"Nirvana…I found nirvana!": Ethics, Non-Duality, and William James

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Jonathan Weidenbaum, Ph.D.

I. Finding Nirvana

The eyes of the woman in the video are damp with emotion. Her words are slow, emphatic, even sing-song like—as if invoking rather than merely recalling her flight toward religious ecstasy. "And my spirit soared free like a great whale gliding through a sea of silent euphoria." Her head tilted back to face the ceiling, she gently clenches her upturned hands as if pulling sentences from the air. "Nirvana!" she tenderly proclaims, "I found nirvana!"

What appears as a synthesis of charismatic televangelist preaching and flamboyant New Age instruction is, in fact, one of the most watched of the prestigious TED talks. An acronym for Technology, Entertainment and Design, the lauded series enlists well-known thinkers, writers, political figures, scientists and others to present "ideas worth spreading" in a digestible amount of time. The concepts disseminated in this video are the revelations of Jill Bolte Taylor: a neuroanatomist who, after suffering a stroke in 1996, claims to have observed first-hand how our very identity is constituted by the nervous system.

The left hemisphere of the brain, Taylor explains, is the seat of our volitional and individualized ego, as well as our sense of temporality—our habit of taking up the past and anticipating the future. The right hemisphere, when free of the nagging influence of the left, resides purely in the here-and-now, and thrusts beyond the duality between our self and the rest of the cosmos. At one point of her narrative, Taylor recalls not being able to discern where her body ends and the external environment begins. It is in expounding upon the moral implications of her discoveries, however, wherein the earnestness of her talk is the most palpable. "I believe that the more time we spend choosing to run the deep inner peace circuitry of our right hemispheres, the more peace we will project into the world, and the more peaceful our planet will be."[1]

In addition to what some have criticized as an exaggerated portrait of the roles played by the brain's two hemispheres, the moral and spiritual dualities at work in Taylor's presentation—including the value of realizing our unity with the cosmos verses our identification with a temporal and finite "I"—may raise a few questions. One may wonder, for instance, how we can effectively project more peace into the world without a little planning and attentiveness to the future, let alone some individual and communal effort. Surely, if more peace is required as opposed to being content with the way things are, basking in some placid and timeless present won't do the job alone. Perhaps what is needed is the nullification of one last dualism—namely

[1] "My Stroke of Insight," http://www.ted.com/.

that between mystical philosophies which seek to identify us with the rest of the universe and an equal recognition of the worth of personal agency and initiative.

While Taylor's talk casts a somewhat negative light upon the calculative and individuating tendencies of the left brain, her book of the same title, *My Stroke of Insight* (1996), seems to appreciate their importance. At one point she even goes as far as to express a kind of balance between the functions of the two hemispheres: "I experience a feeling of awe when I consider that I am simultaneously capable of being at one with the universe, while having an individual identity whereby I move into the world and manifest positive change."[2] Yet in the conclusion of her book we are beckoned, no less than in her talk, to "step to the right"—to favor the side of the brain which identifies us with the entire cosmos rather than as the temporally-bound and particularized self.[3]

The mission of the pages which follow is to point out the significance of an earlier scientist-turned-philosopher, one who offers an even stronger synthesis of non-duality with the indispensability of personal agency. I have in mind the creator of the first experimental lab in psychology in the United States and the author of the magisterial *Principles of Psychology*: William James.[4]

It should be recognized upfront that James is a thinker for whom the search for truth is more important than consistency. As a few scholars have noted, he never settled upon a single or final interpretation of the self.[5] My strategy is to focus upon merely one line of James's thinking on the topic, a set of themes stretching from the *Principles* through his later philosophy of "radical empiricism." I unpack the moral relevance of these observations all throughout, concentrating specifically on our own development as selves, our role and place in the cosmos, and our relationships to others.

II. The Self as Project.

Chapter ten of the *Principles*, "The Consciousness of Self," is where James most exhaustively explores the problem of personal identity. In contrast to the idea of an ego or soul abiding unchanged throughout the fluctuations of our experience, James here famously depicts the "I" as merely a succession of thoughts—each of which arises to appropriate the one before; and each, in turn, perishing before being taken up by the next one. As if this bundle-theory of the self were not enough of a challenge to the conventional and Cartesian notions of the "I," earlier in this same chapter James briefly flirts with a model of consciousness as entirely impersonal at its base, a pure awareness without a self of any kind—a notion he labels as *sciousness*.

