

THE PROMETHEAN SELF AND COMMUNITY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF WILLIAM JAMES

by *John J. McDermott*

Surely the individual, the person in the singular number, is the more fundamental phenomenon, and the social institution of whatever grade, is but secondary and ministerial.

(William James, *Memories and Studies*, p. 102)

From the outset, we should make it clear that readers of the writings of William James are hard put to find a doctrine of community therein. In fact, the basic cast of his thought runs not only against social conglomerates but against simple aggregates as well. In a letter of June 7, 1899, he writes:

As for me, my bed is made: I am against bigness and greatness in all their forms, and with the invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, stealing in through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, and yet rending the hardest monuments of man's pride, if you give them time. The bigger the unit you deal with, the hollower, the more brutal, the more mendacious is the life displayed. So I am against all big organizations as such, national ones first and foremost; against all big successes and big results; and in favor of the eternal forces of truth which always work in the individual and immediately unsuccessful way, under-dogs always, till history comes, after they are long dead, and puts them on the top.¹

James was an unabashed and indefatigable champion of sheer individuality. Many have interpreted him as the paragon of a philosophical version of the mythic American claim to rugged individualism, despite his own proclivities' being due more to the genteel brahmin experience than to that of the more fabled frontier sort. Nonetheless, James's version of the individual has much to teach us about a doctrine of community, especially as it is worked out in the fabric of American life.

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It is unquestionable that a central theme in all of James's life and thought has to do with the nature of self-consciousness and the meaning of human activity. The remarkable upshot of this long-standing theme is that James collapses the first concern, self-consciousness, into the second, human activity, so that John Dewey can write of "the vanishing subject in the psychology of James."

There is a double strain in the "principles of psychology" by William James. One strain is official acceptance of epistemological dualism. According to this view, the science of psychology centers about a subject which is "mental" just as physics centers about an object which is material. But James's analysis of special topics tends, on the contrary, to reduction of the subject to a vanishing point, save as "subject" is identified with the organism, the latter, moreover, having no existence save in interaction with environing conditions. According to the latter strain, subject and object do not stand for separate orders or kinds of existence but at most certain distinctions made for a definite purpose within experience.²

Dewey is fundamentally correct in the interpretation of the *Principles*. He, like other subsequent commentators, was able to spot James's early dubiety about the existence of a substantial self, because of the later position taken in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*.³ It is made clear in those essays that James, while writing the *Principles*, had adopted a methodological dualism between self and world only because he would not resolve the question of consciousness at that time. It is not until some fifteen years later that James presents his mature position on these matters, especially in "Does Consciousness Exist?" (1904) and "The Experience of Activity" (1905). This line of intellectual development from the *Principles* to *Essays in Radical Empiricism* is now a commentator's truism and I do not oppose it. Yet there is another strand in this development, and, when noticed at all, it is not sufficiently integrated into James's radically empirical doctrine of human activity. I refer here to the evocative language of his personal crisis and his ensuing attempt to pose the human will as cognitive. In short, I see James's self as one that is self-creating in its transactions with the environment. Although it is true that James's focus was distinctively and aggressively individual, it will not take much transformation to show that his phenomenology of the *Lebenswelt* can be understood in a social matrix. John Dewey, for one, had no difficulty in overlooking just that transformation of James's position, without, however, so acknowledging.

Proceeding now, *seriatim*, I wish to consider the developmental stages in James's doctrine of the self: a) his crisis texts, b) material from the "Principles of Psychology," and c) his radical empiricism. I shall then attempt to illustrate the social and communal significance of James's position, as if he had chosen to do so himself.

At this point in the James literature, his crisis texts are comparatively well-known, although aspects of them have not been adequately studied. We have three texts extant, of which two are diary entries of February 1, 1870, and April 30, 1870. The third is more difficult to place chronologically, although the experience on which it was based most likely occurred sometime between the two diary entries mentioned above.⁴ The actual publication of this third text occurred in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* under the guise of a communication from an anonymous French correspondent. We now know this to be an autobiographical version of an experience undergone by James some thirty years earlier.

