

The Philosophy of William James

As a Framework for Discussion of Issues Relating to Survival

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I propose that we consider using the psychological/philosophical writings of James as a framework for the discussions we are now beginning about theories relating to survival.

As a first attempt to outline, in Jamesian terms, the principle issues to be examined, I propose we look into:

1. The Self, the Stream of Thought, and Continuity of Personal Identity

If we survive death, what of us makes it to the other side? James rejected the notion that what survives is a “substantial soul.” But then how can one account for the preservation of personal identity? James’s treatment of “self” and “I” was meant to replace the old scholastic analysis. Does it provide a truly viable alternative?

2. The Psychology of Pure Experience: The uses and limits of theory

If we are to develop an adequate theory of survival, we have to have a clear idea of what a theory can and cannot do. We also need to understand what constitute “facts” that need to be explained. James’s ideas about facts and theories provide a stimulating starting point for such an investigation, and his conception of “attention” and “abstraction” are at the heart of his approach.

3. The Psychology of Pure Experience: Abstraction as a source of intellectual prejudice

We do not engage in the process of theory-building from some privileged, objectively established position. We all select certain things from the rich texture of pure experience and emphasize them at the expense of others, a process that again James dealt with under the rubric of “attention and abstraction,” particularly as operating in cultural and sub-cultural contexts. This selectivity can, for investigators of survival, lead to neglect of one kind of evidence and overvaluation of another. Although the process of selectivity is inevitable, as theory-makers we can hope to be wise enough to avoid the more obvious pitfalls involved.

4. The Metaphysics of Pure Experience: The end of dualism?

James developed a metaphysics of “pure experience” that he hoped would, among other things, do away with the classical mind/body dualism so deeply entrenched in our language. It was his contention that dualism ends up with people experiencing their relation to the world as alien. In his system, the mental/physical split is not metaphysically basic. Whether he was successful in this quest to overcome dualism is a matter of some dispute. Nevertheless, his highly original approach to the problem opened the door to potentially fruitful investigations of the issue of what it is that survives death.

5. The World and the Environment of Survival

In his later writings, James developed a notion of “intimacy” by which he meant to show that everything in the world is ultimately related and that these relations are what constitutes the world as a world. Furthermore, everything that is in the world is capable of affecting everything else in that world, so we, as part of the world, feel at home here, knowing that nothing is totally foreign to us. In fact, in his last writings, he says we are all part of a wider self, a larger soul whose instruments we are. This implies that God is finite, exists in an environment, is in time, and works out a history—and that we are internal parts of this God. The implications of this view for survival and for an understanding of the environment of survival are great.

By identifying these five issues I hope to make a start at laying out a Jamesian framework for our discussion of the theoretical issues relating to survival. This list may very well be incomplete, but perhaps it can at least be a starting point. It is my contention that such a framework would be a useful procedural device for our investigations. To say that I believe we can profitably use James’s framework as a procedural device is not to say that I believe he has the answers to the philosophical problems involved, but to say that he nicely calls our attention to the main issues we have to face. I hope that adequacy or inadequacy of using his presentations as such a device will be part of our discussions

In what follows, I would like to present some notes on #1 as an experiment with this approach.

Notes On: The Self, the Stream of Thought, and Continuity of Personal Identity

The chief single element that any theory of survival must encompass is that of continuity of personal identity from this life to the next.

In order to tackle this crucial issue, it is best to start, where James did, with the problem of how there can be continuity of personal identity in our day-to-day earthly lives. If we cannot explain personal continuity in the transition from one moment of experience to the next, we will not be able to explain that continuity in the transition of death. Moreover, if we are able to say significant things about the preservation of personal identity throughout this life, we may well be in a position to say something significant about what existence in the next life might be like.

The Soul

From the beginning James rejected the traditional “soul-theory” as an adequate explanation of continuity of personal identity. This theory postulates a “substance,” existing on a non-phenomenal plane, that is the experiencer of our lives. James points out that as such the soul is empirically unverifiable and does not help us in the attempt to understand our direct experience of personal continuity. His approach is to dig deep into our actual experience and make a phenomenological description the basis for any statement about that nature and foundation of that continuity. He carries this out chiefly in two chapters in *The Principles of Psychology*: “The Stream of Thought” and “The Consciousness of Self.”

The Selves

In the *Principles* James does a careful analysis of the self, an analysis that holds up well within the evolution of his thought over the twenty years that follow. The self for James is an empirical reality, one we experience and know as a object of thought, one to which we can assign qualities and about which we can make judgments. For James there are actually three empirical selves: the material self, the social self, and the spiritual self. The material self is comprised of the body, our clothes, our family, our home, our wealth, and the constructions of our hands and brains (I, 292-3). The social self consists in the “recognition a man gets from his mates,” so a person has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their minds. The social self is very fluid and changes from situation to situation (I, 293-6).

James’s examination of the third self, the spiritual self, brings us closer to the core of the continuity issue. It consists of “man’s inner subjective being,” along with his psychic faculties or dispositions. James calls these psychic dispositions (which include talents, abilities, moral sensibilities, and will) the most enduring and intimate part of the self, “that which we most verily

seem to be”. Taken concretely, the spiritual self is the entire stream of our personal consciousness, or the present section or segment of that stream—“both the stream and the section being concrete existences in time, and each being a unity after its own peculiar kind.” To be aware of our subjective being is a reflective process by which we think of subjectivity as such and *think ourselves as thinkers*. (I, 296 ff.).

