

## *William James on the Self*

In the late nineteenth century William James pieced together a theory of self that is remarkably modern, some might say 'post-modern.' In Chapter X of his magnum opus, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), entitled "The Consciousness of Self," James discusses the manifold nature of the self treating it in its native complexity. Among other things, he proposes a notion of identity and experience of self that critiques and melds the three leading models of his day: the 'soul' theory, the associationist model, and Kant's transcendentalist conception.

James begins the chapter talking about the most common empirical sense of self. He starts on a radical note: instead of attributing some centralized, subjective consciousness as many might do, he contextualizes the self. James thinks the self is more than subjectivity:

In its widest possible sense, however, a man's self is 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.<sup>1</sup>

He proposes that an investigation of the self must look deeply into the constituents of the self.

In exploring the constituents of self James continues to appreciate the full complexity of self-hood. This is where his eyes as a scientist and psychologist see deeper than those of the philosopher. The philosopher studies the world through the tools of reason but the scientist studies the phenomena first and makes them reasonable later. Such a phenomenal approach sees complexity; it

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<sup>1</sup> James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Dover Publications, 1890. p. 291

doesn't posit simplicity. James thinks the self is not the base from which all else rebounds but is fragmentary. The components which make it up he calls the material self, the social self, the spiritual self, and the pure ego.

The material self is not simply the body but a man's closest possessions and relatives. One's family turns out to be a component of self; certainly when a close one dies one feels as if they have lost a part of themselves. One's property and wealth contribute to one's material self as do lifelong endeavors. As James mentions: "There are few men who would not feel personally annihilated if a life-long construction of their hands or brains-say an entomological collection or an extensive work in manuscript-were suddenly swept away."<sup>2</sup> As is evident, even something so ostensibly solid as one's material self is composed of numerous elements.

On equal par with one's material self is one's social self. Here James pays heed to man as a social being, an idea that has often escaped recognition. Through thought experiment, James concludes that the worst punishment imaginable would be a complete ostracism from one's fellows. Losing one's nature as a being-for-others can be more of a condemnation than any imprisonment. The social self, as one might expect from James, is no simple entity but: "Properly speaking, a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind."<sup>3</sup>

The social selves may be quite disparate. One's self in a certain context may be markedly different from that in another milieu. In a passage that attests to his broad thinking, James goes so far as to explore the idea of honor in this psychology text. Honor defines a man among his peers and sustains a code of conduct that accords with his position and duties. One's honor may designate a

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 293

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 294

set of behaviors that are unexpected for some but necessitated in others: "Thus a layman may abandon a city infected with cholera; but a priest or a doctor would think such an act incompatible with his honor."<sup>4</sup> The social self portrays a myriad of roles.

James sees the spiritual self as a more crucial element of the many tiered self than the others: "By the spiritual self, so far as it belongs to the empirical me, I mean a man's inner or subjective being, his psychic faculties or dispositions, taken concretely; not the bare principle of personal unity, or 'pure' ego, which remains still to be discussed."<sup>5</sup> James has some difficulty in describing this type of self because it can at once be perceived as that central agent which some call the soul or as nothing more than the most recent thought in a stream which associationists' claim to be the whole content of self. James briefly wrestles with alternate descriptions leaving one unsure just how significant the spiritual self is. In the end he proposes a rather interesting and quite unique model. The spiritual self is a feeling of bodily activities!

As James softly approaches this conclusion he proposes this central part of the self not to be a known agent in some way identifiable through the typical fashion, rather: "...this central part of the self is felt."<sup>6</sup> Thinkers generally want something to be known through a tight inference, a logical consequence, or an infallible proof. The self, that entity known so closely but understood so vaguely, cannot be known in such a way but rather through the most obscure sense of feeling. Since the spiritual self is known through feeling it follows that introspection be the appropriate manner of research. James proceeds to delineate his own feelings which strike one as somehow familiar but eminently strange:

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 295

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 296

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 298

...it is difficult for me to detect in the activity any purely spiritual element at all. Whenever my introspective glance succeeds in turning round quickly enough to catch one of these manifestations of spontaneity in the act, all it can ever feel distinctly is some bodily process, for the most part taking place within the head.<sup>7</sup>

James proceeds here in a project that seems to run throughout the book: the disenchantment of man. Following in the berth of such grand nineteenth century scientists as Darwin, James is taking the metaphysical out of the human equation and substituting the corporeal truth of biology. Although this project runs throughout the text it is by no means univocal. James still holds tightly to some threads of the transcendental. He has some beliefs in spiritualism and perhaps a belief in the soul though he, like Darwin was in his day, is careful not to confuse science and belief.

