

THE TRANSPERSONAL WILLIAM JAMES

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ABSTRACT: Transpersonal psychologists often speculate on who was their “first” pioneer, commonly with reference to Carl Jung. A look at the early development of modern psychology, however, reveals various figures who accepted a spiritual and collective dimension of the psyche, among them William James. Out of a tension between scientific and religious outlooks embodied in his own life and thought, James had embraced and articulated the principal elements of a transpersonal orientation by the early twentieth century, and had given them a metaphysical and empirical justification on which they still can stand today. We can see those elements in four aspects of his thought: first, in what he chose to study, especially in his interest in psychic and religious experience; second, in his definition of true science and his refutation of materialism; third, in his concept of consciousness; and fourth, in his defense of the validity of spiritual experience.

“100 Years of Transpersonal Psychology”: the title and description of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology conference in September, 2006, represented a milestone in the official recognition of William James’s place in the origins of modern transpersonal thought. As the conference’s official announcement declared, James made the first recorded use of the term “transpersonal” in 1905. The conference’s title took its measure of a century from that coinage, suggesting a major role for James in the founding of the field.

The occasion of James’s use of the term was modest: an unpublished document, merely a printed course syllabus at Harvard University for an introductory course in philosophy (Vich, 1998). In truth, the meaning he attached to the term was far more restricted than our usage of it today. James was attempting to clarify a technical, philosophical point: exactly what might be meant by the term “objective.” The object to which an idea refers, he wrote, might be “Transpersonal” (James hyphenated the term) if two people both perceive it—or, as he put it, “when my object is also *your* object” (Perry, 1935, II, p. 445; Vich, 1998, p. 109).¹

James’s invention of the word serves as a convenient symbol, but his significance for transpersonal psychology far transcends that coinage. The purpose of this essay is to clarify that significance, to explain with more precision James’s place as a precursor of the transpersonal movement, and to elucidate the specific ideas that earn him that recognition.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY

As readers of this journal well know, contemporary transpersonal psychology is usually traced to Abraham Maslow’s investigations of peak experiences and

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of self-actualized individuals in the 1960s; to investigations of non-ordinary states of consciousness by Stanislav Grof and others in the same period; to meetings of humanistic psychologists hosted by Anthony Sutich to discuss what they first called “transhumanistic” ideas, and their adoption of the term “transpersonal psychology” in 1967; or to the formation the following year of the Transpersonal Institute, later the Association for Transpersonal Psychology (Chinen, 1996, pp. 9–10; Grof, 2005, pp. 1,4). In the first issue of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, published in 1969, Sutich, as editor, spoke of “a new frontier of psychological inquiry” that was applying an “empirical approach” to “extraordinary subjective experience,” thus providing an early definition of the field (Sutich, 1969, p. iv).

The pioneers who set out towards this new frontier knew that they had predecessors. Willis Harman, writing in that same introductory issue, spoke of this empirical study of subjective, especially “transcendental,” experience as “a new Copernican revolution”; but the revolution, he acknowledged, had its precursors, earlier figures who had investigated what he called “supraconscious processes.” Harman explicitly acknowledged three pioneering works, among them James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Harman, 1969, pp. 22–23).

Among precursors, the one who is most commonly acknowledged is Carl Jung. In *Beyond the Brain*, Grof refers to Jung as “the first representative of the transpersonal orientation in psychology” (Grof, 1985, p. 188), and the chapter on Jung in the now standard *Textbook of Transpersonal Psychiatry and Psychology* calls him “the first clinical transpersonal psychiatrist and depth psychologist” (Scotton, 1996, p. 39). That image persists: an article in a recent edition of this journal opens with the observation that Jung “is widely considered to be the first prominent transpersonal psychologist” (Miller, 2005, p. 164), and in Kevin Page’s recent historical film on the movement, Monte Page makes a similar observation (Page, 2006).

James, however, is not ignored for such honors. In that same *Textbook* noted above Eugene Taylor, in a brief chapter on James, calls him “arguably the father of modern transpersonal psychology” (Taylor, 1996a, p. 21), and the earliest excerpt included in Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan’s defining anthology, *Paths Beyond Ego*, is a passage from James’s *Varieties* (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993, pp. 94–95). In that same volume, Robert McDermott refers in passing to James’s philosophy as “transpersonal” and to James himself, along with Jung, as a “forebear” in the field (1993, p. 209). More recently, Michael Daniels traces the birth of transpersonal psychology to James’s delivery of the Gifford Lectures, subsequently published as *The Varieties*, at the University of Edinburgh in 1901–1902 (Daniels, 2005, p. 16).

All of these statements may be defensible, but claims of primo-generation, of firstness and fatherhood, have real meaning only when the sense of exactly how that is so is more fully defined.

In the days of the formal launching of the field of transpersonal psychology in the late 1960s, the psychological milieu was dominated by behaviorism and

Freudianism, and, despite the advances of humanistic psychology, by materialistic assumptions and a largely anti-spiritual temper. But those trends had won the day only after a struggle. If we look still earlier, into the very beginnings of modern psychology in the late 19th century, we find that some of its initial luminaries were intensely interested in questions that might seem quite contemporary to today's transpersonal psychologists. They stood vehemently in defiance of biological reductionism and were fascinated by phenomena that we would call "spiritual." That being the case, the question of who was first tends to lose its meaning and to dissolve into a fascinating intellectual ambience, shared by a number of prominent investigators who certainly recognized the spiritual dimension of the psyche and who held a more extended notion of the nature of consciousness.

James's role in that spiritually-oriented conversation was pivotal. Well before the turn of the twentieth century, this magnetic thinker who was both psychologist and philosopher developed a transpersonally-oriented psychology and laid philosophical foundations for a transpersonal worldview. Out of a tension between scientific and religious outlooks embodied in his own life and thought, James had embraced and articulated the principal elements of a transpersonal orientation by the early twentieth century, and had given them a metaphysical and empirical justification on which they still can stand today.

