STREAMS OF THOUGHT

STREAMS OF THOUGHT:

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WILLIAM JAMES

By

ALEXIS DIANDA, B.A.

A thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Masters of Arts

McMaster University

Master of Arts (2007) McMaster University

(Department of Philosophy) Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: STREAMS OF THOUGHT: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WILLIAM JAMES

AUTHOR: Alexis Dianda, B.A. (McMaster)

SUPERVISOR: Barry Allen

NUMBER OF PAGES: iv, 97

Abstract

By establishing William James' *The Principles of Psychology* as a significant work in the history of psychology, *Streams of Thought: The Psychology of William James* secures the criticisms of the traditional approaches to the theory of mind and paths a productive course for the study of the human being and his or her relation to the world. *Streams of Thought* explores the dismantling of the historically held distinctions between mind and body, emotion and reason, and knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge about. In place of these long-held dualisms, what is revealed in the *Principles* is a psychology that is rooted in a mind indistinguishable from body and a theory of knowledge that is anti-representational.

Streams of Thought follows James' initial attempt to limit the science of mental life to the positive methodology of the natural sciences and charts the difficulties that arise out of this methodology. What is argued for in this thesis is a theory of psychological and existential inquiry that refuses a reductive explanation and exalts a theory of subjectivity that is rooted in the living world. Specific topics such as perception, sensation, attention, habit, interest and belief are explored through this work and defended in such a way that their conclusions are relevant to the modern discourses of phenomenological inquiry, the philosophy of mind, and the cognitive sciences. The central discovery of this interpretation is reconciliation between our empirical human sciences and our concrete existence.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the support and wisdom I have received from my supervisors Gary Brent Madison and Barry Allen. I have been fortunate to have such wonderful supervisors. I would also like to extend thanks everyone in the department for providing such a hospitable place for me to work in over the last few years. The assistance I have received from Brigitte Sassen and Diane Enns has left a lasting impression upon me and I wish to thank them for all of their time and kindness.

On a more personal note the friendship, care, and support I have received from the following people has made these past years memorable and full of growth: Zdravko Planinc, Jessica Bytautas, Jon Sikich, Colin Koopman, Jeremy Livingston, Rob Virdis, Tess, and last but not least, my family.

Introduction

The sentiment most readily identifiable with the work of William James is that unless philosophy is directed to our human experience it looses its force as a criterion of action. James believed that the tradition which bore him suffered a "metaphysical *tedium vitae*," the cause of which was a "grubbing in the abstract root of things."[1] For James, the only possible result of the divide between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* found so readily in the tradition of philosophy was skepticism and alienation from the world of action. Many readers look to James' later work in the pragmatist movement or the doctrines of radical empiricism to remedy these philosophical and political difficulties. What is often ignored when looking at James is his early work in psychology that is most fully developed in *The Principles of Psychology*. It is in the context of philosophical psychology that the epistemological, political, ethical, and metaphysical problems characteristic of James' approach become developed. Rooted psychologically, the problems of radical empiricism and pragmatism take on new significance.

In this thesis I argue that within the *Principles* James successfully establishes the root of a description of that undermines the classical dualistic picture of a human being standing outside of the environment. In the *Principles* the embodied subject is seen as a concrete actor, productive of meaning, whose principle characteristics are interpretation and selection. The claim that consciousness is a non-entity, emphatically made in the essay "Does Consciousness Exist"[2] is rooted in the discoveries of the *Principles* along

[1] William James, "The Will to Believe," in *William James: Writings* 1878-1899 (New York: Literary Classics, 1992), 485.
[2] William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912).

with the related conclusions regarding the relationship between truth and human interests. While the *Principles* contains many problematic assumptions, such as a professed positivist methodology, a closer look will demonstrate how the radically empiricist position that omits nothing experienced thwarts the possibility of a dualistic theory of mind and a representative theory of truth. If, as I argue, the subject of psychology is a subject capable of producing truth, imbued with meaning, and creative in the process of perception, then the threat of skeptical nihilism and the traditional picture of the dualistic subject as isolated from the world have been overturned.

James' analysis, which makes mind indistinguishable from the body, does not end in a physiological theory. The *Principles* details the analysis of a body-subject that is full of purpose, intention and meaning. Set against doctrines that approach consciousness in general, and perception and knowledge in particular, as a simple *result*, James' psychology clears the way for a new analysis of the subject.

Idealism and transcendental philosophy, favouring the abstract speculations and rigor to the living world of action, provide only academic solutions that are dissatisfying when compared with the superabundance of life. Empiricism, so determined to stay close to the "hard facts," often leaves the discontinuity and indeterminacy felt in the world aside in favour of a pessimistic perspective. James' analysis works by approximate descriptions known through experience in a world of meaning, where hard facts are reconcilable with the felt purpose of the world of experience.

The *Principles* is a work that often lacks clear definitions or a precise methodology. Because no one system dominates James' psychology, it remains open to a number of interpretations. James has been said to have pioneered the age of functionalism, or cleared the way for behaviourism, he has been called a naturalist, a proto-phenomneologist, an anti-realist, and anti-phenomenalist, a physiologist, and a mystic. Clearly, no one interpretation alone is adequate. The *Principles* offers a psychology that is not closed off by claims to finality, or an architectonic; it is a world that aims to be "as vague as its subject."[3] The mark of rigor in James' psychology is not an analysis of mind accountable only to *logical* consistency, but is shown in the willingness to engage with, and the immediacy articulated in, the human condition.

In the Preface to Ferrari's Italian translation of the *Principles* James writes that his goal is to bring the reader into "direct acquaintance with living reality."[4] The claim that reality is pluralistic and always grasped through the lived and animate body is a claim vulnerable to criticism on two fronts. First, psychology does not draw metaphysical or epistemological conclusions from their world. The mark of a complete psychology, founded upon the methods of the sciences, is one that, in principle, deduces philosophical claims from psychological facts. For psychology, practiced as an independent discipline, consciousness is a fact to be measured and described against the world as science conceives it. On the other front, the philosopher may say that James gives too big of a

[3] William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover, 1950), I: 7. All references to *The Principles of Psychology* are references to this edition; citations will hereafter be given in the text.
[4] William James, "James's Preface to Ferrari's Italian Translation." *The Works of William James: The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 3: 1483.

place to psychology when drawing his philosophical conclusions; rationality is compromised when one attempts to found it on the flux of experience. The problem encountered in James' analysis is that after he begins his description of consciousness he cannot allow himself to fall back upon a classically conceived notion of truth and subjectivity. James' *Principles* offers a way to get closer to living reality and this method serves as the basis for the discussions of knowledge, ethics, and metaphysics that are found in the later works.

I begin chapter one with a brief exposition of the status of the new discipline of psychology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, of which James was a forerunner. I account for his insistence upon a methodology grounded in the natural sciences, and show how James undermines this methodology by his very characterization of his object of study. What is shown in chapter one to be the result of this conflict between stated and actual methods is followed up in chapter two by further interpretation of what James claims to be the central functions of the human mind: perception, sensation, and rationality. His account of the "faculties" of the mind culminates in a view of subjectivity that is explored in chapter three. My interpretation shows that James' *Principles* offers a psychology capable of reconciling the hard facts of science and the concrete truths of perception and meaning.

Chapter One:

James' Vision for Psychology

Psychology at the end of the 19th Century

The often overlooked significance of *The Principles of Psychology* can be partially accounted for by James' own dismissal of the stated aim of the work—to secure the *science* of psychology. A few years after its publication James dismissed the whole enterprise of 'the New Psychology' as "a string of raw facts; a little gossip and wrangle about opinions; a little classification and generalization on the mere descriptive level?"[5] Are we to bemoan, as James did, the absence of "psychological laws" in the *Principles*? Is the achievement of the *Principles* a wholly negative one? The historian of psychology Edwin Boring assesses the *Principles* in this light. While Boring claims that James colourfully and insightfully tears down the dominant theories of mind, such as the associationist, the transcendentalist, and the followers of British empiricism, he leaves psychology with no "workable" alternative. For Boring, the greatest achievements of the *Principles* are deconstructive ones. The only thing that led to any positive advancement within the discipline of psychology, according to him, was James' theory of emotions, now known to psychology as the James-Lange theory of emotions, which led to subsequent laboratory work and became a valuable tool for the behaviourists of the twentieth century.[6] This view has largely dominated the way in which history has judged James' *Principles*. Such a view would account for James' most laborious and technical

[5] William James, "Psychology: Briefer Course," in *William James Writings 1878-1899* (New York, N.Y.: Literary Classics, 1992), 433.
[6] Edwin G. Boring, *A History of Experimental Psychology*, 2nd ed., (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1950), 516.

work having achieved so little recognition, often taking the backseat to *Pragmatism*, or *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

It is one of the essential features of the *Principles* that there is an ongoing dialogue between James and the dominant psychologists and metaphysicians from the empiricist and idealist traditions, assessing their failures on primarily theoretical grounds. There is also a constructive line which James, as well as his contemporaries, may have undervalued.

The first task in the *Principles* is to show the inadequacies of both the Continental schools of Idealist psychology and British Empiricism, as according to James, they both lead to skepticism.[7] James' goal is to develop an account of cognition that is both faithful to experience and impervious to the criticisms laid out of his predecessors. James' stated method throughout the *Principles* is to "eliminate from psychology 'considered as a natural science' the whole business of ascertaining *how* we come to know things together or to know them at all."[8] This is said to be achieved by limiting the designation of mental states to their *function*.

A major theme that runs throughout the *Principles* is that "mental phenomena are not only conditioned *a parte ante* by bodily processes; but they lead to them *a parte post*" (I, 5). Mental phenomena lead to acts, and not only the most obvious voluntary and deliberate kinds of acts. James maintains as a psychological law that mental states also

[7] Charlene Haddock Seigfried centers her analysis of the *Principles* in the light of the hermenutical humanist project. This brings James' reading of the two complementary traditions of empiricism and idealist to the fore. (*William James' Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

[8] William James, "The Knowing of Things Together," in *William James Writings 1878-1899* (New York, N.Y.: Literary Classics, 1992), 1074.

occasion changes in heart beat, nerve current, etc.. No mental change ever occurs which is not accompanied or followed by some kind of bodily change. This approach has earned James the title within the history of psychology as a member of the school of functionalism. Yet as James says in "The Knowing of Things Together" that since the publication of the *Principles*, he has become convinced that "no conventional restrictions *can* keep metaphysical and so-called epistemological inquiries out of psychology-books."[9] Such an approach leads to a "strained" and "unnatural" way of talking about our experiences. The functionalist school, largely associated with James' fellow pragmatist Dewey, took a hard-line naturalism which, although present in the *Principles,* is not exhaustive of its territory. As James' biographer Ralph Barton Perry observes regarding James' allegiance to the school of functionalism, James was a functionalist only insofar as functionalism meant "keeping constantly in view the total concrete individual, conceived as active and as occupying an environment."[10]

James' most widely, but perhaps mistakenly, recognized advance in the *Principles* was to liberate psychology from metaphysics and push psychology toward the experimentalism and naturalism that came to the fore in the twentieth century.[11] The pages of the newly founded journals of psychology in James' day were occupied with essay after essay debating the methods of this new and independent discipline of psychology. As psychology was emerging throughout the latter half of the 1800s debates

[9] Ibid., 1074
[10] Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1935), 2:51.
[11] George Trumbull Ladd and E.B. Titchner were highly critical and narrowly focused upon James' insistence of psychology being structured about the natural sciences. In more recent time, people such as Andrew Reck have argued that James' goal in the *Principles* was to divide psychology from metaphysics.

emerged as to its proper place, methods and techniques. Wundt in his mature period argued that psychology is a *Erfahrungswissenshaft*, the science of experience. It is not metaphysics and must develop itself without recourse to unfounded speculations. Herbart on the other hand, argued for psychology as a science, but one founded upon experience, metaphysics, and mathematics, but not experiment. The late nineteenth century saw philosophical temperaments turn into schools of psychological thought and debate was lively concerning the subject of the new discipline of psychology.

In this chapter I will argue that the *Principles* is not only a text that attempts to establish psychology as a new and independent discipline; it is also a part of a larger, integrated philosophical project geared toward a world-view impervious to the kind of skepticism that lurked in the thinking of his contemporaries of both the empirical and idealistic traditions. While an attempt to remain positivistic and naturalistic is present in the early stages of the *Principles*, James cannot keep it up and eventually abandons it. The *Principles* never succeeds in establishing the "science of psychology." Remaining within the confines of a natural science, it is a text into which the "waters of metaphysics leak at every joint."[12] Yet I contend that these metaphysical or philosophical leaks are what solidify the larger project of the *Principles*, which is to establish the world-view that is more often recognized in James' later work.

The Official Program

[12] James, "Briefer Course," 433.

The very possibility of psychology *as a science* laboured under the tradition of Kant. *The Critique of Pure Reason* detailed a criticism of psychology that would affect the course of growth and define the discourse of the emerging discipline throughout the nineteenth century. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that no attempt to ascertain the nature of the soul or thinking subject by means of rational analysis could withstand criticism. All arguments about the soul's simplicity, substantiality, identity, or relation to the world *necessarily* begin with an appeal to the *empirical* position, "I think." This *a posteriori* position, says Kant, cannot provide a ground for a rational and certain proof regarding the nature of the soul. Our assumptions, if they are to withstand criticism, are to be *a priori*, necessary, certain proofs.[13] Kant found none of these qualities in the fundamental datum of psychology—the "I think."

The theoretical or founding problems that psychology inherits from Kant do not end here. In the Preface to the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, Kant advanced his critique of psychology even further, arguing for a Newtonian conception of natural science. Kant, attempting to gauge the possibility of a *scientific* psychology, defined natural science:

> Hence, although a pure philosophy of nature in general, that is, that which investigates only what constitutes the concept of a nature in general, may indeed be possible even without mathematics, a pure doctrine of nature concerning *determinate* natural things (doctrine of body or doctrine of soul) is only possible by means of mathematics. And, since in any doctrine of nature there is only as much proper science as there is a priori knowledge therein, a doctrine of nature

[13] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), B397-432.

