp reality in a superficial, piecemeal fashion--unable to capture the continuity and “thickness” of the sensible flux of experience. The basic idea was present as early as *Principles* when James noted how “Every one of our conceptions is of something which our attention originally tore out of the continuum of felt experience, and provisionally isolated so as to make of it an individual topic of discourse.”³⁹ James became a Bergsonian insofar as both believed that intellectualistic logic arrests continuous aspects of reality into static, discrete, and ultimately discontinuous concepts. Thus, these concepts are derivatives, having been “abstracted and generalized from long-forgotten perceptual instances from which they have as it were flowered out.”⁴⁰ In the “Miller-Bode Objections,” James declares: “No discrimination without separation; no separation without absolute ‘independence’ and

³⁵ *Letters*, 2:178.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Principles*, 1:439.

⁴⁰ *SPP*, 34.

thereupon impossibility of union.”⁴¹ James indicts Plato and Socrates as progenitors of this lamentable state of affairs as they encouraged the idea that what is most “real” is not the thing encountered in experience, but its definition—its essence. By contrast, what is most real for James is just that temporal flux of experience Socrates and Plato found so contemptible. “Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will,” writes James, “exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it.”⁴² James insists that “Bergson is absolutely right in contending that the whole of life of activity and change is inwardly impenetrable to conceptual treatment, and that it opens itself only to sympathetic apprehension at the hands of immediate feeling.”⁴³ James was convinced that language-use took us a step back from reality:

As long as one continues *talking*, intellectualism remains in undisturbed possession of the field. The return to life can’t come about by talking. It is an *act*: to make you return to life, I must . . . deafen you to talk. . . . Or I must *point*, point to the mere *that* of life.⁴⁴

Reality is too profuse for words. “Language is the most imperfect and expensive means yet discovered for communicating thought.” Gavin characterizes James as a “radical realist,” “Being can be alluded to, pointed toward, but not completely captured in speech.”⁴⁵ James writes:

What an awful trade that of professor is—paid to talk, talk, talk! I have seen artists growing pale and sick whilst I talked to them without being

⁴¹ *Manuscript Essays and Notes*, 113.

⁴² *PU*, 96.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 122n.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴⁵ Gavin, *Reinstatement of the Vague*, 79.

able to stop. . . . It would be an awful universe if everything could be converted into words, words, words.⁴⁶

Yet, James's view of language was not wholly negative. He clearly realized that language has many practical uses, namely, it allows us to successfully navigate reality: "*The only things which we commonly see are those which we preperceive . . . which have been labeled for us. . . . If we lost our stock of labels we should be intellectually lost in the midst of the world.*" Seigfried comments that, "It is not an exaggeration to say that all of James's central concerns are expressed in striking metaphors and analogies" which is due to the "inadequacy of all efforts to conceptually verbalize experience."⁴⁷

James saw that reality as it is lived and experienced is pluralistic yet continuous and related; therefore, any philosophy characterized by retrospective classifications and thin conceptualizations required for intellectualistic logic would not do. "Philosophy," writes James, "should seek this kind of living understanding of the movement of reality, not follow science in vainly patching together fragments of its dead results. Thus, the most authentic picture of reality for James would be the one with the fewest boundaries.

Boundaries are things that intervene; but 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.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Richardson, op. cit., 239.

⁴⁷ Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 214.

⁴⁸ *SPP*, 32.

Perry remarks that continuity is “one of the master keys to the understanding of James’ thought. It is the dominant feature of his last metaphysics.”⁴⁹ Thus, James never does give an account of how consciousnesses can compound and still remain distinct; he simply agrees with Fechner that experience does not preclude such a possibility:

If you imagine that this entrance after the death of the body into a common life of higher type means a merging and loss of our distinct personality, Fechner asks you whether a visual sensation of our own exists in any sense *less for itself* or *less distinctly*, when it enters into our higher relational consciousness and is there distinguished and defined.⁵⁰

Again, the more general point being made here is that, although incommensurable according to intellectualistic logic, unity and plurality “compenetrate” in everyday experience—neat conceptual divisions don’t exist in reality. As Fechner’s example suggests, my present conscious state is a unity of various sensory inputs, yet the distinctness and singularity of each input remains. To the charge that the universe is a “contradiction incarnate,” James answers: “If logic says it is one, so much the worse for logic. Logic being the lesser thing, the static incomplete abstraction, must succumb to reality, not reality to logic.”⁵¹

The fact that experience contained a profuseness of varying relations was especially important for radical empiricism since James thought that particular relations of pure experience determined whether it is to be classified as physical or mental. James’ critique of traditional empiricism was based on its failure to acknowledge that “*the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any*

⁴⁹ Perry, *op. cit.*, 1:524.

⁵⁰ *PU*, 80.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

kind of relation experienced must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system."⁵² Traditional rationalism, on the other hand, was intolerant of individuality, change, and novelty. For rationalism, according to James, the unifying relation between different aspects of reality is accomplished through the existence of the all-encompassing, ethereal Absolute. James's *weltanschauung* attempts to preserve the dynamic characteristics of reality which means accepting the reality of conjunctions and real transitions which are so basic to our concrete experience. But there were still further implications of James's vision.

An additional upshot of James's metaphysics, where continuity and relation is the rule, is that it offers us a more *intimate* world. In his essay, "Interpreting the Universe After a Social Analogy: Intimacy, Panpsychism, and a Finite God in A Pluralistic Universe," David C. Lamberth suggests that a desire for an intimate universe, both phenomenologically and metaphysically, was a central theme running throughout James's Hibbert Lectures.⁵³ On this view, James's development of radical empiricism and pure experience, emphasizing continuity and relations, worked hand in hand with a desire for a universe hospitable and responsive to our most cherished ideals. James goes so far as to suggest that intimacy should be a criterion by which the adequacy of a philosophy should be judged: "Perhaps the words 'foreignness' and 'intimacy,' which I put forward in my first lecture, express the contrast I insist on better than the words 'rationality' and 'irrationality.'"⁵⁴

⁵² *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 22.

⁵³ David C. Lamberth, "Interpreting the Universe After a Social Analogy: Intimacy, Panpsychism, and a Finite God in a Pluralistic Universe," *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 238.

⁵⁴ *PU*, 144-5.

The essay Lamberth refers us to is “The Types of Philosophic Thinking,” and in it the importance of intimacy in James’s thinking comes to the forefront. James begins the work by repeating his well-known belief that a person’s philosophy is inevitably a reflection of their temperament. James writes that a philosophy is “the expression of a man’s intimate character, and all definitions of the universe are but the deliberately adopted reactions of human characters upon it.”⁵⁵ More specifically, according to James, all world-views and philosophies are derived from analogies made to lived experiences: “. . . the only material we have at our disposal for making a picture of the whole world is supplied by the various portions of that world of which we have already had experience.”⁵⁶ James continues:

We can invent no new forms of conception, applicable to the whole exclusively, and not suggested originally by the parts. All philosophers, accordingly, have conceived of the whole world after the analogy of some particular feature of it which has particularly captivated their attention.⁵⁷

James recognized that there is something inevitably idiosyncratic about particular philosophies, and yet, because all derive from a shared human mode of experience, there is enough commonality to prevent philosophy from being irretrievably individualistic. That is, although “Different men find their minds more at home in very different fragments of the world,” we assume everyone, insofar as they are human beings, are interfaced with reality in roughly the same way.⁵⁸ In any case, James submits that, with respect to our attitude towards the universe, we all share the same desire: “We crave

⁵⁵ *PU*, 14.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

alike to feel more truly at home with it, and to contribute our mite to its amelioration.”⁵⁹

To “feel more truly at home” is, in general, what James means by intimacy. But not all homes are created equally—some homes are *homier*, i.e., more intimate than others.