JAMES IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT: SCIENCE AND RELIGION

A brief account of the historical context, and of James's personal background, will help explain the evolution of his thought. James was born in 1842 and came to intellectual maturity in materialistic and newly industrializing times, when the post-Darwinian enthusiasm for natural science had driven spiritual concerns from the minds of many intellectuals of the Western world. Henry Adams wrote of his generation of the Adams family that "the religious instinct had vanished, and could not be revived" (1918, p. 34). In higher education, new scientific studies were challenging the old classical curriculum, and scientific schools were being established at America's venerable universities. German-derived idealism, with its impersonal if divinely-tinged "Absolute," continued to reign in British and American philosophy departments, but in the general intellectual atmosphere, traditional theism was in retreat. It was a milieu in which the debate in England between Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and T. H. Huxley over the validity of Darwinism was legendary; scientific ideas seemed to give the lie to age-old religious ones, and many maturing minds felt the need to side with the new over the old. In America, the ambience, at least in some intellectual circles, was captured in the titles of John Draper's *History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science* (1875) and Andrew White's *The Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1876).

William James profoundly engaged the ascendant scientific intellectual milieu. He entered Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School, initially studying chemistry, then anatomy, before training in medicine and physiology at Harvard and in Germany. His first appointments to the faculty of Harvard were to teach

anatomy and physiology. As a pioneer of modern psychology, he was instrumental in setting its studies on empirical foundations, and in divorcing its findings from a traditional concept of mind or soul as a distinct metaphysical entity. The psychological laboratory he established at Harvard, modeled on experimental laboratories in Germany, was arguably the first in the United States. James's first great work, the masterly and literate *The Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890, was physiological in emphasis, thick with neurological detail and focusing on the bodily correlates of psychological experience. Although it relied heavily on introspection and ventured away from strictly positivistic psychophysics, it treated consciousness as dependent on brain function, always examining the connection between mind and body. It was intended, as James said in a subsequent article, to help psychology become a natural science by treating it as one (cited in Richardson, 2006, p. 331).

Later in his career, James was known for his defense of “radical empiricism” in philosophy, and as a founder of the philosophical school of pragmatism, which he himself saw as bringing the influence of Darwin to philosophy. With the weight and validity that it gave to sense experience, to the experiential and concrete, radical empiricism reflected his scientific bent, and pragmatism took scientific procedures as the model for the measure of truth. Subsequent scholarship on James has often emphasized those more scientifically-oriented elements of his career.

But William James had spiritual inclinations that were not to be denied. His father, Henry James Senior, was a religious philosopher, prominent in the era of American Transcendentalism, who was greatly influenced by the Swedish mystical theologian Emanuel Swedenborg. Ralph Waldo Emerson and other Transcendentalist luminaries were part of the James family's social circles, and William James had been steeped in his father's intellectual milieu. On an emotional level, James struggled with bouts of depression, some of which were alleviated only when he took refuge in religious thoughts and intellectually made room for spiritual life (see Allen, 1967, pp. 162–167).

His most serious psychological crisis occurred in the first months of 1870, just as he was entering his 29th year. One focus of his thoughts at the time was the burden of determinism— what he found to be a personally crushing sense that all that we do might be only a product of material processes, with no place for free choice. “I feel...that we are wholly conditioned,” he had written in a letter, “that not a wiggle of our will happens save as a result of physical laws” (cited in Richardson, 2006, p. 101). His cousin Minnie Temple, a great love of his life with whom he had had probing conversations about religion, had recently died of tuberculosis when James hit the depths of his crisis. He suddenly was overwhelmed, he later wrote, by “a horrible fear of my own existence,” leaving him with “a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before.” But the struggle had, he said, a “religious bearing.” “...[I]f I had not clung to the scripture-like texts,” he said, “like ‘The eternal God is my refuge’...‘I am the resurrection and the life’ etc., I think I should have grown really insane” (James, 1902/1929, pp. 156–158. See also Allen, 1967, pp. 162–167, and Richardson, 2006, pp. 117–119).²

James did not see himself as prone to spiritual experience, but, at the same time, he was a seeker: he sought out and studied non-ordinary states; he experimented with what we would call “alternative medicine,” from homeopathy to hypnotism and “mind cure”; and his curiosity about the potential of the psyche prompted him to experiment occasionally with hallucinogenic substances. In 1898, in the Adirondack woods, he had what could be described as a mystical experience, and his letters refer to a previous if lesser one in the Swiss Alps.³ The tension between materialistic and spiritual viewpoints, as he felt it in the culture and, even more, in himself, was a key factor that drove both his psychological investigations and his philosophical speculations.

Some of James’s most powerful and penetrating writings attempt to make spiritual experience acceptable to a scientific frame of mind. In that effort, James laid the foundation for a transpersonal worldview. We can see that foundation first in what he chose to study, especially in his interest in psychic and religious experience; second, in his definition of true science and his refutation of materialism; third, in his concept of consciousness, with its broad, collective dimensions; and fourth, in his acceptance of the validity of spiritual experience. Our task is now to examine those elements more closely.

THE STUDY OF PSYCHICAL AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Throughout his professional life, James was fascinated by psychic phenomena that could not be explained in the context of the prevailing materialistic worldview. For much of his career, he was absorbed, as investigator or knowledgeable scholar, in empirical research on “extraordinary subjective experience,” “supraconscious processes,” and subjective experience of the transcendental. As early as 1869, he had published a review of a book on spiritualism, the supposed contact of the living with spirits of the dead, calling the subject of “transcendent interest” and noting that such phenomena, “if once admitted, ... must make a great revolution in our conception of the physical universe” (James, 1869, p. 4). Traveling in England in 1883, he became involved with the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), which had been founded a year before; it investigated, as he once put it, “all sorts of ‘supernatural’ matters” (cited in Allen, 1967, p. 281), systematically studying figures such as mediums, clairvoyants, and patients under hypnosis, and probing into reports of phantasmal phenomena such as apparitions and haunted houses (see James, 1892, p. 90). In 1884, he helped to found an American version of the society; several years later, the American organization merged with the British. James eventually became president of the combined society, and was a long-term vice president. He took an active research role with its Committee on Hypnosis (using Harvard students as subjects; see Richardson, 2006, p. 270), and especially with its investigations of spiritualism. For a span of two decades, he contributed reports and reviews to the Society’s journal. The London group included F. W. H. Myers, to whom James attributed the psychological discovery of a subliminal consciousness, or the

subconscious. Myers coined the term “telepathy,” and his *magnum opus* investigated the possibility of life after death (Myers, 1903).

