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Laura Westra

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THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF INDIVIDUAL IMMORTALITY IN THE THINKING OF WILLIAM JAMES

Laura Westra

William James states "Immortality is one of the great spiritual needs of man," yet the arguments presented in his *LECTURE ON IMMORTALITY*, while interesting and ingenious, are somewhat less than conclusive in proving that human beings can survive bodily death. Therefore I attempt to clarify the notion of "individual survivor" through an analysis and discussion of various approaches to the problem, before returning to a further examination of James' thought in the "Final Impressions of a Psychological Researcher," the *THEORY OF THE SOUL*, the *PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGY*, the *VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE* and a *PLURALISTIC UNIVERSE*. James' often neglected Christian position provides the key to a better understanding of his thought on the topic, and allows me to conclude on a cautiously optimistic note on the possibility of a philosophical proof for human survival.

"Human immortality is one of the great spiritual needs of man."

With this simple sentence, William James seems not only to capture precisely the importance of the subject, but also to hint at some of its underlying problems. Why is immortality a "great spiritual need of man"? The prospect of mere bodily resurrection somehow does not move us as deeply. Most of us could contemplate without unbearable distress, the possibility of a different body. However, the possibility of a sizeable diminution of brainpower, the threat of brainwashing, the chance of becoming retarded, and the like fill us with fear. It seems incredible that *my mind*, *my soul*, whatever one may call the entity I know as *my self*, should disappear without a trace.

Why? Our physical being is a given, controlled by the same laws that control the rest of the world of things we see around us; our sentient faculty, in contrast, appears much more amenable to the will, which forms an integral part of it. We



can choose to study philosophy, we can decide to learn Latin, we can attempt to be loving, or warm, or truthful. We cannot decide to be tall, though we can attempt to be fit or to keep healthy. The difference seems to be between what is ours (our body) and what is us (our personality) and between what is beyond our control and what is to a great extent "our creation," "us" and "ours" at the same time. Thus the immortality we are concerned with is not bodily immortality. We are resigned to the waxing and waning of all physical things, we are prepared to accept material genesis and decay, but we do not accept without question a similar fate for the non-material. Moreover, immortality is not only more than, or different from, the continued existence of matter as such: it is also more than simply the continued existence of some sort of non-physical entity.

Such energy, after all, could conceivably continue to exist as matter does: in different changing forms. But would that satisfy us? I think not. It is not immortality in general we want to believe in, or immortality of the species, or indestructibility of material or non-material components, in whatever form they might enjoy their respective continued existence. It is personal immortality we seek, the survival of you and me and the people we know and love. What could count as personal survival? Before we discuss whether we can survive, whether the notion is coherent, logical, or possible, we must attempt to define just what could coherently, logically, or possibly survive.

What is a person? many widely divergent answers can be found through the history of philosophy, from Plato's view of the "real man," the probably immaterial soul "entombed in the body's prison," to Cartesian dualism, with immaterial soul and material body as two separate substances, to Strawson's "person, to whom both P and M predicates can be ascribed," to Ayer's concept, where all "criteria of personal identity are . . . parasitic upon the primary physical criteria." Ayer's position would automatically eliminate the possibility of survival or immortality: if all possible criteria of our identity are "parasitical upon the physical," the dissolution of the latter will make it impossible to identify any residue at all. Plato's approach, though diametrically opposed to Ayer's, is problematic for the same reason. The spiritual is believed in, emphasized, and coupled with the perfect; thus, if individual differences are dependent on material multiplicity and on the individual entity's distance from the One Absolute Perfection, the removal of the material aspect would make individuation impossible.

Strawson's approach preserves the balance between the different aspects of the person through its ascription of M-predicates and P-predicates. Strawson claims that "any of us can quite intelligibly conceive of his or her individual survival of bodily death. The effort of the imagination is not even great." But it seems to me that this step cannot be taken in Strawson's schema. If a person is the combination of M- and P-predicates, and we are not told in which proportion, then surely the Strawsonian person is terminated at the time of its natural

death. The absence of M-predicates would appear to destroy the possibility of personhood. The concept of half-a-person seems to me as unintelligible as that of half-a-dog, not hairy, four-legged, and able to bark, but only animal, mammal, and medium sized.