James then writes:

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. (I, 297)

This “sanctuary within the citadel” of our personal life is what James calls the *active* element in all consciousness, a “spiritual something” that goes out to meet the contents of our thought, while 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....It is the source of effort and attention, and the place from which appear to emanate the fiat of the will....It is a sort of junction at which sensory ideas terminate and from which motor ideas proceed, and forming a kind of link between the two. (I, 297-8)

James emphasizes that this central nucleus of the spiritual self is truly empirical: it can be known, and felt.

At this point James moves into a crucial formulation: “*Now can we tell more precisely in what the feeling of this central active self consists,—not necessarily as yet what the active self is, as a being or principle, but what we feel when we become aware of its existence?*” (I, 299). James says that, in his own personal experience of it, this central aspect of the spiritual self is felt not as any purely spiritual thing: “*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*” (I, 300). Now in this statement, James is not saying that the nucleus of the spiritual self is in essence the body. Rather he is affirming that *in so far as it is felt*, this “sanctuary within the citadel” is necessarily felt in a bodily way:

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*. I do not for a moment say that this is *all* it

consists of....But I feel quite sure that these cephalic motions are the portions of my innermost activity of which I am *most distinctly aware*. (I, 301-2)

But what about this central active element “as a *being* or *principle*” (I, 299)? What can we say it *is*. James moves on to that question in a very careful way, and for the purposes of our examination of continuity of personal identity, we must exercise equal care.

He tells us that the stream of thought is there as the indispensable *condition* of our being able to experience “Self” and “not-Self,”

but this *condition* of the experience is not one of the *things experienced* at the moment; this knowing is not immediately *known*. It is only known in subsequent reflection. Instead, then, of the stream of thought being one of *con*-sciousness, ‘thinking its own existence along with whatever else it thinks,’ (as Ferrier says) it might be better called a stream of *Sci*ousness pure and simple, thinking objects of some of which it makes what it calls a ‘Me,’ and only aware of its ‘pure’ Self in an abstract, hypothetic or conceptual way. Each ‘section’ of the stream would then be a bit of sciousness or knowledge of this sort, including and contemplating its ‘me’ and its ‘not-me’ as objects which work out their drama together, but not yet including or contemplating its own subjective being. The sciousness in question would be the *Thinker*, and the existence of this thinker would be given to us rather as a logical postulate than as that direct inner perception of spiritual activity which we naturally believe ourselves to have. ‘Matter,’ as something behind physical phenomena, is a postulate of this sort. Between the postulated Matter and the postulated Thinker, the sheet of phenomena would then swing, some of them (the ‘realities’) pertain more to the matter, others (the fictions, opinions, and errors) pertaining more to the Thinker. But *who* the Thinker would be, or how many distinct Thinkers we ought to suppose in the universe, would all be subjects for an ulterior metaphysical inquiry.” (I, 304)

Insofar as one can conceive the Thinker as an *empirical* phenomenon, it is the Spiritual Self, the Sanctuary within the Citadel, the Self of Selves. On the other hand, the Thinker as a postulated Bare Principle of Unity(I, 296)—what it *is* in itself—is *not* empirical.

The Pure Principle of Personal Identity

James allows himself the “indulgence” of a bit of metaphysical thinking about this matter in the section of this chapter of the *Principles* entitled “The Pure Ego.” Here he examines the “pure principle of personal identity...which we have always shied from and treated as a difficulty to be postponed” (I, 330).

Here James is trying to make sense of several factors: that thoughts seem to belong to one thinker and not to another, that each thought is able to “distinguish between those which belong to its

own Ego from those which do not,” (I, 331) and that we experience a sense of personal identity over time whereby we say that there is a self of yesterday and a self of today and these are the same; we say I am the same self that I was yesterday.

James begins by pointing out that we can detect a kind of “warmth and intimacy” in our own thoughts because after they are experienced, something of them still echos within us (I, 333), “bringing their greeting to us from out of the past” (I, 331). This gives us a *feeling* basis for recognizing what belongs to us and for a sense of personal continuity over time: “*Resemblance among the parts of a continuum of feeling (especially bodily feelings)...thus constitutes the real and verifiable ‘personal identity’ which we feel*” (I, 336).

This is not enough, however, for “common-sense insists that the unity of all the selves is not a mere appearance of similarity or continuity, ascertained after the fact. She is sure that it involves a real belonging to a real Owner, to a pure spiritual entity of some kind. Relation to this entity is what makes the self’s constituents stick together as they do for thought” (I, 337). He proposes a cattle-ranch analogy in which thoughts are like cattle before the round-up, belonging to many owners, dispersed randomly over a vast area. As the cattle’s brand marks them as belonging to a particular herdsman, so we can recognize and gather together our own thoughts because we perceive that “warmth and intimacy” that brands them as our own. But *who* is the Herdsman or Owner of our thoughts? Who recognizes them as its own and *appropriates* them?