These societies, with their interest in what we could call transpersonal experience and the psyche’s relation to the transcendent, stood in a venerable tradition of early psychology, traceable ultimately, perhaps, to Gustav Theodor Fechner. Fechner is conventionally honored as the creator of psychophysics, the man who brought experimental observation and exact measurement to the study of the psyche. But he believed in panpsychism, the notion that all matter involves some form of consciousness, much of it beyond or superior to the human; and in 1836 he published *The Little Book on Life after Death*. James wrote an introduction for the first American edition, published seven decades later, and included an appreciation of Fechner’s panpsychic and pantheistic notions in *A Pluralistic Universe*, one of his later philosophical works (James, 1909b).

Soon after he became involved with the Society for Psychical Research, James met the American medium and clairvoyant Mrs. Leonora Piper, who was then in her mid-twenties. Attending her séances, he grew convinced that her skills were not fraudulent. James wrote extensively about Mrs. Piper, submitting reports on her to the SPR, and they formed a lasting association. Besides trance states, hypnosis, mediumship, and clairvoyance, his psychological research interests, especially in the 1880s and ‘90s, included automatic writing, supposed apparitions, thought-transference, and multiple personalities, and he studied and commented on demonic possession, witchcraft, and genius.

In all of this investigation, his attitude was both open and skeptical, emphasizing the need to accumulate data but to reserve interpretation. Repeatedly, he urged his colleagues to ferret out more facts before formulating theories (see, for example, comments cited in Perry, 1935, II, p. 171). In the 1890s, James argued against proposed bills before the Massachusetts state legislature that would restrict the activities of mental healers and effectively limit the practice of psychotherapy to doctors of medicine. Faith healers, he argued, were accumulating a body of facts that, however they might be explained, deserved study (James, 1894). Wherever the facts might lead, James was convinced that the study of what he called “exceptional mental states” would vastly deepen our notion of the psyche. “A comparative study of trances and subconscious states,” he wrote in 1890, “is...of the utmost urgent importance for the comprehension of our nature” (James, 1890a, p. 373).

The great culmination of James’s psychological research into spiritual life was *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In the sense indicated by figures such as Sutich and Harman as they announced the founding of a new field, the book is certainly transpersonal in subject and approach. James’s definition of his topic was radically innovative: he would examine religion not as ideational beliefs, or theological dogmas, or moral dictates, or ecclesiastical institutions, but as psychological experience—as propensities, feelings and impulses. Moreover, he was interested in the most intense varieties of such experiences, those that were felt as “an acute fever,” rather than in the mere acceptance of the “ordinary

religious believer” (1902/1929, pp. 7–8). With its massive abundance of personal testimonies, *The Varieties* is a great anthology of peak and non-ordinary experiences, providing an empirical approach to extraordinary subjective experiences, especially of the transcendental.

Despite the popular success of *The Varieties* and its impact on general intellectual life, James’s ongoing study of psychic phenomena and his openness to non-materialistic explanations earned him the growing disapproval of the psychological profession. In attempting to establish its scientific validity, the field was moving implacably in a more positivistic direction. By the time of the famous Clark University conference of 1909, which drew major figures in the world of psychology and occasioned Freud’s only visit to the United States, that disdain was evident to the young Carl Jung. Jung enthusiastically engaged James in discussions about parapsychology and religious experience, but he noted in a letter that “James was not taken quite seriously on account of his interest in Mrs. Piper and her extra-sensory perceptions” (Jung, 1949).

James’s reputation as a philosopher was flowering, but some of his later contributions to psychology were relatively ignored. In fact, though, the articulation of transpersonal principles that we can now see in James is a product of his abiding interest in spiritual experience and psychical phenomena. Much of his writing on these matters initially was published for a restricted audience associated with the SPR and not republished for more than half a century after his death. Some key lectures were never published at all.⁴ For helping to revive interest in this aspect of his work, and for the resurrection of some of the unpublished material, we are much indebted to the scholarly labors of Eugene Taylor of the Harvard Medical School (1982 and 1996b).⁵

In James’s writings on psychical and religious experience, we find, I would argue, a full articulation of the modern transpersonal worldview. That worldview entails particular beliefs or attitudes about the nature of science, of consciousness, and of spiritual experience; its orientation on those questions form, I would say, the core of a transpersonal philosophical framework. In each of those spheres, James anticipated the movement’s modern-day outlook. In brief, that outlook scientifically argues the limitations of materialism; it acknowledges what Grof calls an “enlarged model” of human consciousness, and it accepts the value and validity of spiritual life. James not only supported those positions but gave each of them a philosophical foundation on which they can still rest. The nature of this essay allows me to give only an compressed account of his positions on these matters, but even a glance at them reveals how, in defending these broad notions, James was a precursor of some more specific ideas that are very much alive in our own contemporary discussions.

SCIENCE AND MATERIALISM

While James was certainly a believer in science, he made a radical distinction between the method of scientific inquiry and the philosophy of positivism or

materialism. True scientific procedures, he argued, required that we take account of whatever we might observe, even if we had no framework with which to explain it. Orthodox science largely ignored phenomena for which it had no explanation, even if such phenomena occurred repetitively. But if in their trance states, Mrs. Piper and other mediums sometimes revealed knowledge that they could not have known in their ordinary states of consciousness, if faith healers sometimes seemed to help bring about seemingly miraculous cures, if thoughts sometimes seemed to be directly transferred from one person to another, the most *unscientific* response would be to deny or discount what had been observed (see especially James, 1896 and 1909a).