Perhaps the problem lies not in the concept of a person, but in our determination not to abandon such a concept when individual survival is under discussion. If the term "person" tends to carry within it these connotations, we might turn to some other expression such as "individual survivor," which may represent a small gain toward clarity. But a change in terminology will not help in formulating an answer to our original question: what is a person?

To seek for individuality is to seek for unity. What will confer unity on an entity, and at the same time be such that death will not destroy it? The possibilities are limited. Memory appears a prime candidate (in fact, James thinks of individual survival in such terms⁵). Another candidate is character, the combination of dispositions and abilities which is unique to each of us, but can we conceive of a character trait, a disposition, an ability that is neither dependent on nor arises from material entities? How about some sort of Platonic justice as a balance of parts in the soul? But what could such parts be like? Or courage might conceivably be the virtue of a disembodied soul, or cowardice; a sense of self-worth, or lack of it; a generally outgoing disposition or a shy, retiring one. How about intellectual activities and abilities?—perhaps quickness of intellection or a sluggish disposition, a tendency toward mysticism or a love of mathematical or logical reasoning. How can such general characteristics define one specific individual, so that it is indeed his survival that one is taking into consideration. Will the analogy to a chemical compound work? While, for instance, an aggregate of Al_2O_3 (aluminum trioxide) describes a sapphire, a unity, it does not delineate this or that individual stone. As the problems and complexities appear to multiply, we might turn to James, in the hope that his treatment of the question might shed light on the questions I am forced to leave unsolved, so that we can return to them later, perhaps in a more enlightened state.

Although William James speaks of human, not personal immortality, the reference to humanity in the opening quotation shows his concern with the survival of an entity recognizably human. Yet when he discusses what exists in the universe, James envisions a "continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge, as into a mother-sea, or reservoir." (from "Final Impressions of a Psychical Researcher," in *Writings*, J. McDermott, ed., p. 799) thus he speaks of a "mother-sea" in pantheistic terms, when he refers to that which lies on the other side of the limits of our consciousness. It would seem as though such an understanding of Transcendental Reality and its connection with our individual "selves" would preclude the possibility of individual survival. James, however,

does not admit to such a contradiction within his doctrine. The crux of the matter is that we may conceive of the “mental world behind the veil, in as individualistic form as we please” and still remain within the ambit of the possibilities engendered by the “brain as a transmissive organ.”

Our “transmitted earthly memories may accumulate credit, to be somehow collected after the grave, perhaps as memories-of-earthly-transactions, in the Lockean sense of person-stages, held together by memory.”² The problem of maintaining identity through memory, yet not being able to assess true memory (as “memory caused in the right way”), except through identity, with the ensuing circularity, is not even hinted at by James.³ This is perhaps in keeping with his rather modest aim of showing that immortality is “not incompatible with the brain function theory of our present mundane consciousness,” although he holds that such compatibility “extends to uphold immortality in fully individualized form.”⁴ Can we accept James’ belief as philosophically sound and supported by his own doctrine?

He clearly shows his interest in the question, especially in the Preface to the second edition of *Human Immortality*.⁶ He appears to think that the belief in survival after bodily death is widespread and commonsensical but needs defending, mainly from “the fangs of cerebralistic materialism.”⁷ His approach is not to give an argument for the possibility of survival, but simply to attack “two supposed objections to the doctrine.” The second objection, less interesting philosophically, concerns the immense quantity of disembodied souls entailed by immortality; James mentions it only briefly. The first objection he wishes to refute is the appeal to science. When our brain is injured, when our head has been hit, our mental capacities are temporarily suspended or altered. It makes sense—prima facie—to say that a more serious injury, resulting in death, would terminate permanently any activity of the mind or soul. And yet: “When the physiologist who thinks that his science cuts off all hope of immortality pronounces the phrase ‘Thought is a function of the brain,’ he thinks of the matter just as he thinks when he says ‘Steam is a function of the steam-kettle’ . . . [and this is] called productive function.”⁸ From this simple understanding of function it is easy to say, by analogy, that it also must be so with the brain, and that our mind or soul’s life is produced in this manner. Such production (as an effect) would in turn cease when the agent (cause) no longer exists and thus no longer operates.

