

PURE EXPERIENCE AND THE APPROPRIATOR IN WILLIAM JAMES: NOTES FOR A SURVIVAL-FRIENDLY JAMESIAN METAPHYSICS

December 4, 2006

Esalen

A small essay by William James called “How Two Minds Can Know One Thing” is key to understanding his solution to two key problems for any theory that is survival friendly. The essay appears in the collection *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912). In this important treatise written in 1905, James presents his metaphysics of pure experience in a remarkably clear form and resurrects his notion of “appropriation” by the “I” as found in his *Principles*. In the process he does away with any vestiges of a metaphysical of mind/body duality and reraises the question of the central self or “I” left in suspension since 1890. In addition, he shows how his view of these matters is completely compatible with speculations such as Fechner’s notion of a “world-soul.”

He dives into these issues here, he tells us, because before he can solve the question of how two minds can know one thing (or how one thing can enter into two streams of consciousness) he must first show how some segment of pure consciousness can enter into *one* stream, in other words, what does it mean for something to become “conscious.”

In the essay entitled '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 'phen,' for example, is, in the first instance, a bald *that*, a datum, fact, phenomenon, content, or whatever other neutral or ambiguous name you may prefer to apply. I called it in that article a 'pure experience.' (McDermott, p. 227)¹

¹“What are the materials of your universe’s composition?”...My hypothesis is that the materials are what I shall call *experiences*. To be a part of the universe is to be experienced; and not to be experienced is not to be, in this philosophy of “pure experience.” By an experience, I mean what the Germans call an *Erlebniss*—any thing that can be regarded as a concrete and integral moment in a conscious life. The word is exactly equivalent to the word “phenomenon”....The essential consequence to remember is that, if experiences thus defined are the minimal world-factors, absolute “substances” in the old dualistic sense of “material masses” on the one hand, and “souls” or “spirits” on the other, cannot be allowed to be real. A philosophy of pure experience can admit no “matter” except that which some subject of

This way of looking at the basic given datum of experience perhaps is at first a bit difficult to grasp. This is probably because we *do* tend, in a common sense sort of way, to think of a thought of having, by the fact of its being conscious, a kind of illumination or light shone upon it, transforming it in some essential way. James says that this is not the way to look at it. But in James's schema, a piece of "pure experience," a "pure pen," for instance, is simply is what it is, as given. For it to become "conscious" to us, something has to happen, new relations needs to be set up. These new relations do not have any affect on the "pure pen." Rather they occur as a second step beyond the pure existence of the pen.

The pure pen has successors, experiences that follow the first pure experience. Speaking of the pen as pure experience, James says,

Continue, if you please, to speak of the pure unit as 'the pen.' So far as the pen's successors do but repeat the pen or, being different from it, are 'energetically' related to it, it and they will form a group of stably existing physical things. So far, however, as its successors differ from it in another well-determined way, the pen will figure in their context, not as a physical, but as a mental fact. It will become a passing 'percept,' my percept of that pen. What now is that decisive well-determined way? (*Essays in Radical Empiricism*)

What does James mean by that other "well-determined way"—a new experience by which the pen is taken as "my percept of the that pen"? To explain what he means, James refers us to what he had written fifteen years earlier in his discussion of the "self" in his *Principles*. In another paper ("The Philosophy of William James As a Framework for Discussion of Issues Relating to Survival" (Esalen, May 2006); see excerpt below), I have written at length about James's analysis of the self in general and his description of the appropriation of a pervious thought by a successive passing thought. James now calls upon this early formulation to elucidate the meaning of a thought being "conscious."