It is difficult to know exactly the cause of James's period of depression from 1868 until 1870, although this has not stilled the frequent speculation as to a correct diagnosis of his malady, especially as he and his family have left so very many private papers and letters.⁵ One of the most intriguing and plausible interpretations is that of William Clebsch, who attributes to James an advanced case of acedia. Considering James's situation from 1868 until 1870, Clebsch writes:

In an earlier era this plight would have been recognized as acedia, or torpor. Catholic moralists wrongly combined this eighth deadly sin of the early monks with sloth, mistaking the inability to act for laziness. Acedia was rather an overscrupulous wondering about what one ought to do. It prevented one from doing anything. It tempted one to suicide as the only escape from the ennui and the guilt of inactivity. Victims of acedia could love nothing, could hate only themselves and could hate themselves only for their inability to love anything, including themselves.

In the history of Western spirituality acedia had been treated by placing its victims under the absolute spiritual authority of another. Martin Luther's confessor dealt with such scrupulosity in the young monk by ordering him to teach biblical theology in Wittenberg. But James had no Doctor John Staupitz. The sole authority he could find was his own ability to believe that he might command his own will. Having envisioned the only escapes from acedia as committing suicide or having a shriveled soul, James became his own spiritual director. Reciting verses of comfort in the crisis of fear had held James back from insanity and suicide, but God had not delivered him. He began saving himself from acedia, a feat traditionally held impossible. He became, as it were, at once the sick-souled patient and his own absolving confessor. Nor does it detract from the feat to point out that his indulgent father could afford to let this thirty-one-year-old son teach or rest, work or travel, as best pleased him. The fiscal ease that allowed for this cure must also have deepened the malady.⁶

In his diary entry of February 1, 1870, James states his plight:

Today I about touched bottom, and perceive plainly that I must face the choice with open eyes: shall I frankly throw the moral business overboard, as one unsuited to my innate aptitude, or shall I follow it, and it alone, making everything else merely stuff for it? I will give the latter alternative a fair trial. Who knows but the moral interest may become developed. . . . Hitherto I have tried to fire myself with the moral interest, as an aid in the accomplishing of certain utilitarian ends.⁷

In my judgment, James here laments his second-handedness. Burdened by his father's overwhelming presence and his pressure on James to adopt a career, he entertains the possibility of abandoning his inherited ethic for a hedonistic life. James's complaint about the "moral business" is that it functioned only in a utilitarian way and was not deeply rooted as a personal commitment. His inability to cut between these options of hedonism and second-handedness made him ripe for an intense personal experience undergone sometime in the early spring of 1870. As James tells it:

Whilst in this state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospects, I went one evening into a dressing-room in the twilight to procure some article that was *there*; when suddenly *there* fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, or rather shelves against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over *them* inclosing his entire figure. He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human. This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. *That shape am I*, I felt, potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him.⁸

The key line in this text is James's warning, "*that shape am I*, I felt, potentially." James is hereby denying the existence of a fixed, inherited self as a given. The choice of the word "shape" is crucial here, for it attributes an almost chameleon-like character to self-identity. The self that we accept ourselves to be is but one tenuous shaping, which is vulnerable to forces that can up-end it and cause us to present ourselves to the world in a multiple number of profoundly different ways. The task is obvious. We must seize the world on behalf of our own version and it is this version that is to become our self. This is not to be an act of intellect but rather an act of will. On April 30, 1870, James records this decisive step.

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's second "Essais" and see no reason why his definition of Free Will—"the sustaining of a thought *because I choose to* when I might have other thoughts"—need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present—until next year—that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will. . . .