Even such a “productive relation” as the positivists would propose does not appear a sufficient cause to abandon belief in survival after bodily death. Perfectly material things are quite capable of producing effects that persist beyond the causal efficacy that engendered them originally, such as sound waves existing after a drum is struck or waves spreading in circles from the point where a stone hits the water. However, application of this production theory would lead to the

existence of “attenuated individuals,” or—as Strawson has it—“former persons,”⁹ mere echoes or vestiges of their former selves.

James justly points out that there are other ways of effecting a result than the simple production we have considered: “We also have releasing or permissive function, and we have transmissive function.”¹⁰ The release of the bow effects the flight of the arrow, and it represents a causative but not a productive function. Similarly, coloured glass transmits light as does a refracting lens. James thus concludes: “My thesis now is this, that when we think of the law that the thought is the function of the brain, we are not required to think of productive function only; we are entitled also to consider permissive or transmissive function. And this the ordinary psychophysicologist leaves out of his account.”¹¹ The function of transmission, James believes, offers the most appropriate analogy. It is not an unusual philosophical notion to think of the world around us as mainly phenomena, veiling or even obscuring a world of deeper realities. Could our brain not represent a prism, a multicoloured glass, reflecting the “infinite Thought” existing timelessly beyond it? In this life these “beams” of luminous reality would come through imperfectly as “streams of knowledge,” “glimpses of insight,” and “glows of feeling,” distorted by the restrictions engendered by their mode of transmission. Later, when the brain and material in general were eliminated, they would not “vanish entirely,” but continue, though in “ways unknown to men.”¹² A partial injury to one part of the brain tends to destroy that particular, localized function only temporarily; later the same function is restored, but as originating from another, unaffected part of the brain. This fact is decidedly more compatible with a transmission theory than with a theory of direct causal efficacy with no outside agency involved in the process.

Still, is James’ theory strong enough to withstand the sharp bit of those cerebralistic, materialistic “fangs” it is meant to repel? Materialists wish to uphold the following: (a) there is no effect without a cause, and (b) material entities are both a necessary and a sufficient condition for the existence of all physical phenomena. James, though in general agreement with (a), wishes to dispute (b) and suggests a different way through which matter may be related to and connected with “consciousness.” Just as the earth reacts to the cosmic reality that envelopes it (he is thinking here of such connections as that of the moon phases and the states of the ocean, or the states of the atmosphere in relation to the condition of the crops and other earthly things),¹³ so too the brain may be both affected and “continuously” connected with Transcendental Being, or the “mother-sea,”¹⁴ without the necessary connection of Transcendence with a specified organ (i.e., the brain). Clearly, “earth” reacts without ears, nose, or any specific organ. Rather, its reactions manifest a deep affinity, a oneness even, which transcends organs and specificity as such. Yet, just as the materialist does not really explain how causality is effected by the material entities (a fact James is quick to seize

upon with his “Ignoramus, ignorabimus”),¹⁵ so James himself is content to use a loose metaphor, no less likely than the materialistic one, he contends, and far more satisfactory for a human being hopeful of continued future existence. The materialist assumes, without defining, the nature of matter’s capacity, and James assumes something as well: the existence of Being, Transcendental and Infinite (in effect, the existence of God). A generally theistic understanding of reality is also clearly in evidence in his description of the sort of thought available through the coloured glass or the somewhat obstructive medium of our brain and, by way of contrast, in the free, unimpeded soaring of the mind when the medium is removed. There is a striking similarity to the doctrines of the mediaeval theologians who contrasted the sort of intellection available to man in *statu viae* to that available when, with the termination of the soul’s association with the body, the intellect’s angelic abilities were restored. Thus both the materialists’ and James’ positions on immortality are based on unspoken and undefended assumptions: the materialists’, that the universe can be made sense of without recourse to a transcendental reality; James’, that it cannot.