The Owner is not among the things collected, but is superior to them, for, as James tells us, a thing cannot appropriate itself. It appropriates *to* itself, it is “the actual focus of accretion” (I, 340). In fact, the Owner is “the real, present onlooking, remembering, ‘judging thought’ or identifying ‘section’ of the stream. This is what collects,—‘owns’ some of the past facts which it surveys, and disowns the rest,—and so makes a unity that is actualized and anchored and does not merely float in the blue air of possibility” (I, 338). From this point on in the discussion James specifies this thought with a capital “T”.

But how does James deal with the problem of talking about this Owner, the Thought which provides continuity of personal identity for the individual, without making it a kind of “substantial soul” or transcendently existing thing which exercises its ownership from beyond experience? As I have pointed out, James has declared his opposition to such an explanation, considering this notion to be at best an empty concept with no verifiable consequences. But how can he now avoid reintroducing the concept if he is going to give us a truly credible principle of personal identity? He does this by introducing one of his most ingenious devices, one based, he insists, on the close examination of our actual experiences:

How would it be if the Thought, the present judging Thought, instead of being in any way substantially or transcendently identical with the former owner of the past self, merely inherited his ‘title,’ and thus stood as his legal representative now? It would then, if its birth coincided exactly with the death of another owner, *find* the past self already its own as soon as it found it at all, and the past self would thus never be wild, but always owned,

by a title that never lapsed. We can imagine a long succession of herdsmen coming rapidly into possession of the same cattle by transmission of an original title by bequest. May not the 'title' of a collective self be passed from one Thought to another in some analogous way? It is a patent fact of consciousness that a transmission like this actually occurs. (I, 339)

But remember that, as we have said, the Owner stands outside the things it appropriates. And James now introduces an astonishing and evocative statement about the issue of continuity of personal identity:

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. 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. Such consciousness, then, as a psychologic fact, can 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....The passing Thought then seems to be the Thinker. (I, 340-2)

Certain elements stand out in James's presentation. First, the Thought appropriates, owns, acts, decides, judges, remembers, and knows. It is the "active" element. But it is not empirical. It is true that it may be "felt," but it is not "an object in its own hands." And as such, it is not appropriated or owned, but does the appropriating. It appropriates to itself, is a center of accretion, but, says James, it may be most correct to say that it appropriates to the spiritual self, because what is appropriated are various previous thoughts which *are* objects of thought to the

present, passing Thought. The Thought itself is an object of thought only *after it passes*, when it is “dead and gone.” *Then* it can be known empirically, but not before. But *then* it is no longer the “active element” operating in the present.

We might recall that earlier James had talked about his problem with describing the “sanctuary within the citadel” of the spiritual self, the “active element” in all consciousness. In that earlier passage (I, 299) he ascribed to this “active element” aspects that he has here ascribed to the passing Thought. He says it is what welcomes or rejects, what goes out to meet the contents of our thought, while they seem to come in to be received by it. In his earlier section, James is attempting to describe what we *sense* of this active element, “not necessarily as yet what the active self *is*, as a being or principle, but what we *feel* when we become aware of its existence” (I, 299). In the text above, he takes up the active element in its being, as the principle of the continuity of personal identity, as a non-empirical “something.” In the earlier text, James tried to catch a glimpse of it, but always failed because, he tells us, “*whenever my introspective glance succeeds in turning around quickly enough to catch it in the act, all it can ever feel is some bodily process*” (I, 300). In our current text, James takes us back to this moment and says that the present moment is “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.” This puts us in mind of the dilemma referred to by various philosophical writers who attempted to pinpoint the “I” that knows or experiences things. Thinkers from the time of Fichte have talked about the problem of the “infinite regress” of the “I” whereby if we are going to try to directly perceive our own “I”, we have to move back to another “I” that does the perceiving. But that new “I” cannot be perceived without imagining yet a more remote “I” standing behind the new “I”, and so on to infinity. (In the West, among those who find this notion of an “infinite regress” of the “I” of some positive value are J. W. Dunne, J. J. Poortman, and A. Diekman; among those who hold it to be illusory are J. G. Fichte, J. P. Sartre, G. Ryle, and J. Searle.)

In the present passage, James gives his own slant on the problem. He expresses it in terms of the passing Thought being the “hook” on which all previous thoughts and selves dangles. With each new moment, the former passing Thought dies and becomes, now for the first time, an object of thought, an empirical reality for a new-born passing Thought. Thus, “the chain of past selves dangles, planted firmly in the Present.” So here too we have a series of “I’s”, the passing Thoughts, each having a wider perspective than the previous one (since each knows not only its present contents, but also all inherited contents), and each being superceded by a new “I” with a yet wider perspective. That James considered the passing Thought to be the “I” of our experience is clear from his statement a little further on: “*Hereafter let us use the words ME and I for the empirical person and the judging Thought*” (I, 371). So James ends up with his own version of the infinite regress, with the difference that this regress is not literally infinite, but is still working itself out, stretching forward indefinitely in serial time.

In his *Principles* James refuses to take up a definite metaphysical stance on this matter. The Thought turns out to be the Thinker; the examination of our psychological experience confirms this, but nothing more. To go beyond this basic statement is to go beyond psychology:

Psychology is a natural science, an account of particularly finite streams of thought, co-existing and succeeding in time. It is of course conceivable (though far from clearly so) that in the last metaphysical resort all these streams of thought may be thought by one universal All-thinker. But in this metaphysical notion there is no profit for psychology; for grant that one Thinker does think in all of us, still what He thinks in me and what in you can never be deduced from the bare idea of Him (I, 367).

