

JAMES ON SELF, ACTIVITY AND FREEDOM

During James' life-time his pragmatism attracted the greatest attention. It aroused a heated controversy in which both realists and idealists joined to attack his "cash-value" theory of truth. But in our own times James has been revived for his descriptive and phenomenological insights.¹ His *magnum opus*, *The Principles of Psychology* inspired and influenced both Wittgenstein² and Husserl.³ Recent interest has therefore shifted from his pragmatism to "radical empiricism". James used his concept of British empiricism to distinguish it from traditional British empiricism which culminated in the Humean theory of experience. He certainly evinced a rare sensitivity and imaginative skill in giving a phenomenological description of the actual flux of "lived" experience both in *The Principles* and later in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. But James failed to perceive clearly the intimate relation between his "pragmatism" and "radical empiricism". He wrote: "... there is no logical connection between pragmatism, as I understand it, and a doctrine which I have recently set forth as 'radical empiricism'. The latter stands on its own feet. One may entirely reject it and still be a pragmatist".⁴ However, a careful reading of James' works shows that there is a close link between his pragmatism and radical empiricism. Both these doctrines were conceived by him to be primarily methods for solving or "dissolving" conceptual philosophical problems. He conceived the notion of "pure experience" as a methodological principle which enunciates that "everything real must be experienceable somewhere, and every kind of thing experienced must somewhere be real."⁵ This was basically a reaffirmation of his position in *The Principles* where he expressed his purpose as the "reinstatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life."⁶ His pragmatic method sought to do the same thing — namely, to solve philosophical disputes and validate concepts by tracing them to the "realities of experience". This is what he meant by their

"pragmatic equivalence" or "cash-value". It is my intention in this paper, (i) to show that James' concept of activity is fundamental to his treatment of the problems of both self and freedom, (ii) to evaluate his attempt to solve the problem of self at various stages of his writings (in *The Principles*, 1890, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 1912, and in *A Pluralistic Universe*, 1909), and lastly (iii) to confront his treatment of freedom with the problems raised by Professor John Hospers in the light of the findings of psychoanalysis.⁷

The commonsense notion of self is meant to distinguish between experiences on the one hand, and *that* which *has* or *owns* these experiences, on the other. Self is supposed to be the *subject* of experiences. Secondly, self is taken to be a *continuant* as against the transient nature of experiences, and lastly personal identity forms an integral part of our notion of self. Let us see how James deals with the concept of self and the problems associated with it.

It will be fruitful to compare and contrast the attempts of Hume and James in dealing with the problem of the self. Both of them based their analysis on what they conceived to be empirical grounds. Hume's concept of experience was atomistic. Each perception was a distinct and disjointed particular. Hume, therefore, rejected the identification of the self with soul-substance for the reason that such a permanent entity was not encountered in the flux of impressions. To quote his famous passage:

"For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or the other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perceptions".⁸

Hume was probably not aware of the paradoxical nature of the above statement since he was "presupposing" the "I" in the very *effort* to catch "myself." In other words, Hume accepted the ordinary concept of the self as a persisting *entity* and then failed to discover it in the flux of particular

perceptions. It did not occur to him that if the concept of self as an identical subject was accepted, then *ab initio* such a self could not become an object of my introspective glance and yet remain a subject of *that* very particular introspective perception. The self, as thinking subject, could not be its own object in one and the same act of thinking. This is not only a psychological but a logical impossibility. Now let us see whether James' treatment of the self is an improvement on Hume's. In *The Principles*, James devoted a lengthy chapter on "The Consciousness of Self," and because of his background in physiology, maintained a dualistic position with respect to the body-mind problem. He repudiated the soul-substance theory, the "bundle theory" of Hume and the transcendentalist theory of Kant on grounds of what he conceived to be "radical empiricism" as distinguished from Hume's atomistic empiricism. He said that the soul-substance theory, "explains nothing and guarantees nothing. Its successive thoughts are the only intelligible and verifiable things about it..."⁹ He put forward, in *The Principles*, a new concept of experience as a "stream" of *continuous change* in place of Hume's concept that "all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences." He reaffirmed and elaborated this concept in his later essays, *Does Consciousness exist?* (1904), *A world of Pure experience* (1904) and *The Continuity of Experience* (1909). During this latter period he gave up the earlier dualism maintained in *The Principles*. In effect, he pointed out that Hume's "laws of association", introduced *ab extra* to account for the self's continuity, could be obviated if one rejected Hume's concept of experience as comprising distinct and disparate focal points of perception only and replaced it by his own brand of radical empiricism in which both the focal points (the "substantive" parts) and the vaguely felt relations (the "transitive" parts) were given in the continuous flux of immediate experience. He wrote,

