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THE MISSING PERSON IN THE CONVERSATION:
OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, SR., AND THE DIALOGICAL SELF

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ABSTRACT. Wiley (2006) has argued for a relationship between pragmatism and the dialogical self, noting that both are rooted in the thought of William James and Charles S. Peirce. This commentary delves into the possible connection between James's and Peirce's ideas as well as the probable influence of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., on the development of dialogical conceptions of the self.

Norbert Wiley (2006) has written a stimulating piece on the relations between pragmatism and the dialogical self. It provides a very useful, broad-stroke portrait of these relations, and it raises many questions worthy of further exploration and discussion. For someone with historical interests, like myself, it invites additional consideration of the origins of the dialogical premises held by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) as well as by William James (1842-1910), the two major sources of American pragmatism identified and discussed by Wiley. Hence, his article prompted me to look more deeply into a matter that I had neglected in writing a long chapter on James's views on the self (Leary, 1990).

In that chapter, I noted that James, in making his now-classic distinction between the *I* and the *Me*, had indicated that he meant "nothing mysterious and unexampled" by these terms. They were, he said, "at bottom only names of *emphasis*" (Leary, 1990, p. 107; James, 1890/1981, Vol. 1, p. 324). Nevertheless, emphases are significant, I said, and in this case they provided a theoretical structure that allowed James to treat a vast array of issues that "touched off many lines of later conceptual development" (p. 106). I went on to discuss those lines of subsequent development but never looked in the other direction – never searched for the possible origins of James's apparently original way of speaking about the *I* and *Me* aspects of the self. In short, I did not pick up on the implications of James's comment that his proposition of the I-Me distinction was "nothing…unexampled." Prompted by Wiley's article, I have now searched for previous examples, and I am happy to have this opportunity to share what I have found.

It seems clear that Peirce's notions about *I*, *It*, and *Thou* were instigated by his study of Friedrich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795/1965), as Wiley

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has suggested. I will refrain from discussing this further because Wiley has indicated that he will do so in a forthcoming article. It also seems very probable that Peirce's I-Thou-It distinction led to, or at least melded with, his later notions regarding inner speech. However, those notions, so far as I can tell, developed considerably later; they were less explicitly formulated by Peirce than some have implied (though Wiley himself was explicit in admitting that "Peirce has no treatise or extended discussion of inner speech"); and they had no demonstrable impact on James's thinking. I deny any influence in this regard even though (a) Peirce was a crucial stimulant to James's intellectual development from the time that James became a fellow student at Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School in 1861, (b) Peirce shared his ideas of I-Thou-It with James, and (c) James considered these ideas significant enough to record in a notebook, explicitly attributing them to Peirce (James, 1862). Nonetheless, as Peirce's own writings of the time and James's notebook entry make clear, Peirce's triadic distinction was then a schematic form of analysis, *not* a theory of inner speech. Exactly when, how, and to what extent that theory emerged is not clear, at least to me. Whether or not one might call it implicit at an earlier time, it seems not to have been articulated at all (even in Peirce's unpublished notebooks, so far as I have been able to determine) for a number of decades, and there is absolutely no evidence that it had any influence on James's use of *I* and *Me* in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890/1981). While it is true that as early as 1859 Peirce included "me" among the list of words associated with the "I" term of his triad (e.g., Fisch, 1982, p. xxviii), this listing had no conceptual significance whatsoever, either for a theory of inner speech or for James's I-Me distinction.[1]

However, that doesn't mean that James's use of I-Me in *The Principles of Psychology* was without precedent. At the very time that Peirce was developing his I-Thou-It distinction, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. (1809-1894), the well-known literary

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[1] To the extent that Peirce commented on inner speech, using concepts of "I" and "me" (or "myself"), it seems that his fascination with Shakespeare – especially his familiarity with the dialogical soliloquies and monologues in Shakespeare's works – may have been more relevant than his study of Schiller. As he wrote in "Pragmatism" (1907/1998), anyone who thinks back on an experience of self-reflection "will remark that his deliberations took a dialogic form." In addition, anyone who observes "the sort of mind that is least sophisticated" will note that it often "betray[s] itself by its language," as when it uses "such expressions as 'I says to myself, says I'" or when it is heard "audibly talking to himself, like Launcelot Gobbo," a character depicted in *The Merchant of Venice* (Act 2, Scene 2) by "the subtle psychologist who created him" (p. 402). Long before he wrote this, Peirce had read James's *Principles of Psychology* and acknowledged James as "the first [greatest] psychologist living or that ever lived" (Peirce, 1902/1935). So, instead of Peirce possibly influencing James's incipient treatment of the dialogical self in the *Principles*, it is entirely possible that James's treatment of the self in that work influenced Peirce's later description of inner speech. Interestingly, Francis Child, the same professor who stimulated Peirce's study of Schiller, almost certainly contributed also to his appreciation of Shakespeare.