On the basis of intimacy, James prefers spiritualistic philosophies over their materialistic counterparts. Materialistic philosophies, arising out of a “cynical character,” define the world “so as to leave man’s soul upon it as sort of outside passenger or alien,” says James.⁶⁰ According to James, spiritualistic philosophies, by contrast, arise from a “sympathetic temper.” These philosophies “insist that the intimate and human must surround and underlie the brutal.”⁶¹ Thus, on the basis of intimacy, he prefers spiritualistic philosophies and rejects materialistic philosophies from further consideration. Continuing his analysis, James distinguishes between two different forms spiritualistic philosophy has taken: dualistic theism and pantheism. The problem James notices with dualistic theism is that it tends to make us:

. . . outsiders and keeps us foreigners in relation to God, in which, at any rate, his connexion with us appears as unilateral and not reciprocal. His action can affect us, but he can never be affected by our reaction. Our relation, in short, is not a strictly social relation.⁶²

In other words, intimacy as mere *closeness* or *withness* is not sufficient intimacy. The intimacy that James believes we crave involves the additional “social relation” which is characterized by reciprocal activities. That is to say, part and parcel of our desire for an intimate universe is the possibility of *ameliorative* activity within that universe as well.

⁵⁹ *PU*, 17.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 17.

Accordingly, pantheism, by including humans beings in the divine, is able to attain a “higher reach of intimacy,” than dualistic theism.⁶³ Unlike dualistic theism, pantheism does not maintain an insurmountable gulf between an infinite God and His finite creatures. Pantheism is thus more intimate than dualistic theism. However, pantheism comes in monistic and pluralistic varieties, the latter of which, according to James, is the more intimate philosophy.⁶⁴ The pluralistic variety of pantheism James has in mind, of course, is his own radical empiricism. James seeks to show that radical empiricism is more intimate than its monistic competitors, namely, rationalistic philosophies of the Absolute.

James contends that radical empiricism is superior insofar as it is more intimate in the phenomenological sense of comporting with our lived, concrete experience as well as in the metaphysical sense of granting reality to all we directly experience. As Lamberth puts it:

Intimacy concerns not only the phenomenological affects that can be discerned through considering the subject, in addition intimacy refers directly to the concrete characteristics of factual relations, conjunctive and disjunctive, which are constitutive of all of reality as such (inclusive of thoughts and things). Intimacy as a criterion, then, demands a philosophy that is both phenomenologically and metaphysically responsive to experience.⁶⁵

As we have seen, James’s metaphysics of radical empiricism and pure experience, compared with its rationalistic counterparts and their thin abstractions and intellectualistic

⁶³ *PU*, 16.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁵ Lamberth, *op. cit.*, 244.

logic, more adequately envisaged reality as it experienced—in all its continuity and connectedness—thus best satisfying that craving for essential relatedness and intimacy. But what James's believes makes his metaphysics finally superior is that it suggests only a finite God with whom we coincide and actively work to better reality.

In James's metaphysics, unlike dualistic theism, there is no unbridgeable gulf between humans and a finite God, and, unlike monistic pantheism, a meaningful, interactive social relationship is possible. Moreover, a finite God, not being all-powerful, is not necessarily indicted by the presence of imperfection and evil. Additionally, human freedom and novelty are more compatible with a non-monistic world. James admits that a pluralistic universe featuring a finite God is incomplete, but it is “self-reparative through us, as getting its disconnections remedied in part by our behavior.”⁶⁶ This is what James refers to as “meliorism,” which he contrasts with optimism and pessimism. Optimism says the world must and shall be saved; pessimism says the world cannot be saved, while meliorism claims that the world *may* be saved. The remedy is accomplished by cooperating with God--the being having the wider, more encompassing field of consciousness with whom we are essentially continuous. Regarding this essential relatedness, James writes,

Thus does foreignness get banished from our world, and far more so when we take the system of it pluralistically than when we take it monistically. We are indeed internal parts of God and not external creations, on any possible reading of the panpsychic system. Yet because God is not the absolute, but is himself a part when the system is conceived pluralistically, his functions can be taken as not wholly dissimilar to those of the other smaller parts—as similar to our functions consequently.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ *PU*, 248.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

Thus, any super-human consciousness should not be something wholly different and unrelatable, but, instead, will be similar to the kinds of consciousness we are familiar with. Moreover, James suggests, “Having an environment, being in time, and working out a history just like ourselves, [God] escapes from the foreignness from all that is human, of the static timeless perfect absolute.”⁶⁸ In addition, the redemptive power advanced by traditional notions of God is not abandoned under this finite conception:

The believer finds that the tenderer parts of his personal life are continuous with a more of the same quality which is operative in the universe outside of him and which he can keep in touch with, and in a fashion get on board and save himself, when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck. In a word, the believer is continuous, to his own consciousness, at any rate, with a wider self from which saving experiences flow in.⁶⁹

As Lamberth observes, in *Varieties* “the relational character of religious experience” was a subjective one, confined to the mind. In James’s metaphysics, however, it “can be understood as an objective function within the fabric of pure experience.”⁷⁰ What James previously referred to as the “wider self” and “the more” can be taken to refer not merely to a subjective subconscious region but also to a real “superhuman consciousness.”⁷¹

But what are the implications of a finite God for James’s hope for immortality? Was James’s finite God finite in every respect? Could there come a time when Nietzsche’s proclamation, “God is dead,” could literally be true--in which case we are simply out of luck? In *A Pluralistic Universe*, James writes that God is best conceived

⁶⁸ *PU*, 144.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁷⁰ Lamberth, *op. cit.*, 254.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

not as all-embracing, but as “finite, either in power or knowledge, or in both at once.”⁷² Thus, as James conceives it, there may be limitations on what such a God can do and what He can know, but James neither suggests nor seems to be concerned about whether or not God’s existence is ultimately contingent. In the 1881 essay “Reflex Action and Theism,” James argues that God, “if he did exist, would form the most adequate possible object for minds framed like our own to conceive as lying at the root of the universe.”⁷³ James then clarifies what he means by the term “God”: “First, it is essential that God be conceived as the deepest power in the universe; and, second, he must be conceived under the form of a mental personality.”⁷⁴ Although he does not explicitly discuss the issue, by defining God as “deepest power in the universe” James seems to be implying that God is everlasting. For, if God’s existence is contingent upon other realities, these other realities, at least in one respect, could be considered more powerful than God. That is to say, it could be argued that whatever has the last say in terms of Being, in terms of existence, could claim to be the “deepest power.” In any case, James later makes the comment that, although one does not know exactly how one interacts with God, “It is sufficient for him to know that he himself simply is, and needs God; and that behind this universe *God simply is and will be forever*, and will in some way hear his call” (my italics).⁷⁵ Thus, James does seem to understand God as necessarily everlasting, otherwise, as was mentioned above, there may come a time when “the deepest power in the universe” is dead—along with all of the previously sustained hopes and ideals carried

⁷² *PU*, 141.

⁷³ *Will to Believe*, 93.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁷⁵ *PU*, 107.

therein. As Ellen Kappy Suckiel justifiably notes, “James offers a plethora of ideas and suggestions regarding the concept of God, many of which appear to be in a state of gestation, and which require a great deal more analysis than he provides.”⁷⁶ Perhaps James would respond here with a similar line of reasoning he used in *Principles* regarding the possibility of immortality. If we suppose the universe is rational, and if God exists as the best and most valuable thing within it, it would be *irrational* to suppose God is not everlasting. In any case, James does appear to assume the eternity of his finite God.