Not in maxims, not in *Anschauungen*, but in accumulated *acts* of thought lies salvation. *Passer outre*. Hitherto, when I have felt like taking a free initiative, like daring to act originally, without carefully waiting for contemplation of the external world to determine all for me, suicide seemed the most manly form to put my daring into; now, I will go a step further with my will, not only act with it, but believe as well; believe in my individual reality and creative power. My belief, to be sure, *can't* be optimistic—but I will posit life (the real, the good) in the self-governing *resistance* of the ego to the world. Life shall [be built in] doing and suffering and creating.⁹

The die is cast for James's future in both life and thought. Not seduced by any form of Pollyanna optimism,¹⁰ James affirms the creative character of the human organism in positing the meaning of the world as inseparable from how we "have" the world, that is, how we experience the world. We are not to the world as a spectator is to a picture but rather as a sculptor to matter. Many years later, in *Pragmatism*, he is to affirm this position in an even more Promethean way.

In our cognitive as well as in our active life we are creative. We *add*, both to the subject and to the predicate part of reality. The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands. Like the kingdom of heaven, it suffers human violence willingly. Man *engenders* truths upon it.¹¹

If the crisis texts yield an impressionistic view of the fragility of the self, James's scientific dubiety of the fixed self is found in *The Principles of Psychology*. In the chapters in "The Stream of Thought" and "The Consciousness of Self," he rejects the classical doctrine of the substantial soul, and the idealist transcendental ego. And although he expresses some admiration for Hume's treatment of personal identity,¹² he condemns the ensuing Associationist philosophy as being unable to account for how the self "comes to be aware of itself."¹³ Two years after publishing the *Principles*, James was forced to condense his thoughts on the self for presentation in his *Psychology—Briefer Course*.

The consciousness of Self involves a stream of thought, each part of which as 'I' can remember those which went before, know the things they knew, and care paramourly for certain ones among them as 'Me,' and *appropriate to these* the rest. This Me is an empirical aggregate of things objectively known. The I which knows them cannot itself be an aggregate; neither for psychological purposes need it be an unchanging metaphysical entity like the Soul, or a principle like the transcendental Ego, viewed as 'out of time.' It is a *thought*, at each moment different from that of the last moment, but *appropriative* of the latter, together with all that the latter called its own. All the experiential facts find their place in this description, unencumbered with any hypothesis save that of the existence of passing thoughts or states of mind.¹⁴

The self that is appropriative in the stream of thought is the physiological correlate to the Promethean self of the crisis texts. Further, this self is anticipatory of the self that risks belief in hypotheses so as to elicit data unavailable were an agnostic position adopted. Consequently, James's much maligned essay on "The Will to Believe" is simply an epistemological version of what he earlier affirmed in deeply personal terms and then accounted for in the context of physiological psychology.¹⁵

The next step in James's development of his notion of the self comes with his doctrine of radical empiricism. Its most clear formulation is found in his "Preface" to *The Meaning of Truth*, published in 1909.

Radical empiricism consists first of a postulate, next of a statement of fact, and finally of a generalized conclusion.

The postulate is that the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience. [Things of an unexperienceable nature may exist ad libitum, but they form no part of the material for philosophic debate.]

The statement of fact is that the relations between things, conjunctive as well as disjunctive, are just as much matters of direct particular experience, neither more so nor less so, than the things themselves.

The generalized conclusion is that therefore the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience. The directly apprehended universe needs, in short, no extraneous trans-empirical connective support, but possesses in its own right a concatenated or continuous structure.¹⁶

Both the "statement of fact" and the "generalized conclusion" are significant for our present concerns. The "fact" is that relations become experienced equivalent to the objects experienced. This yields a tissue of continuous transition, in which the human organism is never wholly other from the relations that intend or lead from the world of objects. This continuity is affectively experienced, always, in such a way that it is never necessary or warranted to posit as "a generalized conclusion" that there be an external principle of accountability, be it God, the Absolute Mind or some eternal law of Nature. The upshot of James's position is that the human self, as it were, is on its own for its own creation within the flow of experience. That is, the human self is on its own for the formulation of its peculiar "shape" as wrested from the "push and pressure of the cosmos."¹⁷ Actually, forging the self is a scramble, characterized by the interplay of environ and presence, with novelty and mishap lurking everywhere. So strongly does James believe this version, that in a footnote to his essay on "The Experience of Activity," he portrays the vaunted "I" as but a pronoun of position, struggling to maintain its presence in an ever shifting relational flow.