"To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, *the*

*relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relations experienced must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system."*¹⁰

Before dealing with the question whether James improved upon Hume it may be worthwhile to note that he disagreed with those who thought that Kant had refuted Hume and given a satisfactory account of the self in his concept of the Ego as the "transcendental unity of apperception." No doubt, Kant emphasized the element of *activity* in our concept of the self — which was conspicuously absent from Hume's account of the self as a passive bundle of perceptions succeeding one another with great rapidity. We shall see below that James himself made a lot of this element of activity in accounting for our notion of the self. However, he repudiated the Kantian transcendental Ego on the ground that Kant, according to James' interpretation, accepted tacitly Hume's theory of experimental manifold as disparate and chaotic, and regarded the Ego as an outside Agent to perform the operations of unifying that manifold. If that is what Kant meant by the self, then James pointed out that,

"Transcendentalism is only substantialism grown shame-faced, and the ego, only a 'cheap and nasty' edition of the soul . . . The soul truly explains nothing; the 'syntheses', which she performed, were simply taken ready-made, and clapped on to her as expressions of her nature taken after the fact: but at least she had some semblance of nobility and outlook. The Ego is simply *nothing*: as ineffectual and windy an abortion as Philosophy can show."¹¹

In other words, according to James, Kant himself accepted Hume's bundle theory of the self and invented the transcendental string to tie it up. James, therefore, rejected the Kantian Ego on the phenomenological ground that such an *entity* was not *presented* in the stream of experience. After distinguishing between the "Me" and the "I" he tried to describe the *feel* of the elusive innermost core of 'subjec-

tivity' for which all concrete psychical states were objects. He made use of the notion of *activity* to describe the central core of subjectivity to which all other parts of the stream seemed "transient external possessions." Kant, in contradistinction to Hume, recognized activity as an integral part of our concept of the self; yet, he limited it to the epistemological situation only. This is to say that according to Kant an active self was presupposed as an epistemological necessity; and without it the fact of organized human knowledge could not be explained. James generalized this notion of *activity* and, instead of introducing it *ab extra* (as he thought Kant had done), located it in the very heart of the stream of subjective life without limiting it to the epistemological situation only. He wrote "It is the source of *effort* and *attention*, and the place from which appear to emanate the fiat of the will."¹² In another graphic account he described this *central spontaneity* as follows:

".... 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 The mutual inconsistencies and agreements, reinforcements and obstructions, which obtain among 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."¹³

However, James floundered when it came to a proper interpretation of this *central spontaneity*. In *The Principles* his account on this point was ambiguous. He could not decide whether this subjectivity was the *feel* of "a collection of *cephalic movements of adjustments*" only or it was the very core of spirituality. He was right in emphasizing that the "warm" and "intimate" feeling of our bodily existence was an integral part of our self. But was *this* the only part? Explaining "personal identity" in terms of "resem-

blance among the parts of a continuum of feelings" he assigned "ownership" to the real passing thought, and said, "each Thought is thus born an owner, and dies owned, transmitting whatever is realized as its Self to its own later proprietor."¹⁴ But if the self (or subjectivity) is identical with the passing perishing thought how is it different from Hume's account of the self as a series of perishing particular perceptions? The only difference seems to be that whereas Hume made use of the "laws of association" to account for the continuity between distinct perceptions, James located that continuity *within* the stream of experience itself. And yet James committed the same error of searching for and identifying the self with the "passing Thought". The only real advance he made on Hume was in emphasizing the element of "activity" and "spontaneity" as the core of our notion of the self. James confirmed such a view of the self in some of his later works. In his essay *Does Consciousness Exist?* he dispensed with the transcendental Ego altogether when he wrote, "The 'I think' which Kant said must be able to accompany all my objects, is the 'I breathe' which actually does accompany them."¹⁵ But here again he comes perilously near identifying the innermost self with *mere* physiological breathing. His concept of "pure experience" in which relations were an integral part was meant to obviate the need for such "metaphysical fictions" and "trans-experiential agents of unification, substances, intellectual categories and powers, or Selves."¹⁶