writer, social commentator, and medical doctor, published his *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* (1858/1892a). In that extremely popular collection of imaginary conversations at a Boston boardinghouse, previously published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Holmes put these words in the mouth of the Autocrat:

> Talking is one of the fine arts, – the noblest, the most important, and the most difficult….It is not easy, at the best, for two persons talking together to make the most of each other's thoughts, there are so many of them….When John and Thomas, for instance, are talking together, it is natural enough that among the six there should be more or less confusion and misapprehension. (p. 52)

When the Autocrat's boardinghouse listeners fail to understand his reference to six interlocutors, the Autocrat explains:

> There are at least six personalities distinctly to be recognized as taking part in between that dialogue between John and Thomas.

Three Johns.
1. The real John; known only to his Maker.
2. John's ideal John; never the real one, and often very unlike him.
3. Thomas's ideal John; never the real John, nor John's John, but often very unlike either.

Three Thomases.
1. The real Thomas.
2. Thomas's ideal Thomas.
3. John's ideal Thomas.

> Only one of the three Johns is taxed; only one can be weighed on a platform-balance; but the other two are just as important in the conversation. (p. 53)

After some additional comments, the Autocrat concludes:

> It follows, that, until a man can be found who knows himself as his Maker knows him, or who sees himself as others see him, there must be at least six persons engaged in every dialogue between two. Of these, the least important, philosophically speaking, is the one that we have called the real person. No wonder two disputants often get angry, when there are six of them talking and listening all at the same time. (pp. 53-54)

These remarkable comments came from someone who was and still is acknowledged as one of the greatest of 19th-century conversationalists. But Holmes was more than a conversationalist and perceptive writer, he was also the former Dean of the Harvard Medical School (1847-1853) and the school's current Parkman Professor of

Anatomy and Physiology (1847-1882). More to the point, he was one of William James's teachers – even one of those who examined him for his M.D. degree – as well as an intimate family friend and the father of one of his closest friends, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. Even more significantly, just a year after James received his degree, Holmes delivered a widely noted Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard on "Mechanism in Thought and Morals" (1870/1892b). In that address, after reviewing contemporary research on the "two brains" (the two cerebral hemispheres) in humans and the implications of this research for understanding double consciousness, Holmes harkened back to his discussion in the *Autocrat*:

> We are all more or less improvisators. We all have a double, who is wiser and better than we are, and who puts thoughts into our heads, and words into our mouths. Do we not all commune with our hearts upon our beds? Do we not all divide ourselves, and go to buffets on questions of right or wrong, of wisdom or folly? Who or what is it that resolves the stately parliament of the day, with all its forms and conventionalities and pretences, and the great Me presiding, into the committee of the whole, with Conscience in the chair, that holds its solemn session through the watches of the night? (p. 289)

It would strain credulity to think that James was not familiar with Holmes's address, particularly since it dealt with a matter of crucial importance to him – the nature and role of cerebral mechanism, especially in relation to human thought and experience. In any case, James is likely to have known Holmes's thoughts on these matters through the classes he took and the many conversations he had with him. Hence, Holmes's treatment of the multiple aspects of self is almost certainly one of the "examples," probably the primary example, that James had in mind when he suggested that his I-Me distinction was not entirely original. Indeed, Holmes himself saw a connection between his own earlier works and James's way of discussing the self. As he wrote in 1890:

> I have not ventured very often nor very deeply into the field of metaphysics, but if I were disposed to make any claim in that direction, it would be the recognition of...my studies of the second member in the partnership of I-My-Self & Co. (Holmes, 1890/1892c, pp. 165-166)

As he goes on to make clear, Holmes was referring in these comments to James's article on "The Hidden Self" (1890/1983) rather than his chapter on the self in *The Principles of Psychology* (published in the same year), and the emphasis of Holmes's remarks was placed, not on James's I-Me distinction, but on the different "layers" of the mind and "the distinct, separable, independent individualities," i.e., multiple selves, that James treated in "The Hidden Self." Holmes said that he had never seen these distinct "individualities" described as well as James had done (p. 166). In fact, I would contend that James's "Hidden Self" provided even clearer manifestations of the dialogical self than were apparent in his discussion of the I-Me distinction in *The*