The individualized self, which I believe to be the only thing properly called self, is a part of the content of the world experienced. The world experienced (otherwise called the 'field of consciousness') comes at all times with our body as its centre, centre of vision, centre of action, centre of interest. Where the body is is 'here'; when the body acts is 'now'; what the body touches is 'this'; all other things are 'there' and 'then' and 'that'. These words of emphasized position imply a systematization of things with reference to a focus of action and interest which lies in the body; and the systematization is now so instinctive (was it ever not so?) that no developed or active experience exists for us at all except in that ordered form. So far as 'thoughts' and 'feelings' can be active, their activity terminates in the activity of the body, and only through first arousing its activities can they begin to change those of the rest of the world. The body is the storm centre, the origin of co-

ordinates, the constant place of stress in all that experience-train. Everything circles round it, and is felt from its point of view. The word 'I', then, is primarily a noun of position, just like 'that' and 'here'. Activities attached to 'this' position have prerogative emphasis, and, if activities have feelings, must be felt in a peculiar way. The word 'my' designates the kind of emphasis. I see no inconsistency whatever in defending, on the one hand, 'my' activities as unique and opposed to those of outer nature, and on the other hand in affirming, after introspection, that they consist in movements in the head. The 'my' of them is the emphasis, the feeling of perspective-interest in which they are dyed.¹⁸

A careful reading of this text shows that James's Promethean self is still tinged with the fragility that emanates from the "crisis" texts. If the "my" of myself is dependent on how I "feel" the messages of my environment, then we are perilously close to a derivative self. Yet James insists that in our conscious life we are active; welcoming, selecting, and choosing all the while. After all, "each of us dichotomizes the Kosmos in a different place."¹⁹

For casual readers of James, the term "kosmos" may seem rather prepossessing. Indeed, it is nothing less than the cosmos that is the immediate environ. Nonetheless, such an environ must be experienced in distinctively personal terms. For James, "so long as we deal with the cosmic and the general, we deal only with the symbols of reality, but *as soon as we deal with the private and personal phenomena as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term.*"²⁰

We must admit that James seems to miss a crucial context at this point. On the one hand, consciousness has access to nothing less than the wider range of consciousness "from which saving experiences flow in."²¹ On the other hand, our "inner state is our very experience itself; its reality and that of our experience are one."²² Yet, as we of the twentieth century know all too well, it is the filtering of these cosmic and personal experiences through the social matrix that is how we have our being. To the contrary, James is quite intractable on this matter, for even when he describes the social context of our experience, he asserts the irreducibility of the distinctively personal. He writes:

A conscious field *plus* its object as felt or thought of *plus* an attitude towards the object *plus* the sense of a self to whom the attitude belongs—such a concrete bit of personal experience may be a small bit, but it is a solid bit as long as it lasts; not hollow, not a mere abstract element of experience, such as the 'object' is when taken all alone.²³

All is not lost, however. What would happen if we were to describe James's radically empirical self in distinctively social terms? Let us contend that the relational environ is so irreducibly social that James's descriptive tension between the Promethean self and a wider range of consciousness is mediated by social transactions. In direct terms, James is not much help on

this matter. In the almost fourteen hundred pages of text in his *Principles of Psychology*, he devotes little more than two pages to the "social self." His version of the social self sounds quaint to our contemporary awareness. He writes that "*a man's Social Self* is the recognition which he gets from his mates. . . . Properly speaking, *a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind.*"²⁴ Although this statement is the line of prose and thought that provided the impetus for G. H. Mead to develop his own important doctrine of the self as social, it is not the direction I wish to take.