That James in working out his metaphysics of radical empiricism was constantly shoring up the possibility of immortality I think should now be obvious. The craving for an intimate and ongoing relationship with the universe, with a higher and wider consciousness one may call “God,” was supposed to be more fully realized beyond this life, and into the future. A quick fling wouldn’t do. As James puts it, our essential continuity with a wider field of consciousness is our life raft “when lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck.” Although, when it comes to filling in the details on how this all is supposed to work, James simply doesn’t. Instead of nuts and bolts, we are given suggestive metaphors and analogies, a “vague blueprint” as Myers calls it—which is perhaps the best that can be done.⁷⁷ All commentators realize James left many important questions unanswered.

In his notes for a second series of Gifford Lectures, James wrote, “Philosophies are only pictures of the world which have grown up in the minds of different

⁷⁶ Ellen Kappy Suckiel, *Heaven’s Champion: William James’s Philosophy of Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 106.

⁷⁷ Myers, *op. cit.*, 316.

individuals.”⁷⁸ And a “picture of the world” is probably the best way to describe James’s radical empiricistic metaphysics. James’s vision of reality offers possibilities such as immortality and is intentionally meant to be consistent with science, even supported by it, but he is not attempting to offer any kind of scientific or philosophic proof. Rather, James is offering us those analogies he spoke of earlier as he tried to incorporate reality as he experienced it into conceptual language. James never proved that we may survive bodily death but, as he developed his metaphysics and his vision of reality came more and more into focus, the more it made perfect sense.

In the final chapter I will conclude that James’s quest for securing future possibilities for the self is a reflection of both the Promethean and mystic aspects of his life and thought—and there was nothing contradictory about combining the two endeavors for James. I don’t believe there is a division in James’s psyche nor his philosophy. Again, James’s understanding of psychological phenomena, his analysis of religious experience, and his radical empiricistic metaphysics expanded the possibilities for the self and rendered the subject more active in the world.

⁷⁸ *VRE*, 488.

Chapter 6

Mysticism in James's Thought: A Final Reply to Gale

Throughout the previous four chapters I have argued that James's belief in the possibility of immortality grew stronger as he developed an understanding of the self that increasingly grounded such a possibility. With this account in place, I will now return to Gale's divided-self thesis that was set aside at the end of the first chapter. If you'll recall, in the first chapter I argued, against Gale, that James was not a mystic. As we have seen, James's understanding of the self certainly provides a conceptual framework to account for mystical experiences, but he himself was not one. In any case, what remained to be decided was Gale's further argument that two incommensurable types of selves are present within James's philosophy. In this chapter I will conclude my re-unification of James by considering Gale's characterization of these selves, ultimately concluding that Gale's characterization not only runs against the current of James's thought, but, in addition, is unsupported by and conflicts with James's texts. In the end I will have hopefully offered a more coherent and cohesive view of the Jamesian self and its dramatic possibilities.

To be clear, the two incompatible selves that Gale identifies within James's philosophy, the Promethean self and the mystical self, are not incompatible in the same way, for example, that being Donald Trump is incompatible with being Michael Jordan. That is to say, they are not incompatible simply because of a lack of time, talent, and competing interests. James fully appreciated this sort of incompatibility:

Not that I would not, if I could, be both handsome and fat and well dressed, and a great athlete, and make a million a year, be a wit, a *bon - vivant*, and a lady-killer, as well as a philosopher; a philanthropist,

statesman, warrior, and African explorer, as well as a 'tone-poet' and saint. But the thing is simply impossible. The millionaire's work would run counter to the saint's; the *bon -vivant* and the philanthropist would trip each other up; the philosopher and the lady-killer could not well keep house in the same tenement of clay. Such different characters may conceivably at the outset of life be alike *possible* to a man. But to make any one of them actual, the rest must more or less be suppressed. So the seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully, and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation. All other selves thereupon become unreal, but the fortunes of this self are real.¹

Gale concedes James's point that a single human being cannot possibly realize all of these different types of selves and must eventually choose amongst them. Further, Gale acknowledges that many of these selves have beliefs and interests that are not shared or consistent with the beliefs of other kinds of selves. However, Gale suggests that, fundamentally, these selves are conceived by James as pragmatic agents seeking to maximize desire-satisfaction by "riding herd" on discrete, external objects.² Thus, Gale classifies all of them as Promethean selves. What doesn't fit into this class is the mystical self. The mystical self, according to Gale's interpretation, neither seeks to maximize desire-satisfaction nor does he conceive reality as consisting of discrete, external objects. In other words, the Promethean self and the mystical self each belong to a different world--they cannot co-exist, both cannot be actual. In sum, Gale believes that James inadvertently comes up with two, mutually exclusive, competing models of the self.

As I see it, one of the underlying problems with Gale's account is his willingness to dichotomize James's psyche and philosophy in much the same way as James believed intellectualistic logic dichotomized experience. That is to say, Gale does to James what

¹ *Principles*, 1:295-96.

² Gale, *Divided Self*, 260.

James claims intellectualistic logic does to reality—fixing aspects of the perceptual flux into static concepts which are then hypostatized as being more *real* than the source whence they came. Recall James’s remarks about the inevitable results of intellectualistic logic: “No discrimination without separation; no separation without absolute ‘independence’ and thereupon impossibility of union.”³ Thus, when Gale discriminates between two separate selves in James’s text, defines and classifies them, it becomes no great mystery how difficult it then becomes to reconcile the two. James O. Pawelski, in *The Dynamic Individualism of William James*, hits on the same point. According to Pawelski, Gale’s “intellectualization” of James creates “two straw men” which broadly mirrors the distinction James makes in *Pragmatism* between the tough-minded and the tender-minded temperaments.⁴ Pawelski agrees with Gale that we do need to find a way to integrate our conflicting and competing tendencies, but he believes that the dilemma Gale sets up between radically opposite selves is neither an accurate reading of James nor edifying.⁵ Thus, although we could respond to Gale’s charge that James was a contradiction incarnate with James’s line: “If logic says it is one, so much the worse for logic,” we can do better by identifying how and why Gale’s classificatory scheme gets James wrong.

According to Gale’s analysis, the clash between a Promethean self and a mystical self in James’s philosophy occurs on two main fronts. The first clash between these supposedly rival selves concerns the activity or passivity of the will. The Promethean self Gale identifies is characterized by an active will, while the mystical self requires a

³ *Manuscript Essays and Notes*, 113.

⁴ Pawelski, *op. cit.*, 107.

⁵ *Ibid.*

passive will.⁶ The second clash between these selves occurs because of their competing claims about the nature of reality. The Promethean self is a committed fallibilist and Ontological Relativist who “rides herd” on discrete external objects in order to maximize desire-satisfaction. By contrast, according to Gale’s account, the mystical self makes apodictic claims about an Absolute reality characterized by an overall unity.⁷ Gale takes the second clash to be the more significant of the two and believes it to be irreparable in James’s philosophy. Thus, in order to diffuse the situation and reunify James, we have to determine whether he does, in fact, advance these competing conceptions of the self as Gale describes them. I don’t believe he does.