Must we ultimately have recourse simply to preference, or feeling, in choosing between such totally divergent views? “Immortality is one of the great spiritual needs of men”¹⁶ only if we view it against the background of an understanding of reality such as that of James. We wish for survival because we wish for at least a continued, possibly a heightened, awareness, the possibility of redress of wrongs suffered, the chance to see loved ones again, which in turn implies the continued ability to love and feel, as well as to think.¹⁷ This is in some contrast with his expressed doctrine in the Introduction to the second edition of *Human Immortality*, where the last sentence tends to promise a rather hollow, continued “instant replay” of that which we have already lived: a future “heaven” hardly to be devoutly anticipated.

This brief examination of *Human Immortality* does not appear to bring us closer to a satisfactory view of what James thinks is the surviving entity or what we ourselves can conclude in that regard. Therefore it might be worthwhile to examine briefly James’ notion of the self. In his *Theory of the Soul*, he concludes: “Our reasonings have not established the non-existence of the soul; they have only proved its superfluity for scientific purposes.”¹⁸ In his *Principles of Psychology*, James seeks a substantial view of the soul that can explain the ability of the will to direct the body and the existence of such immaterial actions as thoughts and yet allow these to inhere in a substrate, which he terms “stream of consciousness.” He feels that the soul cannot explicate phenomena, but—at best—is itself explained by them. As far as immortality goes, the soul guarantees “no immortality of the sort we care for. The enjoyment of the atom-like simplicity of this substance in saecula saeculorum would not to most people seem a consummation devoutly to be wished. The substance must give rise to a stream of consciousness

continuous with the present stream, in order to arouse our hope, but of this the mere persistence of the substance *per se*, offers no guarantee."¹⁹

Let us consider this metaphor. What is a "stream of consciousness?" A stream or a river is continuous, unitary—"it flows."²⁰ It also flows within its banks, not at random. River banks and a river bed are what make the body of water a river, rather than a flood, a puddle, or a swamp. It has "parts,"²¹ but is more than these. It cannot be exhausted by bucketfuls, thimblefuls, or pailfuls of water. Could we not say that there is more to a stream of thought or consciousness than the individually defined thoughts or acts of consciousness that compose it? Maybe the river bed is not the substance in which the river inheres, but it and its banks are the limits out of which its unity arises and the ground of the possibility of its existence. By the same token, James acknowledges that "there is thought." This fundamental fact²² also requires a "personal consciousness"; thought must be owned by unquestionably existing "personal selves."²³

But is James not assuming a unity he can then analyse, rather than assembling or collating a unity from disparate thoughts or acts of perception? Does the method beg the question? And if it does, is the stream of consciousness such that it can fulfill the function the soul ought to, and do so in a more satisfactory manner? It is an extremely selective sequence of thought and other mental events, as it may ignore some things while "exalting" others to a status of "independence and dignity."²⁴ Thus it acts, wills, and so on as a unity, and as such it thinks,²⁵ rather than being "thoughts." Perhaps we are entitled to extend our river metaphor further: a stream or river requires not only banks and a bed, but also, and most importantly, a spring to originate it and start its flow. Our metaphoric river would be represented by the self, which, for James is possessed of three aspects, the material, the social, and the spiritual. These coexist in the "me," or "empirical self,"²⁶ as known object. The knower, the subject, is the "I" for James. The "I" is conscious, the "me" is only one of the things of which the "I" is conscious.²⁷

Clearly the material aspect will not be considered for survival. The social aspect would be and would demand the existence of other selves with whom to interact in various ways. These would, in turn, guarantee the identity of the self by providing many other selves, impenetrable unities, as a limit to our self, when natural bodily definition is no longer available; and by offering a continued stage on which certain character traits and specific capabilities can persist. The spiritual aspect is equally important: "By the 'spiritual me' . . . I mean . . . the entire collection of my states of consciousness, my psychic faculties and dispositions taken together."²⁸ This also includes a "certain average tone of self-feeling which each of us carries about with him,"²⁹ which appears to be "independent of objective reasons" for its existence.