Yet people will keep insisting on asking their metaphysical questions about James's depiction:

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 (in the mathematical sense) of each other, I reply that the reason, if there be any, must lie where all real reasons lie, in the total sense or meaning of the world. If there be such a meaning, or any approach to it (as we are bound to trust there is), it alone can make clear to us why such finite human streams of thought are called into existence in such functional dependence upon brains. This is as much as to say that the special natural science of *psychology* must stop with the mere functional formula. *If the passing thought be the directly verifiable existent which no school has hitherto doubted it to be, then that thought is itself the thinker*, and psychology need not look beyond. The only pathway that I can discover for bringing in a more transcendental thinker would be to *deny* that we have any *direct* knowledge of the thought as such. The latter's existence would then be reduced to a postulate, an assertion that there *must be a knower* correlative to all this *known*; and the problem *who that knower is* would have become a metaphysical problem. With the question once stated in these terms, the spiritualist and transcendentalist solutions must be considered as *prima facie* on a par with our own psychological one, and discussed impartially. But that carries us beyond the psychological or naturalistic point of view. (I, 401)

So it is that James in the end leaves us stranded, with the principle metaphysical question still hanging in the air. The passing Thought is the Thinker, the psychologist must say. But the psychologist must leave it at that and say nothing about the conditions that make the Thought and the Thinker possible in the first place. That is left to the metaphysician. As James put it: "But *who* the thinker would be, or how many distinct thinkers we ought to suppose in the universe, would all be subjects for an ulterior metaphysical inquiry" (I, 304).

To questions such as, "How can it be that the Thought, with its ability to judge and own exists at all?" or "Where does this faculty come from?" the psychologist says: "Don't ask! All we need is the fact of its empirically verifiable existence. We do not need to get into further speculation about things that cannot be empirically established." That is all well and good, but when we move on to the final section of James's treatment of the self—"The Mutations of the Self"—we cannot leave it at that, even if James did.

Multiple Identities

There is only *one* body-based stream of thought or awareness (with its corresponding pure ego and personal identity) at any given moment in time. That is all that is ever given. This is true even of the most florid cases of multiple personality and the most stunning examples of automatic writing. This is a *privileged* personality.

The “storm center” of the stream is the body. The perspectival quality of all experience of the stream of awareness is based on an irreducible reality—that our experience possesses but one body-based center of interest and one body-based position in space and time from which that experience takes place.

Given this fact, how do we explain the possibility of one or more co-conscious (simultaneous) identities in one individual? The fact that such centers exist is attested to by a great deal of empirical research. The most impressive examples of this phenomenon are automatisms in which the body-based stream of awareness continues to function while the body simultaneously produces intelligent and creatively original messages (e.g. through writing) of which the body-based stream has no knowledge and experiences no sense of ownership.

In this section James cites a vast and growing body of evidence that such multiple selves exist. Most of the evidence he describes is of alternating selves, where there are two different identities appearing one after the other, but not together. However he does also point out that there is good evidence for the existence of more than one identity operating *simultaneously* in the same person or body. This is where things get interesting.

All multiple identities are described by James as examples of multiple “me’s”, multiple empirical selves, centered around the central core of the spiritual self (see above).

James tells us that “the identity found by the *I* in its *me* is only a loosely constructed thing, an identity “on the whole,” just like that which any observer might find in the same assemblage of facts” (I, 372-373). As the *me* evolves, as its experiences multiply, as its internal relations shift, the identity alters. He tells us that the feeling of identity of the self or “me” over time is based on memory. When we have losses of memory or false recollections, the “me” is changed. In old age the “me” shrinks as memory does. In dreams we forget what we know in our waking state and experience a different “me.” When we experience amnesia after mesmeric trance, the waking “me” does not include the experiences of the trance.

Discussing abnormal alterations in the present self, James also relates them to memory. This may involve sudden and bizarre changes in identity, as in insanity where there are masses of alterations in sensation, impulse and ideas. Sometime the individual remains conscious of the change and marvels at having two different selves; then

it is as certain that the *I* is unaltered as that the *me* is changed. That is to say, the present Thought of the patient is cognitive of both the old *me* and the new, so long as its memory holds good.. Only, within the objective sphere which formerly lent itself so simply to the judgment of recognition and of egoistic appropriation, strange perplexities have arisen. The present and the past both seen therein will not unite. Where is my old me? What is this new one? Are they the same? Or have I two? (I, 378)

Moving on to the phenomenon of *alternating personality*, James points out that in its simplest form there is simply a lapse of memory:

Any man becomes, as we say, *inconsistent* with himself if he forgets his engagements, pledges, knowledges, and habits; and it is merely a question of degree at what point we shall say that his personality is changed. In the pathological cases known as double or alternate personality the lapse of memory is abrupt. (I, p. 379)

To illustrate, James mentions the case of Felida X (described by E. Azam) who had two alternating personalities who appeared spontaneously in her life. Issues of memory stood at the center of this manifestation: “During the secondary state she remembers the first state, but on emerging from it into the first state she remembers nothing of the second” (I, 379). James says that these changes in memory are best understood as involving inhibitions of memory in the first state, and fullness of memory in the second. James believes that even in more complicated cases, such as that of Louie Vivé, in which multiple identities alternate with each other, inhibitions of memory remain sufficient explanation.