For all its accomplishments, science was still in its nonage, a recent development in human history, and no match for the infinite complexities of existence. It can give us still only a minute glimpse of unending intricacies of the universe, which may well extend far beyond the reach of human intelligence. “Our science is a drop,” he wrote, “our ignorance a sea” (1897, p. 54). In supporting his case against a simplistic materialism, James offered an account of the progress of science that foreshadowed the notion of scientific paradigms advanced nearly seven decades later by Thomas Kuhn (1962). Perhaps his clearest statement of that critique was in a version of “What Psychical Research has Accomplished,” included in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, published in 1897. Once a scientific theory is widely accepted, said James, it is viewed as a “closed and completed system of truth,” leaving any other scheme “unimaginable.” But in any science, investigation produces a set of “exceptional observations” that cannot be accounted for with the dominant theories, no matter how entrenched they might be. Such observations usually crop up only occasionally and irregularly—and are more easily ignored than incorporated. In this phase of what Kuhn was to call “ordinary science,” such observations that are “unclassifiable within the system...,” wrote James, “must be held untrue.” So long as they seem oddities or “wild facts,” researchers neglect or deny them. But, initiating the phase that Kuhn was to call “extraordinary science,” some geniuses become fascinated by this “unclassified residuum” of phenomena, and, delving more fully into it, propose new formulas that “break up the accepted system” and renovate the field. “No part of the unclassified residuum,” wrote James, “has usually been treated with a more contemptuous scientific disregard than the mass of phenomena generally called mystical” (1897, pp. 299–303).

For too many scientists, a fact was only a phenomenon that could be explained with a materialistic paradigm. But James wanted to pursue observed facts wherever they lay, even if conventional scientific opinion found them unthinkable. To do so was the very purpose of the Society for Psychical Research, which applied scientific methods to phenomena that, having been left to haphazard observation, were largely disregarded in scientific circles. Claims and manifestations of spiritualist and psychic phenomena might be rife with fraud and trivia, and subject to naïve and sentimental interpretations. But from those phenomena emerged a core of facts that James found it scientifically irresponsible to dismiss (see 1909a). A truly scientific outlook

lay somewhere “between vague tradition and credulity on the one hand and dogmatic denial at long range on the other” (1896, p. 306). “I believe there is no source of deception in the investigation of nature,” he wrote, “which can compare with a fixed belief that certain kinds of phenomenon are impossible” (cited in Allen, 1967, pp. 281–2, also in James, H., 1920, I, p. 248). In interpreting such phenomena, naturalistic explanations should be preferred whenever plausible, but at times the suggested ones simply proved inadequate (see, e.g., James, 1909c, p. 255).

James laid out the case against materialism most fully in his Presidential Address to the SPR in 1896: science meant a “dispassionate method” of inquiry, not a philosophical result. Unfortunately, it had, he said, “come to be identified with a certain fixed general belief, the belief that the deeper order of Nature is mechanical exclusively, and that non-mechanical categories are irrational ways of conceiving and explaining even such a thing as human life.” But such a belief was both limited and limiting, as well as undemonstrated; it converted science into a “sect” and broke violently with ways of thinking that had been accepted throughout the whole of human history. The full truth requires that such “mechanical rationalism” be balanced with a more “romantic and personal view of Nature,” which is also fed by fact and experience (James, 1896, pp. 132–136).

In that same address, James presented his metaphor of the white crow. To refute a general belief that all crows are black, you need not show that no crows are: you need only find one white crow. On the question of our ability to know things that we could not have learned in our ordinary experience—that is, through our senses—“my own white crow,” he said, “is Mrs. Piper.” Witnessing her trances, he could not “resist the conviction that knowledge appears which she has never gained by the ordinary use of her eyes and ears and wits” (James, 1896, p. 131). Eventually, he submitted an extensive report to the SPR detailing 69 sittings with Mrs. Piper, in which she appeared to be the channel of spirit presences. In some of those sittings, she demonstrably showed knowledge that in her normal state she could not have known (1909c). James’s interpretation of those phenomena remained open and speculative, with the actual return of a spirit being only one of several hypotheses. But more than any other factor, his observation of Mrs. Piper’s supernormal abilities in trance states convinced James of the inadequacy of the reigning scientific explanations of nature. The “most urgent intellectual need” of the times was for a science that could accommodate such anomalous facts (James, 1892, pp. 100–101). They might be baffling and inexplicable in reigning paradigms, but they could push science towards new conquests (1909a, p. 375).

When we step out of a certain paradigm, James argued elsewhere, new facts come into view, or older observed facts reappear that had subsequently been dismissed. On those grounds, while suspending judgment on any single explanation, James was unwilling to deny observations associated even with such occult phenomena as stigmata, diabolical possession, prophecy, and levitation (1902/1929, p. 491). Reality was far more extensive than the materialist dogma was suited to explain. “There are resources within us,” he

once remarked, “that naturalism...never recks of...” (1909b, p. 305). What shape the new science beyond naturalism might take, he was not yet prepared to say, but he had no doubt that a paradigm shift, as we might call it, was in the making. “Science, like life,” he wrote, “feeds on its own decay. New facts burst old rules; then newly divined conceptions bind old and new together into a reconciling law” (James, 1892, p. 101).

SUBLIMINAL AND COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

This outlook made the study of what we would call “non-ordinary states of consciousness” especially important, for in such states people encountered different facts of experience. James’s term was “consciousness beyond the margin” that is, beyond its ordinary limits, beyond common, rational awareness. Such consciousness, James recognized, was linked to the newly emerging notion of a subliminal or subconscious mind, a secondary, wider, unconscious self. James was an early advocate of such a notion: he found it by the early 1880s, especially in the ideas of his friend F. W. H. Myers. In 1882, Myers had published the first in a long series of articles on “the subliminal consciousness”—that was a decade before Breuer and Freud published their early studies of hysteria and seventeen years before Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*.⁶

As James later summarized Myers’s theory, ordinary consciousness was only one part of a “spectrum” of consciousness, analogous to the spectrum of light rays, which extended far beyond our normal awareness and memory. Just as visible rays formed only a band in a much wider spectrum encompassing invisible ones, so normal, rational awareness was a relatively narrow band in a spectrum of consciousness encompassing the subliminal (James, 1892, p. 98). In Myers’s conception, that spectrum stretched in one direction towards a lower subliminal that might include forgotten experiences, madness and incoherence; but in another direction, it could entail supernormal faculties of insight and clairvoyance, often taking in elements of a “spiritual world” (James, 1903, p. 207).⁷

James considered that notion to be reinforced by evidence from such phenomena as post-hypnotic suggestion, automatic writing, crystal-gazing clairvoyance, and thought-transference, as well as by trance states (see Taylor’s reconstruction of James’s lecture on “Automatism” in Taylor, 1982, 35–52; also James, 1902/1927, pp. 228–231 and 1909b, pp. 298–99). These non-ordinary states of consciousness revealed that the mind encompassed far more than was accessible in our common states of awareness. James later called that notion of a subconscious mind “the most important step forward that has occurred in psychology” in his professional lifetime (1902/1929, p. 228).

