

SCIOUSNESS AND CON-SCIOUSNESS: WILLIAM JAMES AND THE PRIME REALITY OF NON-DUAL EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT: William James's radical empiricism of "pure experience" both anticipated and directly influenced the transmission of Zen in the West. In this centennial reconstruction, the author shows how the man called both the "father of American Psychology" and the "father of transpersonal psychology" was also the father of a Western approach to enlightenment. Relying mainly on introspection and ether-induced states, James made a crucial distinction between *con*-sciousness (consciousness-with-self) and sciousness (consciousness-without-self). Prime reality, he maintained, is not revealed through the subject-object divide, but in the "sciousness" of non-dual experience. The coherence of organized experience (both static and successive) is accounted for without an organizing "I." The "I" itself is seen not as the foundation of consciousness, but as a reverberation within it: a palpitating core of welcoming and opposing emotions.

PREFACE

In 1894, William James, M.D., author of a widely acclaimed textbook, *The Principles of Psychology*, turned his back on the conservative medical community that had trained him. The Massachusetts legislature, with the urging of James's professional colleagues, had sought to pass a "Medical Registration Bill," requiring all healers to pass a licensing exam. Since this exam would be devised by the medical schools, James knew that it would turn all alternative practitioners into charlatans and criminals overnight. In particular, he was concerned about the banishing of mind cure therapists, such as Christian Scientists, who viewed their patients as spiritual rather than material beings, with "no separate mind from God" (Eddy, 1906, p. 475). In a passionate and lengthy letter to the *Boston Evening Transcript*, he argued that such banishment would be a disservice to science:

I assuredly hold no brief for any of these healers, and must confess that my intellect has been unable to assimilate their theories, so far as I have heard them given. But their *facts* are patent and startling; and anything that interferes with the multiplication of such facts, and with our freest opportunity of observing and studying them, will, I believe, be a public calamity. (James, 1920, Vol. II, p. 69)

Defenses of transpersonal therapies and research, along with his own original research, are one reason that James lays claim to the title of "the father of modern transpersonal psychology" (Taylor, 1996, p. 21; see, also, Kasproff & Scotton, 1999, p. 13). The other more significant reason is that James's philosophy accommodated their "startling" facts.¹ "Unable to assimilate" the theories of any particular transpersonal therapy, James nonetheless undercut the two metaphysical assumptions that prevented scientists from even considering them. The first assumption was that the activity of the brain's matter does not merely correspond to

consciousness, it generates it. The second assumption was that matter is a prime reality that can exist intact, independently of all consciousness.

James made an extended attack on the first assumption in 1897, in an essay entitled “On Human Immortality.” While allowing that thought was a function of the brain, he argued that the function was better conceived as one of *transmission* rather than production (James, 1898, 1102–1121). The brain, he proposed, might well act more like a prism, refracting a light source from beyond, than like a generator, producing the light within (pp. 1109–1110). A century later, transpersonal psychologists echoed James in asserting that consciousness was not a “by-product of material processes occurring in the brain” (Grof, 1993, p. 5).

James’s attack on the second, more widely held assumption, began early in his career, but was not formally stated until two essays published in 1904: “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” and “A World of Pure Experience.” In those essays James challenged the scientific worldview of his day that had divided reality into subjects and consciousness on one side, and objects and matter on the other. When quantum physicists began issuing the same challenge a decade later, they discovered that James had prepared the way.² This article is offered in honor of the Centennial (1904–2004) of William James’ landmark in Western thought: his manifesto on the prime reality of non-dual experience.

SCIOUSNESS

“The Witness”—William James’s handwritten annotation next to the word “sciousness” in his own copy of *The Principles of Psychology*. (Burkhardt, Bowers & Skrupskelis, 1981, p. 1149)

It is widely believed in the West that consciousness implies a self;³ that to be conscious (literally, to “know with”) is to be a *self* that knows. But William James, who devoted most of his life to the study of consciousness, dismissed this belief outright, claiming it to be “a perfectly wanton assumption”:

... not the faintest shadow of reason exists for supposing it true. As well might I contend that I cannot dream without dreaming that I dream, swear without swearing that I swear, deny without denying that I deny, as maintain that I cannot know without knowing that I know. (1890, p. 264)

The self or “I” was many things for James: “a noun of position, just like ‘this’ or ‘here’” (1909b, p. 803n.);⁴ a state of “peculiar *internality* ... possess[ing] the quality of seeming to be active” (1892, p. 48); a feeling of “*some bodily process, for the most part taking place within the head*” (1890, p. 287); “a uniform feeling of ‘warmth’”;⁵ to name a few. What it was *not*, however, was an abiding subject-substance *in which* “phenomena inhere” (1890, p. 328). Nor was it a ground or condition of consciousness:

I may have either acquaintance-with, or knowledge-about, an object O without thinking about myself at all. It suffices for this that I think O, and that it exist. If, in addition to thinking O, I also think that I exist and that I know O, well and good; I then know one more thing, a fact about O, of which I previously was

unmindful. That, however, does not prevent me from having already known O a good deal. O *per se*, or O plus P, are as good objects of knowledge as O plus me is. (James, 1890, pp. 264–265)

Consciousness is always a “knowing” or “witnessing.” Sometimes it is a knowing “pure and simple” (James, 1890, p. 290), without an accompanying sense of “I.” Sometimes, “along with” whatever else is known, consciousness has a sense of its “own existence” as knower (p. 290). James labeled consciousness-without-self “*sciousness*,” and consciousness-with-self “*con-sciuousness*” (p. 290). [From hereon the term “*consciousness*” will encompass both “*sciousness*” and *con-sciuousness*, referring to a moment which might be one or the other, or moments alternating between one and the other. In this more general sense, “*consciousness*” is synonymous with “*awareness*” and “*experience*.”]

The existence of both kinds of consciousness was evident to James not only from simple, try-at-home, experiments, like his O plus P introspection above, but from more exotic experiments (not infrequently tried at home in 19th Century America): the taking of ether. A commonly noted side-effect of this drug was the loss of the sense of “I” *without the loss of consciousness*.⁶ Thoreau likened it “to exist[ing] in your roots—like a tree in winter,” and advised: “If you have an inclination to travel, take the ether. You go beyond the farthest star” (1848–1851/1990, p. 218). In *The Principles*, James quotes the following account of such travel:

During the syncope there is absolute psychic annihilation, the absence of all consciousness; then at the beginning of coming to, one has at a certain moment a vague, limitless, infinite feeling—a sense of *existence in general* without the least trace of distinction between the me and the not-me. (1890, p. 263)

To this non-dual experience with ether just before “coming-to,” James adds his own personal testimony: “. . . as it [the effect of the ether] vanishes I seem to wake to a sense of my own existence as something additional to what had previously been there” (James, 1890, p. 264).

An American mystic who profoundly influenced James, Benjamin Paul Blood,⁷ put this moment of coming-to from the ether state at the center of his mystical vision. Blood called this moment the “Adamic Surprise,” invoking Adam’s state of awareness *prior to* his eating from the tree of knowledge:

There is an invariable and reliable condition (or uncondition) ensuing about the instant of recall from anaesthetic stupor to “coming to,” in which the genius of being is revealed. . . . No words may express the imposing certainty of the patient that he is realizing the primordial Adamic surprise of Life. (Blood, quoted by James, 1910b, p. 1306)⁸

The serpent’s salespitch notwithstanding, Adam did not gain knowledge when he bit into the apple; he didn’t discover fire, or how to graft a tree. The “knowledge” Adam gained was knowledge of *self*, which is not so much knowledge as *belief*. Under the influence of ether, the basis of this belief vanishes, returning only as one “comes to.”

“Comes to” from what? Can black-outs (including dreamless sleep) be confirmed to be other than black-*ins* of which only the last moment of blackness before

“coming-to” is remembered? What of Tibetan Yogis, for example, who remember more? “Taught to develop lucidity first in their dreams and then in their *nondream* sleep” (Walsh & Vaughan, 1992, p. 198, emphasis added), they are able “to remain continuously aware twenty-four hours a day” (p. 198). They black-*in* to dreamless sleep, and know nothing of black-*outs*.