James's daring reluctance to perceive the self as possessing a reality over and above the ever-changing "stream of thought"—to borrow a seminal phrase from the previous chapter in the *Principles*—is frequently compared to the Buddhist concept of *anatta* or "no self."[6] Recollecting

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[2] *My Stroke of Insight*, g. 171. On page 141, Taylor states: "As much as I obviously adore the attitude, openness, and enthusiasm with which my right mind embraces life, my left mind is equally amazing. Please remember that this is the character I just spent the better part of a decade resurrecting." Of course, the following question can then be asked: if the calculating and individualized self is a product of the left mind, then precisely *who*, during its loss of function, was responsible for its resurrection?

[3] Ibid, pg. 177.

[4] James's deconstruction of modern and Cartesian assumptions of personal identity, in combination with his avoidance of anti-humanist denials of the self, helps to earn him the title of a "constructive postmodernist." See Marcus Ford's contribution on James in *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy.*

[5] This is pointed out by Gerald Myers in his chapter on the self in *William James; His Life and Thought*.

[6] See Jonathan Bricklin's insightful opening essay to his edited volume, *Sciousness*.

my own history with James, it was through a close friend and practicing Zen Buddhist that I first encountered the pithy and well-known statement from the *Principles* that the "thought is itself the thinker." Such a comparison between James and Buddhism is apt, provided that the interpretation of *anatta* is subtle and nuanced enough to account for *some* kind of personal and volitional factors within our inner life—for these elements are also central to James's landmark analysis.[7]

Despite his introduction of the notion of *sciousness*, James's account of personal identity is an attempt to steer between two extremes: the concept of an unchanging soul-substance on the one hand, and the *complete* absence of any unifying agency in consciousness on the other. Rejecting the vacuous and over-intellectualized picture of our mental life as a succession of bare and separate sensations, as in Hume's empiricism, James sought account for the personalized feel of our actual experience. Not only does James argue for the *internal* relations between the thoughts comprising our sense of self, a metaphysics in which each thought takes into itself, adopts as it were, the one before. Rather, each thought takes up previous ones based upon the "warmth and intimacy" it finds therein, a connection founded upon the body as the shared locus and place from where the whole series of thoughts emanate.

If the "I" is the current and passing segment of our conscious life, the manner in which we *appear* to ourselves is labeled by James as the "me." As James describes it, we may apprehend as ourselves as our possessions, as the way in which we are perceived by others, or as our innermost values and powers of judgment. These are our *material*, *social*, and *spiritual* selves respectively. James search for the last of these ends, not in the location of anything non-physical at the core of the psyche, but in the mere movements of our eyeballs, throat, forehead… etc. Since not all of our potential selves can be realized within a single lifetime, James devotes some discussion to the manner in which we prioritize these different forms of the self, with the social "me" as playing the crucial role of projecting the ideal toward which we aspire.

The upshot of all this is that the Jamesean self is a living and dynamic process rather than a static entity or thing. It is an open-ended but finite and embodied project, one which possesses the power to guide its own becoming and shape itself toward some imagined ideal. Although James's account here is descriptive rather than normative, the position outlined in chapter ten of the *Principles* may remind us as much of existentialist models of the self as Buddhist ones.

James is most commonly compared to the existentialists in his affirmation of free will in the wake of reading the French author Charles Renouvier ("my first act of free will shall be to believe in free will…").[8] Such a display of radical commitment, along with the intensely personal nature of his struggle with the issue, certainly bears a passing resemblance to the existentialists. However, any comparison of James with the likes of Sartre runs into a crucial difference, for the former rejects any understanding of the human subject as intrinsically uprooted and sharply distinct from the rest of nature. This is, in fact, the subject of the next section.