Could the entity James has in mind indeed aspire to immortality within its own framework? It seems to me that whether we accept streams of thoughts

thinking themselves or the nucleus-of-individuality theory which appears to lurk below the surface, either can be totally consistent with the transmission theory of causal efficacy that James contrasts with the materialistic approach in *Human Immortality*. Both appear capable of being directly receptive to a Transcendent Intelligence, thus of existing in various degrees of almost Augustinian illumination.

Yet one problem persists: if we accept streams of thoughts as James' theory, it is not obvious that the survival he wishes to defend is of the individual variety. If we wish to assume the nucleus of individuality, we have only implicit or vague textual evidence, rather than an explicit statement on which to base our interpretation.

We must again recall why this examination of James' philosophy and psychology was undertaken. Once we accepted his pronouncement about the deep-seated need to believe in immortality, we soon found that it was very difficult to render personal or individual survival coherent or viable. We undertook to examine James' doctrines on the subject, in order to see whether they would aid our understanding, perhaps even suggest a novel approach. Has that hope been fulfilled?

Well, James' appears to be a somewhat split doctrine that he is unable or unwilling to unify. How can he reconcile an "individual" stream of consciousness, composed of "thoughts doing the thinking," and a willing, creating self, which is both knower and known, spiritual and social, and "intimately," "warmly" known to us? How can a sequence of thinking thoughts, one of which disappears as the next one comes alive, plan and "make the man" and what he will become? James repeats that the soul explains nothing but does not show how the other possibility acts as an agent and thus a purposeful, unitary entity. Even stranger is the divergence between his psychological approach and the metaphysical; the latter allows him to soar beyond logical, scientific reasoning and simply follow his own intuitions.

These lead him, he confesses, to what Plotinus referred to as a World-Soul: he finds "the notion of an *Anima Mundi* thinking in all of us to be a more promising hypothesis, in spite of all its difficulties, than that of a lot of individual souls."³⁰ We must recognize in these metaphysical speculations the perfect complement to his immortality doctrine of transmission. It is far easier to see the survival of an *anima mundi*, since once our brains cease their light refracting function, it is hard to conceive how the plenitude of Transcendental Light could remain individualized: "Our finiteness and limitations seem to be our personal essence; and when the finiting organ drops away and our several spirits revert to their original source and resume their unrestricted condition, will there be anything like those sweet streams of feeling . . . here below?"³¹

James appears unconcerned by the implications: he simply advocates more

study and thought on the subject as he wonders “how much we may lose and how much we may possibly gain, if its finiting outlines should be changed.”³² he fails to consider that whatever may be gained by such lack of finiteness, we would not be the ones to enjoy it, as his own system has already discarded the possibility of the continuing self, together with those “finiteness and limitations” he terms our “personal essence.” James has not contributed much to our search. So far we have focused mainly on his conclusions: perhaps we could approach him through another route. We could for instance accept his undefended premise with all its implications, not only the one he prefers to emphasize.

I am referring to that Transcendental Being, whose existence James does not appear to doubt. We have already remarked upon the barrenness of the notion of survival without such a premise. Perhaps we could now go a step further and accept the same Being as Creator of individual souls, in fact, as the Ground of the possibility of the existence of such individual intelligences, which are necessarily such in order to be individually responsible to Him. Yet even if we ignore the apparent inconsistencies between James’ doctrine of survival and his understanding of what it is to be a self, we cannot take the “illumination” theory he embraces and still arrive at a satisfactory position in regard to the existence of the God (or Divine Transcendence) James himself needs to support his structure.