The psychologist, if he or she is to be a natural scientist, is to be a dualist, and this dualism must stand as irreducible. The psychologist must suppose two insulated elements—mind knowing and thing known—elements that "stand face to face," separate and distinct. The task of the psychologist, then, is to account for the *causal* link between the two. By adopting this strong methodological dualism as the backbone of psychology, James aligns himself with the "common man" and thus dismisses the philosophical or metaphysical questions concerning the possibility of knowledge or skepticism concerning other minds or the external world. James argues that if psychology begins with basic facts, then it does not need to provide any theoretical justifications for its starting point. Just as physicists do not question the existence of the physical world, psychology ought to assume the data of its subject and leave the skeptical questions to metaphysics. A clear divide between metaphysics and psychology is thus proposed at the outset of the *Principles*. To go beyond this positivistic account is to go beyond the scope of the natural sciences. "Metaphysics fragmentary, irresponsible, and half-awake, and unconscious that she is metaphysical, spoils two good things when she injects herself into natural science." (I, vi)

Following the publication of the *Principles* this program for psychology as a natural science was a topic of debate, and James had opportunity to clarify his objective. In a reply to G.T. Ladd's criticism of James' proposed natural scientific program James

flies under the banner of "*Divede et impera.*"[17] If psychology is ever to conform to the natural sciences, it must renounce metaphysics, assume such data as the existence of states of mind, the physical world, and the relationship called "knowing." Questions concerning the nature of the soul, the possibility of knowledge, the transcendental ego, "mind stuff" and other such speculative questions inherited from the empiricist and rationalistic traditions must be rejected.

The necessary assumptions of the psychologist must be the following four things. James even lays them out in the form of a diagram to exhibit "more emphatically" the necessity of the irreducibility of each field. (I, 184)

1 The Psychologist	2 The Thought Studied	3 The Thought's Object	4 The Psychologist's Reality

The psychologist takes as given the thought studied, thought's object, and the reality that emerges; together they "form his total object, to be realities." A psychologist simply "reports them and their mutual relations as truly as he can without troubling himself with the puzzle of how he can report them at all." (I, 184) The dualistic program of the *Principles* is made strong and absolute. Of our two objects, James says, "Neither gets out of itself or into the other, neither in any way *is* the other, neither *makes* the other. They just stand face to face in a common world, and one simply knows, or is known unto, its

[17] William James, "A Plea for Psychology as a 'Natural Science,'" *The Philosophical Review* 1 (Mar., 1892), 147; William James, "A Plea for Psychology as a 'Natural Science,'" *The Philosophical Review* 1 (Mar., 1892), 147.

counterpart. This singular relation is not to be expressed in any lower terms, or translated into any more intelligible name." (I, 184)

However, what James says he will do in his natural scientific program, and what he actually accomplishes in his analysis yield two distinct images of the nature and limitations of psychology. That the dualism and scientistic methodology of the *Principles* is more apparent than real is well worth noting, as James' early thought is often characterized as blatantly, if not naively, dualistic. Many readers of James' psychology have agreed in one form or another that the professed dualism between subject and object, knower and known, mind and body, appears only upon the surface of his arguments.[18] What interests such varied readers as Dewey, Wittgenstein, Bohr, and Husserl, is not James' professed methodology, but rather what James seems to accomplish despite his advocacy of the natural science methodology. However the question, why bother looking at the *Principles* at all can be answered if one looks to what is achieved despite the official acceptance of dualism, which brings me to the second strain occurring in the *Principles*.

Methodology

Psychologists have three resources at their disposal for the successful practice of their science: introspection, experimentation, and comparison. (I, 185-194) It is through the use of these methods that the psychologist is able to ascertain the facts regarding

[18] Dewey, Wild, Haddock, Ralph Barton Perry, Wilshire, etc.

thought, thought's object, the psychologist's reality, and how these relate to the psychologist.

James defines introspection as "looking into our own minds and reporting what we see." (I, 185) The topic of introspection has received little attention or clarification in the twentieth century. The rise of behaviourism marked James as one of the last psychologists to defend it. [19] Today, when philosophers discuss introspectionism the question that arises is not, 'What is introspection?' but rather, 'Is our faculty of introspection *infallible*?' While many philosophical psychologists did claim that we possess an infallible ability to self-scrutinize, this is not necessarily what introspection is. Standing somewhere between Brentano's claim that introspection is infallible and Comte's outright dismissal of its usefulness, James saw it as a useful tool for psychology. Yet, James' defense of introspection requires a redefinition of our common-sense definition of the term as simple self-observation of mental states, looking "inside" and reporting what we "see."

By rejecting the infallibility of introspection, James changes the meaning of introspection to a kind of inferential process of retrospection:[20]

> If to *have* feelings or thoughts in their immediacy were enough, babies in the cradle would be psychologists, and infallible ones. But the psychologist must not only *have* his mental states in their absolute veritableness, he must report them and write about them, name them, classify and compare them and trace their

[19] Gerald E. Myers, in the essay "Pragmatism and Introspective Psychology" gives a compelling argument defending James' use of introspection in the *Principles*. Techniques of retrospection that are said to characterize introspection are argued as necessarily grounding a successful pragmatism in the post-modern era.

[20] Gerald E. Myers, "Pragmatism and Introspective Psychology," in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 13.

> relations to other things. Whilst alive they are their own property; it is only *post-mortem* that they become his prey. (I, 189)

The main reason James identifies introspection with retrospection is due to the nature of the stream of thought. In other words, the stream of thought flows quickly; by the time one has identified a feeling, emotion, or sensation it has already changed or disappeared all together. "It is the state of *saying-I-feel-tired*, of, of *saying-I-feel-angry*,—entirely different matters, so different that the fatigue and anger apparently included in them are considerable modifications of the fatigue and anger directly felt the previous instant. The act of naming them has momentarily detracted from their force." (I, 190) Introspection is fallible and difficult but it "is what we have to rely on first and foremost and always." (I, 185)

The experimental method has changed the face of psychology. However it is not exhaustive of the discipline. "It must be said that the [experimental] results have as yet born little theoretic fruit commensurate with the great body of labor expended in their acquisition. But facts are facts, and if we only get enough of them they are sure to combine." (I, 193) The comparative method serves to supplement both the introspective and the experimental methods.

The Second Strain

Psychology seeks after a general term to designate all states of consciousness whatever their particular quality or nature may be. However, looking for such a general

term makes sense only when the different mental states have something in common. By giving the feeling of pain, the sensation of heat and a decision a common name, the psychologist becomes a type of metaphysician. All these mental states are particularizations of one fundamental form—the experience of the individual. James uses two names to designate the mental states that correspond to experience. These are: thoughts and feelings. He looks over the several terms used in classical psychology, he feels obliged to reject each of them. (I, 185-187) This rejection of old terms and the invention of new ones in which to discuss mental life give insight into the nature of James' investigation.

The much used terms, "mental state," "state of consciousness," "conscious modification," are clumsy and imply specific theories about mental life, they also lack an active form. James wants to express the *active* quality of mental life. Consciousness is not a passive thing aware of something; consciousness is an active thing, an ongoing stream. The term "feeling" has the accompanying verb 'to feel,' both active and neuter, with derivatives such as 'felt,' 'feelingly,' 'feltness,' makes it convenient. Yet discouragingly it has a very specific meaning, and sometimes it is treated as a synonym for sensation. James is looking for a term to cover all activities of mental life, sensation and thought indifferently. (I, 185) 'Thought' says James, would be the best word if only it could be made to cover sensation. It has no negative connotation such as 'feeling' in the minds of the rationalist schools and it also suggests the omnipresence of cognition. James, like Hume, seems to be thrown back to reliance upon a pair of terms such as Hume's 'impression and idea.' James chooses the pair 'thought and feeling' to describe mental

life. Yet it should not be forgotten that these two terms do not express unique or isolated things, but are rather introduced as a pair used to characterize the single quality of mental life.

Along this line, James introduces a distinction between what we know by acquaintance and what we know through the use of concepts (knowledge about). Knowledge about is characterized by James in the following manner:

> Through feelings we become acquainted with things, but only by our thoughts do we know about them. Feelings are the germ and starting point of cognition, thoughts the developed tree. The minimum of grammatical subject, of objective presence, of reality known about, the mere beginning of knowledge, must be named by the word that says the least. (I, 221)

There are certain ultimate terms in the sphere of "knowledge about" which cannot be conceptually defined. For example all logical thought involves what we call comparison, the finding of likeness and difference. Yet we cannot define what likeness is in purely conceptual terms. Once an object has become familiar through perception it can be clarified through conceptual analysis. Yet, the *experience is prior to analysis*. "All the elementary natures of the world, its highest genera, the simple qualities of matter and mind, together with the kinds of relation that subsist between them, must either not be known at all, or known in this dumb way of acquaintance without *knowledge-about*" (I,221). All of our conceptual knowledge refers back to what James calls this "dumb way of acquaintance." James' terms "thought" and "feeling" give voice to this distinction in knowledge. Feelings are the "germ and starting point of knowledge" (I, 222). The word that says the least, the interjection, "lo!," "there!," "hey!," or the demonstrative pronouns

"the," "it," "this," "that," are best representatives of the "feelings" that are the starting points of thoughts.

The Stream of Thought

As James remarks in the Preface to the Italian translation of the *Principles*, the main goal of the *Principles* is to bring its reader into "direct acquaintance" with "living reality."[21] As result of this explicit intention, James must begin his discussion of consciousness with the *experience of consciousness*, as opposed to the mind's supposed elements. With this methodological principle James' metaphor of thought as a "stream" is born. One of the most well-known chapters of the *Principles* is "The Stream of Thought," in which James takes on the dominating views of mind put forth by both the followers of British Empiricism and those of Continental Idealism.

In the 1890s it was not popular to speak of consciousness as a "stream." Rather the dominating metaphors of consciousness were ones of "trains" or "chains" of thought, following in the tradition of Locke and Hume. As James insists throughout "The Stream of Thought," these metaphors are inadequate and misleading when referring to consciousness; thought "does not appear to itself chopped up in bits" (I, 239).

In this early phase of the *Principles*, after the preliminary discussion on method is behind him and the discussions of brain physiology are laid out, James begins his study of "the mind from within." (I, 224) As soon as his attention turns to the view of the "mind

[21] William James. "James's Preface to Ferrari's Italian Translation," 3: 1483.

James calls conception. The question of reality as extra-mental arises only in the context of experiences of the *same*.

Conception

The chapter "Conception" identifies the "basis of our belief in realities outside of thought." "*The function by which we thus identify a numerically distinct and permanent subject of discourse is called* CONCEPTION." (I, 149) When I compare or distinguish anything, the basis of this comparison must be a sense of sameness. What allows thought to compare, contrast, isolate, and refer to particular objects or a quality of experience is the function James calls conception. It is important to note that conception applies neither to the mental state nor to that which the mental state refers, but rather to the relation between the two; "namely, the *function* of the mental state in signifying just that particular thing." (I, 461)

The ability to refer back to the same thing, object, or idea is the ground of our experience for James. We can conceive realities such as cups, tables, fictional and real selves, mere *entia rationis* like sameness, difference or non-entity, but regardless of what the conceptions are of they remain what they are. Against the "Hegelizers" James argues that thought can clearly change its states and meanings, drop one conception in favour of another, but the dropped conception can in no intelligible sense be said to "*change into* its successor." (I, 462)

The problems related to the function of conception have been largely influenced by the nominalism of Berkeley and the Mills. In *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* Berkeley argues that we never frame a conception of an isolated element of experience. To think any one thing is to think it in its totality. As Berkeley argues in the infamous introduction to the *Principles*, whenever I imagine an eye, I must imagine some particular shape or size. Likewise, the ideas "man" and "woman" must each have particular characteristics such as height, shape, age, etc.. Berkeley denies that we can strip away qualities from an idea of a particular creating a new, general, and abstract idea.[22] In other words, a concept abstracted from experience and held in the mind such as "eye," or "woman," or "equality," as distinct from any particular found in experience is held to be meaningless without grounds in experience.

Berkeleyan nominalism and the controversy surrounding abstract ideas, James argues, has centered on a false assumption: "That assumption is that ideas, in order to know, must be cast in the exact likeness of whatever things they know, and that the only things that can be known are those which ideas can resemble. The error has not been confined to nominalists. *Omnis cognito fit per assimilationem cognoscentis et cogniti* has been the maxim, more or less explicitly assumed, of writers of every school." (I, 471) This assumption amounts to saying that an idea must *be* a duplicate of what it knows—in other words, that it can only know itself. (I, 471) Berkeley has assumed that a thought must *be* what it intends—what it means—and further, means what it *is*. For example, if I

[22] George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, (New York: Cosimo, 2005), §10.

hold an idea of "woman" in my mind it must be an image of a complete individual. It cannot mean any one part of her and it must exclude everyone but her.

This identification of a particular error in thought philosophers fall prey to highlights James' own distinction between the topic and object of thought. Asked what the mind's object is when you think "Columbus discovered America in 1492," most will say that the object is either 'Columbus,' or 'America,' or perhaps, 'the discovery of America.' Yet these are not the mind's objects of thought; they are the grammatical subjects or at most 'fractional objects'—what James calls the *topic of thought.* The object of thought is something entirely different; it is thought's entire content or delivery. The object of thought in James' example is neither 'Columbus,' nor 'America," nor even "the discovery of America." Rather it is the whole sentence, "Columbus-discovered-America-in-1492." To speak properly of an object of thought one must represent the object's relations as obscurely as they present themselves.

Whereas Berkeley or the Mills argue against abstract ideas because they assume that the thought must be identical to the object of thought, James argues that meaning pertains to a "fringe," a *feeling* of tendency captured only by the object of thought and the preservation of its relations. We can use the word "woman" with the same sound and the same "mental image," and mean two different things. By saying, "What an intelligent woman Jessica is," I exclude all women but Jessica. By saying "What an intelligent being woman is" I include both Jessica and every other woman.

James uses the distinction between thought and object to refute the assumptions of the associationist picture of mind as well as the school of soul-psychology. Both suppose

that states of mind are composed of simple mental elements. They part ways in supposing different agencies for their composition: the one maintains that the agency is psychological "laws" of association, the other that it is the transempirical soul. The doctrine of the "omni-presence of cognition" undermined both these assumption" they have mistaken the multiplicity in the object for a multiplicity in the mental state itself, and they have done so because they have blurred the distinction between mental state and its object. (I, 278)

. "Every one of our conceptions," says James, "is of something which our attention originally tore out of the continuum of felt experience and provisionally isolated so as to make of it an individual topic of discourse." (I, 465) It is only through conception that structure and definition arise in the stream of experience, in our varied sensations and perceptions. Importantly for James, this sense of sameness is not only a cognitive process but also a precognitive one. As Linschoten argues in his study of the *Principles*, "Consciousness *can*, but *does not have to*, distinguish between itself and the object that it perceives. A man can be totally absorbed in perceiving without accomplishing self-consciousness."[23] James says, "A polyp would be a conceptual thinker if a feeling of 'Hollo! thingumbob again!' ever flitted though its mind." (I, 463) What is required of the conceptual thinker is the intentional relationship, involvement that is not merely causal with some other thing.[24] That the polyp becomes involved with the 'thingumbob,' that the polyp recognizes this 'thingumbob' as the same 'thingumbob' that the polyp has seen

[23] Hans Linschoten, *On the Way Toward a Phenomenological Psychology*, 180.
[24] Ibid., 181.

before is enough for James to call it a conceptual thinker. It is conceptualizing consciousnesses that articulates and gives coherence within the stream of thought. Yet, the mental state, the conceptualizing-consciousness, cannot be specified independently of what it is conscious of. As James argues in the chapter "The Stream of Thought," a mind that has become conscious of its own cognitive function, that "plays the 'psychologist' upon itself, arises due to a habit in adult life and cannot be seen as primitive. The consciousness of objects must come first." (I, 273)

James is trying to specify the mental state's function in signifying its permanent subject of discourse, yet he is unable to unless he first specifies the object. He has to speak of both the mental state and its object in order to speak of the cognitive relation. Accordingly, each thought must be understood to have two aspects: the structural, psychical or subjective aspect that appears as distinct from the passing feeling in the stream of thought, and the cognitive aspect that appears as a thought of something known.