Now, in 1905, James quickly comes to the central point of the whole discussion:

The pen, realized in this retrospective way as my percept, thus figures as a fact of 'conscious' life. But it does so only so far as 'appropriation' has occurred; and appropriation *is part of the content of a later experience wholly* additional to the originally 'pure' pen. That pen, virtually both objective and subjective, is at its own moment actually and intrinsically neither. It has to be looked back upon and *wed*, in order to be classed in either distinctive way. But its use, so called, is in the hands of the other experience, while it stands, throughout the operation, passive and unchanged.

experience shall perceive or think. The matter is there only for that subject. Conversely it can admit no "mind" not given in correlation with some material or immaterial "object" which is felt or thought." (James 1888, p. 21)

Two points must be emphasized here: when a thought is experienced as “conscious,” 1) that experience is a second, later experience that follows the first “pure” experience, and 2) that experience occurs as the result of a very specific action, which he calls “appropriation.” The “pure pen” is, “at its own moment” and before the appropriation occurs, is neither objective nor subjective. This echoes the two stage description given in *Principles*:

There must be an agent of the appropriating and disowning; but that agent we have already named. It is the Thought to whom the various 'constituents' are known. That Thought is a vehicle of choice as well as of cognition; and among the choices it makes are these appropriations, or repudiations, of its 'own.' But 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. Anon the hook itself will drop into the past with all it carries, and then be treated as an object and appropriated by a new Thought in the new present which will serve as living hook in turn. The present moment of consciousness is thus, as Mr. Hodgson says, the darkest in the whole series. It may feel its own immediate existence - we have all along admitted the possibility of this, hard as it is by direct introspection to ascertain the fact - but nothing can be known *about* it till it be dead and gone. (I, 340-341)

Now, James moves on to discussing how this way of seeing things aids in the explanation for how two minds can know one thing. I do not intend to recap the whole discussion, but only mention what is most interesting for us in our quest for a theory that is survival-friendly.

James tells us how two minds could be conscious of one thing:

Obviously no new kind of condition would have to be supplied. All that we should have to postulate would be a second subsequent experience, collateral and contemporary with the first subsequent one, in which a similar act of appropriation should occur. The two acts would interfere neither with one another nor with the originally pure pen. It would sleep undisturbed in its own past, no matter how many such successors went through their several appropriative acts. Each would know it as 'my' percept, each would class it as a 'conscious' fact....To be 'conscious' means not simply to be, but to be reported, known, to have awareness of one's being added to that being; and this is just what happens when the appropriative experience supervenes. The pen-experience in its original immediacy is not aware of itself, it simply is, and the second experience is required for what we call awareness of it to occur. (pp. 130-131, 132)

For our purposes, who should take note of the statement that soon follows:

It is, indeed, 'mine' only as it is felt as mine, and 'yours' only as it is felt as yours. But it is felt as neither by *itself*, but only when 'owned' by our two several remembering

experiences, just as one undivided estate is owned by several heirs. (p. 133)

When he wrote about this “estate” in *Principles*, it slipped by, as it were, with barely a second glance, since it was presented as a general analogy to illustrate how a series of thoughts can be “owned” by right of succession (see *Principles I*, 339). But here he follows this idea up with this:

After sleeping, my retrospection is as perfect as it is between two successive waking moments of my time. Accordingly if, millions of years later, a similarly retrospective experience should anyhow come to birth, my present thought would form a genuine portion of its long-span conscious life. 'Form a portion,' I say, but not in the sense that the two things could be entitatively or substantively one--they cannot, for they are numerically discrete facts--but only in the sense that the *function* of my present thought, its knowledge, its purpose, its content and 'consciousness.' in short, being inherited, would be continued practically unchanged. Speculations like Fechner's, of an Earth-soul, of wider spans of consciousness enveloping narrower ones throughout the cosmos, are, therefore, philosophically quite in order, provided they distinguish the functional from the entitative point of view, and do not treat the minor consciousness under discussion as a kind of standing material of which the wider ones *consist*. (*Essays in Radical Empiricism*, pp. 135-136)

Here James envisions an expanse of pure experience, parts of which are appropriated by individuals in any possible combination of overlapping and commonality, including the possibility that there could be centers of appropriation that include vastly more than we do and which appropriate all humans do, and more, and that this could involve a hierarchy of greater centers, each including and appropriating all that is appropriated by lesser centers.

The vision of such a hierarchy of centers of increasing breadth of appropriation in no way wipes out the individuality and independence of the other centers involved. As individuals they are simply additions to the whole community of appropriators, and are not encroached upon by the others.