III. Intimacy and the Void.

In chapter ten of the *Principles,* the self is an ever-changing segment within the flow of experience. In James's later philosophy of radical empiricism, experience is no longer relegated to the contents of our inner life, but is instead identified as the basic constituents of reality—

[7] And such nuanced interpretations of *anatta* are readily available. For instance, see D.C. Mathur's "The historical Buddha (Gotama), Hume, and James on the self: Comparisons and evaluations."
[8] Gerald Myers,pg. 389.

beyond, or more fundamental than, any division between "inner" and "outer," subject and object, mind and world. James labels this heterogeneous and roughly overlapping substratum of the cosmos as "pure experience." Once again, the classical picture of an atomic "I" or unchanging soul-substance is replaced by a series of functions or activities occurring within and through a broader medium. Such functions include all the usual operations of willing, thinking and feeling, and are anchored, once more, in our corporeality. In one very significant footnote, James depicts the body as the source and "storm centre" of so much of the meaning found within our experience, the node and reference point around which everything in our environment is granted its place and value (i.e., the comfy chair is "there" across the room, but the heater is right "here").[9]

Throughout the remainder of this section I will journey even further into metaphysics, an incursion pertinent for James's synthesis of non-duality with the existence, and even *purpose,* of personal agency.

Pure experience is sometimes compared to the Mahanaya Buddhist idea of the *sunyata* or "void"—the understanding of reality as thoroughly interdependent, and wherein nothing possesses a strictly independent existence. It is therefore no surprise that James's concept of pure experience was a major historical influence upon Nishida Kitaro and the Kyoto school of Buddhist thought.[10] And yet James's entire authorship is animated and directed by two fundamental themes: the purpose of doing justice to the fullest range of our experience possible, and the mission of inculcating the morally vigorous life.[11] A closer examination of pure experience sees both concerns at work, and, as a few scholars have noticed, qualifies any easy equating of pure experience with the Buddhist concept of the void.[12]

First, in accounting for the full texture of our perception of the world, the concept of pure experience encompasses the breaks and disconnections between events as much their connections.[13] The idea that nothing whatsoever can be abstracted away from a web of causal relations possesses consequences that can be seen as problematic by Jamesean standards. While Buddhists typically speak of the void as a flux, some formulations of it fail, at least on the level of theory, to provide for real contingency and possibility in the cosmos—what James holds are necessary conditions for the moral life.[14] Arguably, it also comes dangerously close to collapsing into what he ridicules in *A Pluralistic Universe* as a "block universe," a kind of monism which ignores and even violates the rich and stubborn particularity of things as we actually perceive them. For James, the universe not only outstrips the great bulk of our ontological categories, but is populated by full-blooded facts, things not fully exhausted by their relations.[15] A central component of his mature ontology is a view of reality as an endless succession of distinct, albeit

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[9] *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, pg. 170.

[10] See Kazashi (2011) and Krueger (2006).

[11] Radical empiricism, among other things, is a method which strives to take into account everything that we experience and to exclude all that is *not* found within experience.

[12] For instance, see Nobuo Kazashi's "Metamorphoses of the Philosophy of 'Pure Experience' in Modern Japanese Thought."

[13] Kazashi (2011) states: "Whereas the moment of "unifying activity" operative in pure experience assumes a pivotal significance in both James and Nishida, it seems that, for James the pluralist, it is kept in a critical balance owing to his acknowledgement of the 'disjunctive moments' as well as the 'externality' of some relations in the field of experience."

[14] See "The Dilemma of Determinism," wherein James argues that in the absence of contingency and possibility in the universe, all value judments (which assume that the world can be different than it currently is) are rendered absurd. In *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy.*

[15] See "Absolutism and Empiricism," the last piece in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*.

internally related, buds or droplets of experience.[16] A powerful influence on the process ontology of Whitehead, this is a metaphysics which balances the roughly interrelated character of the cosmos with a measure of individuality as well as the continual introduction of novelty into existence.

To be fair, defenders of the notion of *sunyata* will respond that the void reveals and preserves rather than nullifies the individualized things and entities of our mundane experience. The reed in a Chinese landscape painting is not swallowed up by the empty white background signifying the infinity of the void, but instead serves to embody and disclose it through the grace and spontaneity of its form. Moreover, the dialectics at work in the concept of the void, as it is expressed in some of the most exquisite schools of Indian thought, is not content with placing the *sunyata* over and beyond the everyday world, but instead dissolves any final dualism between the two. Whether or not the logic of a Nagarjuna actually works, one might more accurately say that the idea of the void relativizes the world of experience instead of liquidating it, making it only part of a larger story.