> The contrast is really between two *aspects* in which all mental facts without exception may be taken; their structural aspect, as being subjective, and their functional aspect as being cognitions. In the former aspect, the highest as well as the lowest is a feeling, a peculiarly tinged segment of the stream. This tingeing is its sensitive body, the *wie ihm zu Muthe ist*, the way it feels whilst passing. In the latter aspect the lowest mental fact as well as the highest may grasp some bit of truth as its content, even though that truth were as relationless a matter as a bare unlocalized and undated quality of pain. From the cognitive point of view, all mental facts are intellections. From the subjective point of view all are feelings. (I, 148 fn.)

James goes on to make the explanatory relationship between thought and thought's object more explicit:

> If every feeling is at the same time a bit of knowledge, we ought no longer to talk of mental states' differing by having more or less of the cognitive quality; they

> only differ in knowing more or less, in having much fact or little fact for their object...Concept and image, thus discriminated through their objects, are consubstantial in their inward nature, as modes of feeling...Both concept and image, *qua* subjective, are singular and particular. Both are moments of the stream which come and in an instant are no more. The word universality has no meaning as applied to their psychic body or structure, which is always finite. It only has a meaning when applied to their use, import, or reference to the kind of object they may reveal. The representation, as such, of the universal object is as particular as that of an object about which we know so little that the interjection 'Ha!' is all it can evoke from us."(I, 149 fn.)

Therefore, as Wilshire comments, "if the psychical aspect must be specified in conjunction with the cognitive aspect, and if the cognitive aspect involves the sense of the same, then the psychical aspect must be specified in conjunction with the sense of the same. That is the comings and goings in the stream cannot be specified in isolation from a stable world cognized—a world intended to be thought about."[25]

In reference to James' diagram cited above, which so emphatically demonstrated the putative distinctness of the field of the thought studied, thought's object, and the psychologist's reality, we are now faced with something much less suitable to such a neatly divided diagram. Numbers 2 and 3 of the fundamental postulates of the psychologists are, in the discussion of conception (the "keel and backbone of our thinking") revealed as aspects of one and the same function. It is suggested that "thought studied" and "thought's object" are known and specified only in terms of each other. Thoughts' object is beginning to dominate the psychologist's reality, including the

[25] Bruce Wilshire, *William James and Phenomenology: A Study of 'The Principles of Psychology,'* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1968), 154.

relationship of thought to what thought is about.[26] The initial definition of the thought studied (no. 2), thought's object (no. 3) and the psychologist's reality (no.4), as the necessary assumptions of the psychologist has collapsed as soon as James begins to discuss the "mind from within." If we return to our diagram, thought's object (no. 3) can only be specified in relation to the thought studied (no.2). In other words, the stream of thought cannot be articulated in isolation from the world that is *intended.*

The fourth characteristic of the stream of thought and the problems which it wreaks for James' natural scientific program are also worth noting. This fourth characteristic forces James outside of the confines of his "manifest program." Interestingly enough, in the abridgment of the *Principles*, *Psychology: Briefer Course*, in a chapter now entitled "The Stream of Consciousness," we are presented with only four characteristics of thought. Our missing fifth is our original fourth, "Human thought appears to deal with objects independent of itself; that it is, it is cognitive, or possesses the function of knowing. (I, 271) By Volume Two of the *Principles*, the residues of James' natural scientific program are clearly absent from the investigation. As James takes on the specific discussions of sensation, perception, attention, and will, he makes room for what we can now identify as a secondary program undercutting the natural scientific goals of the *Principles*.

In the following chapters some of the details of this undercutting strain in James' *Principles* will be worked out the critiques of rationalism and the correspondence theory of truth will be exposed from within the *Principles of Psychology*.

[26] Ibid., 106.

Throughout the *Principles* James turns away from his initial idea of psychology conceived as an empirical science and toward the study of psychology as a study of the foundation of meaning. Yet James never seems to be entirely comfortable with his own discoveries. Reflecting upon his own work, and upon the limits of psychology, he says: "Psychology as a natural science" never "stands on solid ground." It is a science that is fragile, and one into which James admits that the "waters of metaphysical criticism leak at every joint."[27] He describes the world as "a string of raw facts; a little gossip and wrangle about opinions; a little classification and generalization on the mere descriptive level…This is no science, it is only the hope of a science."[28]

From the outset of the *Principles* we are faced with such bold and positivistic claims as the following:

> Psychology, the science of finite, individual minds, assumes as its data (1) *thoughts and feelings*, and (2) *a physical world* in time and space with which they coexist and which (3) *they know*. Of course these data themselves are discussable; but the discussion of them (as of other elements) is called metaphysics and falls outside the province of this book. This book, assuming that thoughts and feelings exist and are vehicles of knowledge, thereupon contends that psychology when she has ascertained the empirical correlation of the various sorts of thought or feeling with definite conditions of the brain, can go no farther—can go no farther, that is, as a natural science. If she goes farther she becomes metaphysical (I, vi).

Yet, as the *Principles* sets out to examine specific topics such as the nature of the self, or of belief, this methodology becomes unsustainable. The methodological dualism involved "metaphysical" assumptions that could not be left uncriticized. James begins the *Principles* with a clear objective to remain within the limits of the "natural sciences." He

[27] William James, "Briefer Course," 433.
[28] Ibid.

assumes that "thoughts and feelings exist" and that when psychology has successfully determined the correlation of thoughts and feelings with brain states "can go no further." However, it most certainly does go further.

Chapter Two:

A Pluralistic Psychology

The aim of solidifying a psychology of meaning grounded in concrete experience has triumphed over the necessary postulates of the scientific psychologist. James' own characterization of the stream of thought threw into doubt the dualism presupposed by the natural-scientific method. The attempt to "eliminate from psychology 'considered as a natural science' the whole business of ascertaining *how* we come to know things together or to know them at all,"[29] is overturned, and James continues on his more philosophical or "metaphysical" approach in his analysis of specific psychological topics. The second current of the *Principles* culminates in the discussions of perception, belief, attention, and finally in James' account of subjectivity, revealing a psychological theory that brings together physiological science and psychological theory.

This chapter will begin in the manner that James begins Vol. II of the *Principles*, examining and rejecting dominant theories of sensation and perception and in their place offering a view harmonious with his intention of founding psychology in the concrete. Following this inquiry will be a description of the "higher" functions of the human psyche such as reason and belief, showing the intimate relationship they hold to perception. These functions—sensation, perception, reason, and belief—are always related to the functions of perception. While attempting to explain the relationship between knowledge derived from the senses and knowledge derived through reason, James neither exalts the mind nor diminishes the body. Rather, he emphasizes the continuity and complementarity between the two. These achievements secure James' objective of grounding psychology in a meaningful world that centers about an active and creative subject, one whose nature

[29] William James, "The Knowing of Things Together," 1074.

guarantees a meaningful world. As was remarked at the outset, the expressed intention of the *Principles* is to bring the reader into "direct acquaintance" with "living reality."[30]

Sensation and Perception

The words "sensation" and "perception" are often unclear; they do not carry definite meaning in the philosophic or the psychological traditions. Sensation and perception share things in common, for instance both name processes by which we come to know our environment, and both (in normal conditions) require stimulation of the organism before they can occur. James distinguishes sensation from perception in the following manner: "Perception always involves Sensation as a portion of itself; and Sensation in turn never takes place in adult life without Perception also being there. They are therefore names for different cognitive *functions*, not for different sorts of mental *fact*." (II, 1) The difference says James, between sensation and perception is not one of kind but of *degree*. Sensation differs from perception only in the "extreme simplicity" of its object or content. (II, 2) Advancing this position, James once again returns to the two interlocutors of the *Principles*, the empiricists and the rationalists, to develop his understanding of sensation and perception.

In the empiricist's tradition, sensations are abstract moments of perception that result from sensory stimuli.[31] The associationists suppose that since an object of thought

[30] William James, "James's Preface to Ferrari's Italian Translation," 3: 1483.
[31] James frequently characterizes the empiricists many schools as having an abstract understanding of sensation and perception: I, 158; 277-278; II, 3, 183.

contains many elements, thought itself must also be made up of many ideas, one idea standing for each element and combined together in appearance but really separate.[32] James observes that "most books start with sensations, as the simplest mental facts, and proceed synthetically, constructing each higher stage from those below it," yet for him this separation of sensation and perception signals an abandonment of "the empirical method of investigation." (I, 224) Empiricism, staying true to experience observed demands that however complex an object of thought may be, it is always of one undivided state of consciousness.

In the empiricist tradition, sensations appear *in* consciousness *as* mental contents, as elementary parts of more complex mental compositions. Being primarily nothing but the reflection of the stimulated state of sensory receptions, sensations are deemed discrete moments of perception. For the British empiricists, the mind of the new-born is a *tabula rasa* upon which sensations appear as isolated moments written by experience. The mind develops its "complex ideas," its complete picture of the "external world," by combinations and associations over time. Sensations are the elemental moments that provide the developing building blocks of thought.

This understanding of perception and sensation clearly violates James' own theory that thought proceeds not as a chain or succession of discrete moments, but flows as a stream. According to James, the empiricist understanding of consciousness sacrifices

[32] "There can be no difficulty in admitting that association does form the ideas of an indefinite number of individuals into one complex idea: because it is an acknowledged fact. Have we not the idea of an army? And is not that precisely the ideas of an indefinite number of men formed into one idea?"; James Mill *Analysis of Human Mind* (J.S. Mill's Edition), Vol. I, 264 cited in William James *The Principles of Psychology*, (New York, Dover Publications, 1950), I: 277.

what we know in experience to be a continuous flow for a "brickbat plan of construction." James finds no introspective or otherwise compelling evidence that would indicate that thoughts are isolated and experience presents itself as chopped up in bits.

The tradition of Locke and Hume is a one deeply and irrevocably immersed in the psychologist's fallacy, that "great snare": "the *confusion of his own standpoint with that of the mental fact* about which he is making his report." (I, 196) There are different forms of this so-called fallacy. The first is explained in the following manner:

> The psychologist...stands outside of the mental state he speaks of. Both itself and its object are objects for him. Now when it is a *cognitive* state (percept, thought, concept, etc.), he ordinarily has no other way of naming it than as the thought, percept, etc., *of that object*. He himself, meanwhile, knowing the self-same object in *his* way, gets easily led to suppose that the thought, which is *of* it, knows it in the same way in which he knows it, although this is often very far from being the case. (I, 196)

To commit this version of the psychologist's fallacy one attributes what is available only upon reflection to the original experience. One "reads back" into experience distinctions made from a different reflective perspective.

Our thoughts are directed toward things in the world, and language has developed a rich vocabulary for describing our objects of thought. However the vocabulary available for our feelings directed toward those objects is impoverished. Qualities such as hard, blue, hot, and cold are words capable of being used both in the subjective and objective sense. Yet it is the objective use of the word that is primary and we are required to describe many of our sensations by the name of the object from which it originally got (a thunderous sound, the colour of orange, a cold temperament). Consequently we have a

tendency to regard thought as a replica of the object located somewhere within the mind. Our manner of speech and vocabulary leads us to believe that object X will arouse the exact same feeling in both subject Y and psychologist Z. Naming our thoughts by the objects from which they came allows one to assume that as the object exists, so too must the thought exist. In such instances, thoughts of identity over time, multiplicity, and succession are thought to be brought about only through a multiplicity of atomized perceptions as opposed to the stream of thought as it is experienced.

Another related form of the psychologist's fallacy is the assumption that the mental state studied must be conscious of itself in the same way that the psychologist is conscious of it. (I, 197) A mental state is aware of itself only from within, the mental state "grasps what we call its own content and nothing more." (I, 197) The psychologist however, is aware of the mental state from the outside, as an onlooker. The psychologist knows the thought, plus the object, plus all the relations surrounding it. This form of the fallacy cautions against substituting what we known consciousness *is*, for what it is a consciousness *of*, including external relations among the things we claim the thought to be aware. (I, 198)

Language makes the psychologist prone to certain kinds of errors. One could emphasize the delusions inflicted upon us by language and say that a word functions to denote a group of phenomena. Consequently we are prone to suppose a substantive element exists transempirically beyond the phenomena, such as The Equal, The Beautiful, etc. However, the lack of a word will often lead to opposite error in thought, overlooking phenomena that would be obvious if only we had a word for it (i.e. the distinction

between the-thing-thought-of and the-thought-thinking-it expressed in Latin by *cogitatum* and *cogitation*). James emphasizes the importance of avoiding the substitution of what we know consciousness *is* for what consciousness is *of*, and counting its physical and outward relations among the objects of experience.

The problem of perception for people like Wundt was cloaked in the psychologist's fallacy. The psychology of perception in the late nineteen hundreds often centered about questions such as, how can our sensory systems provide us with knowledge of space? Confusing one's own understanding is what space was with what knowledge might be expected of ordinary observation and experience, those guilty of the psychologist's fallacy were forced to hypothesize intricate interpretive processes that converted basic sensory events into complex knowledge of dimension and structure captured in the phrase "space perception."

Space Perception

James calls Berkeley's work on space perception the "first achievement of any note" in the history of psychology (II, 271), and it was from him that psychology inherited the two great problems that framed discussion of space perception in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Berkeley's *Theory of Vision* made two central points: 1.) that distance is not a visual but rather a tactile perception; and 2.) that there is no one 'idea' or quality common to the sensations of touch and sight, such that one may, from the look of an object, deduce anything regarding its felt shape or size and conversely

from its felt shape or size to its look. (I, 271) Berkeley thus formulates the problem of discerning that manner in which the various senses harmonize to form one world.

The associationists inherited many of Berkeley's difficulties. They tried to solve the problem of the harmony of the senses, claiming that the senses suggest one another through the process of association. The problem that emerges for James regarding the associationists "solution" to Berkeley is that they explain the extensive quality itself by the association of feelings which posses it. John Stuart Mill states for example that "the idea of space is, at bottom, one of time,"[33] and Bain claims that "as a quality, it [space] has no other origin and no other meaning that the *association* of these different [non-spatial] motor and sensitive effects."[34] Yet association itself can produce nothing original, it can only weave together ideas.