As to where all this pure experience comes from that is then appropriated, James says:

The difficulty of understanding what happens here is, therefore, not a logical difficulty: there is no contradiction involved. It is an ontological difficulty rather. Experiences come on an enormous scale, and if we take them all together, they come in a chaos of incommensurable relations that we can not straighten out. We have to abstract different groups of them, and handle these separately if we are to talk of them at all. But how the experiences ever *get themselves made*, or why their characters and relations are just such as appear, we can not begin to understand. (*Essays in Radical Empiricism*, pp. 132-133)

The Appropriator

Who, then, in any particular instance of individual appropriation is the appropriator? Let us take a closer look at the process of appropriation as described by James in the *Principles*.

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, realized as a solid present fact, which makes us say 'as sure as I exist, those past facts were part of myself.' They are the kernel to which the *represented* parts of the Self are assimilated, accreted, and knit on; and even were Thought entirely unconscious of itself in the act of thinking, these 'warm' parts of its present object would be a firm basis on which the consciousness of personal identity would rest....The identity which the *I* discovers, as it surveys this long procession, can only be a relative identity, that of a slow shifting in which there is always some common ingredient retained. The commonest element of all, the most uniform, is the possession of the same memories. However different the man may be from the youth, both look back on the same childhood, and call it their own. Thus the identity found by the *I* in its *me* is only a loosely construed thing, an identity 'on the whole,' just like that which any outside observer might find in the same assemblage of facts. We often say of a man 'he is so changed one would not know him'; and so does a man, less often, speak of himself. These changes in the *me*, recognized by the *I*, or by outside observers, may be grave or slight. (*Principles*, I, pp. 341, 372-3)

For James, the “I”, the non-empirical self, is the appropriator. It appropriates not so much to itself as to the “me”, the empirical self. The person’s identity, the result of the appropriation process, is only a loosely constructed thing. It can change radically, and even be lost if memory is lost. What is outside the process of change is the “I”. In James’s formulation in the *Principles*, the “I” is the passing thought. For that reason (as I have discussed in the paper mentioned above), there must be as many “I”s as there are passing thoughts—an ever growing multitude. James took this position on the “I” because he wanted above all to stay on a purely psychological level, as descriptive level that makes not metaphysical assumptions.

In his later writings, James allowed himself to become more speculative within his discussion of the “I” and appropriation. He went beyond pure description and said something meaningful about the matter on a metaphysical level of discourse. Nevertheless, to the day of his death James resisted the notion of the “I” as a substance or a substantial soul. It is important to try to see precisely where James had gotten to in this discussion by the end of his life.

James called the “I” the *non-empirical* self. By definition that leaves it out of any purely descriptive discussion. But that does not mean that we are therefore reduced to silence in its regard. If that were the case, metaphysical statements of every kind and on every matter would be ruled out since they all refer non empirical things. So let us move onto the metaphysical, as

James himself was ready to do shortly after finishing the *Principles*, and see what we can say.

Perspectival Experience

The “I” is intimately connected with the perspectival nature of experience. All experience is perspectival, that is, it is had from a particular, unique point in *space and time* and from a unique point of *interest*. Let me first say something about the space-time perspective.

Since our experience is inextricably tied in with the bodily aspect of our being, our experience happens from some *where* and some *when*. We cannot have a non-located experience. This means that everything is experienced from a very specific and very unique angle, and no two individuals could ever have the same angle, the same perspective, on experience. No two individuals can occupy the same point in space-time. James had a unique way of seeing the relationship between the moment of experience and time. As we have seen, for James the moment of experience has a duration. It is not instantaneous. And the moment of experience is not some kind of pure present point. Each moment of experience contains within it echoes of the past still resounding. And each moment of experience contains anticipations of the future, of what is about to come. So each moment is something of the present, the past, and the future all rolled up into one.