In his Postscript (to *Varieties of Religious Experience*), James clarifies his position in the Ingersoll Lecture. He admits that his position on immortality in the lecture does not lead to God (not to a “unique God who is the all-inclusive soul of the world”³³). It does, however, lead to “*something* larger than ourselves,” in union with which “we find our greatest peace”: “It need not be infinite, it need not be solitary. It might conceivably even be a larger and more god-like self, of which the present self would then be but the mutilated expression, and the universe might conceivably be a collection of such selves, of different degrees of inclusiveness.”³⁴ Such a non-infinite would not represent an “absolute guarantee” of survival: we would need to be content with “incomplete religious consolation” and make do with the possibility of “partial and conditional salvation,” which in turn is “a most familiar notion” to us already. Would “a partial and conditional salvation” mean that the best among us may be saved? Would it mean that “many finite gods” may be less than thorough in their dealings with our souls? James may well be right in affirming that “for practical life at any rate, the *chance* of salvation is enough.”³⁵ But the decisive factor for conventional believers seems to be that the chance of salvation is grounded upon the belief in universal immortality. Salvation and immortality are chancy and unsure, the “conditional” factor may be magnified to a point well beyond that of a “familiar notion.” Similarly, it would tend to remove all vestiges of a “justice” component

from the notion of salvation, since while salvation would still be based on merit, immortality or survival would simply be a factor of the competence, capability, and thoroughness of these “partial” or “finite” gods. This viewpoint, moreover, is in direct conflict with James’ own expressed agreement (“in principle”) with the Buddhist doctrine of Karma.³⁶

While James’ approach is better than the materialist approach in that it leaves the door open to further transcendental argumentation, he accepts not a God who is Infinite and infinitely sustaining, but rather a collection of possible “demi-gods” of limited efficacy, operating with the universe in a hit-or-miss fashion. Still, reading James, one is often left with the impression that it is not a deity as such that James objects to, as much as some of the a priori proofs offered for His existence, and perhaps even his understanding of the Christian understanding of Him.

But James accepts an Entity whose existence he does not attempt to prove. Perhaps it is my mistake to expect from him precisely the sort of “a priori proof” he explicitly decries. It is clear that James is not familiar with the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, or at least not enough to recognize Aquinas’ understanding of the *Actus Essendi* as something at least not in conflict with his own thinking. He could have found within Aquinas not only the logical proofs of the “quinque viae,” but also such experiential, phenomenological approaches as the one in *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*.³⁷ I associated James’ expressed approval of empiricism with the sort of fragmented, limited approach to reality that can be at least as “thin” as the logical, idealistic, absolutist type of philosophy James speaks of in such scathing terms in *A Pluralistic Universe*.³⁸ But, in fact, his much touted “empiricism” is no other than a phenomenological, existential form of philosophy, capable of manifesting “wholeness,” connectedness within the chain of Being, such as characterizes disparate philosophers from the great Pre-Socratics to Martin Heidegger. James himself emphasizes the phenomenological, experiential aspect in his own *Varieties of Religious Experience*. His own linking of Bergson with “empiricism”³⁹ tends to confirm this hypothesis.

What about a non-theistic approach to individual survival, based on the introspective certainty of the existence of an individual self (which even James appears to admit)? this would probably involve a dualism in which the soul, or self, is allowed both substantiality and a total lack of dependence for its survival on material entities. A self must possess dispositions, capabilities, and memory. However, dispositions, capabilities, and memory all require embodiment, and all are affected by the body’s condition. Even memory can be localized in the brain, can be affected by injuries, and appears to be as localized as speech or the sense of smell. This dependence on the material substrate is very damaging to a dualist approach.

Again, could an individual identify himself without memory as well as without

body? The answer appears to be dubious at best. That vague "sense of self" of which James speaks could conceivably prevail even in a person (embodied) who had lost his memory. He would still know that he can't remember. The "he" would not be "John who lives in residence" or "Peter who is married and lives off-campus," but, simply, minimally, a unity, an entity, a self. Would that be sufficient for such an entity to be thought of as an individual survivor? Perhaps that "sense of self" might do, together with the dispositions and capabilities it possessed when embodied. But, as we have had occasion to remark, while it might be sufficient for third-person identification, the lack of continuity implicit in the lack of memory would appear to make this survival one that the original self could neither acknowledge nor enjoy.

Now does this scant collection of attributes amount to an entity that can individually survive? The answer, it seems to me, hinges on what one means by "individually." If, taking it in the weaker sense, one means a unity, an individual, a monad (i.e., an entity unmixed, and not simply a drop in an eternal energy pool), the answer appears to be in the affirmative. If an awareness of self which is consciously unitary exists now, it seems to me the onus would be on the side of those who would simply opt for the continued existence of an entity that appears strongly cohesive in itself, continuous, and unlikely to decay according to the laws with which we are acquainted.