In 1896, he gave a series of lectures at the Lowell Institute in Boston on “Exceptional Mental States”—hypnotism, trances, multiple personalities, demon possession and the rest. The lectures were never published, but they have been reconstructed by Dr. Taylor from James’s notes and related writings.

They demonstrate James's belief that subliminal consciousness, the subconscious, was the source not only of pathology, as Freud and Breuer portrayed it, but also of higher human awareness—of supernormal consciousness and, on occasion, of transcendent wisdom (Taylor, 1982, see esp. pp. 91–92).

Moreover, James soon came to view the personal subconscious as connected ultimately with a transpersonal consciousness, “a superior co-consciousness” (1909b, p. 299) that went beyond the individual. That was a notion he traced to Fechner: “a great reservoir in which the memories of earth's inhabitants are pooled and preserved” and with which some of us, in extraordinary states of awareness, can occasionally make contact (1909b, p. 299). Myers, too, James noted, had a comparable idea, of a subliminal region where the mind of one person communicates with those of others, where there is a “subliminal life belonging to human nature in general” (James, 1903, p. 206). “Our lives,” James eventually wrote, “are like islands in the sea, or like trees in the forest.... [T]he trees...commingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the islands also hang together through the ocean's bottom. Just so there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother-sea or reservoir” (James, 1909a, p. 374). Here, years before Jung did his major work on the subject, is a clear notion of the collective unconscious. Though he was unready to formulate a theory, it was in that notion that James looked for an explanation of the supranormal consciousness revealed by trance mediums like Mrs. Piper (1909c). Their clairvoyant observations could be pictured as revealing an “interaction” between the individual, subliminal consciousness of the medium and “a cosmic environment of *other consciousness*” (1909a, p. 373).⁸

And out in that mother sea are forms of awareness entirely different from what is presented in our ordinary states of mind. Over a hundred years ago, James cast his weight behind that expanded model of the psyche that is at the heart of transpersonalism: “The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me,” he wrote in *The Varieties*, “that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences that have meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points and higher energies filter in” (1902/1929, p. 509). And again: “Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different” (1902/1929, p. 378). As a philosophical pragmatist, James believed that the test of truth for any idea was in its applications in the world of experience, and he had no doubt that these other forms of consciousness “somewhere have their field of application and adaptation” (1902/1929, p. 379).

James regarded any effort to discern structure in that mother sea—to create, that is, a map of transpersonal consciousness—as highly tentative. He thought that Myers's conception of a spectrum, and his map of the subliminal, for all

their value, still constituted only a vague hypothesis (James, 1903, pp. 204, 207). Late in his career he saw a “probability” in favor of Fechner’s panpsychic notions, which conceived of consciousness as something extending far beyond the human mind (1909b, pp. 309–310). By that outlook, the divine is “indwelling” rather than external to human life; human substance partakes of divine substance. So, too, do other compounds of life and reality, in an ascending order of comprehensiveness. As James sympathetically observed, Fechner regarded the entire universe as “everywhere alive and conscious” (1909b, p. 149). Plants had a form of consciousness; so, too, did heavenly bodies and systems. Articulating a notion later to be called “Gaia,” Fechner believed in an “earth-soul” and “earth-consciousness” subsuming the consciousness of individual forms of life that are part of its “self-sufficing” system (James 1909b, pp. 153–157). The awareness and memories of individual persons, even after their passing, become part of that earth-life (1909b, p. 171). Ultimately, at the highest level, there is an all-comprehensive consciousness that men call God.

It bears mention that James’s own experience of parting the filmy screen between normal and other forms of consciousness came through the use of a substance, nitrous oxide. On occasion, William James, the iconic Harvard philosopher, experimented with such routes into other worlds; only the “artificial mystic state of mind,” he said, gave him a level of insight that seemed closer to ultimate reality (1902/1929, p. 379). For many years he maintained an extensive correspondence with Benjamin Paul Blood, an amateur mystic philosopher and poet, whose plunge into other worlds was first prompted by anesthesia in a dental chair. Blood had written up his experience in a pamphlet called *The Anesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy*, published in 1874, which James promptly reviewed for the *Atlantic Monthly* (James, 1874). The pamphlet spurred James to experiment with nitrous oxide; he gave an account of his experience in a philosophical journal (James, 1882) and later in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. That adventure had left him with a persistent sense of “a profound meaning” and was instrumental in revealing the existence of those other worlds of consciousness (1902/1929, pp. 378–379). In *The Varieties*, James also provided detailed accounts of other subjects whose mystical experiences had been sparked by chloroform or ether (1902/1929, pp. 381–385). The last essay that James published in his lifetime was a spirited appreciation of Blood, who by that time had written numerous tracts on nitrous oxide experimentation and the insights that came from them. Blood’s mystical vision involved many worlds, not just one unified reality, and James acknowledged its influence on his own pluralistic philosophy (James, 1910).

James was also, we might note, among the first to characterize alcohol consumption as a misdirected striving for spiritual experience (1902/1929, pp. 377–378). “The sway of alcohol over mankind,” he wrote, “is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour” (1902/1929, pp. 377). That insight was later sanctioned by Jung and eventually became a key element in the methods of Alcoholics Anonymous, whose founder, Bill Wilson, was directly influenced by *The Varieties* (Richardson,

2006, pp. 405, 531 n. 16). It subsequently has been applied with great effect in transpersonal psychotherapy (see especially Grof, 1985, pp. 267–269; Grof, C., 1993; and Williams, O., 2006).