James then takes up “‘*mediumships*’ or ‘*possessions*,’” in which, as he believes,

the invasion and the passing away of the secondary state are both relatively abrupt, and the duration of the state is usually short—i.e., from a few minutes to a few hours. Whenever the secondary state is well developed no memory for aught that happened during it remains after the primary consciousness comes back. (I, 393)

Writing about the “lowest phase” of mediumship, automatic writing, he says that it exhibits a range of involvement of conscious awareness on the part of the writer from that in which “the Subject knows what words are coming, but feels impelled to write them as if from without,” to instances in which the person writes “unconsciously, even whilst engaged in reading or talk” James then describes various degrees of mediumistic manifestation, from inspirational speaking to cases in which “the trance is complete” and there is “no after-memory whatever until the next trance comes” (I, 393-394).

James calls the identities manifested in mediumistic trances “sub-conscious selves” (I, 394) and states that, based on his experience with a certain medium (Mrs. Piper), the self, or “control” “may be altogether different from any *possible* waking self of the person” (I, 396).

James acknowledges that in some of these instances of multiple selves there is not only alternation of personal consciousnesses, but *simultaneously existing consciousnesses*, realizing that “thus only can we understand the facts of automatic writing, etc., whilst the patient is out of trance, and the false anaesthesias and amnesias of the hysteric type” (I, 399). Speculating about the part the brain plays in these phenomena, James writes:

If we speculate on the brain-condition during all these different perversions of personality, we see that it must be supposed capable of successively changing all its modes of action, and abandoning the use for the time being of whole sets of well organized association-paths. In no other way can we explain the loss of memory in passing from one alternating condition to another. And not only this, but we must admit that organized systems of paths can be thrown out of gear with others, so that the processes in one system give rise to one consciousness, and those of another system to another *simultaneously existing consciousness*.... But just what sort of dissociation the phrase 'thrown out of gear' may stand for, we cannot even conjecture; only I think we ought not to talk of the doubling of the self as if it consisted in the failure to combine on the part of certain systems of *ideas* which usually do so. It is better to talk of *objects* usually combined, and which are now divided between the two 'selves,' in the hysteric and automatic cases in question. Each of the selves is due to a system of cerebral paths acting by itself. If the brain acted normally, and the dissociated systems came together again, we should get a new affection of consciousness in the form of a third 'Self' different from the other two, but knowing their objects together, as the result. - After all I have said in the last chapter, this hardly needs further remark. (I, 399)

Here James ends his chapter on the Self. Unfortunately, we very much need “further remarks” to deal with some of the problems James has left unsolved in his discussion of continuity of personal identity in this chapter. Outlining those problems is my next task.

The “I” and the “Me” and Continuity of Personal Identity

In writing about the passing Thought, James talks about “pulses of subjectivity” (I, 278), “pulses of thought” (I, 337), and “pulses of cognitive consciousness” (I, 339) in the stream of thought which rapidly succeed each other. James insists elsewhere that these pulses cannot be infinitely divisible but must have a measurable duration, probably in the range of a fraction of a second (James believed the minimum duration we could actually *feel* was approximately 0.002 second—see *Principles* I, 614 and note 11). This view of thought pulses, first formulated in the *Principles*, persisted into his later writings (*Some Problems in Philosophy*, pp. 154-156, where he talks about “buds or drops of perception”). These pulses or drops of thought are the passing, judging Thought that constitutes the momentary “I.”

When James discusses the way the continuity of personal identity can be psychologically accounted for—through a succession of passing Thoughts who become “owners” of all that has

gone before in the stream of thought—he is telling us that there will be an indefinite number of such Thoughts, an indefinite number of “I’s,” succeeding each other moment by moment, as we live our lives. These “I’s” are all distinct and in no way identical with each other, since each “I” is nothing more than the new passing, judging, owning Thought.

This is James *psychological* description of continuity of personal identity. In the *Principles* he indicated that he would like to have left it at that and avoided metaphysical speculation altogether. But he cannot resist moving onto the metaphysical level now and again, and these moments are informative and stimulating. For me, however, the final section of the chapter on Self, dealing with “Mutations of the Self,” is incomplete, in that it draws certain issues with metaphysical implications to our attention without saying anything about those implications. The issue of the “I” is the prime example.

Writing about the Thinker as the passing, judging Thought, James said:

The Thought never is an object in its own hands, it never appropriates or owns itself. It appropriates *to* itself, it is the actual focus of accretion....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.* (I, 340-341)

The “feeling of this central active self” (I, 299), referred to in this quote, is for James the nucleus of the spiritual self, which is eminently empirical. Remember that the spiritual self is “a man’s inner or subjective being, his psychic faculties or dispositions, taken concretely...These psychic dispositions are the most enduring and intimate part of the self, that which we most verily seem to be.” (I, 296). It is around this that our material and social selves cluster, and it is to this, in its central core, that all our experiences are appropriated. In this sense, it represents all that we (and James) signify by “Me”, the total, fully empirical Self. The empirical Self seems to be intimately and inseparably connected to the body, which is the storm-center of experience. If this is true, there must be implications for survival of the individual. In the discussion that follows, I will use the word “Self” to represent this changing, growing, evolving reality.

