

NOTES ON: WILLIAM JAMES AND THE SUBSTANTIAL SOUL

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The common-sense view of survival of death presumes that the individual who survives has something like a “soul” that is not destroyed at death, but continues to exist. Philosophies that accept this notion talk about a “substantial soul,” employing the notion of “substance” as defined within scholastic philosophy. A substance of a thing represents its essential nature. Substance is also something that exists in its own right and is a principle of continuity, in that it is what stays the same as the concrete thing changes. It is a substrate for “accidents,” which are non-essential properties or qualities. While the substance remains the same throughout change, the “accidents” that “inhere” in it alter. The “substantial soul” provides continuity of personal identity throughout all the changes of life, and, if one accepts the notion of survival, it continues to exist after death. What changes in a human being—specific physical aspects, mental and emotional states, personal dispositions, etc.—are mere “accidents.” They can alter radically from birth to death, and after death, but the substance in which they inhere, the substantial soul, remains the same.

Throughout his whole career, William James was relentless in his opposition to the notion of a “substantial soul” as the principle of continuity of personal identity, pointing out that such an entity was undescrivable and had no empirically verifiable consequences. He said:

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)

Nevertheless, an examination of James’s writings reveals that he did not seem to think he had completely disposed of the problem. Again and again he returned to the issue of the nature of “substance” (and, by implication, “substantial soul”) so that even in his last word on the matter, found in his posthumously published *Some Problems in Philosophy*, he identifies it as a crucial metaphysical puzzle.

We cannot adequately develop a theory of survival without addressing the problem of “substance” and “substantial soul.” The literature of survival is laced with references to the “soul” (or its equivalent), but usually the meaning of the term is not spelled out. Rather it is assumed, erroneously, that we all know what is meant. This leads to a great deal of confusion in discussions relating to continuity of personal identity and the nature of post-mortem existence.

James knew that the issue of substance was not an easy one to deal with, and his struggle with it is evident in his writings. Because he tackled the problem directly and raised crucial questions, I propose to use his musings on the problem as a useful starting point for our own discussions.

In the *Principles*, James tells us that there is no need to invoke something like a “substantial soul” to explain the experience of continuity of personal identity, since all that is needed on the *psychological* level is the “passing, judging thought” which, as soon as it comes into being, inherits all that its predecessors possessed. But he leaves us in a state of suspension in regard to what might be involved on the *metaphysical* level of explanation, a problem to which I will return later

Here, from the *Principles*, is James’s argument against the use of the term “substantial soul”:

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." (I, 347)

The deep background to James’s criticism of the soul-theory is to be found in his views about attitudes toward philosophical investigation in general, views which can be discerned in his early writing, but which progressively develop and are found most clearly expressed in his *Some Problems in Philosophy*.

Perception and Conception

The key is his understanding of *perception* and *conception*. For James *perception* corresponds to our experience as it is immediately given to us. Experience exposes us to a vast array of raw input, we encounter a “blooming, buzzing” richness of enormous complexity. *Conception* occurs when we attend to certain parts of that experience and begin to take note of difference and sameness among those parts. We make connections between those parts that have a sameness, paying attention to the likenesses and not paying attention to the differences. From the perceptions of samenesses, we form *concepts*, mental instruments that simplify the complexity of experience by emphasizing some parts of it and ignoring others and that provide a tool, potentially expressible in words, which we can use to highlight certain aspects and form classifications that can be useful in making our experience digestible. This is a process of *abstraction*. It moves us away from the immediate fullness of experience. Through forming concepts we create a new world, a world of thought which, while pointing to the world of experience, can only give us a partial and imperfect take on that experience.

Concepts can never adequately express the richness of experience itself, and compared to experience, the world of concepts is a desiccated one. Nevertheless, the conceptual world is a very useful, even essential, one for us in our everyday living. Without this simplification of experience, we could hardly live at all. We would be overwhelmed with what would seem to us to be a chaotic whirl of input. Concepts provide a way to abstract from the world those aspects which we can use. Nonetheless, “conception is a secondary process, not indispensable to life. It presupposes perception, which is self-sufficing, as all lower creatures in whom conscious life goes on by reflex adaptations, show” (79).

Concepts and percepts are in fact always found together: “Concepts are like evaporations out of the bosom of perception, into which they condense again whenever practical service summons them...The universal and the particular parts of the experience are literally immersed in each other, and both are indispensable....The two mental functions play into each other’s hands. Perception prompts our thought, and thought in turn enriches our 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” (107-108).

Empiricism and Rationalism

Having said this, we can move on to James’s ideas about philosophical pursuit. He believed that there are two basic tendencies in philosophy: empiricism and rationalism. He says that empiricism proceeds from parts to wholes, while rationalism starts with a vision of the whole. For empiricism the parts are percepts which are built into wholes by conceptual additions. Rationalism is enamored of concepts, which are abstracted from experiences already given, “postmortem preparations, sufficient only for postmortem understanding” (99). For empiricism reality cannot be “confined by a conceptual ring-fence. It overflows, exceeds, and alters. It may turn into novelties, and can be known adequately only by following its singularities from moment to moment as our experience grows” (99) In contrast, rationalism lives on the level of abstraction: “For rationalism concept-stuff is primordial and perceptual things are secondary in nature” (106).

If you are a true empiricist, you start from experience and you stick close to it. You emphasize the empirical, the observed and experienced, and elaborate what experience gives with caution, using analogy and carefully disciplined speculative work. You realize how easily you can jump to the abstract and lose touch with the concrete. So you must continually keep in mind that the abstract is just a secondary derivation from the richness of experience: “Rationalistic thought, with its exclusive interest in the unchanging and the general, has always de-realized the passing pulses of our life. It is no small service on empiricism’s part to have exorcised rationalism’s veto, and reflectively justified our instinctive feeling about immediate experience” (110).

Substance

So what about “substance”? Rationalism, says James, tends to take abstractions and, without a moments hesitation, turn them into *things*. Concepts become entities and exist in their own right. Instead of concretizing our abstractions, we should keep in mind the true and valid function that abstractions have, and ask, “What is this concept trying to accomplish? What is its true value?” If we forget its *functional* nature and look upon it as an entity, we will lose our way.

So with this attitude as our guide, 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 (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 end with 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.

Addendum:

When James was developing his metaphysics of "pure experience," he took up this rather striking position:

"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 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)

References

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