Does anyone else? After all, a first person account of “absolute psychic annihilation” or “the absence of all consciousness” would be tantamount to a description of what does not, indeed *cannot* exist: absolute nothingness. While it may be possible to experience or imagine the relative absence of anything, it is impossible to experience or imagine absolute nothingness or emptiness.⁹ Blackness, silence, the abyss, empty *space*, however large or small, are all relative nothingness, merely. “Absence of all consciousness,” therefore, is a far more difficult inference to substantiate than an ongoing blackness, all but the last moment of which has been forgotten. *Con*-sciousness, not sciousness, is all that can be said to go out in these gaps; gaps which are no more gaps than “a joint in a bamboo is a break in the wood” (James, 1890, pp. 233–234).¹⁰

At the end of his life, James suggested that even causality might originate in the *transmarginal* sciousness realm revealed by “ether-mysticism,” rather than the “I”-marginated *con*-scious realm (1910a, p. 1279). With more certitude, however, he held that “pure and simple” consciousness, without a “*self-brand*” (1890, p. 320),¹¹—sciousness—was not only a reality, it was the *prime* reality. For sciousness is not *distilled from* the “dualistic constitution” of subject-object consciousness (*con*-sciousness), like oil might be from pigment (1904a, p. 1144), but rather a “dualistic constitution” is *added to* it (pp. 1144, 1151). When James first introduced “sciousness” as a possible prime reality in *The Principles*, he backed off with the warning that it “traverse[s] common sense” (1890, p. 291), something he felt comfortable doing as a philosopher, but not as a textbook writer for a conservative scientific community. Fifteen years later, writing solely as a philosopher, he returned to his “parenthetical digression” that “contradict[ed] the fundamental assumption of *every* philosophic school” (p. 291), openly embracing it. James had founded a new school of philosophy, called “radical empiricism,” and sciousness was its starting-point: “plain, unqualified . . . existence,” where there is “no self-splitting . . . into consciousness and what the consciousness is “of”” (1904a, p. 1151).¹² He did, however, discontinue using the word “sciousness,” substituting the phrase: “pure experience.”¹³ In this essay they will be used interchangeably and in combination.

West Meets East: Sciousness and Zen

Ether experiences notwithstanding, James *theorized* about pure experience sciousness more than he described instances of it. Yet had he consulted D. T. Suzuki, destined to become the foremost explainer of Zen to the West, and employed at the time as a translator by a philosopher friend of James, he might have done otherwise. For while James claimed ignorance of Buddhism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, his fundamental insight that “*to know immediately . . . or intuitively, is for mental content and object to be identical*” (1909a, p. 856)

explicates Zen monks' attempts to communicate their satori. Take, for example, the following:

When Fa-ch'ang was dying, a squirrel screeched on the roof. "It's just this," he says, "and nothing else." (Watts, 1957, p. 201)

A sound as startling (yet nonthreatening) as a squirrel screeching on the roof bursts *con*-sciousness into sciousness insofar as "no dualism of being represented and representing resides in the experience . . ." (James, 1904a, p. 1151). All seeing, tasting, hearing, smelling, touching, thinking, imaging, feeling are reduced to the experience of that screech. If, say, you were watching TV when a squirrel screeched nearby, you could not describe the TV image that coincided with its onset. Likewise, when you bite into a particularly rich piece of chocolate you lose the sensation of how the chocolate feels in your hand; when you see a shooting star, you stop hearing the crickets; and when the answer to a question you have been puzzling over for weeks suddenly bursts into awareness, you lose complete contact with all external sensations.

Sciousness has what James calls a "*naif* immediacy," never knowable as such, but only in "retrospection" (1904a, p. 1151). Zen tradition is filled with examples of such im-mediated¹⁴ experience. Typical is the account of the 9th Century monk, Xiangyan. Having become frustrated by his efforts to understand Zen through reading, Xiangyan abandoned his studies altogether for meditation; one day, hearing pebbles strike a clump of bamboo, he became enlightened (see Cleary, 2001, p. 265). All such examples of one-pointed satori evoke the original enlightenment of the Buddha who, after years of self-torturing meditation, attained enlightenment all-of-a-sudden, in a moment of im-mediated sciousness. The moment occurred after an all-night meditation session under the Bodhi tree, when he "glanced at the planet Venus gleaming in the eastern sky" (Kapleau, 1965/1989, p. 31).

The satori bliss of sciousness, or what the Zen tradition interchangeably calls "one thought-instant" (*ekaksana*) and "no-thought-instant" (*aksana*) (Suzuki, 1959, p. 268), contrasts sharply with the mild disturbance (from the Latin word "turba" meaning "commotion" or "mob") of ordinary experience. Ordinarily, thoughts or images come with what James calls a "staining, fringe, or halo of obscurely felt relation to masses of other imagery" (1890, p. 452). In the wholemind of sciousness this fringe drops away. Whatever awareness there is, is full awareness. It is "pure *onsense!*" (James, 1897, p. 678),¹⁵ with no residue of self inhabiting the moment.

Suzuki, for his part, immediately saw the connection between James's pure experience and Zen, and introduced James's writings to his teacher Kitaro Nishida. Nishida not only directly appropriated James's analysis, but also his expression "pure experience" in seeking to translate the direct-experience satori upon which Zen is based.¹⁶ Suzuki, too, appropriated the phrase "pure experience" to define "this most fundamental experience . . . beyond differentiation" (Loy, 1998, p. 136).

Non-dualism was well established in the two strands that wove into Zen: Buddhism and Taoism. Buddhists distinguished between dualistic knowledge—*vi-jna* ("bifurcated-knowing")—and non-dual knowledge—*pra-jna* ("springing-up-knowing"). So, too, dualistic perception—*sa-vi-kalpa* ("with-bifurcated-

thought construction”)—was contrasted with non-dual perception—*nir-vi-kalpa* (“without-bifurcated-thought construction”).¹⁷ And as for Taoism, Chuang Tzu claimed nondualism—“when ‘self’ and ‘other’ lose their contrareity,”—to be “the very essence of Tao” (Loy, 1998, p. 34). Zen borrowed from these non-dual ontologies, but at the same time rejected any borrowed doctrines as the ultimate foundation for truth. Truth in Zen is confirmed by direct experience or not at all.

The British empirical tradition that James adhered to also confirmed its truths by direct experience. Berkeley used it in denying the independent reality of objects. Hume used it in denying the independent reality of subjects. When James used it to confirm what was left, his own tradition converged with Zen. For Zen’s “suchness” or “this-as-it-is-ness” (Suzuki, 1959, p. 16) is James’s pure experience consciousness: “immediate experience in its passing,” “a simple *that*” before it is “doubl[ed]” into

1. “a state of mind”
and
2. “a reality intended thereby” (1904a, p. 1151).

James’s Koan

Common sense says that mind and matter are distinct. Common sense says that exterior material objects interact with interior consciousness, and that such objects can survive the extinction not only of the subjects who behold them, but of consciousness itself. But if the experience of consciousness is the “always ‘truth’” prime reality that James, in agreement with Zen, claims it to be (1904a, p. 1151), then consciousness is not *of* something (internalized), but *as* something (neither internalized nor externalized). Echoing the great Koan traditions of Zen, James delivers this world shattering wisdom in the form of a question:

How, if “subject” and “object” were separated “by the whole diameter of being,” and had no attributes in common, could it be so hard to tell, in a presented and recognized material object, what part comes in through the sense-organs and what part comes “out of one’s own head”? (1904a, p. 1154)

There is a useful distinction to be drawn between an object and a mere thought of an object. As James put it, “Mental knives may be sharp, but they won’t cut real wood” (1904a, p. 1155). Mere thoughts of objects are intangible, internal, and inconsequential. “Real” (by-contrast-to-merely-mental) objects are tangible, external, and consequential. Kicking a rock is one way to make the distinction between a mental and a “real” object. It is not, however, as Samuel Johnson believed, a way to establish the independent existence of objects themselves. For the touch of his foot on the rock, as James’s koan could have helped him understand, did not confirm a realm beyond perception. What part of the touch came in from the rock? What part came out of his own head?