To admit the possibility of supranormal knowledge in trance states, or of direct experience of other worlds of consciousness, challenges the materialistic notion that all perception comes through the senses and that all consciousness is a product of the individual human brain. Certainly the material conditions of the brain have a great effect on consciousness: James closely followed the burgeoning experimentation that by the 1870s had begun to localize brain functions. But he did not conclude, therefore, that consciousness necessarily begins in the individual cerebrum. In a series of lectures given in 1878, first at the Johns Hopkins University and then at the Lowell Institute in Boston, James argued that the emerging physiological data could not explain consciousness, and that it was more accurate to think of the brain and the mind as interacting, or correlating, rather than as one producing the other (Allen, 1967, pp. 224–225; Perry, 1935, II, 27–31; see also James, 1879).

Stanislav Grof frequently explains the same basic distinction with reference to a television set: if we toy with the tubes, we affect the picture. But that is not to say that the programs that we see are generated by the individual machines in our living rooms (see, e.g., Grof 1993, p. 5). This is a metaphor for the “transmission theory” of the brain—a theory, in fact, that James defended in his Ingersoll Lecture on Human Immortality, delivered at Harvard in 1897. He acknowledged that “thought is a function of the brain,” but when we make that claim, he argued, we commonly think of a *productive* function, like a pot producing steam. It is perfectly compatible with the evidence to think rather in terms of a *transmissive* function—the conducting of a consciousness that may already exist in a transcendental world, in that “mother sea.” Such a notion was better suited than the production theory to explain clairvoyant visions, the knowledge displayed in mediumistic trances, and other psychic phenomena (James, 1898). On another occasion, James, like Grof, turned to a metaphor drawn from the technology of his times to illustrate the transmission theory: not a television, but a Marconi wireless telegraph, which received and transmitted radio waves (1909c, p. 358; see also Taylor, 1996b, p.83). The main currents of twentieth-century neuroscience flowed in a more materialistic direction, but lately a number of prominent neurological theorists have adopted a posture more like that of James, suggesting an interaction between brain and consciousness and challenging strict materialism in neurobiology.⁹

THE VALUE AND ELEMENTS OF SPIRITUALITY

As the great psychologist of religion, James was among the first to suggest that genuine spiritual experience comes not through doctrine and ritual, but through the newly identified subconscious mind. Religion, in its most basic form, involved an intuition that we all have a “higher” or “better” part of ourselves, and that this higher part is, as he put it, is “continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside” of us

and which we can “keep in working touch with” (1902/1929, p. 499). So he argued, at the very beginning of the twentieth century, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. “Whatever this MORE may be on its *farther* side,” he hypothesized, “it is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life” (1902/1929, p. 503). Thus the “further limits of our being plunge” into another dimension of reality that we refer to as “supernatural” or “mystical” (1902/1929, p. 506). That insight is fundamental to modern transpersonal psychology, growing as it did out of the practices of humanistic psychology and related therapies, when subjects exploring their subconscious began to have spiritual experiences and take seriously a spiritual dimension.

On thoroughly pragmatic grounds, James defended what he called “the reality of the unseen” and the reasonableness of giving credence to a spiritual realm. On that score, *The Varieties* elaborated arguments he had made five years earlier in “The Will to Believe,” his most widely read essay, which defended the right to accept religious notions that may not have persuaded our purely rational intellect (James, 1897). Like Maslow and others who followed him, James recognized that genuine spiritual experience contributes to psychological health. In 1895, he gave an address to the Harvard YMCA entitled “Is Life Worth Living?” which later was published in a volume with “A Will to Believe.” There he defined supernaturalist religion as a sense, a faith, that beyond the order of nature is an unseen world that gives significance and meaning to mundane life. In that view, which can be accepted without dogma or specific creeds, the natural order can be seen “the external staging of a many-storied universe, in which spiritual forces have the last word....” For those of a certain temperament, such an outlook could indeed “make life seem worth living,” bringing “light and radiance” to their worlds (1897, pp. 56–57).

As he stated the case in *The Varieties*, the “faith state”—that is, our feelings and intuitions that there is “something else”—has real emotional effects in our lives and the way we conduct them; it brings us “zest” and “enchantment” (1902/1929, p. 475), a sense of meaning which can engage us more fully with the world around us; it makes “a genuine difference” to us. And whatever produces effects in the world we know must be considered, in some way, to originate in a reality. Many religious creeds may be fanciful and absurd, but spiritual life itself is how we fulfill our “deepest destiny” (1902/1929, p. 507). In its broadest sense, religion is an acceptance that there is an unseen order, and a sense that our highest purpose is putting ourselves in harmony with it (1902/1929, p. 53). Conceived in that way, as he wrote in a letter, “the life of religion...is mankind’s most important function” (cited in Allen, 1967, p. 415).

With this perspective, James elaborated other basic positions that closely anticipate the view of spirituality now widely held in the transpersonal movement. This forum allows me to do little more than define them, but behind each is a rich body of thought and empirical investigation. James believed that all major religions are built on a mystical experience, and he drew a strong distinction between those core experiences and the institutions that grew from them. He identified death-rebirth experience as a central element in

those core experiences. And he displayed a fascination with Eastern religions for their approach to these essential aspects of religious life.

Personal religious experience, James said, “has its root and center in mystical states of consciousness” (1902/1929, p. 370). Based on his empirical studies of what mystics report, James endeavored in *The Varieties* to define such states, stating that they are “ineffable” but “noetic,” that is, they give “insight into the depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect” (1902/1929, p. 371). In such states, we lose our sense of separate individuality; we become aware of our oneness with the Absolute, the divine (1902/1929, p. 410). “The whole point” he once noted, lies in the sense that “through a certain point or part in you, you coalesce and are identical with the eternal” (Allen, 1967, p. 431). That experience is fundamentally the same in all religions—mystics from all traditions describe it in similar terms (1902/1929, p. 410). In essence, it is, as Abraham Maslow would assert more than sixty years later, a core mystical experience (Maslow, 1964). This sense of a core mystical experience is at the heart of what Aldous Huxley, decades after James, would call “the Perennial Philosophy” (1944)—a notion that has had momentous sway in transpersonal thought, and that is pivotal in the ideas of Maslow, Wilber, Grof, and other principal figures of the movement.