He ventures to describe these cephalic movements more explicitly. When thinking visually, for instance, movement occurs in the eyes. When recalling a distant fact one often squints the eyes and contracts the brow as if searching for something in the horizon. James also talks about movements in the throat when assenting, negating, or evaluating an idea. The alterations in the throat seem to mimic the efforts used when vocalizing. Whole templates are formed such that certain ideas or ways of thinking correspond to a unique patterning of muscle flexion in the face, eyes, and throat. It seems impossible to think without these movements and alterations or, at the very least, thinking without these accompanying sensations is out of the ordinary. Opposing that age old clash of mind and body, James shows the two to be conjoined in convivial interrelation. Overriding the very term 'spiritual' he says:

...it may be truly said that 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... it

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 300

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.<sup>8</sup>

James sees this conception as leading to surprising results. The thoughts and feelings of subjectivity turn out to be more of an objective reality than a subjective one. The point here is quite subtle and difficult. James thinks that the movements are almost the entire reality of thought or some kind of a gateway to the acceptance or rejection of thoughts. Since he sees this as leading to imponderable difficulties, though, he proposes to progress with the self's products for a while and deal with its unusual constituents again at the end. He closes this analysis with a vivid statement:

At present, then, the only conclusion I come to is the following: that 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...<sup>9</sup>

James spends the bulk of the rest of the chapter on the pure ego and identity question. It is here that his own theory of the self contrasts with the leading schools of his day.

The question of identity raises many highly difficult points of contention. James credits Hume with raising many of these questions but thinks Hume missed the mark in his responses: "And if, with the Humians, one deny such a principle (the soul) and say that the stream of passing thoughts is all, one runs against the entire commonsense of mankind, of which the belief in a distinct

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 301

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 305

principle of selfhood seems an integral part."<sup>10</sup> James holds the sense of personal identity to be indubitable and proceeds to articulate those things which corroborate a sense of identity.

'Warmness' is a term that appears repeatedly in these pages. James thinks a feeling of warmness imbues all those passing thoughts and ideas that belong to the self. The collection of these various states are perceived in and by the self in a kind of synthesis. All those things that compose the self are not seen willy-nilly as a random collection of perceptions but are synthesized into the set of *my* perceptions or those things that occurred to and/or through me. A feeling of sameness permeates all these episodes such that one may say that *I am the same self that I was yesterday*. One doesn't wake up pondering if they are still the same person. It is as clear and evident as any fact in reality. Among other things, bodily integrity helps to create this sameness: "...we feel the whole cubic mass of our body all the while, it gives us an unceasing sense of personal existence."<sup>11</sup> The body component is essential but warmth in some way is James's central criterion: "The character of 'warmth,' then, in the present self, reduces itself to either of two things-something in the feeling which we have of the thought itself, as thinking, or else the feeling of the body's actual existence at the moment-or finally to both."<sup>12</sup> This sense seems vague but James supports it with his entire theory.

Resemblance and continuity are critical in this theory. The members of the collection of thoughts, states, and ideas have a kind of 'herd-mark' due to their warmth and this is buttressed by their general continuity. Thoughts are rarely thought or remembered as isolated but surrounded by a whole context of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 330

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 333

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 333

contributing, contiguous, or continuous thoughts. They often resemble many other thoughts so that one might compare a particular thought with a 'train' of thought or with other thoughts that repeat or transpose the thought or elements of it. This is not a perfect process, though, and examples of its rare failures can be seen in examples that everyone has some experience of: discussing a thought and misattributing it to the wrong person or communicating a thought only to later realize it wasn't one's own but something picked up from a book or another person. These exceptions indicate that the typical processes of resemblance and continuity are quite accurate but real, non-metaphysical, processes subject to error.