The associationists (Brown, the Mills, and Bain) ended up defending a Kantian position when discussing space perception: "there is a *quality produced* out of the inward resources of the mind, to envelop sensations which, as given originally, are not spatial, but which, on being cast into the spatial form, become united and orderly." (II, 272) James insists that the Kantian view is incoherent and that to speak of space as a super-sensational mental product is to mythologize it. James' refutation of the Kantian "machine shop" view of space perception rests primarily on introspective grounds:

> I have no experience of mentally producing or creating space. My space-intuitions occur not in two times but in one. There is not one moment of passive inextensive sensations, succeeded by another of active extensive perception, but the form I see is as immediately felt as the color which fills it out. (II, 275)

[33] John Stuart Mill "Examination of Hamilton" 3rd Ed. Cited at I, 283
[34] Bain. "Sense and Intellect" p. 372 Cited at I. 283

The linchpin of the Kantian claim that so many empiricists ended up having to defend is that there exists one infinite continuous *unit of space*, and our knowledge of this cannot be a "piecemeal sensational affair." Yet this notion of a single space is what James charges with being piecemeal construction, claiming that most of us must drop the thought of the space in front of us when we turn our attention to the space that lies behind. And the space that is near to us is all the more divisible than the space further away.

By rejecting the theory of association, which was the dominant explanatory approach of the day, James was left to account for a series of problems that the associationists had previously addressed. One such problem was the relationship between sensation and perception; another is the problem of relating sensation to the function of the senses. James' criticism of the theories of space perception and his critique of empiricism and associationism arise out of his own understanding of sensation and perception, which implied for James that all of our sensations are *extensive wholes*.

Sensation

For James, a vague feeling of volume is present in every sensation, even those arising from the inner organs. For example, the whole body is spatially sensed during nausea or fatigue. "Our entire cubic content," says James, "seems then sensibly manifest to us as such, and feelings much larger than any local pulsation, pressure, or discomfort."

(II, 135) Since this spatial feeling is an aspect of all sensory experience James dubs it "the original sensation of space." Loud sounds, for instance, even have a certain "enormousness of feeling"; they are intrinsically spatial and not mere impressions. Although at first it is vague, later through "imagination, association, attention, these volumes are subdivided and ordered. (II, 145)

At first, each sense has its own world of space and to a degree it retains some autonomy. But through constant dealings with stable things, one comes to correlate different spaces together. (II, 182, 188) I can then see the coffee cup and feel my hand against it and know my tactile and visual perceptions to be of on and the same object. Through ordering of kind, we come to have the single space which we move and live in, oriented with respect to the different directions, "in front, "behind," "up," "down," etc.. These spaces refer not to an "extrinsic total space," as in the Kantian picture,[35] but to the living body. "Relation to our own body is enough." (II, 151)

A pure sensation is called an "abstraction," though not in the sense of the abstract moments characteristic of the Empiricists, because strictly speaking, the adult never has anything like a "pure sensation." The adult has prejudices of attention. In sensation we first meet with the "*bare immediate natures*" by which we later come to distinguish objects. As sensations present objects, they cannot be described in the manner of the empiricists as *mental content* that *re-presents*.

> *The first sensation which an infant get is for him the Universe.* And the Universe which he later comes to know is nothing but an amplification and an implication

[35] Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics that Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science*, ed. Gary Hatfield, Cambridge, (Cambridge University Press, 2004), §12.

> of that first simple germ…In his dumb awakening to the consciousness of *something there*, a mere *this* as yet (or something for which even the term *this* would be too discriminative, and the intellectual acknowledgement of which would be better expressed by the bare interjection 'lo!'), the infant encounters an object in which (though it be given in pure sensation) all the 'categories of the understanding' are contained. (II, 8)

Even the very first sensation of the new-born is not an elementary thing, but the way in which the *whole Universe* first appears, with all its significance intact. The world appears not as the discriminate "that" of knowledge about, but the "bare interjection 'lo!'" of acquaintance. Sensations for the child present the world, not a duplicate of it. Sensations are not within the mind, for sensation is shown to be the way in which the mind knows things.

In Berkeley's theory of perception, which James calls "eccentric projection," sensations are regarded as subjective and internal bits of data. Berkeley introduced the theory that the human eye does not perceive three-dimensional space. If we do have impressions of visual space, this is because the flat optical perceptions are associated with the sensation of touch. Only by some special act on the part of the subject are sensations 'projected' so as to appear located in the outer world. James rejects eccentric projection on the grounds that it supposes sensation to be located in one place (the brain) and then transfers these sensations to another place (the external world) by some mysterious process. In James' view sensations are not properly things, and therefore cannot be said to be projected. Furthermore, consciousness cannot be said to inhabit any place and it cannot be said to be projected.

> Certainly a child newly born in Boston, who gets a sensation from the candle-flame which lights the bedroom, or from his diaper-pin, does not feel either of

> these object to be situated in longitude 72 W and latitude 41 N. He does not feel them to be in the third story of the house...The flame fills its own place, the pain fills it own place; but as yet these places are neither identified with, nor discriminated from, any other places. That comes later. For the places thus first sensibly known are elements of the child's space-world which remain with him all his life; and by memory and later experience he learns a vast number of things *about* those places which at first he did not know. (II, 34)

Furthermore, consciousness cannot be said to *inhabit* any place and it cannot be said that a sensation feels either itself or its object to be in the same place as the brain.[36] Sensations do have dynamic relations with the brain but they have cognitive relations with everything.

> [The] supposition that a sensation primitively *feels either itself or its object to be in the same place with the brain* is absolutely groundless, and neither *a priori* probability nor facts from experience can be adduced to show that such a deliverance forms any part of the original cognitive function of our sensibility. (II, 34-35)

So where then, if not *in consciousness,* do we feel the original objects of sensation? James' reply to this question proves to blur his founding duality even further and leads the *Principles* into controversial territory.

In our experience, space is not an empty place that we fill by projection; sensations are spatial themselves. "Space *means* but the aggregate of all our possible sensations. There is no duplicate space known *aliunde*, or created by an 'epoch-making achievement' into which our sensations, originally spaceless, are dropped. They *bring* space and all its places to our intellect, and do not derive it thence" (II, 35). As Linschoten observes in his analysis, the "outsideness" of visual sensations belongs to

[36] Hans Linschoten, *On the Way Toward a Phenomenological Psychology: The Psychology of William James*, ed. Amedeo Giorgi, ed. and trans. Amedeo Giorgi (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1968), 91.

them in a similar way as "insideness" belongs to bodily sensations.[37] The body is not something given before the sensational experience of it is given *in* and *as* sensation. Again, James refers to the new-born to illustrate this argument.

> By his body, then, the child later means simply *that place where* the pain from the pin, and a lot of other sensations like it, we or are felt. It is no more true to say that he locates that pain in his body, than to say that he locates his body in that pain. Both are true: that pain is part of what he *means by the word body*. Just so by the outer world the child means nothing more that *that place where* the candle-flame and a lot of other sensations like it are felt. He no more locates the candle in the outer world than he locates the outer world in the candle. Once again, he does both; for the candle is part of what he *means* by 'outer world.' (II, 35)

In other words, then, "body" and "outside world" are not empty terms or discrete locations to be filled up by sensations, but are meanings inherent to sensation. Sensation is shown to be the way the self knows the world. The child's experience is considered to be objective. Only later, through reflection, does the child come to be aware of itself as a self. Sensations are the least developed kind of consciousness and are objective; only through reflection do we become aware of an inner world at all. Our first way of knowing things is not subjective or mental but rather objective and world-directed.

James concludes from his discussion of sensation, perception and space that we *select* certain sensations to be the bearers of reality. He speaks of the education of the artist as something that consists in learning not only to see the presented signs but the represented things; to *see* the object as one *feels* the object is the mark of the artist and demonstrative of this selective function at work in perception. (II, 243) From the very beginning the world is ordered around the "bald facts" of sensation. Sensations come to

[37] Ibid., 88-96.

us as facts and we feel them at the seat of desires and interests. However they are not simply given and non-malleable. What we call 'experience' is a history in which purposes and things become ordered. The process of sensation is constantly being revised; it is a process that is unending. (II, 110) The theme of selectivity is omnipresent throughout the *Principles*. The attention given to the selective quality of human perception bears the mark of Darwin's influence on James' thinking, and leads him to some of his most remarkable discoveries. This theme of selectivity will be explained further in the following sections.

Rationality

In the previous chapter, the distinction between knowledge about and knowledge by acquaintance was introduced. For James it is by way of perception that we first become acquainted with objects; perception and sensation are held to be the seat of feelings that are held to be the "germ and starting point of knowledge." In James' description of sensation and perception, the world of the senses contains half-formed patterns that are ready to be expressed; the question of how we express them and how these expressions are truthful to the thing itself is of central importance to James' psychology.

Knowledge about a thing is knowledge of its relations, or articulating what lies on its "fringe." Most of the relations felt in the stream of thought are not clear and defined but unarticulated. "Of most of [a things] relations," says James, "we are only aware in the

penumbral nascent way of a 'fringe' of unarticulated affinities about it." (I, 259) As the discussion of conception made clear, and will become clearer in my treatment of the function of attention, all voluntary thinking is thinking of some topic or subject around which all thought centers. This topic can be a problem or "gap" we wish to fill, or it can be a "mood of interest" that functions both by inciting an active thought process and also by guiding the search and accepting or rejecting trains of thought insofar as the fringe of relations contains affinities with the topic.

Reasoning proceeds from definite interests and purposes, whether they are the purposes of understanding a mathematical problem or fulfilling a basic need. Other forms of thinking such as irrational thought or daydreaming are excluded from the category of rational thought because they wander incorrectly from one purpose to another. Reasoning, on the other hand, is focused on its object or purpose. It disregards any accidental attributes of a thing and focuses on its essence, "that one of its properties which is so *important form my interests* that, in comparison with it I may neglect the rest (II, 335).

As early as 1879, then years prior to the publication of the *Principles of Psychology*, James was working out some of his most influential philosophical ideas. The first version of "The Sentiment of Rationality," later published as a chapter of *The Will to Believe*, appeared in the journal *Mind*. In this essay, James asks after the ground of rationality itself. James comes to the conclusion that rationality, when taken to mean an understanding of the necessary or irrefutable, is grounded irrationally. He argues that no philosophical system, no set of scientific principles, or aesthetic rules, are capable of *independently* demonstrating their own rationality. "The Sentiment of Rationality" is not

concerned with defining the concept "rationality" or "knowledge about," for, according to James, this would not address the immediate concern. Rather, James asks after the psychological nature of the *feeling of rationality*, which is presupposed in the very definition of rationality itself. The questions that ground the inquiry of "The Sentiment of Rationality" are of a psychological nature: What are the characteristics of rational thought? How do we *feel* when it is achieved? How do we recognize it for what it is? James answers these questions in the following way: We recognize rationality as we recognize all other phenomena, "by certain subjective marks with which it affects [us]."[38] In other words, we recognize rationality by the feeling of being rational. It is only by the experience of being rational that we come to know what rationality means. What then are the subjective marks of rationality? "A strong feeling of ease, peace, rest...lively relief and pleasure."[39] The sentiment of rationality is also a feeling of sufficiency, a satisfaction in the present moment, characterized by the absence of distress and discomfort. Consequently, whatever modes of thought that contributes to the "fluency of thought" may be deemed rational.

Helmholtz's "immortal works on the eyes and ears" led James to the conclusion that *practical utility* wholly determines which parts of our sensations we are aware of and which parts we ignore. Darwinian biology emphasized for James that the intellect is governed by practical interests. "The germinal question concerning things brought before

[38] William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," *Mind* 4 (July, 1878): 22.
[39] Ibid.

the first time before consciousness," James characterizes as, "not the theoretic 'What is that?' but the practical 'Who goes there?'" (II, 314)

There are different ideas about theoretic thinking in the tradition of philosophy and James discusses some of them in "The Sentiment of Rationality." Each discussion of the nature of the philosophic tradition informs the criticisms and perspective of the *Principles*.

> The widest postulate of rationality is that the world *is* rationally intelligible throughout, after the pattern of *some* ideal system. The whole war of the philosophies is over that point of faith. Some say they can see their way already to the rationality; others that it is hopeless in any other but the mechanical way. To some the very fact that there is a world at all seems irrational. Nonentity would be a more natural thing than existence, for these minds. One philosopher at least says that the relatedness of things to each other is irrational anyhow, and that a world of relations can never be made intelligible (II,667).

The intellectualists' versions of rationalism presuppose a "block universe" wherein particulars can only be understood insofar as they are explainable aspects of a closed system. The whole takes priority over the part. The intellectualist aims at total comprehensibility, emphasizing a subject (a transcendental ego or thinking subject) who stands apart form nature because of its ability to conceptualize. Conversely, there is the empirical tradition that, according to James, has its own form of rationalism. The empiricist presupposes a world of mechanistic atomism about which we seek absolute clarity. Empiricists are struck by the fact that mere familiarity with things is able to produce a feeling of their rationality, so much so that the feeling of familiarity is equated

with rationality.[40] Custom allows the empiricist to explain phenomena by antecedents and to know them by foreseeing their consequences. Seeking to disclose the nature of the world, the empiricist will go so far as to deny the whole, giving priority to the parts.

What strikes James about these opposing trends is that both the empiricist and the intellectualist seem to share a common assumption—that the nature of the universe can be disclosed by a rationalistic approach. James' goal, which begins in *The Sentiment of Rationality*, is to show to the intellectualist that the universe is less systematically related and to the empiricist that it is more closely related than either suppose, and to both that the rationalistic approach fails to disclose the truth about the way the world is.

> We seem thus led to the conclusion that a system of categories is, on the one hand, the only possible philosophy, but is, on the other, a most miserable and inadequate substitute for the fullness of the truth. It is a monstrous abridgment of things which like all abridgments is got by the absolute loss and casting out of real matter. This is why so few human beings truly care for Philosophy. The particular determinations which she ignores are the real matter exciting other aesthetic and practical needs, quite as potent and authoritative as hers. What does the moral enthusiast care for philosophical ethics? Why does the *Aesthetik* of every German philosopher appear to the artist like the abomination of desolation? What these men need is particular counsel, and no barren, universal truism.[41]

One misreads James' position regarding the sentiment of rationality if one thinks he claims that we focus too much of our attention on intellect and knowledge and not enough on feeling and action. This claim overlooks the issue that is at the heart of the matter. Intellect and knowledge, feelings, emotions and sensations, are not separable things. Mind and emotion are not contending parties in James' psychology.

---

[40] David Hume *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed., ed. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), Bk. 1 §VII.
[41] William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," 338.