My contention is that if we take James's radical empiricism as our point of departure, we can develop a notion of the social self that can be of fundamental assistance to contemporary social thought.²⁵ The self in James's thought is both aggressive and fragile. Its home-made character poses a challenge to forge a series of mooring points in an ever-changing flow of experience. These moorings are vantage points rather than pylons. The self casts about for the optimum relational choices, seeking to advance the interest-oriented concerns of the organism. To fail to make relations yields three pejorative results. The self is either cut adrift as flotsam in the flow, or is mired while the flow rushes by, impervious to our needs, or still again, more dangerously, is cast out of the flow and remains as jetsam. When the self is self-creative, it moves hand over hand through the relational fabric, pointing, intending, leading and constructing all the while. For the self to be without novel relations is for it to be subject to enervation and severe shrinkage, somewhat like the proverbial "raisin in the sun." Relation amputation and relation starvation threaten the capacity of the self to energize and reshape in response to the novel press of experience. In reverse, relation saturation and relation seduction are characterized by an accosting of the self with more than it can handle, either quantitatively or qualitatively.²⁶ The making of relations is not done out of whole cloth, for each relation has its own set of demands and prices. In effect, the self proceeds from its own transient locale, physically and psychologically, and, as such, confronts relational possibilities and implications intended to be consonant with its own interests. These relations, however, often have other fish to fry. They teem with hidden novelty and obligations to still other relations not directly in the purview of the self.

James is quite aware of these novelties, for he writes: "Our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view. Both are fringed forever by a *more* that continuously develops and continuously supersedes them as life proceeds."²⁷ The "more" of which James speaks is not a mere accretion. Rather it begets still further novelty. In a kaleidoscopic fashion, each turn of the wheel, each new relation begets not only "more" relationships but retroactively changes the relationships previously undergone. For James, "there can *be* no

difference anywhere that doesn't make a difference elsewhere."²⁸ Whereas the common assumption is that we stand relatively fixed, somewhat as an observer, while things and situations change "around" us, James's perception of our situation is radically different. The self, as present to the world, is more of a permeable membrane than a spectating redoubt. Relational changes do not happen "around" us as mere external ports of call. Rather, they penetrate the very fabric of our being and, optimally at least, demand that we reshape, reassess, reconnoitre, rework, and revisit each of our previous relations undergone. For the most part, we do not act this way, lapsing rather into an Archimedean point of view as a spectator of a picture. In this latter way, relations are only external to us, shorn of their febrility and capacity to transform. We move through the world as a ghoul, looking but not seeing. We are dead, not only to the press of experience, but to ourselves as well.

Now to the point at issue, the Jamesian self and its relationship to the experience of community. Just as the self is a bundle of relations, so more so is the community. Communal relations differ from the ongoing fabric of relations, *ueberhaupt*, in that they are self-conscious and often intentionally reflective. James failed to focus on the fact that my own self consciousness comes into being inseparable from how I am consciously "had" by others. He was unaware of Marx's notion of the *Gattungswesen*, or species-consciousness, which is the single most potent influence on how I come to understand who I am. James was correct in stressing the creative, interested, and assertive character of the human organism. He neglected, however, the formative power of the social situation, which, despite our Promethean protestations, conditions all of our versions of what we are doing, including and especially those we contend to be distinctively independent of such influence. In a word, James was not aware of the blanketing presence of self-deception, a notion so central to twentieth-century thought as a bequest from Marx, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Sartre.

Still, James is not without significant contributions on this matter. Twentieth-century social thought, when sophisticated, is largely an attack on the naive tradition of a substantial self, operating independently of its social environment. James never held such a position. Somewhat ironically, then, it turns out that although James does not take into sufficient consideration the significance of the social context, his empirical description of the human self is strikingly akin to that of twentieth-century thought. Specifically, James's self is functionally rather than ontologically derived. Although his point of departure is physiology, James duplicates the position of existential thought, namely, that the human self has no fixed place from which to proceed. In fact, it is precisely this lack of an inherited place that distinguishes James's

notion of the self from classical philosophical and psychological positions, and which therefore makes James's thought so relevant to contemporary social thought. Indeed, the only notion of the self that is viable in our century is one that is functional rather than ontological in its principle of accountability. And that is precisely the position of James. Let us look at the potential significance of James's thought on this issue, as directed to the important contemporary problem of "having a place."