That the divided-self interpretation of James should be given up is partly accomplished by Gale himself as he attempts to reconcile James’s Promethean self with his alleged mystical self in the last chapter of his book. Throughout the book, up until the last chapter, Gale emphasizes that one of the essential differences between James’s Promethean self and his mystical self was that the Promethean self has an active will and the mystical self, having surrendered its will, is passive. In the final analysis, however, Gale softens his stance:

The aporia due to the clash between the active and passive selves has been made to appear more formidable than it really is. Even Promethean selves must be permitted to sleep, for they won’t amount to much as Promethean agents if they don’t. Similarly, they shouldn’t be denied some mystical R and R if it enables them to return to the war zone better equipped to do battle with the forces of evil.⁸

As it turns out, some amount of activity and passivity is necessary for both types of selves. What prompts Gale’s reconsideration is James’s insistence that ideals and

⁶ Gale, *op. cit.*, 257-60.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 312.

experience should result in practical and moral activity. First, Gale acknowledges James's stress on the connection between inner ideals and overt behavior in the essay "What Makes a Life Significant." Gale concludes, "Just as one's inner ideal must causally lead one to the right sort of Promethean actions, so a mystical experience, in general, must do likewise for its subject."⁹ Second, Gale cites James's insistence on a *practical* union with God rather than a sort of substantial identity in "Reflex Action and Theism." According to Gale, James's "emphasis on the practical expresses his insistence on mystical experiences bearing fruit for life."¹⁰ As Gale sees it, James wants to put mystical experiences to work in the service of a melioristic religion.¹¹

I believe Gale was right to soften the distinction between the active nature of the Promethean self and the passive nature of the mystical self, but, like Pawelski, I don't believe Gale goes far enough. Pawelski's specific criticism of Gale on this point centers around James's reflex action theory, which Pawelski believes belongs to the center of James's thought.¹² In "Reflex Action and Theism," James describes the human organism as composed of three dynamic, interrelated elements:

The structural unit of the nervous system is . . . a triad, neither of whose elements has any independent existence. The sensory impression exists only for the sake of awaking the central process of reflection, and the central process of reflection exists only for the sake of calling forth the final act. All action is thus *re*-action upon the outer world; and the middle stage of consideration or contemplation or thinking is only a place of transit, the bottom of a loop, both of whose ends have their point of application in the outer world. If it should ever have no roots in the outer world, if it should ever happen that it led to no active measures, it would fail of its essential function, and would have to be considered either

⁹ Gale, *op. cit.*, 312.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Pawelski, *op. cit.*, 109.

pathological or abortive. The current of life which runs in at our eyes or ears is meant to run out at our hands, feet, or lips. The only use of the thoughts it occasions while inside is to determine its direction to whichever of these organs shall, on the whole, under the circumstances actually present, act in the way most propitious to our welfare.¹³

Accordingly, complete human experience exists in three sequential and interrelated stages: (1) incoming sense impressions, (2) reflective processing of sense impressions, and (3) a subsequent action or reaction. Thus, as Pawelski puts it, “The reflex arc is understood as a dynamic system, with nerve currents flowing in, being processed, and then flowing out again,” adding, “Any disruption to this dynamism is indicative of malfunction.”¹⁴ Pawelski’s charge against Gale is that Gale wants to “snip the reflex arc” by severing the connections between stage (1) and stages (2) and (3).¹⁵ In other words, Gale’s mystical self is characteristically stuck at the level of sense impressions, sympathetically and non-conceptually intuiting reality, while the Promethean self is all instrumental rationality, volition, and action. Accordingly, Pawelski argues that James would have considered each of these selves as malfunctioning.¹⁶

In “The Still Divided-Self of William James,” Gale responds to this charge by claiming that James’s reflex arc was a normative theory, and shouldn’t be understood as a factual thesis. That is to say, Gale claims that some experiences, e.g., mystical experiences, do not result in overt behavior, and, therefore, are exceptions to the reflex arc model.¹⁷ Pawelski argues, I think correctly, that Gale simply misunderstands James’s

¹³ *Will to Believe*, 91-92.

¹⁴ Pawelski, *op. cit.*, 109.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 109-10.

¹⁷ Gale, *op. cit.*, 156-57.

view. According to Pawelski, Gale mistakenly supposes that “the discharge James has in mind must be a motor action.”¹⁸ Pawelski cites the following passage from James’s

Talks to Teachers:

The fact is that there is no sort of consciousness whatever, be it sensation, feeling, or idea, which does not directly and of itself tend to discharge into some motor effect. The motor effect need not always be an outward stroke of behavior. It may be only an alteration of the heart -beats or breathing, or a modification in the distribution of blood, such as blushing or turning pale; or else a secretion of tears, or what not. But in any case, it is there in some shape when any consciousness is there; and a belief as fundamental as any in modern psychology is the belief at last attained that conscious processes of any sort, conscious processes merely as such, *must* pass over into motion, open or concealed.¹⁹

Thus, stages (1) and (2) of the reflex arc do not necessary discharge as a motor effect or overt action; instead, they may result in some internal modification, however slight. In sum, I believe Pawelski is correct insofar as Gale fails to appreciate James’s reflex action theory and is willing to snip it at points James never would. Still, I believe we can go even further in challenging Gale’s characterization of a mystical self. Specifically, I don’t believe a so-called “passive will” belongs to James’s characterization of the mystical-religious person *at all*.

In order to determine this, let us recall James’s discussion of passivity in *Varieties* in which it was considered to be neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for mystical experience, but only “usually found.” James writes:

Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and

¹⁸ Pawelski, op. cit., 110.

¹⁹ *Talks to Teachers*, 102.

indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power. This latter peculiarity connects mystical states with certain definite phenomena of secondary or alternative personality, such as prophetic speech, automatic writing, or the mediumistic trance.²⁰

A couple of important points may be drawn from this passage. First, the passivity usually found in a mystical experience is typically confined to the duration of the mystical experience itself. Second, in order to have a mystical experience it is not necessary to be passive before or after the experience. In James's view, then, passivity is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for a mystical experience either before, during, or after such an experience. Additionally, in this passage James only claims that the mystic feels *as if* their will was in abeyance, which is not conclusive evidence that it, in fact, *was*. Thus, one of the problems with Gale's analysis is that it fails to highlight James's restrictive usage of passivity. Gale simply refers to "passivity" as "one of the four defining conditions of a mystical experience," and further equates it with "resignation" and "abandonment of the finite self" that is characteristic of all mystical and religious experience.²¹ Thus, James's idea of passivity as a *usual accompaniment* to mystical experience becomes promoted by Gale to be the *hallmark* of mystical experience. I think this is a mistake.

In support of his view, Gale cites the following from James:

There is a state of mind, known to religious men, but to no others, in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God.²²

²⁰ *VRE*, 302-03.

²¹ Gale, *op. cit.*, 256.

²² *VRE*, 46.

It is not obvious from this passage what role our will plays when we are “nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God.” After all, James uses the term “willingness” to describe our relation to this state of mind. In *Principles*, James describes belief as resembling “acquiescence” and “consent,” the latter of which is “recognized by all to be a manifestation of our active nature,” adding, “It would naturally be described by such terms as 'willingness' or the 'turning of our disposition.’”²³ Moreover, James claims that “*Will and Belief, in short, meaning a certain relation between objects and the Self, are two names for one and the same psychological phenomenon.*”²⁴ The only difference between an object of belief and an object of the will, according to James, is that an object of the will is a goal to be achieved. As Henry Samuel Levinson puts it: “Whether the mind was believing or willing . . . it did the same thing: it looked at an object and consented to its existence, espoused it, and claimed reality on its behalf.”²⁵ That the religious person consents, and, thus, wills, is suggested by James when he compares the Christian’s agreement *with* God’s scheme to the Stoic who merely agrees *to* the scheme. James writes that “He literally *abounds* in agreement, he runs out to embrace the divine decrees.”²⁶ Thus, it is far from clear that “willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God” indicates a purely passive will.