> Indeed, among the subtlest emotions is one that, if common speech were to be believed, is the enemy of all feeling. I mean reason, rationality. Depending on the speaker and the situation, is praised as "cool reason" or condemned as "cold reason," these modulated temperatures being meant to distinguish it from such sources of heat as sympathy and lust. But one has only to look around the world or consult history to discover that the most passionate fanatics are the devotees of reason. As for the basis of all reasoning, it is no more than a feeling—the conviction of obviousness that we experience in self-evident truths: "equals added to equals give equals." Whoever doubts or denies makes us angry or contemptuous (more passion!) by questioning not so much our thought as the irresistible force of our feeling, which is not an act of reason at all.[42]

Intellectualists overemphasize the idea that that experience is a "dumb that" until it is named and classified as a "what." Although James recognizes that there are advantages to such a description, it can become vicious. We can define or conceptualize the flow of experience while forgetting and falsifying the origin of concepts as humanly constructed extracts from the flux. James consistently argued that we are situated in and not separate from the world, and our philosophic interpretations should reflect that.

James' own position is that "meaning is a function of the more 'transitive' parts of consciousness, the 'fringe' of relations which we feel surrounding the image, be the latter sharp or dim." (I, 49) Beyond our first sensation, consciousness is a matter of suggestion and therefore we must look to perceptions, not sensations, as the base of knowledge. But we do not passively assimilate the "outside world;" rather, out of "a conflux of sensible qualities," some are regarded as "more constant, interesting, or practically important," and therefore we have to consider them as essential constituents.

Belief

[42] Jacques Baruzen, *A Stroll With William James* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 66.

In the chapter "The Perception of Reality" James is concerned with the question of existence: What are the conditions under which we think something is real? What are the reasons one thing is believed in as opposed to another? These are the questions that initiate James' discussion of the perception of reality.

We cannot believe in something, judge it to be the case, desire it, or assert its existential status unless it is thought of in the first place. James, following Brentano, asserts that all acts of consciousness are intentional acts. In other words, consciousness is consciousness of something. Brentano claims that every object is given in a two-fold way: as something acknowledged (e.g. desired, remembered, grabbed hold of) in a particular way. James cites Brentano in "The Perception of Reality" and in agreement with him acknowledges that "the way in which ideas are combined is a part of *the inner constitution of the thought's object or content.*" (II, 268)[43] Conception and belief (what Brentano calls judgment) are two different psychic phenomena, yet belief in the object of thought always presupposes the mere thought of it, too.

James adds to Brentano's two-fold definition of intentionality. First says James, I experience an object, and then I ask, is it a real something? James Edie explains James'

[43] "Every object comes into consciousness in a twofold way, as simply thought of [*vorgestellt*] and as admitted [*anerkannt*] or denied. The relation is analogous to that which is assumed by most philosophers (by Kant no less than by Aristotle) to obtain between mere thought and desire. Nothing is ever desired without being thought of; but the desiring is nevertheless a second quite new and peculiar form of relation to the object, a second quite new and peculiar form of relation to the object, a second quite new way of receiving it into consciousness. No more is anything judged [i.e., believed or disbelieved] which is not thought of too. But we must insist that, so soon as the object of a thought becomes the object of an assenting or rejecting judgment, our consciousness steps into an entirely new relation towards it. It is then twice present in consciousness, as thought of, and as held for real or denied; just as when desire awakens for it, it is both thought and simultaneously desired." Franz Brentano, *Psychologie*, cited in William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, (New York: Dover, 1950), II: 286.

modification of Brentano's concept of intentionality, which comets to two points: (1) identification of objects which can be identically the same for a multiplicity of different acts of consciousness, and (2) an active and selective achievement of consciousness rather than a merely passive or static directedness to objects already constituted independent of the acts which grasp them as objects.[44]

I first experience an object as such and then I ask the question, is it a real something—when I reply 'yes it is real' or 'no this is an illusion,' I have a belief. Yet we should not be misled. We are not concerned here with first experiencing something, *then* confirming its existence. Rather, the whole has already taken place before reflection. James' example of thunder-breaking-in-upon-silence is not the mere topic of thought, but the perceptual object itself. To hear thunder-breaking-in-upon-silence is not necessarily to judge "thunder breaks upon silence." James, with the help of Brentano's concept of judgment, defines the object and its inner constitution. In the formulation of "thunder-breaking-upon-silence" the belief presupposes the thought. Yet as to the object as a whole, its reality, the question 'is this a true proposition or not?' initiates a new psychic act—what James calls belief: "the psychic attitude in which our mind stands toward the proposition taken as a whole." (II, 287) The feeling of the real, the whole, the very experience of reality is taken as irreducible. Given that James supposes the feeling of reality to be irreducible, does this mean that the inquiry into its nature can go no further? No. James asks after its conditions.

[44] James Edie, *William James and Phenomenology,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 26.

He begins with a thought experiment: "Suppose a new-born mind, entirely blank and waiting for experience to begin." (II, 287) The first experience of this new-born mind is of a lit candle against a dark background, and nothing else. We are to suppose that this candle is only imaginary, a hallucination. The necessary question becomes, 'will the candle be believed in?.' James makes it quite clear. For *us* the onlookers, the psychologists, the candle is most certainly unreal and when we say it is unreal we mean something quite precise. "[There] is a world known to *us* which *is* real; and to which we perceive that the candle does not belong; it belongs exclusively to that individual mind, has no *status* anywhere else...the candle is simply outside of our reality and belief altogether. (II, 288) *Yet*, for that new-born mind, such considerations could never enter. "The candle is its all, its absolute. (II, 289) The new-born mind has no other reality with which to compare that of its present experience. The reality *par excellence* is that of the hallucinatory candle. No alternative candle, or any different position or flicker of the wick could suggest itself as conceivable.

The sense that anything can be deemed unreal or disbelieved can only arise when one thing is contradicted by another. "Any object which remains uncontradicted is *ipso factor* believed and posited as absolute reality." (II, 289) The psychological contrary of belief is not disbelief, but doubt and inquiry; they are phenomena that belong to the same psychological order. But how do we know when one thing is thought of is contradicted by another? In the case of the child, there is no "other thing;" the candle is its all and absolute, contradiction is no problem. To illustrate this, James gives another example; here he refers to a horse named Maggie. If one simply dreams of a horse with wings,

nothing is contradicted; like the infant with his candle the fully imagined horse presents no problem. Thinking of the horse Pegasus is unproblematic; furthermore we can even say true and false things of Pegasus.

> That horse, its wings, and its place, are all equally real. But if with this horse I make an inroad into the *world otherwise known*, and say, for example, 'That is my old mare Maggie, having grown a pair of wings here she stands in her stall,' the whole case is altered...'Maggie in her stall with wings! Never!' The wings are unreal, then, visionary. I have dreamed a lie about Maggie in her stall. (II, 289)

All propositions entertained are believed in by their very existence *as* thoughts, unless of course they are contradicted by "the world otherwise known"; disbelief is but the "incidental complication to belief." (I, 284) "The whole distinction of real and unreal, the whole psychology of belief, disbelief, and doubt, is thus grounded on two mental facts—first, that we are liable to think differently of the same; and second, that when we have done so, we can choose which way of thinking to adhere to and which to disregard." (II, 290) Those things we "adhere to" become real objects for us, and consequently those things disregarded are equally disregarded as imaginary. If with the horse named Maggie, as opposed to, say, Pegasus, we attribute wings, we err. We have "dreamed a lie about Maggie," but not about Pegasus. The contradiction is not between things in the same sub-universe but between two things in two different universes.

A Pluralistic Universe

In "The Divided Self of William James" Richard Gale defends James as both a promethean pragmatist and an anti-promethean mystic. Nowhere better in the *Principles*

of Psychology does this anti-promethean mystic appear than in the chapter on "The Perception of Reality." Our scientific self may accept an atomistic world, some version of materialism or determinism, while our moral self believes that there are undetermined acts in a human world of meaning.[45] Gale sees James as someone who has "many different selves hungering for self-realization, each of whose interests are directed toward its own corresponding world."[46] This is a characterization of the Jamesian subject, if not of James himself that I agree with. What appear as inconsistent claims and desires from the scientist/moral agent are neutralized in James' chapter on the "Perception of Reality." The 'popular mind,' as James characterizes it, classifies the objects branded as unreal as "equivalent to nothing at all." However, the "genuinely philosophical mind" must account for these existences—"*as* objects of fancy, *as* errors, *as* occupants of dreamland, etc., they are in their way indefeasible parts of life, as undeniable features of the Universe, as the realities are in their way." (II, 291) The complete philosopher is the one who tries not only to account for and assign each object its place in the world, "but he also seeks to determine the relation of each sub-world to the others in the total world which *is*." (II, 291) To begin the discussion of the "sub-worlds" or "many worlds," James compiles a list that is supposed to acknowledge what we can recognize as existing with its "own special style and existence":

1. The world of sense, or of physical 'things' as we instinctively apprehend them;
2. The world of science, or of physical things as the learned conceive them;
3. The world of ideal relations, or abstract truths;
4. The world of 'idols of the tribe,' illusions or prejudices common to the race;

[45] Richard M. Gale, *The Divided Self of William James*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 190.
[46] Ibid., 191

5. The various supernatural worlds, faith and fable;
6. The various worlds of individual opinion;
7. The worlds of sheer madness and vagary.

Each object thought of is referred to one or another of these sub-worlds (or some similar list). Each of these worlds, whether the world of science, of the idols of the tribe, of madness, has its own "fashion," a logic that is consistent with itself.

One can define and give all the rules necessary for identifying winged horses and unicorns even if these creatures do not exist within the world of perception. "Each world *whilst it is attended to* is real after its own fashion; only the reality lapses with the attention." (II, 293) The worlds of literature, the world of the *Iliad* of *King Lear* or *Ivanhoe*, are all internally consistent worlds based on specific attitudes or beliefs, which establish their own sense of reality. Thus, we can say such things as:

> Ivanhoe did not *really* marry Rebecca as Thackeray *falsely* makes him do. The real Ivanhoe-world is the one which Scott wrote down for us. In *that world* Ivanhoe does *not* marry Rebecca. The objects within that world are knit together by perfectly definite relations, which can be affirmed or denied. Once absorbed in the novel, we turn our backs on all other worlds, and for the time the Ivanhoe-world remains our absolute reality. When we wake from the spell, however, we find the still more real world, which reduces Ivanhoe, and other things connected with him, to the fictive status. (II, 292-293)

The sub-world of fable, for instance the world of Ivanhoe and Rebecca, is a world in which we can certainly say true and false things. It is a world where relations are definite and precise. We can, as James argues, "absorb" ourselves into these relations, give our attention over to the text and enter into the world of *Ivanhoe*. Yet "when we wake from the spell," when we put down the book and attention lapses, we are faced with a "still more real world;" a world which "reduces Ivanhoe, and other things connected with him,

to the fictive status." It is this "still more real world" that James separates and identifies from this initial list of seven sub-worlds to give the most attention, referring to it as distinct from the order of the other realities. This is the perceptual world or what James calls the "paramount reality."

Interest and the Perceptual World

James praises Hume, his account was "essentially correct" when he argued that belief in the existence of a thing was simply having the idea of it in a "lively" and "forcible" manner.[47] The matter of belief, reality or the real, is, then, something quite distinct from any other predicate that one may hold true. And here, James, in a rather uncharacteristically charitable moment with Kant, praises him. (II, 296) Kant has said, "By whatever, and by however many, predicates we may think a thing—even if we completely determine it—we do not make the least addition to the thing when we further declare that this thing *is*...Whatever, therefore, and however much our concept of an object may contain, we must go outside of it, if we are to ascribe existence to the object."[48] James agrees, commenting:

> *The fons et origo of all reality, whether from the absolute or the practical point of view, is thus subjective, is ourselves*. As bare logical thinkers, without emotional reaction, we give reality to whatever objects we think of, for they are really phenomena, or objects of our passing thought, if nothing more. But, *as thinkers with emotional reaction, we give what seems to us a still higher degree of reality*

[47] "I say, then, that belief is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain." David Hume, *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sec V. pt 2

[48] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, §B 628-629.

> *to whatever things we select and emphasize and turn to* WITH A WILL. These are our *living* realities…Reality, starting from out Ego, thus sheds itself from point to point—first, upon all objects which have an immediate sting of interest for our Ego in them, and next, upon the objects most continuously related with these. It only fails when the connecting thread is lost. A whole system may be real, if it only hangs to our Ego by one immediately *stinging* term. (II, 297)

As thinkers with an "emotional reaction," we are thinkers with prejudice. We do not come to objects indiscriminately, but always with interest, emphasis, and judgment. Such prejudices found our "living realities" and ground the interest that makes possible something like the word "reality". The world of living realities, as contrasted with that of unrealities, is thus "anchored in the Ego, considered as an *active*, and emotional term." (297) It is the *active ego,*[49] the ego not as consciousness or mediator, but as actor in a world that makes judgment possible. "'As sure as I exist!'—this is our uttermost warrant for the being of all other things." (297) For James, the sense of belief is inextricably linked to the sense of the word "real."

James speaks of the "paramount reality" of the world of sensation and of the "many worlds" or "sub-universes" built upon and surrounding it. He distinguishes the world of "real existence" or the "paramount reality" from the other orders of reality by the degree or kind of ego involvement they express. This reality is given to us through our perceptual involvement with other living beings and objects with which we have a practical and interested relationship. "It can be defined as the world within the reach of

[49] James' is using the term "ego" here in the "common sense" or pejorative meaning (i.e. self). Chapter X, "Consciousness of Self," contains a lengthy and thorough refutation of the Ego in its philosophical (German) usages. The footnote on page 297 of Vol. II runs: "I use the notion of the Ego here, as common-sense uses it. Nothing is prejudged as to the results (or absence of results) of ulterior attempts to analyze the notion."

our senses, the world we can grasp immediately, upon which we can act and which can act upon us."[50]

> A dagger hurts us only when in contact with our skin, a poison only when we take it into our mouths, and we can only use an object for our advantage when we have it in our muscular control. It is as tangibles, then, that things concern us most; and the other senses, so far as their practical use goes, do but warn us of what tangible things to expect. (II, 306)

Perception exercises coerciveness over our attention and emotional responses and possesses an independence over other objects which distinguishes it from other kinds of experience. We can spend our evenings in the world of dreams yet our bodies still age in the perceptual world. This is the world that Husserl will later describe as that in which we are already living and which gives the foundation for all achievements of knowledge and for scientific determination. "This reality is the reality we enter with 'practical relations'; it is that which is *believed* to be sensibly at hand and to which we turn to *with a will*; it is all that, too, all those things believe to be related in space and time." (II, 297)

The perceptual world is paramount because it is primary and inescapable. It is the world in which we pursue our practical goals, live as citizens, and establish our lives. This is the realm in which perceptual realities become objectified, objects of perception become objects of the arts or sciences. When attention is held, and we are in the midst of these other realms, whether of science or the idols, the perceptual world is still pervasive on the "fringes" of consciousness. The lived time and lived space of the perceptual world mark it distinctly from our worlds of science, idol, or art. Here our bodies locate us and determine "practical interest" in a way in which the sub-universes do not.