Memory emerges as a central factor to identity. Holes in memory create entire holes in the self. One may be prodded by another to remember a certain distant episode the details of which have been completely forgotten. One listens on with bemused attention and even amazement. Certainly this person is telling the truth but one's own lack of memory makes one lose 'ownership' of the moment. He may affirm the general character or sentiment though his loss of the episode due to forgetting makes him realize a whole part of his life is no longer his own. In this way the social self again shows its importance: another's perspective yields an altogether different person than one's own knowledge. Parents may recall a great deal of their child's early history which the individual himself has forgotten and treats almost as if it were a different person. The stories are interesting but aren't really powerful since they have been lost to the person's own sense of self.

Identity is already showing its vulnerabilities but James will show that there exists a unity to consciousness that grounds the self in a more powerful way. He furthers his metaphor of the marked herd saying that the owner doesn't own the cattle because they are branded, rather they are branded because they

are his. In other words, experiences don't create the self but the self makes the experiences his owned history. The collection of memories coalesce because there is a central agent. This is why, for instance, many remember those things best which are favorable to their self-image and forget easiest those things that alter or degrade one's self-image.

James sees associationism in the wrong here because it holds the thoughts and feelings to integrate themselves in some unknown way without the medium of ego. He quickly contrasts their notion with his own: "But in our account the medium is fully assigned, the herdsman is there, in the shape of something not among the things collected, but superior to them all, namely, the real, present onlooking, remembering, 'judging thought' or identifying 'section' of the stream."<sup>13</sup> Soon after this account, James ventures into the most difficult point in his theory. The self is not a persistent agent lingering for all time in its unchanged consciousness but is a constantly renewed, perhaps even recreated, agent:

The unity into which the Thought binds the individual past facts with each other and with itself, does not exist until the Thought is there. It is as if wild cattle were lassoed by a newly-created settler and then owned for the first time. But the essence of the matter to common-sense is that the past thoughts never were wild cattle, they were always owned. The Thought does not capture them, but as soon as it comes into existence it finds them already its own.<sup>14</sup>

One might quickly protest that such a scheme is not possible without some substantial self. James thinks this is a common sense response and holds that both the soul conception and Kant's transcendental conception fulfill this need. James himself does not think such a need really exists. He sees each thought as coming into existence at the death of the previous thought quickly inheriting the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 338

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 338

sense of ownership and warmness that the innumerable chain carries along through time. The current thought inherits the title of ownership and quickly bequeaths it to the next thought.

James acknowledges the difficulties of this theory and says that the real point of obscurity is the act of appropriation itself. How can a thought appropriate itself? Doesn't there need to be an agent of appropriating and disowning? James answers:

...the Thought never is an object in its own hands, it never appropriates or disowns itself. It appropriates to itself, it is the actual focus of accretion, the hook from which the chain of past selves dangles, planted firmly in the present, which alone passes for real, and thus keeping the chain from being a purely ideal thing.<sup>15</sup>

This creates a fascinating conception of the moment. Indeed, the moment takes on the crucial and only living role in the entire movement of the self:

The present moment of consciousness is thus the darkest in the whole series. It may feel its own immediate existence but nothing can be known about it till it be dead and gone. Its appropriations are therefore less to itself than to the most intimately felt part of its present object, the body, and the central adjustments, which accompany the act of thinking, in the head. These are the real nucleus of our personal identity, and it is their actual existence which makes us say 'as sure as I exist those past facts were part of myself.'<sup>16</sup>

With this observation James has incorporated those ideas from his radical notion of the spiritual self into his theory of personal identity. He has created a wholly corporeal sense of identity that coincides with the Humean stream of consciousness but answers the Kantian questions about the unity of the agent and the self. As he sums up: "Such consciousness, then, as a psychologic fact, can

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 340

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p 341

be fully described without supposing any other agent than a succession of perishing thoughts, endowed with the functions of appropriation and rejection, and of which some can know and appropriate or reject objects already known, appropriated, or rejected by the rest."<sup>17</sup> This observation provides for that deliberative capacity within consciousness to analyze and synthesize the information it has gathered and stored.

James next turns to the three schools he feels oppose his own conception: the spiritualist school, the associationists, and the transcendentalists.