Our personal interests also put all experience into a unique perspective. Constantly and moment by moment we involve our particular interests in our experience. We experience and come to know those things that interest us, and we do not experience and come to know what we are not interested in. In other words, our interests direct our attention. We pay attention to the things that interest us. We ignore what does not. And this is a very necessary thing. For if we did not limit our attention in some way, we would be overwhelmed by the endless fullness and manifoldness of the reality of each moment. We would not be able to do any thing with our experience. We would be paralyzed and helpless in the face of that utter richness.

From the almost limitless number of things I could pay attention to in my moment of experience, I limit my attention to a few things—my attention is selective. I am aware of the book, with its dust jacket; I am aware of the significance of the book and its various aspects and meanings for me. But those things that I become aware of are very few compared to all I could become aware of if I let my attention spread out. I could also become aware of all the other objects in front of me, with all their colors, all their significances. I could also become aware of all the possible memories that these significances would stir up and all the mental connections those memories might bring. I could also become aware of my body in its every nerve ending and every organic movement. I could become aware of all the future implications of all my awarenesses of the moment and I could become aware of all the past realities that contribute to what I am experiencing at this moment. And thus the possible awarenesses I *could have* multiply themselves until, if I were to actually have them, I would be lying in a puddle on my study floor.

We cannot live this way. We have to have a limiting factor that not only helps us concentrate on

what is of interest, but also, and at least as importantly, cuts out those things that are not of interest. So interests direct out attention, and attention both includes and excludes elements of our experience. James says that the “I” is the “home of interest,” that the “I” carries out its appropriations according to our interests. This ensures that even if we did not have a body, or at some moment we were not aware of our body, our experiences would still be characterized by a perspectival quality, making all individual experience unique.

Multiple Selves

Clinical and experimental evidence indicates that we have multiple centers of consciousness, some of which are able to use the word “I” when communicating about their experiences. These “I”s form separate streams of experience with the qualities of the main stream as described by James in the *Principles*. Like our normal consciousness, each of these secondary “I”s experience things perspectivally and form their own personal memory chain.. Frederic Myers’s work indicates that these secondary centers can be constantly formed and dissolved. Indications are that experiences can come together in the subliminal self and form a growingly cohesive whole. Upon reaching a certain point of complexity they may coalesce into a unity that can in some unknown way take on an “I” aspect and carry out appropriative acts which lend the quality of “conscious” to its objects of thought. Although these centers of consciousness may be many, there is an overall unity within the individually embodied person. In James scheme of things, this notion is not problematical. Just as many individual people could conceivably appropriate various segments of pure experience while some world-soul appropriates a wider segment that includes all of these sub-“I”s, so within the individual, the various appropriations of the many sub-“I”s could be included within a larger appropriation made by the principle “I” of the individual.

Substantial Soul

As I have said, James always rejected the notion that a substantial soul is at work in these operations. He was, in fact, opposed to any notion of substance as commonly understood:

Substances, whether material or spiritual, are unrepresentable; and the inherence in them, or adherence to them, of properties seems a mere verbal figure....Substance by definition is a non-phenomenal entity. It lies behind the scenes, and we know only the attributes which it presents...To get the notion of the substantial unity of things into a shape fit for discussion at all, we have to translate it into more verifiable terms. If it had any verifiable consequences, the continuity just spoken of might be one of them. (James 1988, p.9, 12-13)

James talks about how should we look at the concept of “substance.” First, we must recognize that “substance” is an abstraction—just as “matter,” “body,” and “mind” are abstractions, not

entities in their own right. What does the abstract concept “substance” tell us? Essentially, “substance” means that a definite group of sensations with recur (*Some Problems of Philosophy*, p. 61). To take this functionally useful conceptual device and make it into a thing, and, in the case of human beings, talk about a “substantial soul,” as though it were an entity to be found in nature, is, on the one hand, ignore its abstract nature and, on the other, to lose the important work the concept *can* perform. That work is only useful if it can actually make a difference to us: “What difference in practical experience is it supposed to make that we have each a personal substantial principle? This difference, that we can remember and appropriate our past, calling it ‘mine.’ What difference that in this [concrete] book there is a substantial principle? This, that certain optical and tactile sensations cling permanently together in a cluster. The fact that certain perceptual experiences do seem to *belong together* is thus all that the word substance means” (p. 123).