But this relativizing of the universe of our actual experience may be enough of an offense for James, which leads us to a second qualification for any comparison of *sunyata* with pure experience. For Buddhist thought, the void contains both spiritual and normative significance; it is the supernal *goal* as well as the source of our being. For James, by contrast, pure experience is fundamentally a means of overcoming a few of the hidebound problems in epistemology and metaphysics (the subject-object split and the mind-body problem as chief among them), but it is replete with potential hazard as much as value.[17] It is messy, incomplete, and open—in fact *fit*, for human efforts toward improvement. It is, in short, a "thick universe" as opposed to the thinner, cleaner ontologies of the monists and neo-Hegelian idealists of James's time.[18] Few can compete with James's own vivid description of the "through and through" ontology as a "too buttoned-up and white-chokered and clean-shaven a thing to speak for the vast slow-breathing unconscious Kosmos with its dread abysses and its unknown tides."[19]

What the advocates of the non-dual James get right is that the concept of pure experience does overcome the subject-object divide, and places us in direct continuity with the cosmos. This is an organic relation to the universe James calls *intimacy*—a criteria he employs in *A Pluralistic Universe* to assess the adequacy of different ontological frameworks. What must not be overlooked however is the equal importance James attributed to a factor in the cosmos against which our moral efforts can be sharpened. It is because of these concerns that James's own religious vision lies not in pure experience, but in a greater divine Mind in which we are somewhat grounded—intimate as it were—and yet one that is also bounded and in struggle with other forces in the universe. This is a finite god with whom we are partners rather than subjects, co-workers in the quest for the salvation and betterment of the cosmos.[20]

If some forms of existentialism interpret the self as pitted over and against an essentially meaningless universe, James's picture of our intimacy with the cosmos, in combination with our mission as partners in creation, gives us both home and direction—tearing us away from complacency and brooding self-absorption alike. The next and penultimate section will unpack

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[16] See *A Pluralistic Universe* and James's final and unfinished text, *Some Problems of Philosophy*.

[17] For the religious significance attributed to pure experience by Nishida Kitaro, the founder of the Kyoto school, and its difference from James, see Kazashi (2011) and Krueger (2007).

[18] See lecture IV in *A Pluralistic Universe*.

[19] *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, Pgs. 277-8.

[20] For James's most mature theological statement, see the first and last chapters of *A Pluralistic Universe*.

the implications of all this in more concrete detail, returning to questions of personal identity and addressing our living relationships to other human beings.

IV. Others.

From his psychology through his mature metaphysics, it is not just the Cartesian understanding of the self as a soul or thinking substance which is rejected by James. The notion of the solitary and purely autonomous ego is also challenged by him—and on more than one front. Toward the end of the chapter on personal identity in *The Principles,* James cites cases in pathology and psychic phenomena for evidence that the self dwells not in isolation, but shares its home, however unaware, with other repressed egos and hidden streams of awareness. Likewise, in his later ontology of pure experience, the "I" or self exists in and through through a web of roughly interconnected experiences. Thus, the boundaries between individuals—while never completely coalescing into a single and monochrome unity—can be understood as overlapping. Gerald Myers explains:

> A world of individual and substantial selves, each private and irrevocably removed from its neighbor, was not an attractive idea for James. He preferred to believe in a world where continuity prevails, including that between individual streams of consciousness…It is a common judgment that James's *Anschauung* was excessively individualistic and ignored the role of community; on the contrary, he sought notions of self and reality that permit communality of the profoundest sort—in the depths of the most intimate personal experience.[21]