In Gale’s defense, James does commonly use the word “passive” to describe the mystico-religious person; so, if it does not refer to a purely passive will, what does it refer to? Given that he uses the term in a wide variety of contexts, James doesn’t seem

²³ *Principles*, 2:913.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 948.

²⁵ Henry Samuel Levinson, *The Religious Investigation of William James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 48.

²⁶ *VRE*, 43.

altogether clear about it either. When he contrasts the “drab discolored way of stoic resignation” with the “passionate happiness of Christian saints,” James concludes that “the difference is as great as that between passivity and activity, as that between the defensive and the aggressive mood.”²⁷ The saint, the epitome of human religiosity for James, is described as passionate, active, and aggressive while the less religious stoic is characterized as passive. However, the difference between these two is not necessarily the difference between an active and passive will. For James, ideas and states of consciousness are naturally impulsive and, if uninhibited, naturally lead to action. James writes:

Every idea that represents an act will translate itself into that act unless something stands in its way; that barrier can be an “antagonistic or inhibiting” idea. In cases of conflict between ideas or blockage of an original idea, the help we provide is an “express fiat” or “act of mental consent.”²⁸

Myers observes that, “There is a smooth transition from idea to behavior that requires no act of will whatsoever.”²⁹ James is sympathetic with Lotze’s view which claims that “All the acts of our daily life happen in this wise: Our standing up, walking, talking, all this never demands a distinct impulse of the will, but is adequately brought about by the pure flux of thought.”³⁰ Thus, the process of willing, according to James, is not to perform an action directly; instead, willing involves making a particular idea command one’s conscious attention. James writes:

The essential achievement of the will, in short, when it is most ‘voluntary’ is to ATTEND to a difficult object and hold it fast before the mind. The

²⁷ *VRE*, 41-42.

²⁸ *Principles*, 2:526.

²⁹ Myers, op. cit., 202.

³⁰ *Principles*, 2:1131.

so-doing *is* the *fiat*; and it is a mere physiological incident that when the object is thus attended to, immediate motor consequences should ensue.³¹

“Consent to the idea’s undivided presence . . . is effort’s sole achievement,” writes James, adding, “Such filling of the mind by an idea, with its congruous associates, *is* consent to the idea and to the fact which the idea represents.”³² Thus, returning to the example of the Stoic and Christian, in so far as both are consenting to their respective ideals, each has an active will, regardless of the difference in physical activity.

To take another example, James describes depression as sometimes being a “mere passive joylessness and dreariness, discouragement, dejection, lack of taste and zest and spring.”³³ In this case, a case of a “sick soul,” passivity seems to indicate more than just a lack of physical activity; it also seems to indicate a non-functioning or deadened will. The depressed person seems to have no interest in anything and, consequently, makes no effort to attend to any idea. Compare this person to someone with an easy-going, happy-go-lucky attitude, which James describes as “passive happiness.”³⁴ Most people, according to James, find this kind of happiness “slack and insipid, and soon grows mawkish and intolerable. . . . Some austerity and wintry negativity, some roughness, danger, stringency, and effort, some 'no! no!' must be mixed in.”³⁵ The passively happy person is not passive in respect to activity—they have plenty of that—they are passive in regard to being non-assertive, being “people pleasers” and “yes men.” In other words,

³¹ *Principles*, 2:1166.

³² *Ibid.*, 2:1169

³³ *VRE*, 123.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 240.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

they go along with whatever ideas are in front of them without feeling the tension between competing ideas or the need to choose between them. Some people, writes James, “need the sense of tension, of strong volition, to make them feel alive and well;” and when they turn to the religious life “they are apt to turn the edge of their need of effort and negativity against their natural self; and the ascetic life gets evolved as a consequence.”³⁶ This hardly sounds like someone with a passive will. Characterizing the ascetic life of the saint, James writes:

The self-surrender may become so passionate as to turn into self-immolation. It may then so overrule the ordinary inhibitions of the flesh that the saint finds positive pleasure in sacrifice and asceticism, measuring and expressing as they do the degree of his loyalty to the higher power.³⁷

Thus, according to James’s account, when people “of strong volition” become religious, they may become ascetics who express their piety by directing their will against their “natural self” as an expression of “self-surrender.” James’s language here clearly indicates, I believe, that he did not understand a passive will to be a defining mark of the religious person.

In order to get a better understanding of this, it might be helpful to distinguish between a passive will and what James calls “resignation.” Although Gale uses the terms interchangeably, James does not. Commenting on the character of resignation in religious persons, James remarks that, in the case of “more optimistic temperaments, the resignation grows less passive.”³⁸ Thus, depending on one’s temperament, resignation can take different forms--reflecting varying degrees of passivity and, by implication,

³⁶ *VRE*, 241.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 231.

activity. But what is resignation? According to James, both Stoicism and Epicureanism are “forms of resignation”:

The Epicurean said: "Seek not to be happy, but rather to escape unhappiness; strong happiness is always linked with pain; therefore hug the safe shore, and do not tempt the deeper raptures. Avoid disappointment by expecting little, and by aiming low; and above all do not fret." The Stoic said: "The only genuine good that life can yield a man is the free possession of his own soul; all other goods are lies."³⁹

Resignation, as this description suggests, is relinquishing one’s claim upon worldly goods or giving up, as James puts it, “this world’s selfish little interests.”⁴⁰ Understood in this manner, resignation is not an attitude or posture reserved only for mystico-religious people-- as Stoics and Epicureans are proof. However, in the religious context, we can now understand James better when he says “resignation grows less passive” in people with optimistic temperaments. That is, once one no longer identifies their ultimate happiness with the goods of this world, some may remain more buoyant and active than others. Compare here Kierkegaard’s “knight of infinite resignation” who gives up everything finite in return for the infinite and now finds himself in the awkward position of living in a world he no longer feels at home in. How people adapt to such a situation will largely depend upon their native temperament. Some may sleep in a little longer than others.

Like the identification of passivity with resignation, I believe Gale’s identification of resignation with the total abandonment of the self is off the mark. James calls the “abandonment of self” and “willing self-surrender” elsewhere as the “denial of the finite

³⁹ *VRE*, 121.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 219.

self and its wants.”⁴¹ As we saw in the case of the ascetic saint, what is being denied is not the self *in toto*, but the “natural self” concerned with “this world’s selfish little interests.” What is surrendered is the part of the self cramped with desires for worldly things. When these “outlines of the confining selfhood melt away,” writes James, one feels an “immense elation and freedom.”⁴² James writes:

The sense of enlargement of life may be so uplifting that personal motives and inhibitions, commonly omnipotent, become too insignificant for notice, and new reaches of patience and fortitude open out. Fears and anxieties go, and blissful equanimity takes their place. Come heaven, come hell, it makes no difference now!⁴³

This renunciation of the finite self is not a complete abandonment of self but, rather, “a sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life.”⁴⁴ In other words, we lose our narrow-minded egoism but do not thereby lose our newly expanded self—we remain an individual. In “Reflex Action and Theism,” James makes this point unequivocally:

That sense of emotional reconciliation with God which characterizes the highest moments of the theistic consciousness may be described as “oneness” with him, and so from the very bosom of theism a monistic doctrine seems to arise. But this consciousness of self-surrender, of absolute practical union between one’s self and the divine object of one’s contemplation, is a totally different thing from any sort of substantial identity. Still the object God and the subject I are two. Still I simply come upon him, and find his existence given to me; and the climax of my practical union with what is given, forms at the same time the climax of my perception that as a numerical fact of existence I am something radically other than the Divinity with whose effulgence I am filled.⁴⁵

⁴¹ *VRE*, 331.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 219-20.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁴⁵ *Will to Believe*, 106.