That’s it. That’s the long and the short of it for the empirical philosopher. If we stay close to experience, if we do not create entities out of thin air, if we use our abstractions in clear and useful ways, we will not go astray. Not that this has told us anything about *why* it is possible that we can remember and appropriate our past. Not that this has revealed anything about *why* certain optical and tactile sensations cling permanently together. To answer those *why* questions takes us into realms of speculation, to the spinning of metaphysical theories that we may never be able to verify through experience. James would not forbid the philosopher such speculations. He would just demand that he know what he is doing and that he has not naively given entitive qualities to abstractions.

In fact James allowed himself such speculations—and precisely in the area of personal identity. Rather than going further into that matter, I would like to here insert a quotation from Bill Barnard’s book *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (pp. 148-149) which gives some indication about the form that James’s speculations took:

Any attempt to uncover James’s understanding of the interconnection between mystical experience and selfhood is made more complex by the fact that James articulated several seemingly incompatible conceptions of the self during the course of his career. In the *Principles*, James claimed that the self is epiphenomenal, transitory, and completely intertwined with the physical body. In this essay “human Immortality,” James explored the tantalizing possibility of the self’s connection with a mother-sea of consciousness. In the *Varieties*, James explicitly investigated the self-transformations that take place as a result of mystical experiences; and in order to bridge the chasm between the scientific and theological understandings of the dynamics of religious experience, he offered the mediating theoretical construct of the subliminal self. In the *Essays on Radical Empiricism*, the self dissolved into a nondualistic fusion of subject and object, but then later in *A Pluralistic Universe*, the self reemerged, this time cosmic in scope.

How should a scholar approach these strikingly different conceptions of the self? Do these theories represent dramatic alterations in James’s thought that can never be reconciled or are there, perhaps, certain thematic patterns that repeat themselves during

this onrush of conceptual mutations? A viable argument could be made for either conclusion, but I suggest that a careful examination of James's conceptions of the self demonstrates that certain key themes do emerge again and again: an antipathy towards any conception of the "soul", an ongoing attempt to explain how personal identity can be maintained without rigid individual boundaries; and perhaps most importantly, a continuing struggle to envision the self in ways that overcomes dualistic modes of understanding the mind and the body, the human and the divine, and the many and the one.

These threads of consistency indicate that the shifts that occurred in James's theoretical understandings of the self were neither as radical nor as arbitrary as they might at first appear. James's proposals on the nature of the self were always rooted in a methodological stance that emphasized empirical, introspectively based observations augmented by analogical, carefully disciplined, speculative elaborations. However, as his career progressed, his loyalty to scientific exactitude was increasingly tempered by his moral and religious predispositions, resulting in a corresponding openness to conceptions of the nature of the self that were increasingly, and overtly, "mystical"; that is to say, more and more, James began to stress the theoretical possibility of an underlying connection between the self and a transnatural dimension of reality, as well as to emphasize a corresponding permeability of personal boundaries.

Continued Existence After Death

If our personal identity is to continue to exist after death, it must continue to have experiences and those experiences must be perspectival—if not spatially perspectival, then perspectival on the basis of interest. Without perspectival experience, without experience from a certain stance, there can be no person at all.

Continued experience after death must involve an appropriator. Our unique segment of pure experience can be made conscious only through the appropriation of that experience from the perspective of a certain group of characteristic interests. These characteristic interests, as applied in appropriation, are a central part of what constitutes our unique individual identity.

According to James, we create worlds or universes that are governed by our interests. Wherever we apply consistent attention to certain things and ignore others over time, we create a world. There is the world of art, of engineering, of science, of ethics, of mathematics, etc. There are also much more specific worlds, such as the world created by an intimate relationship, the world of a client-therapist interaction, etc. There is the world of North American culture, the world of Italian soccer, the world of the Smith family life. There is also the big World of our reality as a whole. This too involves attention in which, over our lifetime, some things are seen and other things are not.