From this point of view, institutional religions, with their theologies and rituals, are only secondary, more mundane growths based on the experience of particular mystics (1902/1929, p. 31). Personally, James found them suspect: they form “corporate ambitions” and political interests that can often corrupt the original visionary experiences of their founders; they generate dogmas that fail to embody the original insight. The “genuine, first hand religious experience” always seems heretical or mad to the orthodox associates of the mystic who has them (1902/1929, p. 328). But ultimately, that experience—or the words in which it is reported—may be converted into a church and an orthodoxy, and when that happens, its inspiration, the inward experience, is inevitably lost (1902/1929, p. 330). James articulated that position, too, more than half a century before it began to be reiterated by Maslow, Grof, and others.

He also saw that a central element in spiritual growth is what later would be called the “death rebirth experience.” The centrality of such an experience was a major theme in Joseph Campbell’s studies of mythology (see especially Campbell, 1949), which influenced the transpersonal movement; its therapeutic value is critical in Grof’s LSD psychotherapy and Holotropic Breathwork (see Grof, 2000). In his Hibbert Lectures, delivered at Oxford University in 1908, James spoke of “religious experiences...of an unexpected life succeeding upon death”—death not in the sense of a demise of the body, but rather in the sense of a personal experience of failure and despair. In spiritual literature, James traced the emphasis on renewed life coming from such death experiences to Luther and his successors, but noted that it was familiar in such modern expressions as mind cure and contemporary evangelical religions. They resulted in breakthroughs in which our egoic props and satisfactions “appear as utter childishness,” and we are brought further into “the universe’s deeper reaches.”

“The phenomenon,” he explained, “is that of new ranges of life succeeding on our most despairing moments,” bringing “another kind of happiness and power, based on giving up our own will and letting something higher work for us....” These phenomena reveal “a world in which all is well, in *spite* of certain forms of death, indeed *because* of certain forms of death....” Those who have such experiences inevitably conclude that “we inhabit an invisible spiritual environment from which help comes, our soul being mysteriously one with a larger soul whose instruments we are” (1909b, pp. 305–308).

And finally, James showed a deep interest in Eastern religions and in their psychologies and practices—well before they were widely known in the West, and more than half a century before they became more popular in America and Europe in the 1960s. His acquaintance with those traditions extended back to the influence, in his early life, of the Transcendentalists. Notebooks written in his late teens reflect readings in Indic literature and religion; ones from about the time of his major psychological crisis refer to books that he read on Hinduism and Buddhism (Richardson, 2006, p. 15, 126). Even his early writings make scattered reference to Sanskrit terms (Taylor, 1996b, p. 61). In *The Varieties*, James’s primary example of union with the Absolute, the core mystical experience, is the “Tat Vam Asi” of the Upanishads: “That art Thou!” (1902/1929, p. 410). In that treatise and elsewhere, James wrote observantly about the insights of Buddhism and Hinduism, whose texts he apparently encountered at Harvard, particularly through the History of Religions Club (Taylor, 1996b, p. 62). Moreover, James had personal contact with teachers in those traditions and their Western disciples (Taylor, 1996b, pp. 62–64). Swami Vivekananda, who came to Harvard in 1896, and whom James met there, seems to have made a particularly strong impression on him: James called him the “paragon” of Vedantist missionaries (James, 1907a, p. 58). Vivekananda is mentioned in several of James’s writings and is quoted in *The Varieties* (1902/1929, pp. 391–392, 503–504) and in *Pragmatism* (1907a, pp. 58–59).

Although he was not a practitioner, James was intrigued by the possibility of cultivating mystical states through meditation and yoga. At Harvard, he had met other invited meditation teachers besides Vivekananda, and he was impressed not only by their accounts of their practices, but by their presence, calmness, and “imperturbability.” In his “Talks to Teachers on Psychology” delivered in 1892, he spoke of the value of their practices and even suggested that meditation might be incorporated into American schools, as a counter to the habitual anxiety and intensity that plagued the national temper (1899/1962, pp. 37–38). His own psychological investigation had taught him the value of holding attention, continually bringing it back to a single focus, and of slower breathing, cultivating a habit of “watchfulness,” and attaining a sense of “calmness and harmony in your own person” (1890/1952, pp. 274–5; 1899/1962, pp. 57, 104, 107, 128–9). In *The Varieties*, James cited Vivekananda on the effects of yoga (1902/1929, pp. 391–392); in a later essay, he argued the benefits of various forms of yoga, presenting a lengthy account by a disciple of Vivekananda, the Polish philosopher Wincenty Lutoslawski, who had undergone intensive training in hatha yoga, attaining “a peace never known

before, an inner rhythm of unison with a deeper rhythm above or beyond” (James, 1907b, p. 327). James did admit to trying some breathing exercises, but he saw walking as his yoga and writing as his discipline (Taylor, 1996b, pp. 64–5). It is reported that after hearing a Theravada monk lecture at Harvard on Buddhism in 1904, James declared to the audience that “this is the psychology that everybody will be studying twenty-five years from now” (Fields, p. 135, cited in Taylor, 1996b, p. 147).

CONCLUSION

As William James developed and refined a transpersonal worldview, his scientific reputation fell into decline. With its strongly positivistic orientation, the post-Darwinian scientific world resisted his efforts to cultivate a spiritual outlook that would be compatible with its established verities and sounder principles, as opposed to its materialistic prejudices and unverifiable assumptions. James’s standing as an icon of American intellectual life rested on his addresses to a wider audience, and to his achievements in the more worldly movement of philosophical pragmatism.