[50] James Edie, *William James and Phenomenology*, 4.

These concepts, coupled together, demand further questioning from the reader of James' *Principles*. What did James take to be the unifying relation between the worlds in virtue of which they form "the total world which *is*"? Do existential contradictions and interrelations come into play at the level of merely thinking something, or do they come into play at the level of belief? The latter question will help us address the former. Existential contradictions and interrelations occur neither at the level of belief nor at the level of mere thought. Rather, the relationship between the various sub-worlds is an *interest*-based choice by a subject. Believing in the reality of thought's object is a *choice*. It is on the basis of choice that we think one thing or another, and then we choose, in a further act, to believe in one sub-universe and not another. This choosing, this holding together of precarious worlds, is a function of our *selective interest*. While discussing attention, James says, "Each world *whilst it is attended to* is real after its own fashion; only the reality lapses with the attention. (II, 293) The "practical relation" to which James gives primacy in the "Perception of Reality" is the relation to the active and emotional self to that which interests us, which we value, and thus grant existence to.

The organization of experience is shown to be the work of the selective interests and activities of the subject. This function of selection shows us the functions of discrimination, distinction, reason and categorical thought to be the result of the needs and interests of the subject. All knowledge of reality is held to be dependent upon human activity and in turn, reality itself can only be approached and defined *through experience*. The very word "reality" signifies nothing other than a relation to our active and emotional selves. (PP, 297) The main themes of James' thought work to show a view of the subject

as an active experiencer, and it is this that shows itself to be the idea around which James' theory of reality, his theory of knowledge and psychology can be oriented.

Chapter Three

Selectitivity

The previous chapter's interpretation of James' views of perception brought to the center of the *Principles* the related themes of interest and attention. As was demonstrated, interest and attention play an active role in all mental functions. From the simplest perceptual experience to the highest intellectual feat, interest and attention are present characterizing and making possible "thought" and "feeling" which are intended to cover all mental life. Chapter two's description of the relationship between perception and interest yields a picture of a mind that is free to choose—choose its reality, its sensational experiences, and its truths. Not a set of immutable truths, but human purposes, necessities, and desires, our moral and aesthetic selves are the bearers of our reality.

Yet as we know from the discussion of chapter one, James' intent was to ground psychology in a set of laws; ones that would make psychology a science not unlike mathematics or physics. If practical, aesthetic and moral desires are given central roles in James' psychology, how could psychology be anything more than what Kant called mere "natural description" that was subject to the endless speculations of metaphysics and uncertainty? How are the two streams of the *Principles* reconciled—James' drive for the certainty of natural science or naturalistic psychology and the psychology of human meaning? These are the questions that frame this chapter.

Habit

The first few chapters of the *Principles* lay out the physiological descriptions held to be indispensable to the study of psychology: brain function, habit, and the conditions of

brain activity. It is in these chapters that the reader is first introduced to the function of habit.

James ranks amongst Aristotle and Hume as one of the great defenders of habit. Habit frees the mind for more complex functions; it conserves energy and shapes moral character. Habit is characterized by James in purely physical terms: "Plasticity of organic matter" is the phrase that captures the "mechanics" of habit in James' psychology. He cites the work of Dumont, describing the way in which new clothing, after being worn a few times, will cling better to the body then when first purchased. A lock will open with less effort after each use. (I, 105) Habit is marked in organic matter by an overcoming of resistance—to reproduce the effect less energy is required. The nervous system, like the piece of clothing or the lock is largely characterized by the same kinds of habits as those of other materials. For example, epilepsies and other neuralgias are conditions that often keep persist only because they have already begun. Gout, a sprained ankle, or a dislocated shoulder are other examples. The brain, like the lock, the cloth, and the dislocated shoulder is a substance largely characterized by habits.

Habit works to simplify the movements of everyday life both by lessening the amount of effort demanded for their execution, and by increasing the accuracy with which the motion is preformed. Whilst performing a habitual act the body operates with a kind of autonomy. A piano player will perform a composition made familiar through repetition while carrying on a conversation, or engaging in unrelated thoughts. The muscles themselves seem to guide the musician rather than any effort or attention. A ballet dancer can execute the most precise movement without strain through the same kind of habit.

The effort of will or the demands of attention or concentration does not play any kind of role in performances where habit is fixed. Consequently, where habit is fixed, the effort of conscious attention required to perform the act is minimal, if present at all. Conversely, conscious attention is most intense when habits are absent. In hesitant action or indecision, habit and reflex are impotent to guide action.

The more complex an animal is so too their sphere of action is more complex. Lower animals have flexibility only with respect to a limited sphere of action; their basic patterns are fixed by instinct and habit while more complex animals, most remarkably the human being, have a wide sphere of possible action. In any novel situation the function of habit must play a backseat to the function of consciousness. Each thing presents an array of possible responses that indicate choice and selection not present in the automatic and fixed reactions of frogs and fish. Lower animals do not hesitate between alternatives, thus we label the acts of a frog or those of a fish to be "meaningless" unlike the conscious or deliberate and teleologically motivated acts of the higher animals.

Given that complex actions like the playing of a piano or the execution of a graceful pirouette are ones which are largely accounted for by reference to unconscious habits and an autonomous body, why not go further? Why can one not say that just like the piano player who has made the compositions of Oscar Peterson habitual and thus is able to execute their performance without the effort of conscious attention, so too the higher functions of composition or improvisation is also a function of a more complex kind of habit? Given that at least some functions of the human psyche are amenable to a physiological description, that stimulus-response activity can be located in complex

human acts, how far can we go with a purely mechanical or physiological description of consciousness? If the spinal cord is amendable to a mechanical description, why not say that the rest of the nervous system is also amenable to this description, and further that this description is exhaustive of psychology?

Physiological research was largely responsible for the independence of psychology as a discipline distinct from metaphysics and many of the new psychologists focused their attention strictly on physiological research. The emphasis on physiology culminated in what was called the "reflex arc theory." The reflex arc theory held that stimulation of sensory nerves caused impulses to be sent to the spinal cord and the motor nerves set off stimulation of the muscular and glandular responses. Furthermore, reflexes were not only restricted to the kinesthetic body but also to the brain. [51] James' own studies in physiology and his familiarity with such theorists as Clifford, Hodgson, and the evolutionary theorist Spencer, demanded that he confront the bulwark of habit. Though interest and habit are conflicting functions James set out to give complementary roles to each. Though organic matter, reflex, and habit have a large role to play in accounting for human action they do not exhaust James' account.

Descartes was "bold enough," says James, to explain seemingly intelligent sets of behaviours as the results of completely self-sufficient nervous mechanisms. Although Descartes' picture of the automaton was limited only to the lower animals, many of James' contemporaries saw no reason to limit the automaton theory (what we now call

[51] D.C. Phillips, "James, Dewey, and the Reflex Arc," *The History of Ideas* 32 (October-November, 1971), 557.

epiphenomenalism) to the explanation of animal behaviour. Hodgson, Clifford, and Huxley all proposed pictures of completely autonomous human bodies. Consciousness was dismissed as epiphenomenal. The reflex arc theory culminates in Huxley's paper "On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automaton." In this essay, Huxley argues the following,

> The consciousness of brutes would appear to be related to the mechanism of their body simply as a collateral product of its working, and to be as completely without any power of modifying that working as the steam-whistle which accompanies the work of a locomotive engine is without influence upon its machinery. Their volition, if they have any, is an emotion indicative of physical changes, not a cause of such changes.[52]

Consciousness is held to be inefficacious. The consequence of such a view would imply for example, that if we knew the nervous system of Shakespeare and all his environing conditions, we ought to be able to show why at a certain point his hand came to trace on certain sheets of paper the little black marks we call "*Hamlet*." Furthermore, we ought to understand the rational of every omission, alteration, metaphor, and movement of the text without any reference or acknowledgement of the thoughts in Shakespeare's mind. (I, 132) The automaton theory, according to James, is typically argued in three ways: the argument from continuity, the argument from convenience, and the argument from causality.

If we look at the frog's spinal cord, so reasons the automaton theorist, by the principle of continuity, we can claim that as the frog acts intelligently, albeit unconsciously, so too do the higher centers. Consciousness could be as mechanically based as the reflex acts of the frog. The problem with the argument from continuity is that

[52] Thomas Huxley, "On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata, and it's History," in *Method and Results: Essays* (New York: Appleton, 1997), 240.

one could easily, using the same principle, defend opposing conclusion. One could propose, as Lewes and Pflüger do, that as the acts of the brain hemispheres owe their intelligence to consciousness, so too does that of the spinal cord. The reactions present in the spinal cord, so they reason, must be due to the presence of consciousness in some lower form.

James takes a stand against all arguments from continuity, claiming that they only work in two ways: "you can either level up or level down by their means; and it is clear that such arguments as these can eat each other up to all eternity." (I, 134) The argument from continuity that defends a radicalization of the reflex arc theory and leads to an epiphenomenal theory of mind rests upon the aesthetic demand for a desire for simplicity rather than compelling evidence.

The second argument that can underlie the automaton theory is one that is informed by the very methods and practices of science. The chasm between mental and physical is central to the theory of mind and the difficulties of the soul psychologists and the automaton theorists. The scientific method depends upon observable facts. Yet, conscious phenomena are not exhaustively described in such a manner. Subjective factors complicate and are not easily assimilated into the objective methods of the natural sciences. James summarizes this view in a description of the scientist's view regarding the place of "feeling" in science.

> In a word, feeling constitutes the 'unscientific' half of existence, and any one who enjoys calling himself a 'scientists' will be too happy to purchase an untrammeled homogeneity of terms in the studies of his predilection, at the slight cost of admitting a dualism which, in the same breath that it allows to mind an

> independent status of being, banishes it to a limbo of causal inertness, from whence no intrusion or interruption on its part need ever be feared. (I, 135)

If such a sharp delineation is made between mind and body, one is left to either radicalize one or the other, and thus the psychologist is left with only two alternatives: idealism and materialism, the mind stuff theory of idealistic psychology or automaton theory of empirical psychology.

A third related reason for a defense of the automaton theory is found in the classical problem of causality. The difficulty of imagining a way in which a thought or feeling can physically influence things in the physical world remains a major reason for the elimination of subjective facts in the description of consciousness. A "lively faith" in reflex machinery, coupled with a sense of the chasm between the mental and the physical, has led theorists to "turn consciousness out of the door as a superfluity." (I, 135) Yet the question of causal interaction between either mental or physical is a metaphysical question that, since the time of Hume, has had no obvious answer.

What the automaton theorist is guilty of is to say that one kind of causation (mental) is unintelligible, while another kind of causation (physical) is perfectly well understood. The automaton theorists are guilty of a dogmatic approach regarding the workings of causality. James stands firm with the claim, "One must be impartially *naïf* or impartially critical." (I, 137)

Psychology must either follow the path set by natural science, blinding itself to the underlying questions of causality and substance, or be thoroughgoing in its philosophical approach. The automaton theorist approaches psychology in neither fashion. Yet, as has

been shown up to this point, James himself, abiding by the maxim that there is always a parallelism between happenings in consciousness and happenings in the brain, and opts for the path of critical philosophy.

Given that James shows no sign of recoiling from parallelism, in principle it ought to be possible to describe the phenomena of consciousness as brain phenomena, which is precisely what the automaton theorists do. If James accepts a parallelism between brain phenomena and the phenomena of consciousness, what prevents him from radicalizing his position? Why does James not say, along with Huxley that brain hemispheres are like the spinal cord—reflex-based and solely responsible for what we call "consciousness." James' position, despite a firm commitment to parallelism, remains that when psychology notices that ideas *seem* to operate causally, it is best to speak of them in that way.

The first positive reason for James' refusal to radicalize the reflex arc theory is due to his firm support of Darwinian biology. James, arguing that the human being evolved through a process of natural selection, claims that an ineffectual consciousness would not have survived, let alone developed through natural history. Any organ or quality must maintain the organism, whether human or frog, in its quest for existence and to do this it must be efficacious and influence the course of bodily history. Given this claim, the burden falls to James to show how consciousness helps, provided it were efficacious. Showing how consciousness helps the course of the human's survival throughout natural history would then inductively demonstrate the efficacy of consciousness.

For James, the cerebrum is distinguished from the spinal cord by its instability and indeterminateness of action. With *guidance*, the cerebrum is suited to the necessities and constraints of life, since it may then by its very flexibility adapt the organism to external changes and contingencies. Consciousness is, on all levels, from sensation and perception through to reason and aesthetic interest, operative by discrimination and choice. Add to this the general consideration that because consciousness has evolved it can be assumed to be useful, and we reach the conclusion that consciousness affirms and expresses the organism's interest and regulates the action of the brain accordingly.[53]

We do act, influence things, cause events, and change our environment. Furthermore we act in a meaningful way. We know that we do this first and foremost because we feel ourselves doing it. To show the efficacy of consciousness James argues primarily from introspective grounds. In the following section I will show how James demonstrates that consciousness is efficacious by looking primarily at the fifth characteristic of the stream of thought—that consciousness is selective. In other words, the function of the brain can only be understood teleologically. Furthermore, teleology is an exclusively conscious function.

Attention

The fifth characteristic of the stream of thought emphasizes the attending function of consciousness: The stream of thought is "*always interested more in one part of its*

[53] Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 31.

object than in another, and welcomes and rejects, or chooses, all the while it thinks." (I, 284) Consciousness is characterized by a "choosing activity," a selectivity that implies a deliberative willing. This choosing activity can be broken down into the two related functions of attention and interest.

James defines attention as "focalization," or "concentration." (I, 401) Attention implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others. It can be focused on objects of sense or ideal and represented objects. Interest is said to be the *cause of our attending* and is derived from the realms of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the practical.

As was seen in the previous chapter, the senses are organs of selection, and for James selection operates on both the physiological and the psychic levels. In the chapter dedicated to the function of attending, we learn that attention is always a physiological or "mechanical process" involving two things: the accommodation or adjustment of the sense organs and the anticipatory preparation from within the "ideational centers" concerned with the object to which attention is given. (I, 434)

For James, a human being actively reorganizes its environment to satisfy more than physical survival alone. Subjective needs also play a major role. To properly characterize human consciousness we need to speak of such things as sentiments, aesthetic impulses, religious desires, and personal affectations. Herbert Spencer had argued in his *Principles of Psychology* that human beings, just like all other organisms, *passively mirror* their environment for the sake of survival. His definition of life as the

"adjustment of inner to outer relations"[54] summarizes his understanding of the evolutionary process of adaptation to an environment.