In my judgment, the crucial difference between Aristotelianism and Copernicanism traces to the doctrine of place. In the Aristotelian perspective, everything had a natural place, and the human organism was not an exception. Copernicanism dealt a devastating blow to this living-room version of the cosmos, by casting deep doubt on the fixed character of the planets. For Aristotle, the importance of human life was inextricably tied to the importance of the planet earth as nothing less than the physical center of the cosmos. The eradication of that centrality by Copernicanism signaled a deep disquiet about the ontological status of human life. The intervening centuries between Copernicanism and the twentieth century witnessed an effort at temporary repair by Newtonian physics. But the die was cast and the full implications of Copernicanism finally arrived in our century, sustained by quantum mechanics, a new cosmology, and the socially derived collapse of religious, political, and ideological eschatologies. In a word, the deepest contemporary ontological problem is that of *Unheimlichkeit* or homelessness. The vast, limitless, perhaps infinite universe does not award us a place. The planet earth is a node in the midst of cosmic unintelligibility. According to Aristotle, who we are is where we are. And where anything is, is a function of where everything is, so that there exists a center and a periphery. If that is so, we are now no one, for we are nowhere, in that we do not know the extension of the cosmos, or for that matter, whether it has any periphery at all. Pascal anticipated our situation when he wrote: "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me."²⁹

James, to the contrary, was not put off by the collapse of the Aristotelian world-view. He never assumed that we had a place, for, as such, there is no place as proper place. If James is correct, as I think he is, then we have no place, for, in fact, there is no place. A place, like time in the famous adage, must be seized. To seize a place is not only to affirm that this is my place. It is also to deny a host of relations, such as, for example, this is your place, some other place, or no place at all. It is true that to be is to be in place, that is, in some place rather than another place. What is less obvious, however, is that every place seized is a place denied. Every relation accepted is a relation denied, or held up, or held off, and, therefore, the place we have is by no means the one we

must have, although we come to think of it that way. Epistemologically, our strongest tendency by far is to assume that the way things are is the way they should be, or even must be. In James's philosophy, this is not so, for the way things are is most often a path of least resistance, a result of having said a precipitous "no" to countless alternatives. Saying "yes" to a relational possibility often has the unfortunate consequence of having to deny that we have said "no" to a series of competing relational possibilities. Having denied that we have said "no," it is too infrequent that we reopen the conversation, tending rather to accept our situation as inevitable and fixed. We receive little help here from our peers, since they for the most part function similarly. Further, all of us seem to treat each other as though our own fixations, *mutatis mutandis*, belong to them as well.

The social science of community, or even of general human gatherings, has not been of much help here. Categories abound: mother, father; black, white; parent, child; male, female; rural, urban; blue and white collar; each cleaves its own peculiar separation, oblivious that such distinctions criss-cross and render dubious any subsequent generalization. In a word, we have come to accept sameness rather than relational novelty as the order of the day.

On behalf of this contention, let us ask the following questions: What is it to say that someone lives *there* or *here* or *somewhere*? What is it to say that someone went *there* or *someplace*? Again, what do we mean when we say that someone is from *there* or *here* or *someplace*? In general, there is a tendency to think that we know what we mean by such identifications, such placeholders. To the contrary, in empirical terms, I think that we assert what we do not, in fact, know, but only assume as a fallout of the generic meaning of the placeholder. In effect, we affirm a name, a location, an identity as a way of salvaging and negating most of the relationships that any event, place, or person necessarily entails. Thereby, we trade off sterile, nominating concepts as a substitute for the richness of actual situations. In Jamesian terms, these nominations are but placeholders, barely representative of the relational fullness with which life concretely comes. For James, as we have mentioned, even the *I*, the *me*, is but a stand-in for the rush of competing selves that both occupy and relent in our stream of consciousness. Things, and all the more so, selves, are not singles. Rather, they are knots of competing relations, fluid and not definable as separate from how they are experienced in the consciousness of others. Yet with rare, albeit important exceptions,³⁰ the social sciences still assume that things exist as such, that objects exist as such, and that names are descriptive of events, places, and artifacts, rather than as substitutes for processes. And, of course, the converse is also held, namely, that unless named, our experiences do

not exist.³¹ The relationship between such an attitude and the ascendancy of quantitative method in the social sciences should not be overlooked.