On the other hand, James uses the word “I” to represent the “judging Thought” (I, 371). Taken on a purely psychological level, the judging Thought is the Thinker. It is non-empirical, known only after it is dead and gone. Also, the “I” is multiple (there are as many of them as there are moments of consciousness), and constantly perishing. James says that as psychologists this is all we need to account for the experience of having a continuity of personal identity: “The passing thought, then, seems to be the Thinker; and though there *may* be another non-phenomenal Thinker behind that, so far we do not seem to need him to express the facts” (I, 342). However, as metaphysicians we might want to say more about the Thinker. Though we cannot know it directly, we might want to speculate about what it *is* in itself. We might want to say that, in contrast to the passing Thought, it is unitary and perduring, that it is one and the same throughout

the indefinitely multiplying pulses of thought in the stream. In the discussion that follows, I will use the word “I” in an inclusive way, allowing for both the psychological and metaphysical meaning of the term.

As I have mentioned, James could not accept the Scholastic notion of a “substantial soul” as the principle of continuity through time. The issue of substance is a problematic one for James, and his scattered comments give one food for thought. In the *Principles* he wrote: “To say that phenomena adhere in a Substance is at bottom only to record one’s protest against the notion that the bare existence of the phenomena is the total truth” (I, 346). In earlier writings James was more forthcoming with ideas about the possible validity of the thinking that has led to the concept of substance: “As Peirce’s criterion, breadth of relation, only admits as real such elements as enter into *the system*—so that the reality of each thing is measured by a standard extrinsic to its actual existence—so *here*, dynamic connection with other existences becomes the test of substantial reality; or, in other words, a thing only has being at all as it enters in some way into the being of other things, or constitutes part of a universe or organism. In other words, as to their *being* things are continuous, and so far as this is what people mean when they affirm a substance, substance must be held to exist” (Perry, Vol. 1, p. 525).

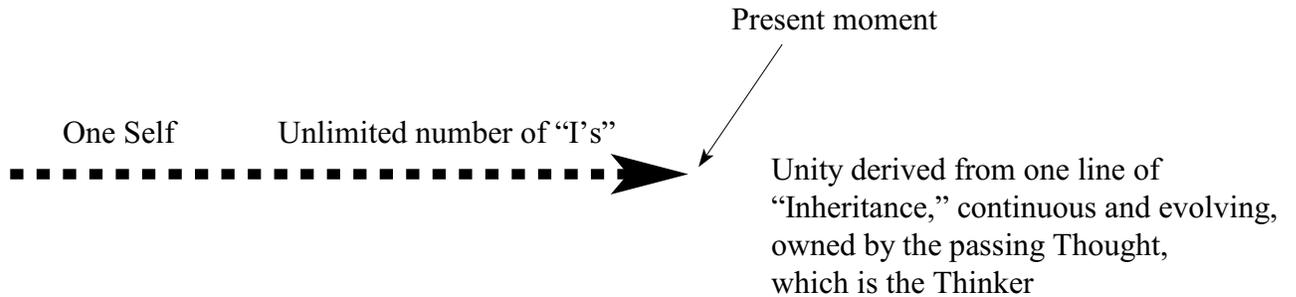
Now, what happens if, perhaps through some interruption of memory due to some disturbing intrusive experience or as a result of some powerful suggestion, the lines of memory are cut or waylaid, new lines of memory are established which set up their own continuity of inheritance or “ownership” and which gather experiences to their altered or newly established spiritual selves? What is the resulting interrelationship between *self* and *I*? This is, I believe, what happens with the formation of secondary consciousnesses, whether they remain subliminal and only manifest indirectly through automatisms such as automatic writing, or actually “take possession” of the body. This is a situation that needs close attention, one that may perhaps teach us more about the *I/me* relationship in general.

In the case of multiplicities of various kinds, certain questions force themselves into our attention: What role does the “I” play where there are many selves in the sense of many distinct streams or lines of inheritance in one body? Are there as many “I’s” as selves? Or could it be that there is only one in each individual? Does the psychological view of the “I” as the ever perishing judging thought provide an adequate explanation of what is going on? Or do we need a more “metaphysical” approach to make sense out of what is happening? Could there actually be an “I” that is the same throughout all changes, and is there a way to conceive this that does not involve the traditional notion of a substantial soul? If there are many such “I’s” in one individual (multiple secondary selves), what gives that individual its overall unity? Is it the mere fact that all the streams are experienced within one body? Is there perhaps one “I” per individual or body, or, taking the idea further, do all individuals share a common “I”, perhaps in the form of a “world-soul” as sometimes speculated by James? And what are the implications of all these things for the possibility of survival?