James' disagreement with this brand of Darwinian theory is first articulated in an essay written more than ten years prior to the publication of the *Principles* entitled "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence." It is in opposition to Spencer's evolutionary theory and his particular brand of empiricism that James defines his own, and in doing so, highlights the centrality of the attending function of consciousness and the paramount place of *subjective interest*. Spencer, determined to show the empirical sources for all experience, including the "higher mental functions," assumes experience as simply given. The phenomenon of selective attention complicates this picture. "My experience," says James, "is what I agree to attend to." Consequently, "only those items which I *notice* shape my mind."

> Without selective interest, experience is in utter chaos. Interest alone gives accent and emphasis, light and shade, background and foreground—intelligible perspective, in a word. It varies in every creature, but without it the consciousness of every creature would be a gray chaotic indiscriminateness, impossible for us even to conceive. (I, 402-403)

The ascertainment of outward fact constitutes only one kind of mental activity, and is in no way exhaustive of what consciousness is.[55] For James, logic, imagination, wit, beauty, morals—all of these and more make up the standards by which we judge mental excellence. Correct perception of fact is only one standard among many. Many of the

[54] Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Psychology* (New York: Appleton, 1910) I: III.
[55] William James, "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind," *William James: Writings 1878-1899*, (New York, N.Y.: Literary Classics, 1992), 894.

standards we use to judge mental excellence are derived from "laws of the ideal" and are dictated by subjective interest.[56]

The discussion of the perception of reality makes the point that the various worlds posses reality only for the individual who addresses him or herself toward them, and that reality disappears when attention fades. The world of Prince Hal loses its reality as soon as my attention wavers from the drama and enters another sub-universe, say that of practical need. While the world of science, myth, or religion does not include Falstaff's wit or Hal's ambition, myth, art and science may all contribute to my interest in *Henry IV*. The attention given over to Shakespeare's creation comes only with an effort to attend to that particular world.

We inhabit worlds partially of our own making because "each of us literally *chooses*, by his way of attending to things, what sort of a universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit." (I, 424) Typically we see only what we are taught, except for the few we call geniuses, those who excel in the ability to bring out new and unwonted aspects of a thing. "In short, *the only things which we commonly see are those which we preperceive*, and the only things which we prepercieve are those which have been labeled for us, and the labels stamped into our mind." When James goes on to assert that "if we lost our stock of labels we should be intellectually lost in the midst of the world." (I, 445), we are reminded the position Nietzsche articulates in the *Gay Science*.[57] The problem

[56] Ibid., 849.
[57] Many parallels have been drawn between James' *Pragmatism* and Nietzsche. See: Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, (London: Penguin Books, 1999); Harvey Comier, *The Truth is What Works: William James, Pragmatism, and the Seed of Death* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); and

concerning the relation between habit, language, and perception is similarly articulated by Nietzsche in the following passage:

> *Only as creators!* – This has caused me the greatest trouble and still does always cause me the greatest trouble: to realize that *what things are called* is unspeakably more important than what they are. The reputation, name, and appearance, the worth, the usual measure and weight of a thing—originally almost always something mistaken and arbitrary, thrown over things like a dress and quite foreign to their nature and even to their skin—has, through the belief in it and its growth from generation to generation, slowly grown onto and into the thing and become its very body: what started as appearance in the end nearly becomes essence and *effectively acts* as its essence! What kind of a fool would believe that it is enough to point to this origin and this misty shroud of delusion in order to *destroy* the world that counts as 'real,' so-called 'reality'! Only as creators can we destroy!—But let us also not forget that in the long run it is enough to create new names and valuations and appearances of truth in order to create new 'things.'[58]

Without the literary flair we come to expect of a Nietzschean aphorism, but with an equal degree of veracity James' discussion of attention, and his refusal to label consciousness inefficacious is very close to Nietzsche's idea. We choose some sensations to notice, the mind then selects again, choosing some sensations as definitive of objects, while at the same time dismissing others. All perception, all intellection involves a two-fold choice. "Out of all present sensations we notice mainly such as are significant of absent ones; and out of all the absent associates which these suggest, we again pick out a very few to stand for reality *par excellence*." (I, 286)

Objects neither call out for nor hide from the attention of conscious beings. It is the psychological constraints on the part of the subject that pick out what will be

---

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

[58] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), §58.

perceived of as an object. The objective world is, for us, only that part of the world to which we respond. An appeal to the work of Helmholtz's *Optiks*, wherein he demonstrates that things differentially attract our attention according to our predispositions, furnishes James' argument. Attention is explained in the following manner:

> If the sensations we receive from a given organ have their causes thus picked out for us by the conformation of the organ's termination, Attention, on the other hand, out of all the sensations yielded, picks out certain ones as worthy of its notice and suppresses all the rest. Helmholtz's work on Optics is little more than a study of those visual sensations of which common men never become aware—blind spots, *muscœ volitantes*, after images, irradiation, chromatic fringes, marginal changes of color, double images, astigmatism, movements of accommodation and convergence, retinal rivalry, and more besides. We do not even know without special training on which of our eyes an image falls. So habitually ignorant are most men of this that one may be blind for years of a single eye and never know the fact. (I, 284)

He goes on to say that we notice only those sensations which are signs to us of *things* which happen to interest us either practically, aesthetically, or ethically, and to which we therefore give substantive name and independence. But the thing, in itself, apart from my interest, like "a particular dust-wreath on a windy day" is James says, "just as much of an individual thing, and just as much or as little deserves an individual name, as my own body does." (I, 286)

There are no 'things' apart from my interest. This is not however the same claim as that of the idealist who argues that consciousness creates its objects. The essential characteristics of a thing, which constitutes its objectivity, are as much sensations selected out of the complex thing as are the subjective conditions. Even rational connections are

the products of the selective activity and are not due to any intrinsic property of the object itself. Reasoning is said to be the "ability of the mind to break up the totality of the phenomenon reasoned about, into parts, and to pick out from among these the particular one which, in our given emergency, may lead to the proper conclusion." (I, 287)

Through selection and attention, the mind connects objects not only empirically but also rationally. Rational choices are the most self-conscious ones out of the many that precede it on various levels. We manipulate experience to serve interests, needs, and desires, yet our choices are not simply spontaneous reaction to stimuli. James calls the mind a "theater of simultaneous possibilities." (I, 289) Consciousness consists in the comparison of these possibilities with each other, choosing one and ignoring the rest, exercising its agency of attention.

> The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. In a sense the statue stood there from eternity. But there were a thousand different ones beside it, and the sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest. Just so the world of each of us, howsoever different our several views of it may be, all lay embedded in the primordial chaos of sensations, which gave the mere *matter* to the thought of all of us indifferently. We may, if we like, by our reasonings unwind things back to that black and jointless continuity of space and moving clouds of swarming atoms which science calls the only real world. But all the while the world *we* feel and live in will be that which our ancestors and we, by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, like sculptors, by simply rejecting certain portions of the given stuff. Other sculptors, other statues from the same stone! Other minds, other worlds from the same monotonous and inexpressive chaos ! My world is but one in a million alike embedded, alike real to those who may abstract them. How different must be the worlds in the consciousness of ant, cuttle-fish, or crab! (I, 289-290)

Attention and interest are coupled themes that tie together the *Principles*. Consciousness is primarily a selecting agency and volition is nothing but attention.

One could object, as Charlene Haddock Seigfried has done in her study of the theme of relation in James, that there is something arbitrary about what the mind chooses as the essence of an object.[59] Thus for James, "my table-top is named *square*, after but one of an infinite number of retinal sensations which it yields, the rest of them being sensations of two acute and two obtuse angles; but I call the latter *perspective* views, and the four right angles the *true* form of the table, and erect the attribute squareness into the table's essence, for aesthetic reasons of my own." (I, 284) If any one of any number of sensations can stand for the essence of an object and any sensation, no matter how obtrusive, can be ignored, we can determine that there are no absolute criteria for selection.

The mere fact of appearance is never enough to guarantee the existence of an object. Belief is based upon a choice in something merely thought of. In turn, this choice is based upon attending to something. Yet because what is thought of offers nothing in itself as criterion for relegating it to one sub-universe or another, and because neither choice nor attention is necessarily belief or disbelief, something more is required to motivate belief. A *willing* is required.

We share a common world despite varied interests. People largely agree on what they will notice and name and what they will ignore. James is interested not in why it is that we share a world, but the *fundamental psychological fact*: "that altogether unique kind of interest which each human mind feels in those parts of creation which it can call *me* or *mine*. (I, 289) Yet if we accept James' argument for the understanding of the

[59] Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Chaos and Context* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1978), 16.

otherwise chaotic world by the imposition of subjectively motivated interests, that removes the 'copy thesis' regarding the genesis of mental categories and any correspondence theory of truth. If we grant to James that we sense only by fragmentary impressions in an order foreign to our subjective interests, then none of the "categories" (space, time, causality, etc.) could possibly mirror experience let alone derive from it.[60]

Selection was shown to work both on the mechanical and conscious levels. How then does it function in the intellectual sphere? This question sets up the framework of Chapter 22 of the *Principles*, "The Necessary Truths and the Effects of Experience." Here James shows how reasoning is a process which utilizes signs to pick out the essential qualities of even novel phenomena. It extracts characters out of a phenomenal totality according to a purpose, chiefly prediction. He makes two points regarding the nature of reasoning: first, "extracted character is taken as equivalent to the entire document from which it comes;" second, "the character thus taken suggests a certain consequence more obviously than it was suggested by the total datum as it originally came." (II, 340) James insists on the "world's concrete fullness,"[61] the reality which overflows our purposes in organizing it: "*the only meaning of essence is teleological and...classification and conception are purely teleological weapons of the mind.* The essence of a thing is that one of its properties which is so *important for my interests* that in comparison with it I may neglect the rest." (I, 335-336) The properties we deem important vary from person to

[60] Charlene Haddock Seigfried orients James' project, beginning with the work in psychology and culminating with his final lectures *A Pluralistic Universe*, as a sustained critique of the esteem of rationality in the history of philosophy. (Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1978).

[61] Seigfried evokes this term in her book *William James' Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy*.

person and moment to moment. "But many objects of daily use—as paper, ink, butter, horse-car—have properties of such constant unwavering importance, and such stereotyped names, that we that we end by believing that to conceive them in those ways is to conceive them in the only true way. Those are no truer ways of conceiving them than any others; they are only more important ways, more frequently serviceable ways." (II, 336)

Conceptualization always involves a reduction of the plentitude of reality to a limited number of aspects chosen for some particular purpose, and those aspects are endless. Essentiality is always an interplay between some phenomenal characteristic and some intentional point of view; given other ends and other views, other characteristics would acquire essential status, and the aspect once deemed essential will cease to matter. Since to classify an object means to pick out some limited number of characteristics and ignore the rest, "I am always unjust, always partial, and always exclusive." (II, 333) I am so because "my thinking is first and last and always for the sake of my doing and I can only do one thing at a time." (II, 333) The human being is finite and practice demands exclusivity and partiality.

Our particular ways of organizing experience into real objects are revealed as a "teleological weapon of the mind." James shows how we construct a world to suit our ends and then by ignoring the fact of our participation in the outcome pass it off as an independently given, objective "reality." Our world, abstracted out of the fullness of experience is always a "rotten and miserable substitute" for the encompassing and pluralistic reality. (II, 336 n. 11) We must organize if we are to survive, yet James warns

that we must not forget the subjective character of the world we take for granted, since such forgetfulness increases the danger that we will not take responsibility for recreating it more satisfactorily. He also warns of the added power gained by those in a position to enforce their views of reality while pretending to merely describe an objective pre-existent state of affairs.

Although reasoning does disclose real aspects of objects, it also distorts them because it cannot grasp them in their entirety. It binds them together according to interest which may not be a fixed and long lasting criterion. This necessity is not a logical constraint, but one that is derived from our finite and practical nature.

James places rational thinking within a continuum of the human organization of experience. This continuity is emphasized when James begins the final chapter of the *Principles* by reminding us that Darwinian biology has shown a continuous relationship between human beings and other animals; that human beings are not of another order of being, as philosophers and theologians have often supposed. Just as there are no sharp breaks between sensation and perception, there are also intermediate and related stages between perception and rational thought.

Conceptualization always involves reducing the plenitude of reality to a limited number of aspects chosen for some particular purpose. Each reality has an infinite number of aspects or properties; the manner in which we can regard that reality is endless. Essentiality is always an interplay between some phenomenal characteristic and an intentional point of view; given other ends in view, other characteristics of the object will acquire essential status, and an aspect essential for some other purpose will cease to

matter. Since to classify an object at all means to pick out some limited number of characteristics while ignoring the rest, "I am always unjust, always partial, always exclusive." (II, 333) I am so because of necessity. The human being is finite and practice demands exclusivity and partiality. "My thinking," says James, "is first and last and always for the sake of my doing, and I can only do one thing at a time." (II, 333)

The Self

The way in which each individual interprets his or her environment, from sensation and perception and the selectivity of attention to the creation of beliefs and "worlds," has shown itself to be at the foundation of James' psychology. What this self is, what consciousness is, now demands clarification.

In chapter X of the *Principles* James sets out to look at the sense of personal identity that was posited as the first characteristic of the stream of thought: "Every thought tends to be a part of a personal consciousness." Furthermore regarding the sense of personal consciousness James boldly claims that "absolute insulation and irreducible pluralism is the law." (I, 226) Thought, as it is first characterized in the stream of thought, appears to be solipsistic and in conformity with the dualistic program of natural science.

> I am *cognitively* present to Orion whenever I perceive that constellation, but I am not *dynamically* present there, I work no effects. To my brain however, I am dynamically present inasmuch as my thoughts and feelings seem to reach upon the process thereof. (I, 214)

What thought *is* in this example is different from its cognitive function.[62] Yet, when James comes to analyze this self in further detail in the chapter "The Consciousness of self," he makes some radical discoveries. What is achieved by the end of his investigation into the self is a distinction between consciousness and self that undermines the solipsism and dualism of the earlier description of our personal identity. What is born from "The Consciousness of Self" is an active, interpreting self that blurs the distinction between thought and object and undermines the tradition of psycho-physical dualism, and is the very origin and source of reality. Consciousness is revealed as not a *thing* or a pure being outside of its many functions, but as another object of thought.

The Empirical Self

James' analysis of the self develops from a distinction made between the empirical self or the *experienced* self and the self that *experiences*. His first observation regarding the self as it is experienced, or what he calls the "objective" self, is that there is not one *Self* but several *selves* that we identify with and dissociate from according to our various aims, purposes, interests, intentions, and situations. What James calls the material and the social selves yield the first descriptions of the "fluctuating material" we call the self.