Thus, concerning our union with God, no matter how hard we try, James claims we cannot lose our self. Moreover, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, James's ideal self was a social self who desired a transactional relationship with an ideal socius:

We and God have business with each other; and in opening ourselves to his influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled. The universe, at those parts of it which our personal being constitutes, takes a turn genuinely for the worse or for the better in proportion as each one of us fulfills or evades God's demands.⁴⁶

Simply put, the passive will of Gale's mystical self does not make a very good marriage partner. A one-sided relationship was not what James envisioned.

Where Gale's passive self does seem to connect to James's text is where James claims that the enthusiasm of the religious person "is the result of the excitement of a higher kind of emotion, in the presence of which no exertion of volition is required."⁴⁷ The higher emotion of the religious person is an advantage one has over the moralist whose "athletic" attitude "tends ever to break down, and it inevitably does break down even in the most stalwart when the organism begins to decay, or when morbid fears invade the mind."⁴⁸ The puzzle that arises is whether the effortlessness with which the religious person performs religious acts corresponds to a "passive" will. To put it another way, is the will passive when a person performs an activity they absolutely *love* to do? Does the emotion override and cancel out any activity of the will? In *Principles*, James writes:

As bare logical thinkers, without emotional reaction, we give reality to whatever objects we think of, for they are really phenomena, or objects of our passing thought, if nothing more. But, *as thinkers with emotional*

⁴⁶ *VRE*, 406.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

*reaction, we give what seems to us a still higher degree of reality to whatever things we select and emphasize and turn to WITH A WILL.*⁴⁹

James seems to be saying here that what we selectively attend to is determined *both* by our will and our emotional reactions. Our emotional reactions predispose us one way or another to objects but do not have the last say. This is what James seems to have in mind when he claims that “The greatest proof that a man is *sui compos* is his ability to suspend belief in presence of an emotionally exciting idea.”⁵⁰ Accordingly, even if the religious person has an “emotionally exciting idea” of God, they still retain the ability to suspend belief through an effort of will. Thus, they can dissent from the idea, consent to it, or, like the passively happy person, unreflectively go along with it. Since the religious person, in James’s view, is not like the passively happy person, we would expect them to take a stand one way or another.

To use an analogy, consider a person bicycling downhill. Like the exciting idea, their momentum is pulling them in a very definite direction; yet, it is still up to them whether to start hitting the brakes or *really lean into it*, expressing their approval as if to say “Yes, yes, yes, go, go, go!” One could say that the leaning didn’t causally determine the forward momentum—and this seems right—but it would seem wrong to say that there wasn’t an active, willing consent, since the person could have ended the ride at any time. Thus, when James says that “no exertion of volition is required” when one has the higher religious emotion, I think it is more accurate to say that the direction of the will is harmonious with the direction of the emotional reaction. Moreover, according to James, emotional reactions are correlated with definite physical dispositions:

⁴⁹ *Principles*, 2:925.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 936.

[There] is continuous cooperation of the voluntary muscles in our emotional states. Even when no change of outward attitude is produced, their inward tension alters to suit each varying mood, and is felt as a difference of tone or of strain. In depression the flexors tend to prevail; in elation or belligerent excitement the extensors take the lead. And the various permutations and combinations of which these organic activities are susceptible, make it abstractly possible that no shade of emotion, however slight, should be without a bodily reverberation as unique, when taken in its totality, as is the mental mood itself.⁵¹

My suggestion here, using James's analysis, is that a mystical-religious experience may evoke both a reconception of the self (as continuous with a wider reality, dropping the shabby finite, natural self, etc.) as well as an emotional reaction which sets up one's being into a religious *stance*, as it were. For example, one may feel more relaxed, at ease, and their various appetites may have lost the edge they once had, making it easier to brush aside potential temptations and distractions. Thus, as long as one is a willing participant, it will *feel* effortless—though one may, in principle, withdraw their consent at any time.

As a final point, although James sometimes talks as if religious persons are permanently overcome with ecstasy, this doesn't seem to be entirely true. Even the most devout believers will have days where they feel uninspired, days where their piety feels less effortless and more like a chore. If this is the case, and if my interpretation of James is correct, whenever the religious excitement fades, the active consent to their religious ideal would still remain—only requiring a more concentrated effort to hold it in focus. If this were not the case, if behind the emotion and enthusiasm was an inert, passive will, it would seem as though one would be in a very strange predicament whenever the excitement dissipates. To put it another way, if the religious emotion is all, what does

⁵¹ *Essays in Psychology*, 172.

one do if they lose it? By contrast, if there is an actively consenting will along with the emotion, there is still the possibility of continuity if and when the emotion fades until the time it (hopefully) returns.

In any case, as James would be the first to admit, mystical and other religious experiences are typically enigmatic and messy. An adequate account of their general nature that aligned seamlessly with his research in psychology and philosophy would have been a miracle unto itself. Though I have attempted to align James's descriptions of mystical and religious experience in *Varieties* with his ideas about the will in his other works, I'm still not certain about the closeness of fit. However, what does seem clear is that James did not define the mystical-religious self in terms of possessing a passive will. James's characterization of passivity as neither necessary nor sufficient for a mystical experience was consistently carried over to the religious life. To be sure, the religious person surrenders part of their former self, that part which identified with the "creature comforts" of this world, but in doing so actively consents to a divine scheme in which they actively participate. And, although this participation feels effortless at times, I have suggested that their willing consent remains in place, ready to support their vision should the emotions fade.

The second clash Gale identifies is considered by him to be the "Big Aporia" in James's philosophy. According to Gale, this clash arises due to the incompatible kinds of claims made by the two selves. Gale argues that the reality claims of the Promethean pragmatist are "advanced in the spirit of fallibilism, as hypotheses to be tested by future experiences and thus subject to revision or withdrawal."⁵² Mystical claims, on the other

⁵² Gale, op. cit., 259.

hands, are “claims to absolute certainty” and “are advanced as noetic claims that are revelatory of an ultimate or absolute reality—the really real in comparison with which everything is a mere illusion or emanation of some sort.”⁵³ According to Gale, the mystic claims that reality is a kind of unity or oneness *simpliciter* which resists human handling:

The mystic’s conception of the Absolute, the undifferentiated unity, the eternal one, God, is not based on how we can ride herd on it, for there is nothing that we do to or with this mystical reality, or ways in which it is expected to behave if we perform certain operations. . . . It simply *is*, and is just what it appears to be in the immediate experience of the mystic. A door-to-door salesman of mystical reality, therefore, would be stymied when asked, “But what does it do?” or “What can I do with it?”⁵⁴

Gale’s characterization of mystical claims as absolute claims which are infallible, ineffable, non-conceptual, non-hypothetical, revelatory of a world ultimately resistant to human interests is, I believe, erroneous. In what follows, I will argue that all of these characteristics are falsely attributed to James’s understanding of mystical experience.