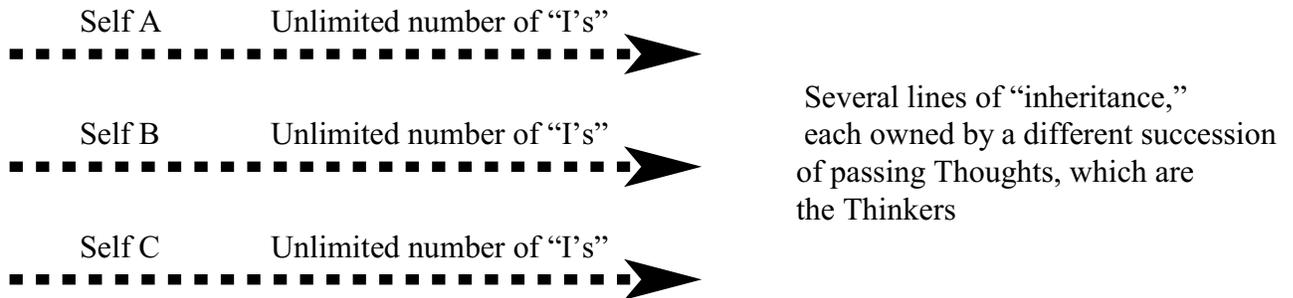
It is to these questions that I now turn. I would like to discuss the questions through a series of diagrams which may help to clarify the issues involved.

James's Psychological Explanation of Self and "I"

A. One Spiritual Self, One Stream of Thought



B. Multiple Spiritual Selves in One Individual



Section A above is the situation with the judging Thought of the normal individual as discussed at length above

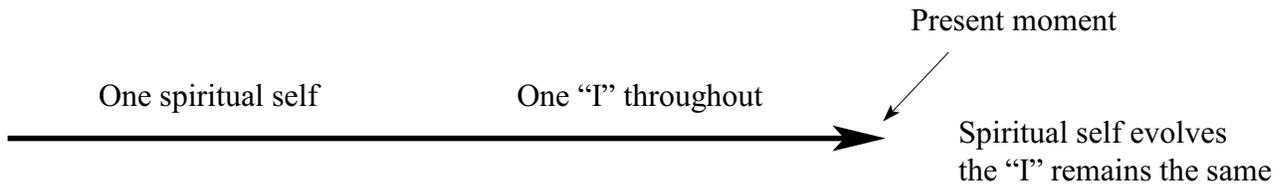
Section B above is the situation with the judging Thoughts of a person who exhibits cotemporal secondary centers of consciousness or secondary selves, where Self A could be taken as the ordinary everyday consciousness of the individual. This diagram represents what I imagine James would say about that situation from a purely psychological point of view

In Section B, the unity of the individual seems very tenuous. In the last analysis it seems to be merely a unity derived from the fact that everything is going on in one body. Here the passing Thought cannot provide the overall unity, since there are a number of lines of inheritance, each unconnected to the other.

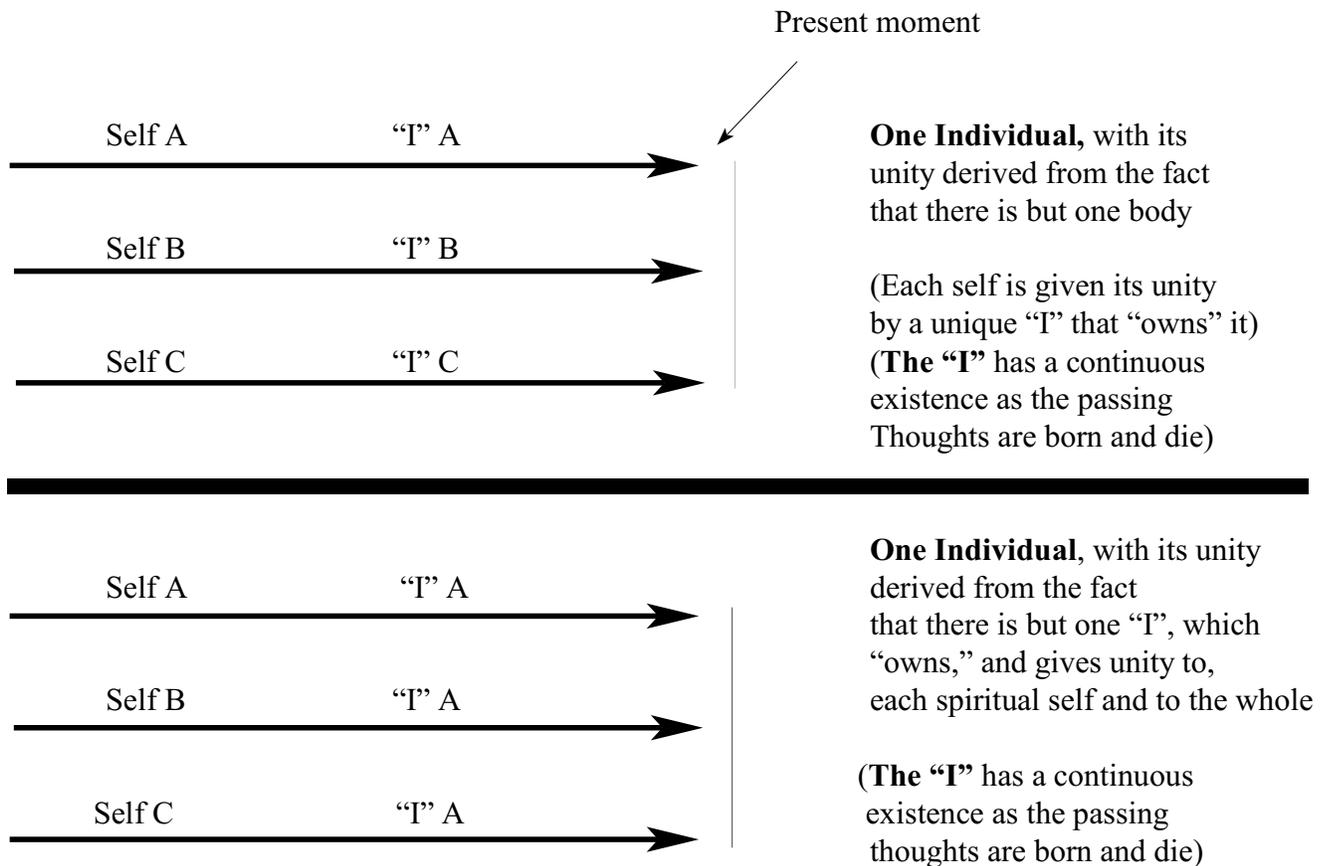
Possible Metaphysical Explanations of Self and “I”