The spiritualist school James sees only as popular philosophy. The soul rationally follows from a need of centrality in the experience of self. Since James's theory fulfills this need the soul theory loses that point. The next reason a soul is needed is for free will. James isn't a strong adherent of free will but concedes that even those believers of free will could just as easily buy into his theory as the soul theory. What really lies behind the belief in the soul is a desire for a substantial core behind the phenomenon of the self. This need for substance behind phenomenon is not a rational one and James says that as a scientist he must see the phenomenon as the end, not some front for deeper substance. After these arguments the only left for the soul are the need for human immortality and a belief in God. These need not be addressed since one can safely compartmentalize them into the realm of religion/belief and not deal with them in a paper on the science of mind.

The associationist theory, at bottom, holds a great deal in common with James's theory. The problem with the associationists (who started with Hume) is that they don't explain any unity of experience. The Kantians have always critiqued them on this point saying that they leave no room for an agent. As James puts it:

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 342

...Hume, after doing this good piece of introspective work, proceeds to pour out the child with the bath, and to fly to as great an extreme as the substantialist philosophers. As they say the self is nothing but unity, unity abstract and absolute, so Hume says it is nothing but diversity, diversity abstract and absolute; whereas in truth it is that mixture of unity and diversity which we ourselves have already found so easy to pick apart.<sup>18</sup>

Hume has created the stream of consciousness but in this stream all is washed away. No agent remains. Hume created an intricate system of rules by which ideas link each other together. Even though this system is intricate it is not accurate and fails to explain the self with the efficacy, and parsimony, that James's own theory does. James explores a few associationist thinkers showing either how they, with him, fail to account for the agency and unity of the self or, like Mills and others, subtly posit a kind of substantial self behind the phenomena.

After this critique James moves on to Kant and transcendentalism. He sees transcendentalism as motivated by a need for agency. He feels that the ideas proceed in bad faith, though, and shabbily reclothes the soul: "Well, if it be so, transcendentalism is only substantialism grown shame-faced, and the ego only a 'cheap and nasty' edition of the soul... The Ego, is simply nothing: as ineffectual and windy an abortion as philosophy can show."<sup>19</sup> James sees all three schools as close to the truth but evading it in an essential way:

There need never have been a quarrel between associationism and its rivals if the former had admitted the indecomposable unity of every pulse of thought, and the latter been willing to allow that 'perishing' pulses of thought might recollect and know. We may sum up by saying that personality implies the incessant presence of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 352

<sup>19</sup> Ibid p. 365

two elements, an objective person, known by passing subjective thought and recognized as continuing in time.<sup>20</sup>

James's own notion of the stream of consciousness and self gently skirts around one problem only to face another which it again manages.

James continues after his critiques of the three schools to venture into terra incognita and account for abnormal events such as multiple personality disorders and psychic phenomena. At the conclusion to the chapter, though, he summarizes his main endeavor quite succinctly:

The *I* which knows them (things and impressions) cannot itself be an aggregate, neither for psychological purposes need it be considered to be an unchanging metaphysical entity like the soul, or a principle like the pure ego, viewed as 'out of time.' It is a thought, at each moment different from that of the last moment, but appropriative of the latter, together with all that the latter called its own.<sup>21</sup>

Now that he has outlined his theory, opposed his competitors, and generally explained himself as best as possible the question remains: is it persuasive? That question resides ultimately in the ancient conflict between Heraclitus and Parmenides. Both Pre-Socratic thinkers were concerned with the understanding of Being. Heraclitus, well known for his saying, "One never steps into the same river twice," thought all was in flux. Parmenides thought that all was unchanging, all movement and change is illusion. This conflict which has lasted throughout the millennia sits right in the center of James's theory. As he himself rightly puts it: "If anyone urge that I assign no reason why the successive passing thoughts should inherit each other's possessions, or why they and the brain-states should be functions of each other, I reply that the reason, if there be any, must lie in the total sense or meaning of the world."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, it seems as if one

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 371

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 400

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 401

needs to understand the world to be able to surmise the validity of this theory. It embraces change, does it truly embrace permanence? To explain the consistency of the self may nearly be impossible and even if James's theory seems spotty on this point, no theory really addresses it in persuasive way.

-John J. McGraw

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