According to Gale, the mystical and the Promethean selves are alike insofar as both *make reality claims*. On James’s account, if and when mystics do make reality claims, they must always come with a set of important qualifications. If you recall, one of the defining characteristics of a mystical experience for James was its “ineffability,” meaning that “it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words.”⁵⁵ James adds that mystical states are “more like states of feeling than like states of intellect.”⁵⁶ Consequently, the contents of a mystical state cannot be transmitted

⁵³ Gale, *op. cit.*, 259.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁵⁵ *VRE*, 302.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

through language--they must be experienced directly. In other words, any attempt to translate a mystical experience fully into propositional language will fail. Gale runs with this idea of ineffability and, unable to conceptualize the experience, as we saw, gets stuck at stage (1) in James's reflex arc. What Gale fails to take into account is the *noetic quality* James ascribes to mystical experiences. That is to say, although mystical experiences are unable to be captured in language, they still have a *noetic quality* which James describes as "insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. . . . illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain."⁵⁷ Making a similar point, Pawelski comments that:

Although it is not possible to do complete justice to mystical states when we speak or think about them, speak and think about them we clearly do. No experience, for James, is fully accessible to words and concepts. But that does not mean they can capture nothing of the reality we use them to describe. Mystical experience is particularly difficult to speak and think about, but that does not mean that nothing we say or think about it has any merit whatsoever.⁵⁸

As James and Pawelski are suggesting, even though a mystical experience resists full conceptualization and adequate expression in language, it indicates deeper truths about reality which we can partially capture in our report of the experience. Indeed, James appears to have this in mind when he remarks that we can still get a sense of a mystical experience's "theoretic drift."⁵⁹

In any case, according to James, whatever knowledge or insight is imparted through a mystical experience is absolutely authoritative for the subject of the experience,

⁵⁷ *VRE*, 302.

⁵⁸ Pawelski, op. cit., 111.

⁵⁹ *VRE*, 329-30.

but no “authority emanates . . . [to] those who stand outside of them.”⁶⁰ Therefore, in James’s view, a mystic cannot dogmatically insist that a non-mystic adopt mystical-religious beliefs. What is not clear here is whether James understands a mystical experience’s “authority” as rationally or logically binding, or whether he is making the weaker claim that, as a matter of fact, mystics *feel* these experiences to be authoritative—or both. This issue boils down to question of whether James, unlike Gale, understands mystical claims to be fallible. I believe that, although he recognized that mystical experiences are, *de facto*, authoritative for the subject, James never considered mystical claims as incorrigible. For example, James often imagined the wider world as having a “mixed constitution” like this world: “It would have its celestial and its infernal regions, its tempting and its saving moments, its valid experiences and its *counterfeit ones*.”⁶¹ (my italics) About this “transmarginal region” James writes:

That region contains every kind of matter: 'seraph and snake' abide there side by side. To come from thence is no infallible credential. What comes must be sifted and tested, and run the gauntlet of confrontation with the total context of experience, just like what comes from the outer world of sense.⁶²

In *Pragmatism*, James repeats the same idea: “The truth of 'God' has to run the gauntlet of all our other truths. It is on trial by them and they on trial by it.”⁶³ As Richard Niebuhr puts it, “the mystic state is like Tolstoy’s faith state; men live by them, but the truths they

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 335-336.

⁶¹ *VRE*, 339.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 338.

⁶³ *Pragmatism*, 56.

proffer are fallible.”⁶⁴ James names “the supremacy of the ideal, of vastness, of union, of safety, and of rest” as examples of truths offered by mystical experience. Regarding such truths James says, “They offer us *hypotheses*, hypotheses which we may voluntarily ignore, but which as thinkers we cannot possibly upset.”⁶⁵ The gauntlet James wanted these hypotheses to run in order to determine their value consisted of set of three criteria: “immediate luminousness,” “philosophical reasonableness,” and “moral helpfulness.”⁶⁶ As you may notice, these criteria roughly correspond to the different stages of James’s reflex arc. “Immediate luminousness” refers to the strength and quality of the original sensory experience, “its immediate force, its raw voltage, its direct, tangible feeling,” as G. William Barnard describes it.⁶⁷ The criterion of “philosophical reasonableness” concerns the extent to which the resultant state of mind is logically defensible. Based on this criterion alone, Gale cannot be right when he claims that the experiences of James’s mystical self were entirely ineffable and nonconceptual, otherwise, the criterion of “philosophical reasonableness” would be inapplicable. To be sure, James believed that mystical experiences involve a different mode of consciousness than our everyday rational consciousness, but, nevertheless, he maintained that the two are consistent and continuous with one another. In James’s view, mystical experience does not contradict the facts of non-mystical states of consciousness, but, rather, adds new levels of meaning:

As a rule, mystical states merely add a supersensuous meaning to the ordinary outward data of consciousness. They are excitements like the

⁶⁴ Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, 232.

⁶⁵ *VRE*, 339.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 23.

⁶⁷ G. William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 277.

emotions of love or ambition, gifts to our spirit by means of which facts already objectively before us fall into a new expressiveness and make a new connexion with our active life. They do not contradict these facts as such, or deny anything that our senses have immediately seized.⁶⁸

In general, then, a philosophically reasonable mystical experience will enhance our experience rather than invalidate it. Lastly, “moral helpfulness” is the criterion which considers the overall positive effects the experience has upon one’s character and, subsequently, the community. Using the language of James’s reflex arc we could say the final discharge or upshot of mystical experience is moral activity. According to James, these three criteria remain true to “our empiricist criterion: By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots.”⁶⁹ In this way, James insists that the mystical-religious life be judged not by its origin, but “by its results exclusively.” Thus, James would not consider authoritative a mystical experience which failed his empiricistic gauntlet.

In summary, Gale’s divided-self thesis, especially in regard to his characterization of the mystical self, appears misbegotten. I have suggested, along with Pawelski, that Gale’s treatment of James resembles an over-intellectualization of James’s psyche and philosophy. In addition, Pawelski highlights Gale’s failure to appreciate James’s reflex action theory. This failure results in a severing of James’s reflex arc, resulting in two malfunctioning human organisms. Further, I argued that Gale’s characterization of the mystical self as possessing a passive will is deeply problematic and unsupported by James’s text. Lastly, we saw that, for James, mystical claims are fallible. James considers mystical claims as hypotheses which we test by considering their fruits for life, i.e., the extent to which they enrich our understanding and galvanize moral activity.

⁶⁸ *VRE*, 338.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

Thus, though certainly a provocative and dramatic presentation of James and his philosophy, Gale's divided-self thesis is ultimately unsuccessful.

Conclusions

There is, Gale tells us, an “obsessive use of the metaphor of leaving all doors and windows open” which pervades James’s writings.¹ For example, James remarks that pluralism accepts “a universe unfinished, with doors and windows open to possibilities and uncontrollable in advance.”² And, similarly: “When one’s affections keep in touch with the divinity of the world’s authorship. . . . It is as if all doors were opened, and all paths freshly smoothed.”³ It seems correct to say that one of James’s greatest fears was to remain behind artificial enclosures in both life and theory. “James was an insatiable lover of landscape, and particularly of wide ‘views,’” wrote James’s son, Henry.⁴ This preference for expansiveness manifested itself in a lifelong love of hiking and mountain climbing. Richardson observes that James “felt a real craving, a hunger for nature, a physical need to spend several months a year in the country.”⁵ This strenuous activity would eventually take a toll on James’s health, causing him to suffer through increasingly frequent bouts of angina. After his death, the autopsy report would conclude that James had died from an acute enlargement of the heart. Commenting on the finding of the autopsy report, Alice wrote in her diary: “He had worn himself out.”⁶ The year before

¹ Gale, *op. cit.*, 4.