If full attention, unimpeded by expectation and uninterrupted by emotional reaction, is given to the contact of foot-touching-rock, its external hard “objectness” is clearly realized to be an *aspect* of consciousness. There is no prime reality of matter. “‘Matter,’ as something *behind* [emphasis added] physical

phenomena,” is merely a “postulate” of thought (James, 1890, p. 291). Touch, however, such as the first feel of sand between your toes, or a friend’s hand on your shoulder, or a Zen master’s thwack with a stick, readily manifests as the prime reality of im-mediated sciousness. “If a man has experienced the inexpressible,” Johnson once remarked, “he is under no obligation to attempt to express it.”¹⁸ He might, however, feel obligated to rethink fundamental assumptions about expressible experience, such as the absolute discrimination between subjects and objects. If Johnson had not been preoccupied with trying to distinguish mind from matter, the touch of his foot on the rock might have dispelled the twin illusion on which the distinction is based: an internal *consciousness-without-object* and an external *object-without-consciousness*.¹⁹

Flickering Self of Con-sciousness

While the undifferentiation of subject and object eludes expression, it does not elude experience. Not only does the sense of “I” not brand our every waking moment, it flickers in and out—a flickering that happens so rapidly that the transition from *con-sciousness* to sciousness and back to *con-sciousness* barely registers. The sense of “I” flickers out, for example, with a red flash at the window; it flickers back in when the red flash “becomes” a cardinal. Like the screech of the squirrel, the sensation of redness, when it first appears, is undefined, unconnected to anything else, unpositioned, without context; and if attention is without definition, position, or context, the sense of “I” is without definition, position or context, which is another way of saying it is no sense of “I” at all. The conversion of the red flash into a cardinal is the reconstitution of the sense of self.

It is not that names or words always contextualize consciousness. If, for example, after identifying the red flash as a bird, I struggled to remember the name of the bird, the first moment of remembrance might feel as absent of context and self as the initial burst of red color; for a moment it would command full attention. But when it follows immediately upon the one-pointed sensation of redness, the word-thought for the redness, “cardinal,” dis-tracts (“*pulls apart*”) the one-pointed sensation of redness into two points:

1. a state of mind
2. a reality intended thereby.

The loss of the sense of “I” in a one-pointed, wholemind moment of sciousness is not to be confused with feeling lost or disoriented. As James says, when you are lost in a forest and say “Where am I?,” that is the wrong question. You know where *you* are; you don’t know where everything else is. So, too, when a red flash appears outside the window, the “I” sense, oriented in thoughts and feelings of the past and future, drops out in the wonderment of the present moment; but there is no feeling of being lost, since there is no sense of a somewhere else to be.

In the moment just prior to a wholemind moment of sciousness, however, there may be a sense of disorientation, as whatever context had positioned the “I” (the “everything else” of the forest wanderer) lingers. If, say, I am sitting at my desk

daydreaming, my “I” positioned within the narrative of that dream, the sudden absence of that narrative, and all its positioning images, in the first moment of the red flash outside my window, may be palpable. Like forest wanderers who feel lost, not because of where they *are*, but because of where they are *not*, there is a palpable presence of an absence.²⁰

But most of the time the sense of self flickers out and in so rapidly that its absence is not noticed, and its presence seems continuous, just as a rapid succession of film frames projected on a screen seems to be one uninterrupted narrative. But whenever we become completely absorbed in anything—such as a sunrise (just before the response “How beautiful!”), or dancing (when “the dancer becomes the dance”)—the narrative has been interrupted. “To forget the self,” says the 12th Century Zen Master Dogen, “is to be actualized by myriad things” (Dogen, in Tanashi, 1985, p. 70).

Pre-assembled Thoughts

“If we could say in English ‘it thinks,’ as we say ‘it rains’ or ‘it blows,’ we should be stating the fact most simply and with the minimum of assumption.” (James, 1890, p. 220)

The very awareness of myriad moments seems to entail a unifying agency. How else could myriad moments be thought or felt in relationship to each other, including that most minimal relationship: difference? Even individual moments, including wholemind moments of sciousness, are made up of myriad details that seem to presuppose an organizer, or, at the very least, an organizing. Does not any image or thought of more than one detail—that is, any image other than, perhaps, a monolithically perceived patch of color—entail “a manifold of coexisting ideas” that must be assembled? As James puts it:

If . . . the thought be “the pack of cards is on the table,” we say “Well, isn’t it a thought of the pack of cards? Isn’t it of the cards as included in the pack? Isn’t it of the table? And of the legs of the table as well? The table has legs—how can you think the table without virtually thinking its legs? Hasn’t our thought, then, all these parts—one part for the pack and another for the table? And within the pack-part a part for each card, as within the table part a part for each leg? And isn’t each of these parts an idea? And can our thought, then, be anything but an assemblage or pack of ideas, each answering to some element of what it knows?” (1890, p. 268)

But having made the argument for a manifold of co-existing ideas in any thought of more than a single detail, James immediately dismisses it, claiming that “not one of these assumptions is true” (1890, p. 268). To make them is to commit a basic error: confusing a thought with what the thought “can be developed into” (p. 268). Although the thought of the pack of cards on the table is a thought about both “the pack of cards” and the “table,” the “conscious constitution” of the thought is not one of plurality but of unity (p. 268). As a whole unit unto itself it is an “entirely different subjective phenomenon” than the thought “the pack of cards” or “the

table” (p. 268). Emphasizing the point with italics, James declares: “*Whatever things are thought in relation are thought from the outset in a unity, in a single pulse of subjectivity, a single psychosis, feeling, or state of mind*” (p. 268).

No moment of consciousness, however complex, is to be confused with what it can later be broken down into. A stab of pain in a tooth, for instance, is not an accretion of different experiences, even if it can later be described as such. So, too, a simple thought, such as “table” (or “cards on table”), does not arise disassembled, like mail-order furniture, requiring assembly from an “I.” It arrives whole. The more complex the relations within a single thought, the more its pre-assembled quality is manifest.

In saying that “things thought in relation are thought *from the outset* in a unity,” James is making no claim as to *how* such unity is accomplished. The “how” of such unity remains a mystery—a mystery, he points out, that cannot “be made lighter” by assuming that it happens “inside the mind” (1890, pp. 343–344). To say, as some philosophers do, that a thought is unified “inside the mind,” is to assume that there is something *un*unified outside the mind, a “chaotic manifold” that needs to be “reduced to order” (p. 344). The most renowned of these philosophers, Kant, called this chaotic manifold “noumena,” or objects as they exist in themselves, without the admixture of thought; he then posited a “transcendental I,” a *pure* “I,” which, though never actually experienced in any way, must still exist in order to convert noumena into recognizable phenomena.²¹ In place of the direct experience of an existing unity in thought, Kant thus posited two *un*experienced *concepts*. For James, however, Kant’s description of “the facts” was “mythological,” and his transcendental “I” (not to be confused with the empirical “me” of a sensed “I”) “as ineffectual and windy an abortion as Philosophy can show” (1890, p. 345). As James rightly observes, there is no evidence that thoughts come from unknown elements, brought together in an “internal machine-shop” in the mind (p. 344):

Experiences come on an enormous scale, and if we take them all together, they come in a chaos of incommensurable relations that we can not straighten out. We have to abstract different groups of them, and handle these separately if we are to talk of them at all. But how the experiences ever *get themselves made*, or *why* their characters and relations are just such as they appear, we can not begin to understand. (1905, pp. 1190–1191)

Still, even if there is no chaos of *unknown* elements to bring into the known, the presumption persists that *known* elements brought into a relation with each other require a *relator* of some sort. How else to account for a unity formed not “from the outset” but in time? James’s example of the pack of cards on the table, for instance, is presented as a sentence: “The pack of cards is on the table.” While the upshot of this sentence is indeed a unified whole, and such a unity, when it occurs at the end of the sentence, occurs “all at once,” the parts are, nonetheless, articulated temporally. Is temporal relating possible without a *relator*? Mozart, in the act of composing a sonata, claims to have heard the complete sonata “all at once,” in a “single glance of the mind” (Mozart, quoted in James, 1890, p. 247), but most of us need time to get from “twinkle” to “star.” The simplest melody (like the simplest sentence), whatever its ultimate unity, unfolds as a *succession*. There may not be “a constant

'self' moving through successive experiences'' (Watts, 1957, p. 123), but any experience of succession (as opposed to an "all at once" "single glance") seems to entail if not an assembler, at least something more than the assembling itself. But does it?