Principles of Psychology. Still, the point at hand is that James's I-Me distinction, apparently traceable to Holmes's "I-My-Self & Co.," was a direct precedent of contemporary dialogical modes of analysis, as Wiley has shown.[2]

In conclusion, it is relevant to note that after Holmes called James's description of multiple selves the best that he knew, James returned the compliment, placing Holmes's name on a short list of "geniuses of the community in which I live" and remembering him, personally, as "one of the great big and important memories of my younger days" (James, 1895/1987, p. 512; James, 1894/1999, p. 554). Interestingly, James, like Holmes, was a very sociable person and, by all accounts, a remarkable

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[2] Sometime late in life, Holmes recorded some notes in anticipation of writing an autobiography. In those notes, published posthumously (Holmes, 1896), Holmes wrote: "Though fond of society at times, I have always been good company to myself, either by day or night. The 'I' and the 'me' of my double personality keep up endless dialogues, as is, I suppose, the case with most people, – sometimes using very harsh language to each other. One of them, I am sorry to say, is very apt to be abusive and to treat the other like an idiot, with expressions which, if uttered, would make a very bad figure in these pages" (p. 43). While James could not have read this passage before writing *The Principles of Psychology*, it is quite possible that he had heard Holmes utter similar thoughts, inside or outside the classroom, long before he formulated his own version of the I-Me distinction. Although his own definition and use of *I* and *Me* are somewhat different from Holmes's, it is relevant to note that it was not unusual for James to adopt others' concepts and terms and then turn them to his own purposes. He was generally aware of what he was doing and was always generous in giving credit to his original sources; at times, however, he was unaware – or perhaps felt he had transformed ideas sufficiently to have made them his own – and he simply stated what he thought, without citing sources. It should be recalled that conventions for citations were only then taking shape and that James was among the leaders in this regard. In any case, as Holmes himself (1870/1892b) readily admitted, "Honest thinkers are always stealing unconsciously from each other. Our minds are full of waifs and strays which we think are our own. Innocent plagiarism turns up everywhere" (p. 287). He never recorded a sense that James had done anything improper in using ideas similar to his own without citing him.

As regards other probable sources for James's I-Me distinction, it is relevant to note that James, like Peirce, was a devoted reader of Shakespeare's work. (Indeed, his interest in Shakespeare was stimulated by Peirce as well as by Francis Child during his years in the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard.) James was also a frequent reader of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues. It seems quite likely that Browning as well as Shakespeare inspired James's views – and provided powerful illustrations – of the dialogical character of self-reflection (Leary, 2004, 2005).

In addition, James was familiar with Thomas Carlyle's discussion of "ME" in *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34/1987, p. 129) as well as the dialectical reasoning associated with Hegel and other idealists. At minimum, these were important contextual or background factors with regard to his incipiently dialogical thinking.

conversationalist. It seems fitting – and not at all a coincidence – that our contemporary notions of the dialogical self can be traced to two great conversationalists.[3]

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[3] My only other contribution to the informative and suggestive dialogue that Wiley (2006) has established is to say that I am not entirely persuaded by the dichotomy between James's view of the self as supposedly founded on "self-feeling" and Peirce's view as supposedly focused on "cognition." To deal only with James's view, which was much more explicit, I would point out that James's chapter on "The Stream of Thought" (James, 1890/1981, Vol. 1, pp. 219-278), coming just before his chapter on the self (i.e., "The Consciousness of the Self," pp. 279-379), makes it clear that James accepted no clear distinction between emotion and cognition. In fact, his discussions of the "sentiment" or "feeling" of rationality clearly foreshadowed recent discussions of emotional intelligence and intelligent emotions. (Interestingly, the subjective feeling of the rationality – i.e., the relational fitness – of thoughts, as expressed in sentences, lies for James at the root of the sense of "meaning," another topic discussed by Wiley.) "Consciousness," in other words, was for James a term for any and all mental states – "for every form of consciousness indiscriminately" – not just ideation (pp. 219-220).

Anyone who wishes to look further into Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.'s thought, especially as founded in "a culture of conversation," should confer Gibian (2001). This book came to my attention after I had formulated the basic insights I have shared in this piece. While it provides a much broader discussion, it also points out the relation between Holmes's thought and that of James, including the aspects that I have discussed here.

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