² *SPP*, 72.

³ *VRE*, 373.

⁴ Perry, *op. cit.*, 175.

⁵ Richardson, *op. cit.*, 271.

⁶ Simon, *op. cit.*, 385.

James had met with Sigmund Freud at a psychology conference at Clark University in Worcester. In his autobiography, Freud recalled this memorable meeting with James:

I shall never forget one little scene that occurred as we were on a walk together. He stopped suddenly, handed me a bag he was carrying and asked me to walk on, saying he would catch up as soon as he had got through an attack of angina pectoris which was just coming on. He died of that disease a year later, and I have always wished that I might be as fearless as he was in the face of approaching death.⁷

Due to his failing heart condition, Simon is right to claim that James “had not simply willed himself to die.”⁸ Yet, Alice did believe that her husband’s will was a contributing factor during his final hours. “He wanted to go,” Alice told her friend, Pauline Goldmark, “and departed swiftly as he always has when he made up his mind to move on.”⁹ James’s brother Henry echoed this sentiment: “[H]e suffered so & only wanted, wanted more & more, to go.”¹⁰ Thus, like his father, James appeared to welcome death—apparently believing that he was about to “move on.” Although both agreed that James has willingly departed, Alice and Henry had quite different reactions in the following days.

Despite the fact that Alice would wear all black clothing for the rest of her life, she was more than hopeful about the fate of her husband. In a letter written to her friend, Horace Kallen, Alice acknowledges her belief in an afterlife: “I believe in immortality,” and “[I] believe that he is safe and living, loving and working, never, never to be wholly

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *An Autobiographical Study*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1935), 99.

⁸ Simon, 385.

⁹ Blum, *op. cit.*, 316.

¹⁰ Simon, 385.

gone from us.”¹¹ Henry didn’t feel the quite same way: “My own fears are of the blackest,” he wrote to his friend, Grace Norton, “from as far back in dimmest childhood, I have so yearningly always counted on him, I feel nothing but the abject weakness of grief and even terror.”¹² A few days later Henry wrote the following to Thomas Sergeant Perry: “I sit heavily stricken and in darkness. . . . His extinction changes the face of life for me—besides the mere missing of his inexhaustible company and personality, originality, the whole unspeakably vivid and beautiful experience of him.”¹³ Thus, unlike Henry, Alice seemed to share in her husband’s faith. After his death, she wrote to one of his friends, “He said to me once, many years ago, ‘I am *really* a religious man’—and so he was.”¹⁴ For the next several months after the funeral, Alice evidently sought out mediums and held séances in her home, hoping to receive a message from her departed husband. No messages would arrive.

Evidently, Alice James was not the only person concerned with trying to contact James’s spirit. “Within days,” writes Blum, “newspapers carried multiple claims of contacts with the spirit of William James.”¹⁵ The *New York Times* ran with a story from a Boston man who claimed that James had “sent a message to his friends from the spirit world” during a séance.¹⁶ The discarnate James supposedly told him: “I am at peace, peace—with myself and all mankind. I have awakened to a life far beyond my highest

¹¹ Simon, op. cit., 385.

¹² Henry James, *The Letters of Henry James*, vol. 2, ed. Percy Lubbock (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), 172-173.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁴ Simon, 387.

¹⁵ Blum, op. cit., 317.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

conception while a denizen of earth.”¹⁷ This didn’t convince anyone. James Hyslop, too, claimed to have received some supposed messages from James--but nothing that he could count as definitive proof.¹⁸ Wanting to settle all of these circulating rumors concerning the probability of James’s spiritual return, the *Times* turned to an “expert” on the matter: Thomas Alva Edison.¹⁹ The title of the October 2nd, 1910 article tells the whole story: “Human Beings Only an Aggregate of Cells and the Brain Only a Wonderful Machine, Says Wizard of Electricity.” It was settled, according to the “expert,” there was no mystery to be solved.

In *A Pluralistic Universe*, James writes:

Our intellectual handling of [things] is a retrospective patchwork, a postmortem dissection, and can follow any order we find most expedient. We can make the thing seem self-contradictory whenever we wish to. But place yourself at the point of view of the thing's interior *doing*, and all these back-looking and conflicting conceptions lie harmoniously in your hand. Get at the expanding centre of a human character, the *élan vital* of a man, as Bergson calls it, by living sympathy, and at a stroke you see how it makes those who see it from without interpret it in such diverse ways. It is something that breaks into both honesty and dishonesty, courage and cowardice, stupidity and insight, at the touch of varying circumstances, and you feel exactly why and how it does this, and never seek to identify it stably with any of these single abstractions. Only an intellectualist does that,--and you now also fell why *he* must do it to the end.

Place yourself similarly at the centre of a man’s philosophic vision and you understand at once all the different things it makes him write or say. But keep outside, use your post-mortem method, try to build the philosophy up out of the single phrases, taking first one and then another and seeking to make them fit ‘logically,’ and of course you fail. You crawl over the thing like a myopic ant over a building, tumbling into every

¹⁷ Blum, op. cit., 317.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

microscopic crack or fissure, finding nothing but inconsistencies, and never suspecting that a centre exists.²⁰

In this paper I have attempted to heed James's advice. The critical task of my paper has been to show that Gale's divided-self thesis is erroneous and misrepresents James and his philosophy. The remaining task was to construct a unified account of James which could explain the sort of extreme interpretation which Gale offers. My positive thesis has been that James's understanding of the self was centered on a deep, personal desire for immortality. Thus, I argue that James's interest in mystical experience, immortality, and the "dramatic probabilities of nature" were never in conflict with his other alleged non-mystical interests. In Chapter 2, I suggested that the "tremendousness" of this idea first occurred to James through an admixture of native temperament, personal tragedy, blossoming humanistic ideals, and the "dramatic probabilities" of consciousness suggested by abnormal psychology and psychic research. In Chapter 3, I considered James's account of the self in his magnum opus, *The Principles of Psychology*, arguing that James adopted a methodological dualism, resisting a reductionistic account of the self. Additionally, we saw that, even though psychology was his subject matter, James went out of his way to offer a moral justification for immortality while, at the same time, engineering a non-substantive model of the self both fit for science, and, in many ways, better suited to realize "dramatic probabilities" suggested or called for by our moral and religious sensibilities. In Chapter 4, I considered James's Ingersoll Lecture, "Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine," and his landmark work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In "Human Immortality," we witnessed James answering common objections to immortality and defending a view of consciousness that

²⁰ *PU*, 117.

is compatible with its possibility. In *Varieties* James turns away from dualistic categories and begins to employ a consciousness-as-field metaphor, better suiting both his psychological descriptions of mystical-religious experience and a metaphysics consistent with the possibility of personal immortality.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I considered James's most mature, systematic, and metaphysical works: *A Pluralistic Universe*, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, and *Some Problems in Philosophy*. In these works James further develops the idea that the self is ultimately relational and continuous with wider fields of consciousness, the highest and most inclusive of which is a redemptive (albeit finite) God. As we saw, one of the problems that arose was how the self can be part of a larger consciousness, yet still exist as a distinct consciousness. This problem eventually led James to devalue intellectualistic logic and to stress the importance of *intimacy*. James believed that the most rational universe was the universe we could feel most at home in. And I maintain that the universe James felt most at home in was one in which death was not our ultimate destiny.

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