James at Basho's Pond

"Succession is the thing." Xenos Clark, in a letter to Benjamin Paul Blood, that Blood shared with James, defining the essence of "the anesthetic revelation." (Skrupskelis & Berkeley, p. 230)

When we hear a melody do the earlier notes hang around until they are pieced together with the later notes, or is the cumulating experience newly reconfigured in each occurrent moment? What of the various thoughts of a poem read? Who or *what* links them together?

Take the famous haiku poem of Basho (in Aitken, 1978, pp. 25–26):

Old pond!
Frog jumps in
Sound of water

The three lines are distinct but cumulative: the second line building on the first, the third on the first two. Three different thoughts, one successive experience. But the successive experience of whom? The poet Basho? On the basis of these three lines we have not the slightest inkling as to whom that might be. The creator of a delightful poem, surely, but the delight is derived from a total vacuuming out of subjective traces. The relating of this scene, in both its parts and its totality, do not depict the history of a subject in whom the experience inheres so much as the impersonal modifications of experience itself. There is no question that the three moments of the experience are related to each other. The question is how are they related? A daughter, for example, is, at the same time, both related to her mother and independent of her. She has features that can be *traced back to* her mother but these features reside in her now, completely independently of their source; there is no unifying agency relating each to the other.

So, too, the relationship between the lines in Basho's poem exists independently of any unifying agency. The "in" of the second line has inherited its meaning from the "pond" of the line before it. In one sense, then, the first line lives in the second line. But that inheritance of meaning in the second line does not imply the continued existence of the first line any more than the hair color that the daughter has inherited from her mother implies that the mother is still alive. The second line *as* written, and *if* read in the spirit in which it is written, is a new moment in a stream of consciousness, even if it contains something of a moment that came before it.

Granted it may take much meditation practice to even glimpse this spirit, in which everything that arises commands undivided attention upon arrival and then vanishes as the next point of focus arrives, and ultimately, perhaps, grace, to inhabit it fully.

As the considered-to-be-enlightened Zen patriarch Huang Po mused about his students: “Why do they not copy me by letting each thought go as though it were nothing, or as though it were a piece of rotten wood, a stone, or the cold ashes of a dead fire?” (9th Century CE/1956, p. 61). Why indeed? But even from the vantage point of ordinary experience, where each moment of thought is not let go of before the next arrives, relationships between sequential moments are less artificially assigned to the moments themselves than to a go-between unifier.

Take, as James does, by way of illustration, the simplest of sequences—one letter of the alphabet followed by the next. The letter “m” comes before the letter “n,” and “n” comes after “m”; but that does not imply that a before-after relationship exists *in-between* the two letters, actively linking them. The transitioning between two moments may be protracted enough to suggest such active linking is taking place, but whatever transitioning is experienced is, in fact, its own distinct moment in the sequence.²² The distinction of such transitional moments is easily overlooked, which is why James says “We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* and *cold*” (1890, p. 238). But with or without such distinct transitional thoughts as “and” or “is followed by,” the thought “n” does not require the lingering presence of the thought “m” to assume its sequential sense. On the contrary, sequential sense, as James says, comes ready-made as its own distinct pulse:

[I]f the plain facts be admitted . . . the *pure* idea of “n” is never in the mind at all, when “m” has once gone before; and . . . the feeling “n-different-from-m” is itself an absolutely unique pulse of thought. (pp. 472–473)

Instead of an “I,” “‘combining’ or ‘synthesizing’ two ideas [m and n],” there is a *single* “pulse of thought knowing two facts” (James, 1890, p. 473). To believe that the experience of succession entails distinct, lingering moments that are actively unified is to confuse thought *in* succession with a thought *about* succession. As the psychologist Wilhelm Volkman says, in a passage quoted by James, “The thinking of the sequence of B upon A is *another kind of thinking* from that which brought forth A and then brought forth B” (James, 1890, p. 592, emphasis added). Or, saying the same thing in different words: “. . . successive ideas are not yet the idea of succession, because succession *in* thought is not the thought *of* succession” (p. 592). Succession *in* thought, what Kant called “bare succession,” is an unreflected upon “vanishing and recommencing” of thoughts (Kant, 1785/1965, p. 214). The thought *of* succession, by contrast, is a *conceptualization* of this vanishing and recommencing. In this conceptualization, the otherwise unreflected upon transition between different moments is abstracted into still points of thought, spread out in an imaginary row.

But in contrast to a thought *of* succession, thought *in* succession requires no such row of imaginary segments spread before and after an imaginarily contemporaneous “I.” Even Kant, in a self-sabotaging footnote, acknowledged as much:

An elastic ball which impinges on another similar ball in a straight line communicates to the latter its whole motion, and therefore its whole state (that is, if we take account only of the positions in space). If, then, in analogy with such

bodies, we postulate substances such that the one communicates to the other representations together with the consciousness of them, we can conceive a whole series of substances of which the first transmits its state together with its consciousness to the second, the second its own state with that of the preceding substance to the third, and this in turn the states of all the preceding substances together with its own consciousness and with their consciousness to another. The last substance would then be conscious of all the states of the previously changed substances, as being its own states, because they would have been transferred to it together with the consciousness of them. And yet [just as it would not have been one and the same ball] it would not have been one and the same person in all these states. (Kant, p. 342)

What Kant believed to be possible, James claimed as actual. Introducing Kant's metaphor into *The Principles*, James held that "[i]t is a patent fact of consciousness that a transmission like this actually occurs" (1890, p. 322); one thought does indeed pass into another without the mediation of an "I." Capitalizing the word "thought" to mean "the present mental state" (p. 321), James writes:

Each pulse of cognitive consciousness, each Thought, dies away and is replaced by another Each later Thought, knowing and including thus the Thoughts which went before, is the final receptacle—and appropriating them is the final owner—of all that they contain and own. Each thought is thus born an owner, and dies owned, transmitting whatever it realized as its self to its own later proprietor. (p. 322)

It reads like a commentary on Basho's poem.

If it does not read like an account of ordinary experience it is because ordinary experience assumes more than the impersonal arising of a "sequence of differents" (Shadworth Hodgson, quoted by James, 1890, p. 224). Ordinary experience assumes a thinker generating and connecting passing thoughts, rather than the only "directly verifiable existent": "the passing Thought itself" (James, 1890, pp. 328, 379).

The Gap Between Thoughts

"Many years ago, I was working with Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Indian teacher. He asked a woman who was audio taping for a new book, 'What will be the name of my next book?' She replied '*Beyond Consciousness*.' He said, 'No, *Prior* to Consciousness. Find out who you are *prior* to your last thought and stay there'" (Wolinsky, 1993, p. 41).