James's approach is decidedly different. In his thought, there are no singles outside the network, the web, or the concatenated context, which is never known as an *All-einheit*. Rather, to know the world is to know it as *durcheinander*, through and through, in which everything, every place, every event is freighted with a "more," a coming and a going, a saving and a losing. And we speak here on the level of the obvious, saying nothing at this time of the subterranean recesses of our conscious life, or our dreams, tics, and functionally repressed secrets.

Returning to our concern with the doctrine of place, let us deepen our analysis somewhat. Where are you? You answer, I am here. Yet here to you is there to me. What is it for you to be there, that is, to be in place, in that place? Your response, however prosaically jejune it may be, nonetheless has got to be relation-saturated. Supposing our site is a town, a village, a neighborhood, a farm, a block, that is, some version of a *Lebenswelt*. I now ask myself, did I start here? Or did I come here? Do I want to be here or am I backing and filling? Am I here on behalf of my leaving? Or, would my leaving betray my wanting to stay? And what of memories? Are they selective? If so, are they on behalf of my leaving or my staying? Perhaps I am that kind of person for whom memories are called upon not to justify what I want to do but rather to justify what I do.

Now it turns out that I leave from here in order to live there. From the side of leaving, why did I go? Was it a response to a need and if so, of what kind? Was it a response to a fantasy or to a Walter Mitty fulfillment? Again, could it not have been an escape? Perhaps it was only a drifting as in going from one place to another, in a form of personal flotsam. So too, from the side of arriving there from here, similar ambiguities crop up. Am I here because I wanted to come or because I have been forced to come, called by the lure and pull of others? Am I here on the way to somewhere else or as an exile, soon to return whence I came? Perhaps I am very unusual for an American, and I am here to stay. At least, so I think—now.

I can be still more specific. Let us take the case of a young child who is moved from one neighborhood, home, room, to another. This move is a "step up," as they say. The neighborhood is better, the home is nicer, and the room is bigger. Yet a deep loneliness sets in and our child cries itself to sleep each evening. Some would say that the obvious reason is a loss of friends, but I believe that to be too one-dimensional for a sufficient cause. Rather, the relations severed are more subtle. The Jamesian "penumbra," the "halo of relations," has been abandoned. Lost is the familiar creak of a stair, a shadow cast by the bough of a

tree, and the play of light in the child's room, dusk to dawn. Each of them, among countless other sounds and shapes, has acted as a mooring for the ever floating consciousness. Psychically, we are originally weightless and it is necessary for us to hook ourselves to a series of things, artifacts, and images, which in turn tell us where we are and even who we are.

The social psychologists and the social anthropologists are correct. We are creatures formed in the cauldron of the other, selves, things, shadows of all shapes, rings of tones, scent of smells, and above all the double-barrelled touch of touch. James failed to stress sufficiently this context of other. Nonetheless, they fail to stress what James knew all too well, that the active self is hydra-headed and brimming with sensorial capacities, each of them capable of rendering distinctively personal even the most obvious of commonness.

Marx, Durkheim, Mead, Dewey, have it right. The self is a social construct. But James has it right as well. It is the personally idiosyncratic seeker of relations who puts a distinctive cast on the world. Marx tells us that institutions condition consciousness, but who more than Marx himself intruded his personal version of the world on these very same institutions. The social and the communal are intrusive, but so too is the personal. Nothing is final. To this, James attests over and over.