Before commenting upon the question whether James changed his position on the self in later works especially *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909) it will be appropriate to deal with his treatment of the problem of freedom. It is well known that during 1869-70 when James was 27 years old he suffered and later recovered from an attack of severe personal depression. This crisis was precipitated by the problem of freedom versus determinism. Responding to the seemingly powerful arguments against personal freedom he wrote in his *Diary* entry of April 30, 1870.

"My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will... Not in maxims, not in *Anschauungen* but in accumulated *acts* of thought lies salvation. Passer *outré*.... Life shall [be built in] doing and suffering and creating."¹⁷

Both James (in his essay *The Dilemma of Determinism*, 1884) and Peirce (in the essay *The Doctrine of Necessity Examined* 1892) rested their case for freedom, against the weight of arguments drawn from physical science, biology, psychology and psychoanalysis, on their notion of possibility, chance or tychism. James agreed with Peirce in asserting that novelty, variety and diversity are *genuine* features of our universe. The concept of chance or possibility does *not* contradict the fact of uniformity of habit-formation in our universe. It merely avers that the emergence of life, mind and consciousness are *real* additions to the evolutionary history of the universe, and no amount of knowledge, on the part of anybody, about the alleged original cloud-nebula, could predict the detailed diversification and specification manifested in the facts of life and consciousness. James wrote, "... actualities seem to float in a wider sea of possibilities from out of which they are chosen; and *somewhere*, indeterminism says, such possibilities exist, and form a part of truth."¹⁸ However, from this generalized defense of novelty and possibility in the universe James passed on to the treatment of the specific problem of the human free-will. The problem of man's freedom should be stated clearly in order to see how James dealt with it. James saw the problem in the moral perspective. If determinism is true, so thought James, then the whole business of moral *effort* is an illusion. The problem of moral effort could not be solved by making the linguistic distinction between what is called "soft determinism" and "hard determinism." It is true that in our socio-legal context we can make a legitimate distinction between what we *choose* to do according to our desire and what we are *compelled* to do under external overpowering circumstance. It is perfectly intelligible to designate the former as a free act and the latter as a coerced one. That is, the distinction between what

we *do* and what *happens* to us is a genuine one. But, as James saw the problem, this valid distinction did not touch the core of the moral issue involved here. The central question, as James saw it, is: Is it *possible* for a person to *energise*, make an effort and act against his own desire in a moral situation? Can he act against his past character? Is this a *real* possibility? It is true that such a situation applies only to those persons who are *consciously* deliberating about the alternatives. That means that a majority of men may not face such a situation if they do *not* see that there is a moral choice involved here. Awareness or consciousness of the problem is a prerequisite for such a moral dilemma. James presented his view of the problem in the chapter on *Will* both in *The Principles* and in *Psychology: Briefer Course* (1892). He dramatized the issue by depicting the conflict between a propensity and an ideal motive (sense of duty) as one between a powerful sensual factor pitted against a weak ideal force. The ideal motive *per se* had no chance of overcoming the sensual antagonist *unless* it was buttressed by personal *effort* which was an *independent* factor derived from conscious energizing. He wrote, "But the E (effort) does not seem to form an integral part of the I (ideal motive). It appears adventitious and *indeterminate* in advance"¹⁹ (*italics added*).

In other words James thought of freedom as not merely freedom from external compulsion but also from internal compulsion. To be free meant, for James, to have the potentiality of becoming aware of our past character, present desires and motives, etc., and then overcoming the entire past by making a *spontaneous* effort of free-will. Such an effort of free choice was regarded by James as an *unpredictable* "independent" variable brought to bear upon the given situation. This was, for him, the quintessence of personal freedom. He wrote:

"... the effort seems to belong to an altogether different realm, as if it were the substantive thing which we *are*, and those were but externals which we carry."²⁰ (*italics in the original*).