In the absence of distraction in which every moment is experienced as "a one thought-instant" (Suzuki, 1959, p. 268), the discontinuity between each thought-instant is not filled by a self, but a gap. James had introspected experience into "small enough pulses" to realize that the discontinuity between passing thoughts is mediated by the passing thoughts themselves (1909b/1987, p. 760). The "minimal fact" of experience, for James, was a "passing" moment experienced as difference (p. 759). Had his introspection deepened into even smaller pulses, he might have

realized one more minimal fact about passing, *differing* moments: they do not go “indissolubly” into each other, “with no dark spot” between them (pp. 759, 760), but, rather, are separated by the very “darkness” “out of” which they come (p. 759). In ordinary experience, the space between thoughts is so fleeting as to be an “apparition” (p. 759).²³ In meditation, however, the apparition is real. “If you watch very carefully,” says Krishnamurti, “you will see that, though the response, the movement of thought, seems so swift, there are gaps, there are intervals between thoughts. Between two thoughts there is a period of silence which is not related to the thought process” (Krishnamurti, 1954, p. 226). In Tibetan Buddhism, the gap has a special name: “bardo,” literally “in between.”²⁴

Some formal practitioners of meditation have even tried to quantify the frequency of the movements in and out of thoughts: 6,460,000 such moments in 24 hours (an average of one arising moment per 13.3 milliseconds), according to the Buddhist Sarvaastivaadins; a sect of Chinese Buddhists puts it at one thought per 20 milliseconds (Hameroff & Penrose, 1996, p. 20). Obviously, such speeds include both thoughts and thought fragments. But as has been argued recently for visual consciousness (Crick & Koch, 2003 p. 122), all movements of consciousness are derivable from discrete “static snapshots,” like a strip of movie film. And as with a movie film’s frames, the conversion of moments into movements (the word “moment” is derived from the Latin word for “movement,” *momentum*) is, depending on the speed with which they are processed, experienced with or without gaps: anything from a flowing stream to a lurching parade. There might even be a minimum speed for both movies and consciousness. A film frame will melt if it becomes stalled in a projector for more than a few seconds; so, too, “any content of consciousness,” according to German neuroscientist Ernst Pöppel, “has a survival time of only three seconds” (Pöppel, 1988, p. 62). The philosopher who James came to champion the most, Henri Bergson, put it this way: “the visual perception of a motionless external object” can never endure *as* single, but only as repeated rebirths of awareness, since “if a mental state ceased to vary, its duration would cease to flow” (Bergson, 1911/1944, p. 4).

Consciousness as the Whirlpool of Sciousness

Nonetheless, it would seem that only in a “non-regressive satori”²⁵ state of sciousness is the transmittal process between one thought and another (separated by a momentary gap) experienced as a simple transition between one moment and the next, “a bare succession . . . always vanishing and recommencing.” In ordinary *con*-sciousness, instead of the vanishing and recommencing of pulses of thoughts *in* succession, such as

Old pond!
Frog Jumps in
Sound of the water

a thought *of* succession is present as well; each moment-movement of thought is experienced not as an “absolutely unique pulse,” but as actively related to other thoughts. This active relationship, or what James calls “some shading or other

of relation” or “inward coloring” (1890, p. 238), may be as simple as a sense of conjunction:

Old pond!
And a frog jumps in
And a sound of the water

or a more complex causal relationship:

The old pond
Made a splash
When a frog jumped in

In these altered examples, Basho’s one-pointed sciousness *in* succession has been replaced by a *distracted con-sciousness of* succession. A “self” no less than a frog has jumped in, just as it more obviously does whenever the sequence is emotionally charged:

Old pond!
Feels peaceful
What’s that?!
Wow, a frog!
There goes the silence!

But however much thoughts may whirlpool around in a contraction of *con-sciousness* rather than stream in sciousness, there is no independent “I” holding the thoughts together, let alone generating them. James held that *all* aspects of the experience of self arose “*in the stream of consciousness*” (1890, p. 286, emphasis added). It could, of course, hardly be otherwise, since his metaphor of the stream of consciousness (not to be confused with a merely haphazard flow of thoughts²⁶) was seen by him to be all-encompassing. No experience exists outside the stream. Nonetheless, at the risk of straining James’s metaphor, it might be said that the stream of consciousness flows unimpeded only in the absence of contracted self feeling, as in meditation, or in the suchness state exemplified by Basho’s original

Old Pond!
Frog jumps in
Sound of the water

and that contracted feelings of self are as much a disturbance *of* the stream as something *in* it—a disturbance rather like a whirlpool, a turning in on itself that creates a formation so distinct it seems separated from that which constitutes it. The sense of self as an apparently separate formation in a stream of sciousness, as sciousness turning in on itself, like a whirlpool, was vividly described by Suzuki’s star pupil, Alan Watts. Traveling away from his sense of self by means of LSD, Watts, like the ether anatta-nauts of the 19th Century, wrote about what it felt like to return: “The ego is a kind of flip, a knowing of knowing, a fearing of fearing. It’s a curlicue, an extra jazz to experience, a sort of double-take or reverberation, a dithering of consciousness which is the same as anxiety” (Watts, 1962, p. 72). James himself suggests this possibility in his presentation of the passive model of

attention, where he identified the feeling of effort, a contracted self feeling, with “eddies” in the stream of thought (1890, pp. 427–428).²⁷

By this reckoning, the whirl of self feeling *obscures* the arising nature of the impersonal thought process by effectively filling in the gap between one thought and another. Because the stream of consciousness is ordinarily felt *with* “I,” it is presumed to be being maintained *by* “I.” But no “I” accounts for the coherence between thoughts any more than it accounts for the coherence within a single thought. The unity of relations that exists in any given thought or between thoughts is a fact of experience behind which we cannot go. “If anyone,” says James, “urge that I assign *no reason* why the successive passing thoughts should inherit each other’s possessions . . . I reply that the reason, if there be any, must lie where all real reasons lie, in the total sense or meaning of the world” (James, 1890, p. 379).

James’s conviction that sense or meaning is not generated by an “I” but *conveyed* by a passing thought, that the stream of consciousness creates the “I” (and not the other way around), aligns him squarely with the central thesis of Eastern non-dual traditions from Advaita to Zen: *Tat tvam asi*, “That thou art.” As the non-dualist Shankara expressed it 1,000 years before James: “If you say that experience depends upon an experiencer, we reply that on our view the experience is itself the experiencer” (8th Century CE/1962, p. 80). James, for all his skepticism toward what he called the “monistic music” of Eastern religion, seems almost to be paraphrasing Shankara when he says: “*If the passing thought be the directly verifiable existent which no school has hitherto doubted it to be, then that thought is itself the thinker, and psychology need not look beyond*” (1890, p. 379).²⁸

The Actual Nucleus of the Apparent Self

“There is no internal self or soul within and independent of the body-mind. The individual body-mind is a modification or Play upon the infinite, All-Pervading, Transcendental Being. The body-mind itself, in its contraction or recoil from the universal pattern of relations, suggests or implies the subjective internal self or independent soul idea.” Da Free John (John, 1980, p. 396)

Of the many phrases Watts (1962) uses to describe the “something additional,” turning-in-on-itself sense of “I,” (see p. 98) let us isolate the word “reverberation.” This is the same word, as it turns out, that (*without* the assistance of a drug) James used to describe the feeling of “I.”

The word “reverberation,” defined by Webster’s (McKechnie, 1983) as “to throw back (sound),” literally means “to beat again.” What is the nature of this “I” reverberation, this second beat, that accompanies most, but by no means all, states of consciousness? James’s answer to this question begins, as usual, with introspection:

First of all, I am aware of a constant play of furtherances and hindrances in my thinking, of checks and releases, tendencies which run with desire, and tendencies which run the other way. Among the matters I think of, some range themselves on the side of the thought’s interests, while others play an unfriendly part thereto . . . (1890, p. 286)

The impersonal nature of this “constant play of furtherances and hindrances” corroborates what James believed to be the “it thinks,” impersonal nature of the thought process. The “checks and releases” he describes do not issue from his self. He does not *make* the constant play in his thinking, he merely becomes “aware” of it. A thought (such as the thought to get out of bed) arises; subsequent thoughts may reinforce the thought (“range themselves”—like cattle without a cowboy) or obstruct it (“play an unfriendly part”—like directorless actors). For both such “furtherances and hindrances” the reference point of the subsequent thoughts is not a *self* interest but a (preceding) “*thought’s* interest.”

While most people, James believed, would affirm that the “self of all the other selves” is the

... *active* element in all consciousness; saying that whatever qualities a man’s feelings may possess, or whatever content his thought may include, there is a spiritual something in him which seems to *go out* to meet these qualities and contents, whilst they seem to *come in* to be received by it (1890, p. 285),

and while James himself sought to affirm this active element through his defense of free will (James, 1890, pp. 1086–1193), the grounds of his defense were not based on what he ultimately knew, but on what he wanted to believe.²⁹ No one, James knew, could ever prove that the active “spiritual something” that gives or withholds assent to a thought was an “original force,” that “contributes energy to the result” (James, 1890, p. 428).