Everything you can think of, however vast or inclusive, has on the pluralistic view a genuinely 'external' environment of some sort or amount. Things are 'with' one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word 'and' trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes. 'Ever not quite' has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness.¹²

Above all, the escape is perpetrated by the individual, especially the Promethean self. In the last analysis, the critical question is *how* do we feel and *how* we do feel *about*? In the contemporary stress on social conditioning let us not forget James's warning:

Individuality is founded in feeling; and the recesses of feeling, the darker, blinder strata of character, are the only places in the world in which we catch real fact in the making, and directly perceive how events happen, and how work is actually done.¹³

NOTES

1. *The Letters of William James* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), vol. II, p. 90.

2. John Dewey, "The Vanishing Subject in the Psychology of William James," *Problems of Men* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), p. 396.

3. William James, "Essays in Radical Empiricism," *The Works of William James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

4. For a discussion of the occasion of these crisis texts, see Gay Wilson Allen, *William James—A Biography* (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), pp. 162-170. The three texts are cited in full in John J. McDermott, ed., *The Writings of William James* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977) (1967), pp. 6-8.

5. See, e.g., "Psychological Studies of the James Family," *The Psychohistory Review* 7 (Summer-Fall, 1979):5-70.

6. William A. Clebsch, *American Religious Thought* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 142.

7. McDermott, *Writings of William James*, p. 7.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 7 and 8.

10. See William James, "Pragmatism," *The Works of William James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 99. "Woe to him whose beliefs play fast and loose with the order which realities follow in his experience: they will lead him nowhere or else make false connexions."

11. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

12. See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958) (1739), pp. 251-263.

13. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1890), vol. I, p. 354.

14. William James, *Psychology—Briefer Course* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1892), p. 215.

15. For an explicitly physical account of self-consciousness by James, see *Principles*, vol. I, pp. 301-302. "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 particular motions in the head or between the head and throat. I do not for a moment say that this is all it consists of, for I fully realize how desperately hard is introspection in this field. But I feel quite sure that these cephalic motions are the portions of my innermost activity of which I am most distinctly aware. If the dim portions which I cannot yet define should prove to be like unto these distinct portions in me, and I like other men, it would follow that our entire feeling of spiritual activity, or what commonly passes by that name, is really a feeling of bodily activities whose exact nature is by most men overlooked."

16. William James, "The Meaning of Truth," *The Works of William James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 6-7.

17. William James, "Pragmatism," *Works*, p. 9.

18. William James, "Essays in Radical Empiricism," *Works*, p. 86n.

19. William James, *Psychology—Briefer Course*, p. 175.

20. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902), p. 498.

21. William James, "A Pluralistic Universe," *The Works of William James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 139.

22. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 499.

23. *Ibid.*

24. William James, *Principles*, vol. I, pp. 293 and 294.

25. I have made some earlier efforts in this direction. See John J. McDermott, *The Culture of Experience* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), *passim*.

26. A phenomenology of these relational pairs can be found in John J. McDermott, "Life Is in the Transitions," *The Culture of Experience*, pp. 104-110.

27. William James, "Essays in Radical Empiricism," *Works*, p. 35.

28. William James, "Pragmatism," *Works*, p. 30.

29. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (New York: Modern Library, 1941), p. 75.

30. The works of Edward Hall, Robert Sommer, Kevin Lynch, and Erving Goffmann are exceptions to this judgment. See also Raymond P. McDermott, "Social Relations as Contexts for Learning," *Harvard Educational Review* 47 (May, 1977):198-213.

31. See William James, "On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology," as cited in "Essays in Radical Empiricism," *Works*, p. XIX, where he writes that we should avoid "the error, namely, of supposing that where there is *no* name no entity can exist. All *dumb* psychic states have, owing to this error, been coolly suppressed; or, if recognised at all, have been named after the substantive perception they led to, as thoughts 'about' this object or 'about' that, the stolid word *about* engulfing all their delicate idiosyncracies in its monotonous sound. Thus the greater and greater accentuation and isolation of the substantive parts have continually gone on."

32. William James, "A Pluralistic Universe," *Works*, p. 145.

33. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 501-502.