After death we must find ourselves in worlds. If there is personal continuity, and therefore memory of what we have experienced, we must bring with us our worlds as constituted thus far

in our span of existence. Even though these worlds are populated by abstractions, they are nonetheless real and essential to any kind of human life. The question is, do we, after death, find ourselves in a situation in which, as now, we continue to form and revise our worlds according to the experiences we are having? And, following James's model as described at the beginning of this paper, do we again find that two people can know on thing? Is that environment also constituted by pure experience which we, as before, each appropriate according to our interests? And in this environment is there some over-soul that appropriates a wider, more inclusive span of pure experience which includes our own appropriated segments?

Does anything at all need to change with death—anything beyond the loss of the ability to use the body perspectively in making our appropriations? Could we not simply go on making our appropriations from the stuff of reality which James calls pure experience? After all, pure experience did not consist solely of sense experience. For him mystical experience, for example, was a part of pure experience, even though it may have no sensual component. The same holds true of those aspects of the subliminal life—experiences beyond the margin—that do not derive from sense experience but arise through some lowering of the threshold of consciousness. Concepts, memories, mathematical relations, etc. are also parts of pure experience. So with the loss of the body, we do not have to lose our ability to access and appropriate pure experience.

The Conundrum of the Appropriator

There can no doubt about it: in James's scheme of things that to have a human experience we must have an appropriator, and "I". How shall we speak about this "I"?

To make statements about a non-empirical thing is to enter into speculation, to step onto the field of metaphysics. Since the question cannot be empirically decided, how we talk about the appropriator will be largely determined, as are any theoretical speculations, by our temperamental nature, our cultural and subcultural experience, and our personal experience. What appears to be most aesthetically beautiful and deemed most practical in its consequences will carry the day.

We can simply refuse to speculate and remain, as James did in 1890, on a purely descriptive level. Then it will be enough to say: the appropriator is the passing Thought. To take this position does not actually tell us what makes the passing Thought possible, how the passing Thought can carry out an act of ownership, or how our subjective experience of continuity squares up with a situation in which the appropriator, the passing Thought, is changing at every moment. The passing Thought with this ability, is simply taken for granted, and how it could it could come into being at all is not answered, since that kind of answer would put us on the level of metaphysics.

We can say, as did some of James's opponents, that the appropriator is a substantial soul or spirit which possesses the ability to appropriate as one of its characteristic traits. If we say this, we are vulnerable to what I consider to be rather devastating counter-arguments by James which are

found in various places in his writings, but particularly well presented in the *Principles*.²

Or we could say that there is some indescribable, ungraspable “I” that is a primordially given metaphysical element that makes both the individual and, perhaps, the world itself possible. It cannot be a “thing,” since “things” are abstractions, and this element must be eminently concrete. Yet it shows the ability to establish a perspective and take appropriative action. It arises from, or on the occasion of, a stream of thought, and once established, it continues its work. Whether it is the same or different in individuals is impossible to tell. How and why it is brought into existence is impossible to know. It would serve the *function* that “substance” is meant to serve, but not *be* a “substance.”³

² “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. The Soul invoked, far from making the phenomena more intelligible, can only be made intelligible itself by borrowing their form, - it must be represented, if at all, as a transcendent stream of consciousness duplicating the one we know. Altogether, the Soul is an outbirth of that sort of philosophizing whose great maxim, according to Dr. Hodgson, is: ‘Whatever you are *totally* ignorant of, assert to be the explanation of everything else.’” (*Principles*, I, 347)

³ “What difference in practical experience is it supposed to make that we have each a personal substantial principle? This difference, that we can remember and appropriate our past, calling it ‘mine.’ What difference that in this [concrete] book there is a substantial principle? This, that certain optical and tactile sensations cling permanently together in a cluster. The fact that certain perceptual experiences do seem to *belong together* is thus all that the word substance means” (*Some Problems of Philosophy*, p. 123).

References

William James:

The Principles of Psychology, 2 vols. 1950. New York: Dover

A Pluralistic Universe. 1909. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co.

Some Problems of Philosophy 1911. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co.

The Works of William James: Manuscript Essays and Notes, eds. F. Burkhardt and F. Bowers. 1988. Cambridge: Harvard University Press