Now it may seem that all desire, regardless of whether it is “furthered” or “hindered,” manifests contracted self feeling. Indeed, desire is so identified with self that absence of desire is commonly equated with the absence of self. Socrates, for example, seems almost to be quoting his near contemporary, the Buddha, when he says “to have no wants is divine.” In both East and West, the “peace that surpasseth all understanding” transcends all desire. But a distinction needs to be drawn between desiring and hankering, or craving. A desire for something *can* be experienced, in and of itself, as one-pointed, without the second beat “reverberation” of self feeling. An often quoted maxim of Zen Buddhism is “When you’re hungry, eat. When you’re tired, sleep”; and the Buddha himself partook of both activities, for the same reason as everyone else: there was a felt impulse or desire to do so—a desire that presumably did not disrupt his one-pointed, moment-to-moment, enlightenment.

Even a furtherance or hindrance of a desire or “thought’s interest” need not necessarily reverberate with contracted self feeling. The deepening affirmations, for example, that accompany the experience of a favorite symphony or a piece of chocolate may diminish the sense of self to the point that we “lose ourselves” in the experience. So, too, we get “lost” in a thought to the extent that the subsequent thoughts “range themselves” without interruption “on the side of the [antecedent] thought’s interests.” And while hindrances of a thought’s interest may not create such a loss-of-self scenario, they, too, do not necessarily emphasize or manifest self feeling. The hindrance of a thought’s interest may quite simply be its own, discrete, un-reverberated moment, not experienced as connected-through-a-sense-of-hinder-

ing to the moment before. The thought to stay in bed, for example, even if it followed and hindered the thought to get up, could so completely predominate consciousness, bringing with it a wholly renewed appreciation of the warmth and comfort therein, that the thought of getting up would vanish as quickly and completely as, say, a baseball batter's thought to pull the ball to the right side of the field, immediately after he has, instead, socked it into the left field bleachers.

Logically, one cannot both get out of bed and stay in bed. Logically, these two thoughts are opposed to each other. But no *emotion* of opposition between them need necessarily arise. It is even possible for one thought to continue to rotate with an opposing thought without any more feeling of opposition between them than is felt by a skier zigzagging down a hill—turning left one moment, right the next, and then left again. Most often, however, when a pair of opposing thoughts rotates one with the other a *feeling* of opposition is there as well. The opposition of one and the other is felt *in* one and the other; it was *how* they are experienced.

In such felt relationships between two opposing thoughts, each turning-toward is experienced also as a turning-from; each turning-from is experienced also as a turning-toward. Either way, it is in this two-pointed connection of welcoming and opposing that James locates the origin of the feeling of self. Not simply “the *constant* play of furtherances and hindrances,” but the *reciprocal* or mutual play. Picking up his description from where we left off:

The *mutual* inconsistencies and agreements, reinforcements and obstructions, which obtain amongst these objective matters reverberate backwards and produce what seem to be incessant reactions of my spontaneity upon them, welcoming or opposing, appropriating or disowning, striving with or against, saying yes or no. This palpitating inward life is, in me, that central nucleus which I just tried to describe in terms that all men might use. (James, 1890, pp. 286–287, emphasis added)

This “central nucleus,” what James refers to as “the central nucleus of the Self,” is the kind of nucleus that has become familiar to contemporary physics: a blur of movement. Otherwise, it is no nucleus at all. It has nothing recognizable as a core. James emphasizes its coreless nature by calling it a “palpitating inward life.”

The Temporal Landscape of Self

His paradigm of free will gave one example of the systole and diastole of these palpitations, where the rotation of two contradictory desires (to get up or to stay in bed) produced a “mutual” relationship between them (James, 1890, pp. 1132–1133). The “play of furtherances and hindrances” expressed itself in his paradigm as feelings of “welcoming” and “opposing”: a saying “yes” to one thought that is felt as a saying “no” to the other. This “palpitating inward life” of welcoming and opposing is found at the center of every “I”-feeling emotion—which is to say every emotion except the blissful non-“I” mystical state of one-pointed sciousness, a state with no reverberation of approval or opposition, but only a neutral “whatever is, is.”

I-feeling emotions always reverberate. The leap-in-the-air thrill of a victory (as in witnessing a game-winning home run) is felt as a lift from the downward pull of defeat. The let-down feeling of defeat (as when the ball is caught at the top of the wall) is a fall from the up-lift feeling of victory. The “opposing,” “disowning,” “striving against” of negative emotions (anger, fear, hatred, envy, disgust, etc.) is a “saying no” to a present moment because it is a “saying yes” to the moment that precedes it. The “welcoming,” “appropriating,” “striving with” of positive emotions (joy, relief, comfort, etc.) is a “saying yes” to a present moment because it is a “saying no” to its preceding moment.

Take, for example, the negative emotion of anger, an emotion which strongly reverberates with a contracted feeling of self. If each moment of *con*-sciousness were a moment of sciousness instead, then anger would not arise when something contrary to a previous thought’s interest arose. In such a non-“I” state you would not feel anger even if, say, returning to your parked car, you found its windshield had been smashed and the radio stolen. The thought of your intact car might be a vivid image as you are rounding the corner to where it is parked, but it would vanish the instant you saw the car itself. By contrast, without such a wholemind processing of each moment as it comes, a sense of “whatever is, is,” the thought of your car being intact would linger, in felt opposition to the sight before you, an opposition that is experienced as anger. Anger is a “saying no,” a “striving against” what is, because it is a “saying yes,” a “striving for” what *was* but *is no more*.

The reverberation of “I”-feeling emotion created by a mutual incompatibility between two moments is not merely a reverberation in time. Given the timeless quality of being-fully-in-the-moment, without reference to past or future—and hence without the borders that make even the present recognizable as such—the reverberation of “I”-feeling is the construction *of* time: not as an abstract concept, but as a felt relation, a palpitation between two moments.

To the extent that time can be said to exist at all, past, present and future exist too. Of these three, says James, the present is “the darkest in the whole series,” since “nothing can be known *about* it till it be dead and gone” (1890, p. 323).³⁰ The present that *is* known, the present “practically cognized,” is, James held, a “specious present,” “delusively given as being a time that intervenes between the past and the future” (E. R. Clay, quoted by James, 1890, p. 574). Such specious present, more than a point, or even a “knife blade,” is “a saddle-back, with a certain breadth of its own on which we sit perched, and from which we look in two directions of time” (1890, p. 574).

James believed that a non-specious present, without breadth, “*must* exist, but that it *does* exist can never be a fact of our immediate experience” (1890, p. 573). But what of the prime reality of im-mediated experience itself? James’s colleague, F.H. Bradley, also affirmed that “. . . presence is really the negation of time, and never can properly be given in the series,” but he dismissed only time from the present, not “content” (1883/1994, p. 43).³¹ Is there an experienceable non “saddle-back” present that has “content” but no breadth? Is an onsense moment of im-mediated sciousness just such a timeless present, a present that “has no breadth for if it had,

that which we seek would be the middle of that breadth” (Blood, quoted by James, 1910b, p. 1298)?

Such im-mediated experience, however, need not be accepted as actual in order to accept the “*duration-block*” present (James, 1890, p. 574), coming from the past, headed toward the future, as specious. All moments (whether the “*just past*” “rearward portion” of the present (pp. 609–610), the anticipating forward portion, a recollection of riding a tricycle, or an image of one’s projected funeral) can only actually exist as aspects of “now.” Of course, it is one thing to understand that past and future are aspects of the ever-present now and another thing to experience them as such.³² And rather than being experienced as what they always are—now, *present* moments—the past and the future are most commonly experienced as a pulling-apart, a distraction from the now, into a temporal landscape of di-stances. This other-than-the-ever-present-now distracted *con*-sciousness is the “palpitating inward life” of self—a moment of (or movement *into*) time, away from timeless, “breadthless” consciousness.