[62] Both James Edie and Bruce Wilshire make similar points using this example from "The Stream of Thought."

The material self, by which James means the self that is bound to material objects in the world, is "the sum total" of all I can call "mine" (I, 291): the efforts of my labour, my ideas and opinions, my possessions, profession, family, friends, my bank account, and most intimately, my body. These things "may be as dear to us as our bodies are." Objects are not only ours but are, in the self that is experienced, us. What a person may call "me" and what a person calls "mine" is a line not easily drawn for James. While the material self does center about the body it is not exhausted by a physiological description of what a material body is. Even within our body, the most intimately felt part of the material self, some parts seem more intimately ours than others. The hands are more recognizable and intimately felt than the liver or spleen.

Much like the material self, the social self exhibits a great amount of instability. "Properly speaking," writes James, "a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind." (I, 260) This self is akin to one's reputation and is responsive to all situations and intentions.

So far, James' analysis of the self has shown that the self is not isolated from the people, things, and thoughts that surround it; rather the self is shown to be constituted by them. James' emphasis on the bond between what we call "me" with those objects, ideas, labours, and family we call "mine," has shown the self that is experienced not as solipsistic or insulated, but always related to the world. The objects and things that are involved in our lived experience are not only presented as objects of interest for the self, but become identified with it. What we call the "self" is not an experiencing Ego or substantial Soul, but one or another of the self's various objects; objects that the self will

identify with or reject according to interests, needs, and attitudes which are always changing.

The Spiritual Self

While the self is largely characterized as "fluctuating" between the objects of thought, we ought not to assume that because personal existence is not enclosed within an unchanging entity, it exists as nothing but relations. James turns his attention from the question, 'What do we identify with when we identify the Self as experienced?' to '*Who* is identifying him or herself with these empirical selves?'

What James calls "the spiritual self" is that being against which all objects of consciousness are opposed and is that thing that seems to appropriate the world. Even the material and social selves become objects for the spiritual self.

> By the Spiritual Self, so far as it belongs to the Empirical Me, I mean a man's inner or subjective being, his psychic faculties or dispositions, taken concretely; not the bare principle of personal Unity, or 'pure' Ego, which remains still to be discussed. These psychic dispositions are the most enduring and intimate part of the self, that which we most verily seem to be. We take a purer self-satisfaction when we think of our ability to argue and discriminate, of our moral sensibility and conscience, of our indomitable will, than when we survey any of our other possessions. Only when these are altered is a man said to be *alienatus a se*. (I, 295)

James calls this spiritual self the "innermost citadel of selfhood" that acts as the "active element in all consciousness." The "self of selves" is that which is experiencing all other objects and all other selves.

When James turns his focus to the spiritual self the analysis becomes uncertain. He remarks that the "self of selves" is not distinguishable in a Cartesian or even Kantian

sense from the "objective body" and that the Ego is not the "pure Ego" but must rather be, "my historic Me, a collection of objective facts." (I, 321) Yet, he also observes that we do experience our personal identity both as objective fact and as the "pure activity of our thought." James turns his attention to this ambiguity in his attempt to locate or define the spiritual self.

The spiritual self is a reflective process, "the result of abandoning the outward-looking point of view, and of our having become able to think of subjectivity as such, *to think ourselves as thinkers*." (I, 297) Yet when James turns his attention to consciousness itself he finds not an entity distinct from its object, but the cognitive *function* of having objects.[63] If we try to distinguish the empirical or objective self from the self conceived of as the active and emotional source, and attempt to analyze simply "the being denoted by the pronoun I" (I, 298), what do we discover? James discovers the following:

> *It is difficult for me to detect in the activity any purely spiritual element at all. Whenever my introspective glance succeeds in turning round quickly enough to catch one of these manifestations of spontaneity in the act, all it can ever feel distinctly is some bodily process, for the most part taking place within the head...* In the first place, the acts of attending, assenting, negating, making an effort, are felt as movements of something in the head. In many cases it is possible to describe these movements quite exactly... 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, 300-301)

This discovery, as Bruce Wilshire has noted, seems to shock James.[64] But he is willing to follow this evidence through. Taking his observations to their conclusions, James reasons

[63] This is one of the most well noted discoveries of James' discussion of the Self and has been most notably commented on by Wittgenstein and Dewey.
[64] Wilshire, 129.

that if "the innermost sanctuary" of the self is found to consist only in bodily feelings, then it must follow that *all* that is experienced is strictly speaking *objective*.

> If they [bodily feelings] really were the innermost sanctuary, the *ultimate* one of all the selves whose being we can ever directly experience, it would follow that *all* that is experienced is, strictly considered, *objective*; that this Objective falls asunder into two contrasted parts, one realized as 'Self,' the other as 'not-Self;' and that over and above these parts there *is* nothing save the fact that they are known, the fact of the stream of thought being there as the indispensable subjective condition of their being experienced at all. (I, 304)

The stream of consciousness is then not an adequate metaphor. The "con" of consciousness suggests that the stream thinks its own existence along with whatever else it thinks. Yet the stream is only of "sciousness"—of knowns. Only by a second act of reflection will thought reveal itself. Shockingly, when James comes to employ this reflective act to reveal consciousness itself, he did not find it. All he finds are the peculiar motions in the head and throat.

Must we then *deduce* some substantial self as a condition for the possibility of experience? No. James does not have to go the route of transcendental philosophy. We do not have to deduce the spiritual self because conceptual thinking is not the only or even the primary source of our knowledge.[65] We know this self first by "direct sensible acquaintance"; as James says, "When it is found, it is felt." (I, 299) We can never develop the meaning of the self by reflection and imagination without the primary feeling which catches the self in its very act.

---

[65] John Wild, *The Radical Empiricism of William James*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), 87-90.

James' location of the seat of the self in bodily activity has opened him up to charges of materialism and behaviourism. John Dewey, one of the foremost champions of James' psychology, interprets it as being, in essence, one of biological behaviourism. In the essay, "The Vanishing Subject in the Psychology of James,"[66] Dewey advances a reading of James' psychology that espouses him as a biological behaviourist.

Dewey argues that in the *Principles* James' analysis of the self reduces the subject to a "vanishing point save as 'subject' that is identified with the organism, the latter, moreover having no existence save in interaction with environing conditions."[67] He speculates that if James were to have written the *Principles* after 1905 (the year the essay "Does Consciousness Exist" appeared) he would have dispensed with the notion of consciousness altogether and replaced it with a biological behaviourism. Biological behaviourism means that there exists no ontological difference between the mental and physical in the form of an irreducible mental or physical event or substance; psychological states are wholly reducible to the ways in which an organism interacts with its environment.

> James came to the study of psychology from a grounding in physiology…His naturalistic strain, as far as it is constructively stated, and its conflict with the expressed epistemological dualism was derived from this source. If it had been consistently developed it would have resulted in a biological behaviouristic account of psychological phenomena.[68]

Dewey argues that James' account of habit in terms of neural pathways in the brain established by past experience allows for a reflex-arc theory to be advanced.

---

[66] John Dewey, "The Vanishing Subject in the Psychology of James," *The Journal of Philosophy* 37 (October, 1940), 589-599.
[67] Ibid., 589.
[68] Ibid.

Discrimination is based upon habit, and what is true for discrimination will also hold true for attention, which is the center of James' psychology, standing for both will and belief.

Although James' account of the self and the body are laced with physiological terms, they do not define James' whole position. The body which James describes is one that articulates emotions and intentions; it is a body that is the center of a *personal* world. The body is described as an object which is experienced with every other object of experience and is that object in terms of which other objects are identified, located, and objectified. The spiritual self is not a soul or transcendental ego, or even a principle of personality, but a kind of *experiencing*, an inner core that we *feel*. The words "I" and "self," to the extent that they arise feelings and have emotional significance, are objective indications that are related to all that is capable, in the stream of thought, to arouse excitations. The body is given as an object which is simultaneously experienced with every other object of experience, and is that object in terms of which other objects are themselves located and objectified with respect to one another and the self. In other words, the body is the origin and source of reality—"the *fons et origo* of all reality. (II, 296)

Presiding over the functions of sensation, perception, and rationality is a selective self. James' personal self is not one that passively mirrors the world and consequently not one whose truths and beliefs are held to the standard of direct correspondence with the "external world." The most important quality that dominates James' notion of subjectivity is the selective and interpretive functions.

Conclusion

In a letter to Münsterberg James stated his fundamental objection to the former's work, the *Grundzüge*, as the following: "I still believe the immediate living moment of experience to be as 'describable' as any 'scientific' substitute therefor can be."[69] The excessive conceptualizations and schemata found in Münsterberg are antithetical to James' stated aim to keep psychology in contact with living reality. Describing the immediate moment becomes for James the central preoccupation of the *Principles of Psychology*. Yet he did not allow the analysis of the lived subject to overshadow or impede experimental results. He brought the two together to solidify his picture of the human being living in world. While James' attempted restriction to elementary assumptions made his findings particularly vulnerable to the intrusion of metaphysics that which intrudes in the *Principles* becomes a part of James' wider aim and his life-long philosophical project. Despite the stated intention of the *Principles*—to free psychology from metaphysics—the real contribution that emerges from this work lies in the gathering of the two approaches in a psychology of experience.

What I have attempted to do in this thesis is to offer an interpretation of the major currents found in James' *Principles of Psychology*. Throughout this interpretation I have shown how the idealist and empiricist accounts of the human being are exposed as faulty and wrapped up with specific doctrines of the human psyche that are replaced with James' own account of the nature of the stream of thought. While the goal to put psychology on the same path as the other sciences failed, what emerges in its wake is a positive theory of the subject of psychology.

---

[69] Quoted in Ralph Barton Perry's *The Thought and Character of William James*, II: 150.

While the psychologist necessarily becomes an *Erkenntnisstheoretiker*, but James' epistemology is not the traditional one arising out the skeptical question that asks about the possibility of knowledge. Rather James' epistemology is a bulwark against the possibility of asking the skeptical question. For James, the psychologist is necessarily active in the relationship called knowing and therefore does not doubt its possibility. The task of the psychologist then becomes one of explaining what is involved in this relation. The explanation offered by James throughout the *Principles* is a developed account of the active human being participating through interpretation and appropriation in its environing conditions. Seeking to reconcile the practical, aesthetic, and moral demands within a picture of the human being James builds his psychology around his vivid, ceaselessly practical, corporal experience of "living reality."

Bibliography

Baruzen, Jacques. *A Stroll with William James*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1983.

Berkeley, George. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. New York: Cosimo, 2005.

Boring, Edwin, G.. *Sensation and Perception in the History of Experimental Psychology*. (1942) New York:Irvington Publishers, Inc., 1970.

Boring, Edwin, G., *A History of Experimental Psychology*. Second Edition. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1950.

Comier, Harvey. *The Truth is What Works: William James, Pragmatism, and the Seed of Death*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.

Corti, Walter Robert (ed.). *The Philosophy of William James*. Felix Meiner Verlag: Hamburg, 1976.

Danziger, Kurt. "On the Threshold of the New Psychology: Situating Wundt and James." In *Wundt Studies: A Centennial Collection*. edited by Wolfgang G. Bringmann and Ryan D. Tweney, 114-120. Toronto: C.J. Hogrefe, Inc., 1980.

Dewey, John. "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology. *Psychological Review* 3, no. 4 (July, 1896): 357-370.

—. "The Vanishing Subject in the Psychology of James." *Journal of Philosophy* 37, no. 22. (Oct. 24, 1940): 589-599.

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

Gordy, J.P. "Professor Ladd's Criticism of James's Psychology. *The Philosophical Review* 1 (May, 1892): 299-305.

Edie, James. *William James and Phenomenology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. 2nd ed. Edited by P.H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978.

Huxley, Thomas. *Method and Results: Essays*. New York: Appleton, 1997.

James, William. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912.

— "James's Preface to Ferrari's Italian Translation." In *The Works of William James: The Principles of Psychology*. 3 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1483.

—. "A Plea for Psychology as a 'Natural Science.'" *The Philosophical Review* 1, no. 2. (March 1892): 146-153.

—. *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Dover Publications, 1950.

—. "Review of Wundt's Principles of Physiological Psychology." In *Wundt Studies: A Centennial Collection*. 114-120. Edited by Wolfgang G. Bringmann and Ryan D. Tweney. Toronto: C.J. Hogrefe, Inc., 1980.

— "The Sentiment of Rationality," *Mind* 4, no.15 (July, 1878): 317-346.

—. *William James: Writings 1878-1899*. New York: Literary Classics, 1992.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Norman Kemp Smith. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003.

—. *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. Translated and Edited by Michael Friedman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Kersten, Fred. "Franz Brentano and William James." *History of Philosophy*. 7 (April 1969): 177-191.

Kitcher, Patricia. *Kant's Transcendental Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Ladd, George Trumbull. "Psychology as a So-Called 'Natural Science.'" *The Philosophical Review*. 1, no. 1. (Jan., 1892): 24-53.

Linschoten, Johannes. *On the Way Toward a Phenomenological Psychology: The Psychology of William James*. Edited and Translated by Amadeo Giorgi. Pittsburg: Dusquesne Univerisy Press, 1968.

Myers, Gerald E. "Pragmatism and Introspective Psychology." In *The Cambridge Companion to William James*. edited by Ruth Anna Putnam, 11-24. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Edited by Bernard Williams and translated by Josefine Nauckhoff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Perry, Ralph Barton. *The Thought and Character of William James*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1935.

Phillips, D.C. "James, Dewey, and the Reflex Arc" *The History of Ideas* 32 (October-November, 1971), 555-568.

Putnam, Ruth Anna, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to William James*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Reck, Andrew. *Introduction to William James: An Essay and Selected Texts*. Indiana University Press. Bloomington: London. 1967

—. "Dualism in William James's Principles of Psychology." *Tulane Studies in Philosophy* 22 (1973), 79-115.

—. "The Philosophical Psychology of William James." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 9 (Fall, 1971), 293-312.

Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books, 1999.

Schuetz, Alfred. "William James' Concept of the Stream of Thought Phenomenologically Interpreted." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1, no. 4 (June 1941): 442-452.

—. "On Multiple Realities." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 5, no.4 (June 1945): 533-576.

Seigfried, Charlene Haddock. *Chaos and Context: A Study in William James*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1978.

—. "The Positivist Foundation in William James's *Principles*. *Review of Metaphysics*, 38 (March 1984): 579-593.

—. *William James' Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.

Spencer, Herbert. *Principles of Psychology*. 3 vols. New York: Appleton, 1910.

Titchener, E.B.. "Two Recent Criticisms of 'Modern' Psychology. *The Philosophical*

Review 2, no. 4. (July, 1893): 450-458.

Wild, John. *The Radical Empiricism of William James*. New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1969.

Wilshire, Bruce. *William James and Phenomenology: A Study of the Principles of Psychology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968.