A. One Spiritual Self, One Stream of Thought

Here the Thinker or “I” has a continuous existence as the passing thoughts are born and die



B. Multiple Spiritual Selves, Multiple Streams in One Individual



Possible Metaphysical Explanations of Self and “I” Relating to Survival

A. Each Individual has his own Individual Personal Existence and Personal Thoughts in This Life and After Death

(See Preface to second edition of *Human Immortality*)

B. Our Thoughts are Simply the Thoughts of an *anima mundi* (World Soul) Who Thinks in Us All

1. James’s ambiguity about this idea in the *Principles* is strong:

A phenomenon would not itself be, we insist, unless there were something *more* than the phenomenon. To the more we give the provisional name of Substance. So, in the present instance, 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; and when we are once trying metaphysical explanations we are foolish not to go as far as we can. For my own part I confess that the moment I become metaphysical and try to define the more, I find the notion of some sort of an *anima mundi* thinking in all of us to be a more promising hypothesis, in spite of all its difficulties, than that of a lot of absolutely individual souls. Meanwhile, as *psychologists*, we need not be metaphysical at all. (I, p. 346)

Psychology is a natural science, an account of particularly finite streams of thought, coexisting and succeeding in time. It is of course conceivable (though far from clearly so) that in the last metaphysical resort all these streams of thought may be thought by one universal All-thinker. But in this metaphysical notion there is no profit for psychology; for grant that one Thinker does think in all of us, still what He thinks in me and what in you can never be deduced from the bare idea of Him. The idea of Him seems even to exert a positively paralyzing effect on the mind. The existence of finite thoughts is suppressed altogether. (I, 367)

In *A Pluralistic Universe*, he is more at ease with a form of this idea:

Every bit of us at every moment is part and parcel of a wider self, it quivers along various radii like the wind-rose on a compass, and the actual in it is continuously one with possibles not yet in our present sight. And just as we are co-conscious with our own momentary margin, may not we ourselves form the margin of some more really central self in things which is co-conscious with the whole of us? May not you and I be confluent in a higher consciousness, and confluent active there, tho we now know it not? (pp. 289-290)

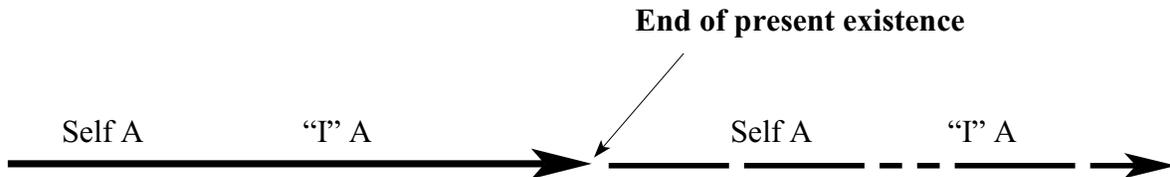
In a word, the believer is continuous, to his own consciousness, at any rate, with a wider self

from which saving experiences flow in. Those who have such experiences distinctly enough and often enough to live in the light of them remain quite unmoved by criticism, from whatever quarter it may come, be it academic or scientific, or be it merely the voice of logical common sense. They have had their vision and they *know*--that is enough--that we inhabit an invisible spiritual environment from which help comes, our soul being mysteriously one with a larger soul whose instruments we are. (pp. 308-309)

This position has come to be called James's "pluralistic pantheism." It sees the world as a ongoing co-creative process involving human beings and God equally in the process.

Possible Ways of Understanding Survival of Death

Possibility A:



Question: How can Self A, being essentially empirical and intimately associated with the body, survive the dissolution of the body?

Possibility B:



Question: Here Self A, being essentially linked to the body, does not survive. A new empirical self is formed which is "owned" by the original "I". Is this truly survival, seeing that all the memories and dispositions of Self A are no longer present? Since "I" A is without empirical content and does not "contain" the dispositions, etc. of the Self, its continuance does not seem to suffice as an explanation for survival.

Possibility C:



Question: Can the mere persistence of a supposed "All-thinker" constitute anything that can actually be called survival? Here all individuality seem to be lost at death.

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