What makes consciousness breadthless is not merely the felt absence of temporal borders, but the absence of any “I” positioning “here” to which such borders can refer. “The past is nowhere.” The future, too (Bohm, 1992/1994, p. 232). But they exist as the imaginary temporal landscape that the “I” reverberates as.

Anger is one example of how such a felt temporal landscape is conjured. A horn honks outside my study, breaking the silence that *was* there and, insofar as I am angry, is *still* there, an *imagined* there, *in felt opposition* to the sound of the horn. Whether it be the smallest ripple of frustration—such as from writing the wrong date on a check—or open rage—such as from discovering your spouse is having an affair—a relationship between past and present is activated. In all cases of anger, frustration, or resentment, the past is not simply recalled—as just another image in the ever-arising now—it is *revived*, to the point that the distracted “I” of *con*-sciousness seems to exist *between* two different moments of time, represented as different spaces within a temporal landscape.

The temporal landscaping of distracted *con*-sciousness applies as well to the other, primal negative emotion—fear. While the sense of self, the “palpitating inward life,” that arises with anger palpitates between past and present, the sense of self that arises with fear palpitates between present and future. If, for example, while walking down a city street, I reach for my wallet and discover that it is not there, my initial response is not anger but fear. I stop dead in my tracks and gasp. My step, my very breath, is interrupted. Not the look back of “what happened?” but a look forward with “what *will* happen?” While anger is a striving against “what is” because it is a striving *for* a “what was,” fear is a striving against “what is” because it is a striving *for* a “what will be.” Thus cancer patients, racked with pain, full of the knowledge that they have only a few days to live, may face a gun (possibly their own) with less fear than those filled with thoughts of the future.³³ In all instances of fear, the sense of self that is threatened is a self of the future; in all instances of anger the sense of self that is threatened is a self of the past.³⁴

Sciousness as Enlightenment

Given that the contractile emotions of anger and fear cannot be experienced in one-pointed sciousness, it is not surprising that accounts of enlightened persons, such as the Buddha, are absent instances of either emotion. In his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James quotes the following first-hand account from Richard Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness*, depicting Bucke's mystical poet friend, Walt Whitman: "... he never spoke in anger and apparently never was angry. He never exhibited fear, and I do not believe he ever felt it" (Bucke, quoted by James, 1902, p. 83).³⁵ While both anger and fear are commonly believed to focus attention, they are, in fact, always a sign that attention is, instead, distracted. As every accomplished martial artist knows, neither anger nor fear facilitates the moment to moment awareness required for self defense. Indeed, the greater the absorption in the precise movement of, say, a fist coming towards you, rather than in any feeling you might have about it, the greater the chance of avoiding it.

Nor is it only "negative" emotions that distract sciousness. If sciousness is an "infinite feeling" of blissful rapture, then no "positive" emotions can add to this rapture, but must, like negative emotions, distract from it. This is hardly surprising since, as we saw, "positive" emotions arise only in tandem with "negative" emotions. While it is true that bliss and rapture are also considered "positive" emotions, they are not felt as a response to, or in a relationship with, a non-blissful or negative emotion. Bliss and rapture are, instead, more like trap doors that drop us out of the positive-negative duality altogether. The surprise scent of a rose, for instance, that comes out of nowhere, is a blissful, non-"I" moment of sciousness, fundamentally different than the joy experienced from the scent of a rose sniffed to see if it has a scent.³⁶ Unlike the blissful scent of a rose that wafts in by surprise, the "positive" feeling we get from the *test* sniff has an additional source: the allayment of a negative feeling (however slight) that it wouldn't have any smell. Although brief moments of bliss, *complete unto themselves*, may be more frequently experienced throughout the day than is commonly suspected, most "positive" feelings are not non-"I" moments of bliss, but, like the test sniff of the rose, are connected to feelings of striving for and against. And even a blissful moment, as it arises, may instantly turn into something to be striven for—its preservation—which is simultaneously a striving against its disappearance.

The reverberation of striving for and against, of welcoming and opposing, that generates the sense of self, defines a range within which all emotions arise. Every emotion is found somewhere between them. To focus, however, as James does, exclusively on the movement between the polar opposites of welcoming and opposing is to lose sight of a more fundamental movement: the movement between a neutral state of consciousness and all others—that is, the movement between sciousness and *con*-sciousness. To describe the feeling of self without reference to sciousness is like describing sound without silence—the silence that forms the contour of any sound that is heard. Just as there can be no sense of sound without a sense of silence, there can be no sense of self without a non-self background to give it definition. "The palpitating inward life" of welcoming and opposing cannot itself give rise to self feeling any more than the change from soft to loud gives rise to

sound. As sound is defined by its contrast to silence, so, too, the “reverberation” (second beat) of “I” is defined by its contrast to a first beat non-“I.”

James’s omission of neutral consciousness, or sciousness, is what leads him to the oxymoronic conclusion that the “. . .reinforcements and obstructions which obtain amongst . . . objective matters . . . produce what seem to be incessant reactions of my spontaneity. . .” (James, 1890, pp. 286–287). “*Produce* incessant reactions of my spontaneity”? Isn’t the defining characteristic of spontaneity the very fact that no known source produces it? James was not witnessing incessantly produced reactions of his spontaneity; he was witnessing the incessant formation of an “I”-sense within the stream of sciousness—what Watts referred to as a “double take” and what they both termed a “reverberation.” This “reverberation” is not an *activity* of self, but the *creation* of self.

The core of that creation—a palpitating inward life of mutually reciprocating feelings of welcoming and opposing—is what the Buddha lost, never to regain, on the day of his enlightenment. As he himself characterized it: “Having . . . abandoned favoring and opposing, whatever feeling he feels, whether pleasant or painful or whether neither-painful-or-pleasant” (*Mahatanhasankhaya*, Sutta 38, in Bhikkus Nanamoli & Bodhi, trans., 1995, p. 360). Such an enlightened state does not, as we said, entail the *complete* extinction of desire, as is sometimes (erroneously) attributed to it, but, rather, the absence of desire that any given moment be other than it turns out to be. It is the absence of such *hankering* desire in the Buddha, as in other mystics, which corroborates James’s sense that “I” feeling is a by-product of the interplay between feelings of welcoming and opposing; for it is only in the *absence* of these feelings that the wholemind state of sciousness arises. James lamented that his own “constitution” shut him out from mystical experiences (1902, p. 342). He knew more than he realized.

NOTES

¹ In assessing James’s legacy in this journal 25 years ago, James scholar Eugene Taylor emphasized his “reckoning with metaphysical developments as a “true religious power,” and as a genuine American folk tradition of self healing” (Taylor, p. 77).

² Neils Bohr, in particular, found James “most wonderful” (Pais, p. 424).

³ For an excellent treatise on the fundamental importance of nondual consciousness in the East, see Loy (1998).

⁴ Though “here” is mostly thought of as an adverb, it is also a noun, defined as such in *Webster’s* as “Immediacy in space, abstracted from the other qualities and relations of the immediate experience.”

⁵ “The past and present selves compared,” says James, “are the same just so far as they *are* the same, and no farther. A uniform feeling of ‘warmth’ . . . pervades them all; and this is what gives them a *generic* unity, and makes them the same in *kind*” (1890, p. 318).

⁶ James Austin, in his magisterial *Zen and the Brain*, trivializes the use of ether to attain spiritual enlightenment by quoting one of Oliver Wendell Holmes’s encounters with it: “A

strong smell of turpentine pervades throughout” (Austin, 1998, p. 239). But Austin fails to add that Holmes himself was not satisfied with that result and tried again. Of that second effort Holmes wrote: “I felt . . . that I really had seen the secret of the universe. . . . Put Jesus Christ into a Brahma press and that’s what you will get” (Holmes, quoted by Blood, 1920, p. 231).

⁷ A debt James publicly acknowledged in his last published essay (1910b).