But now, a century after he first used the term “transpersonal,” a vigorous movement in psychology by that name, with profound philosophical implications, has rediscovered his spiritually-oriented insights, and finds new validity in notions that he pioneered about the nature of science, about the domains of consciousness, and about the validity of spiritual life. The transpersonal movement will be enriched as it comes to understand more fully the intellectual legacy that he bequeathed to it. As we approach the centenary of his death in 2010, we in that movement can view William James as a great precursor, who in this respect was a full century ahead of his time.

NOTES

¹ In the same account, James used the terms “trans-visible,” “trans-palpable” and “trans-mental” to refer to realities outside of our normal perceptions. The first two terms might sometimes refer to “a panpsychic entity,” the latter to an entity “said to be altogether ‘unknowable.’” Those terms come closer to the current meanings that we now attach to the “transpersonal” than did James’s own definition (cf. Perry, 1935, II, p. 446).

² The account appears in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, disguised as the free translation of an original in French by an anonymous writer. James later revealed to his son Henry and to his French translator that it referred to his own experience (Allen, 1967, p. 165; Richardson, 2006, p. 543).

³ In a letter to his wife, James described the experience in the Adirondacks as “a state of spiritual alertness of the most vital description.” It was, he said, “one of the happiest lonesome nights of my existence” (cited in Allen, 1967, pp. 390–391). The experience in Switzerland, also described in a letter to his wife, is cited in Richardson, 2006, p. 210.

⁴ In 1960, fifty years after his death, Viking Press issued a collection of James’s writings entitled *William James on Psychic Research*, edited by Gardner Murphy and Robert O. Ballou. That collection, which stirred little interest at the time, has been superseded by the more comprehensive *Essays in Psychological Research* published by Harvard University Press in 1986, the sixteenth volume in its complete *Works of William James*. The Harvard volume includes a valuable introduction by Robert A. McDermott, which relates James’s interest in psychic research to his ongoing effort to define a position that honored scientific procedures but respected religious insights. Convincingly arguing the sustained character of James’s involvement with psychical research, McDermott places it in the context of his more widely known philosophical stances.

⁵ *William James on Exceptional Mental States* (1982) meticulously attempts to reconstruct James's lost Lowell Lectures of 1896, which were never published; *William James on Consciousness Beyond the Margin* (1996) offers a more synthetic view of James's psychic research and its place in his developing thought. My own perspective on James is indebted to Taylor's investigations (although his major studies, which are intended largely for James scholars, do not make explicit comparisons with modern transpersonal thought).

⁶ F.W.H Myers, "The subliminal consciousness," *Journal of the English Society for Psychological Research*, I (1882); cited in Taylor (1996b), p. 165. James recognized that the concept had other contemporaneous expressions in psychology, particularly in the investigations of Janet, Binet and others with hysteric and somnambulist patients, where a "hidden self" was viewed as an element in various disorders or extraordinary perceptions (see James, 1890a). But he credited Myers with the first attempt to define the extent of subliminal consciousness as an element of human nature, and to "map it out," thereby overturning the classic view of the mind (James, 1901, pp. 195–196). James had known Myers personally since his visit to England in 1883 and undoubtedly had probing conversations with him about the theory.

Following Jacques Barzun (1983), Robert McDermott suggests that James may have come upon the idea of a subliminal self earlier than his British cohort, and prefers to consider James as having developed it concurrently with Myers (1986, pp. xviii, xxix). But Barzun dates Myers's suggestion from 1892—a decade after his article in the first issue of the SPR journal—and bases his assertion on the fact that James's "The Hidden Self," which treats of the concept, was published two years earlier. In *The Varieties*, James characterizes the subconscious as sufficiently established to qualify as a scientific "discovery" by 1886 (1902/1929, p. 228). As Barzun notes, the idea can be traced back in some form to the Romantic writers, whose tales of the *Doppelgänger* indicated a second self, and who attributed true art to the expression of unconscious forces beyond reason (Barzun, p. 230n).

⁷ Myers and James thus employed the metaphor of a spectrum of consciousness nearly a century before Ken Wilber, whose exploitation of it so powerfully affected the transpersonal movement (Wilber, 1977). In their conception of a lower and higher subconscious, of a "subliminal" and "superliminal" flanking, as it were, rational awareness, we see the general elements that Wilber and Michael Washburn identify as pre-personal, personal, and transpersonal. Although Myers does not emphasize the developmental aspects of the spectrum to the same degree as Wilber and Washburn, that concept, too, is embedded in his thought: for Myers, as James observed, the supernormal is "synonymous with the 'evolutive' as contrasted with the 'dissolutive' with which the ordinary neurologist would prefer to connect it" (James, 1903, p. 207). Although Myers faded from view in the professional literature after his death, his critical role in the development of a spiritually-oriented scientific psychology has recently been explored in depth by Kelly, E., et al. (2007).

⁸ Mrs. Piper's trance states seemed to tap some source of information outside of her own individual mind. That source might be the mind of the sitter accompanying her in the room, or of a distant person, or of the supposed "spirit control," or of some other spiritual entity. Alternatively, it might be "some cosmic reservoir in which the memories of the earth are stored" (James, 1909c, p. 355). James thought that the notion of spirit possession, though entirely out of fashion in intellectual circles, might again have its day; but he was more inclined to look for images that could make plausible the notion of consciousness arising from the cosmic reservoir. Turning to Fechner's concept of consciousness and matter acting in parallel, he suggested that certain physical conditions and human situations could cause a particular consciousness to arise temporarily out of that collective unconscious, like a jolt of electricity arises from two poles (pp. 357–359).

⁹ The most comprehensive and sophisticated defense of the transmission theory is the recently issued, monumental study by Edward F. Kelly, Emily Williams Kelly, et al. (2007), which grew out of a study group established at the Esalen Institute's Center for Theory and Research (see especially Chapter 9, pp. 577–643, written by Edward F. Kelly). See also the work of Patrick McNamara of the Boston University School of Medicine, Ann Harrington of Harvard, Andrew Newberg of the University of Pennsylvania, Jeffrey Schwartz of UCLA, Donald Price of the University of Florida, Richard Davidson of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and the results of the "Mind and Life" dialogues between the Dalai Lama and neurobiologists. All are mentioned in Monastersky (2006).

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