But the disconnections and disjunctions found within pure experience are equally at work within human relations—for selves, in the thought of James, are as transcendent to one another as they are mutually immanent. Arguably, James's artistry at description is at its ripest in depicting those moments when "the vast world of inner life beyond us, so different from that of outer seeming, illuminate our mind." Here, the encounter with what is radically other to us is as personally transformative as it is jarring. James continues: "Then the whole scheme of our customary values gets confounded, then our self is riven and its narrow interests fly to pieces, then a new centre and a new perspective must be found."[22] The consequences of such new perspectives, as James draws out elsewhere, include an appreciation for the psychological depths and sentiments of social classes and races marginalized by the status quo and the educated elite.[23]

James's description of the manner in which others defy our conceptual categories and wrest us away from our self-satisfaction and complacency bears something of a resemblance to the postmodern ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. But there are differences here as well. As Megan Craig aptly notes in her comparison of the two, Levinas offers "the more traumatic account," for the contemporary thinker's depiction of our loss of spontaneity and composure before the intrusion of the other is far more stark and unrelenting.[24] Yet it is also far narrower: for in the thought of Levinas only the face of another human being carries ethical significance. For James, by contrast, the whole universe not only outstrips any single and totalizing perspective, but can be understood as carrying a kind of moral import. Craig recognizes this as well: "Yet Levinas, in

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[21] *William James: His Life and Thought*, pg. 350.
[22] "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," from *Talks to Teachers*, pg. 118.
[23] See "What Makes a Life Significant?" in *Talks to Teachers*, as well as James's essay on "Human Immortality."
[24] *Levinas and James*, Pg. 95.

his attentiveness to the human may have underplayed other dimensions of humanity, namely the faces of things, animals, landscapes, rubble, and art. This is a juncture where James can supplement Levinas."[25] In *A Pluralistic Universe* and elsewhere, James goes as far as to demonstrate an appreciation for *panpsychism*—the doctrine that everything in the cosmos possesses a life and sentience of its own. In what possesses obvious implications for an ecologically-based ethics, here our sentience fits us snugly *within* as opposed to distinguishing us from the rest of the natural world.[26]

For the existentialists, it is the cultivation of a sense of responsibility over our development and the acceptance of our freedom which lie at the core of the ethical life. For Levinas it is our relationships to, and obligations toward, the needful eyes of another human being. As we have seen, the thought of James contains parallels to both of these themes, and yet integrates them within its picture of the self as a series of events occurring within and through an open and relational cosmos—a universe which calls for our active partnership and participation. In this way, the dualism between our selves and the rest of nature is overcome, and yet the volitional and morally active agent is retained. Furthermore, our lives and those of our other selves interpenetrate in very basic ways—and yet our obligations can be understood as extending beyond the merely human and toward the entire cosmos of which we are a part.

V. Conclusion: A Vision for the People.

The end of Jill Bolte Taylor's lecture met with a near-deafening applause. This is no surprise. Meditative and spiritual philosophies, when buttressed by the sciences and made palatable for popular consumption, have a very large audience in the United States.

Taylor is but a recent addition to a venerable history of thinkers in America who sought to communicate with a broad and educated public. This includes much of the writings of Emerson and the later, more philosophical works of James. Speaking approvingly of the German scientist and philosopher Gustav Fechner, James draws upon a lovely passage from Proverbs (29:18): "Where there is no vision, the people perish"—a bit of Biblical wisdom to mix with the numerous references to Buddhist and Asian thought throughout the preceding pages.[27]

I have endeavored to show that the thought of James contains a strong notion of non-duality, yet one integrated with a measure of personal agency and forward-seeking moral earnestness. In regards to our own development, our participation in the cosmos, and our relationships to others, I suggest that James offers a most integrative and compelling ethical vision for the future.

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[25] Ibid, pg. 128.

[26] James's encouragement of creating a civil corp. to engage in a "war against nature" in his classic essay "The Moral Equivalent of War" may have a unwelcome ring to a few ecologically sensitive ears. That is, until it is understood against the context of James's entire later thought, with its stress on our *intimacy* and active partnership with the cosmos. Seen in this light, the "war against nature" is just another way of expressing our *participation* in nature, along with our obligations to continually make the universe a better place.

[27] James's full quote: "Where there is no vision the people perish. Few professorial philosophers have any vision. Fechner had vision, and that is why one can read him over and over again, and each time bring away a fresh sense of reality." *A Pluralistic Universe*, pg. 165.

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