⁸ The last sentence, also quoted in an extended footnote in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (p. 352), is attributed by Blood himself to fellow anaesthetic revelationist Xenos Clark, along with all but the last two paragraphs of passages that James attributes to Blood in that same footnote (see Blood, pp. 233, 235).

⁹ This argument was first made by the most influential of the pre-Socratic philosophers, Parmenides. Generally reckoned as the first Western logician, Parmenides is now known to have been a Pholarchos, or “lair leader,” who facilitated trance-state healings in caves (see Kingsley, 1999).

¹⁰ James used this bamboo joint analogy to describe the gap between the thought of one object and another.

¹¹ Or what Brian Lancaster has called an “‘I’-tag” (see Lancaster, 1991, p. xii, and throughout).

¹² Only in his later essays did James do what he said he *might* do in the first edition of the *Principles*: “indulge in . . . metaphysical reflections” (p. 291) concerning the notion of consciousness (James, W. [1890]. *The principles of psychology* [Vol. 1]. NY: Henry, Holt, & Co.).

¹³ James also used the term “pure experience” in the more general sense of “directly lived experience.”

¹⁴ Turning the adjective into a participle, to directly contrast the participle “mediated.”

¹⁵ Writing under the influence of nitrous oxide.

¹⁶ Suzuki also married a student of James, who helped him with his translations. For more about the relationship between James, Nishida, and Suzuki, as well as reasons to suspect James exaggerated his ignorance of Buddhism, see Taylor, 1995.

¹⁷ See Loy, 1998, pp. 42–43.

¹⁸ Though commonly cited, it may be apocryphal.

¹⁹ “If the notions of subject and object are both the separate objects of consciousness, neither term has any real significance. An object, in the absence of a subject, cannot be what is normally called an object; and the subject, in the absence of an object, cannot be what is normally called the subject” (Levy, 1956, pp. 66–67).

²⁰ The palpable presence of an absence, such as the “presence” for someone of his or her missing car in the parking space from which it has been stolen or towed, has been aptly described by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1956, pp. 6–12).

²¹ About this conversion, James says “Although Kant’s name for it—the ‘original

transcendental synthetic Unity of Apperception’—is so long, our consciousness *about* it is, according to him, short enough” (1890, p. 342).

²² James likens such transitions to “flights of a bird” in-between “perchings” (1890, p. 236).

²³ James used his mystical coach Blood’s phrase “apparition of difference” without attribution in his essay “The Continuity of Experience.” He quotes it again, with attribution, in his homage to Blood, “A Pluralistic Mystic,” the last essay James published (see James, 1910b/1987, p. 1298).

²⁴ While this term is more familiar to Westerners as the Tibetan name for the in-between state between death and rebirth, in Tibet it more fundamentally refers to what meditation reveals: “at the death of each moment there is a gap, a discontinuity, before the arising of the next” (Ray, 2001, pp. 330, 333).

²⁵ Loy, 1998, p. 150. See, too, the visual aid representing this state that a Theravada monk sketched for Loy (pp. 144–145).

²⁶ As in the popular usage of the term after James.

²⁷ James cannot and does not oppose this passive model on psychological grounds. His objections are ethical. See Bricklin (1999).

²⁸ James and Shankara converge on the primacy of non-dual over dual experience. They diverge on the inferences that might follow.

²⁹ See Bricklin, 1999.

³⁰ James credits his colleague Shadworth Hodgson with the terminology “darkest.”

³¹ Bradley’s direct quote is: “It is not the time that can ever be present, but only the content.”

³² Alan Watts relates the following conversation with his wife: “One evening, when Eleanor and I were walking home from a meditation session, I began to discuss the method of concentration on the eternal present. Whereupon she said, ‘Why try to concentrate on it? What else *is* there to be aware of? Your memories are all in the present, just as much as the trees over there. Your thoughts about the future are also in the present. . . . there’s simply no way of getting out of it.’ With that remark my whole sense of weight vanished. . . . You could have knocked me over with a feather” (Watts, 1973, pp. 152–153).

³³ Pain can not be experienced as consciousness, as we have defined it, but there are many testimonies of transcending pain through transcending a feeling of self. Yogis and Christian martyrs alike could identify with the final sermon of the besieged 16th Century Zen abbot, Kwaisen, who, along with his fellow monks, was locked into a room that was then set on fire. Sitting cross-legged with them in front of the image of the Buddha, the abbot said: “For a peaceful meditation, we need not go to the mountains and streams. When thoughts are quieted down, fire itself is cool and refreshing” (Suzuki, 1959, p. 79). So, too, morphine’s power over pain is not over the pain itself, but over the *response* to the pain. As the creator of the drug ecstasy, Alexander Shulgin, put it: “[Morphine] doesn’t quiet the pain—it makes you indifferent to it. It depersonalizes the pain” (In Brown, 2002, p. 119).

³⁴ Anger can involve the loss of a future scenario, but what fuels the anger is clinging to the sense of what the future *was* supposed to be.

³⁵ How cosmically conscious or enlightened Whitman remained throughout his lifetime is arguable. In his old age, however, he recalled the ecstatic state of his younger years, in which, like “a god walking the earth,” “the whole body is elevated to a state by others unknown—inwardly and outwardly illuminated, purified,” and, in a “marvelous transformation from the old timorousness . . . [s]orrows and disappointments cease—there is no more borrowing trouble in advance . . . a man realizes the venerable myth—he is a god walking the earth . . .” (Whitman, quoted by Allen, 1975, p. 194). If this testimony, corroborated, in part, by his friends and acquaintances, is not enough to convince us that Whitman did experience something like, if not equivalent to, the Buddha’s enlightenment, there are the many photographs of the man (see, especially, the photograph Bucke called “the Christ likeness,” in Kaplan, 1980, picture no. 17), which confirm Whitman’s own words about how “the marvelous transformation” altered his appearance: “A singular charm, more than beauty, flickers out of, and over, the face—a curious transparency beams in the eyes, both in the iris and the white . . .” (Allen, p. 194).

³⁶ James quotes his godfather Emerson’s example of such a blissful moment coming out of nowhere: “Crossing a bare common in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear” (1899, p. 856).

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The Author

Jonathan Bricklin, coming from a background in philosophy and classical Greek, has been researching William James since 1990, in response to fundamental shifts in consciousness experienced while on Vipassana retreats at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. He is currently finishing a book on James, parts of which have been published by the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* (as "A variety of religious experience: William James and the non-reality of free will") in the special double issue: *The Volitional Brain: Towards a Neuroscience of Freewill* (1999, August/September), 6, 77–98.

He published an introductory work, *The Philosophy of William James*, in 1911. [Back to Profile](#). [Photos](#). [Works](#). [Main Photo](#). [Add photo](#).
School period.Â Fournoy was also one of the few scholars of his time to embrace William James' view of the prime reality of non-dual consciousness (which he dubbed "sciousness") as expressed in his essay, *Radical Empiricism*. [Add photo](#). [View map](#). Born. August 15, 1854. Geneva, Canton of Geneva, Switzerland. Died. Like other revolutionary ideas, pure experience sciousness was mostly attacked when it was first presented.[1] With some notable exceptions, such as Bergson, Dewey, and Whitehead, Western philosophers could not accept the reality, let alone the prime reality, of non-dual experience. The resistance, though increasingly difficult to sustain, continues to this day.Â Didn't mean to jump all over you but I fear I did. Let's talk about the specific issues I was having though. They weren't about the citations here particularly, but were more stylistic and how to edit the language to be neutral and encyclopedic. It's not that each point of view needs to be backed with a citation, but good encyclopedic writing is balanced and neutral. The study of the human mind and consciousness has never been so exciting. During the last few decades, both philosophical and scientific attempts to account for the origin and nature of consciousness have mushroomed so as to form a respectable eld of research that has conquered autonomy and independence.Â At rst glance, the philosophical and the scientific strategies to tackle the mind-body problem and the puzzle of consciousness seem very different. The former analyzes concepts and makes them clearer by screening out logically implausible concepts; the latter investigates specic mental functions in order to identify the cerebral areas and brain processes involved in their realization.