However, to take "individual" (in the stronger sense) to mean an entity continuous with all that it knew up to the moment of bodily death is much more problematical. The evidence we have examined appears to suggest that this hypothesis is completely untenable.

The only road we can take to true individual survival in the second, stronger sense is to follow James' trail further than James himself is willing to do and start with the premise of the existence of God. Only then can we permit ourselves to accept ourselves to accept more and better individualized content for our surviving entity.

Moreover, the steps required to move from the content of the Being of God (which cannot strictly be proven) to the existence of a substantial, individual soul, which it alone can ground, are partially bolstered by faith. Faith in turn (at least in Thomistic terms) is not something apart from and contrary to reason but forms one continuous, unbroken line with it: it is a better sort of knowledge.

If we cannot accept this train of argument, the case for true, individual survival is substantially weakened, as James rightly saw. We are left, as I hope I have shown, with the survival of conscious unitary entities that may not be us or even individuals (in the strong sense) at all. And in this case, we can simply wonder whether a non-individual form of survival can and should be considered "a great spiritual need of mankind," when our right to individuality of thought, decision, and even of individual possessions is perhaps the greatest good we all appear to

strive for now. It is a good that is almost impossible to distinguish from an entity's ability for immanent action, in fact from the freedom that—for existential thinkers at least—forms the essence of what a self is.

Thus James' unquestioned dependence on a Lockean understanding of the equivalence between "memory" and "person" (or "person-stage") seems unsatisfactory, even apart from the logical problems it entails. If we were to accept it, death would still have truncated our personhood, if it left us with nothing but a continuing replay of prior experiences—*ad nauseam*—through eternity. We are not static entities, and James would be the first to admit this. To limit us to one "state," that of "continuing previous entities," and to one capacity, that of remembering past failings or successes, seems a weak substitute for immortality. Perhaps we need to accept some components of the traditional understanding of Providence, in order to escape finitude, whether at death, or after it.

University of Toronto

NOTES

1. William James. *The Will to Believe and Human Immortality* (hereafter *Will, Immortality*), Preface to the second edition of *Human Immortality* (New York: Dover, 1956), pp. vi-ix.
2. John Locke. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Book II, Chapter 27, nos. 6-9, pp. 154-5, J. W. Yolton, ed. (La Salle, IL: Dent University Paperback, Open court Publishing, 1978).
3. John Perry, *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978), pp. 30 and *passim*.
4. James. Preface to the second edition of *Human Immortality*, p. viii.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. James. *Will, Immortality*, p. 293.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 288.
9. P. F. Strawson. *Individuals* (London: University Paperbacks, 1964), p. 116.
10. James. *Will, Immortality*, p. 290.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 291.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 294.
13. William James. "Concerning Fechner," in *A Pluralistic Universe*, in *The Writings of William James*, J. McDermott, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 539.
14. James. "Final Impressions of A Psychological Researcher," in *Writings*, p. 799.
15. James. *Will, Immortality*, p. 292.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
17. By way of contrast, Williams, in *Problems of Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1973), speaks

of unbearable boredom associated with disembodied survival: “an endless life would be a meaningless one; . . . we could have no reason for living eternally a human life.”

18. William James. *Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1892); and F. Murphy and R. O. Ballou, eds., *William James and Psychical Research* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), pp. 243-50.

19. James. *Principles of Psychology*, p. 248.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

30. Murphy and Ballou. *James and Psychical Research*, p. 246.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 301-2.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 301.

33. James, “Final Impressions,” p. 785.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 786.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, p. 784.

37. Thomas Aquinas. *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, I.8.1.1. ad 4.

38. William James. “Hegel and His Method,” in *A Pluralistic Universe*, pp. 512-28.

39. William James. Extract of Letter to Schiller (January 26, 1908), which says in part: “V. Bergson, and his annihilation of intellectualism. He opens the door to a possible empiricist reconstruction”; *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 216.