However, James recognized that such a spontaneous effort

characterized the *heroic* mind. But still he thought that every person, through conscious awareness, was *capable* of such a "strenuous" mood. There was a *real possibility* of summoning inner resourcefulness to overcome the *entire past* and begin afresh, and introduce a genuinely novel factor in the universe. He concluded, "what wonder if the amount which we accord of it (effort) were the one strictly *undervived* and *original* contribution which we make to the world."²¹ (italics added). James reiterated his position later in his essay *The Experience of Activity* (1904) when he said,

"As a matter of plain history the only "free will" I have ever thought of defending is the character of novelty in fresh activity situations."²²

It is important to note that in this essay James was putting forward the thesis that the self as subject or the "I", and its freedom were both given originally in the felt experience of *activity*. The concept of activity was therefore basic to James' analysis of the self and freedom. He also emphasized at this stage of his writings that he was giving a phenomenological description of this *felt* experience of activity without assuming an *entity* of any kind. He was reiterating what he had said about the "I" in *The Principles* with the difference that now he explicitly repudiated the *dualism* maintained earlier. He wrote, "The *percipi* in these originals of experience is the *esse*; the curtain is the picture." And yet James said that he saw no contradiction between maintaining that the individualized self or the "I" was *uniquely* given in the *experience* of activity on the one hand, and, "on the other hand, in affirming, after introspection, that they consist in movements in the head."²⁴ Therefore, as late as 1904 James' analysis of the self or the "I" and its freedom was based on the felt experience of activity, and spontaneous effort of the moment. As he said, "sustaining, persevering, striving, paying with effort as we go, hanging on, and finally achieving our intention — this *is* action, this is effectuation in the only shape in which, by a pure experience-philosophy, the whereabouts of its anywhere can be

discussed. Here is creation in its first intention, here is causality at work."²⁵ (*italics in the original*).

The most serious drawback in identifying the self or the "I" with the *present* experience of effort, striving spontaneity and free creative activity was that it could not give a satisfactory account of the element of continuity in our commonsense concept of the self. Certainly, the self could not be identified with the passing perishing thought or with the momentary free creative activity. Nor could it be identified with the *series* of such momentary acts of creativity. I have pointed out above that such an analysis would resemble Hume's, except for the difference (however important that may be) that for James the self was given in *acts* of free and spontaneous effort, whereas Hume's account was in terms of passive perceptions only. However, without realizing this serious lacuna in his analysis, and without any conscious attempt to reconcile both the *continuity* and the *present* experience of activity, James changed his position in the last years of his life. As a corrective he introduced the element of continuity in terms of the concept of *potentiality* as integrally related to that of the present on-going actualities. He shied away from the earlier reductionistic analysis of the self in terms of present actualities and wrote,

"The passing moment is... the minimal fact, with the 'appartition of difference' inside of it as well as outside. If we do not feel both past and present in one field of feeling, we feel them not at all. The rush of our thought through its fringes is the everlasting peculiarity of its life."²⁶

"The conscious self of the moment, the central self, is probably determined to this privileged position by its functional connection with the body's imminent or present acts. It is the present acting self. Though the more that surrounds it may be 'subconscious' to us, yet if in its "collective capacity" it also exerts an active function, it may be conscious in a wider way, conscious, as it were, over our heads."²⁷

He expressed similar views in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and in his essay *What Psychical Research Has Accomplished*. He wrote:

"The result is to make me feel that we all have *potentially* a 'subliminal' self, which may make at any time irruption into our ordinary lives. At its lowest, it is only the depository of our forgotten memories; at its highest, we do not know what it is at all."²⁸

It is, therefore, safe to say that James equivocated between two discrepant approaches to the self. On the one hand, he located it in the *experience* of creative activity, but on the other hand, he identified this creative activity with 'movements in the head.' This was because he mistakenly assumed, like Hume, that the self could be given or revealed as an *object* of an introspective glance. And James found to his surprise that all that he could discover through introspective glance was "I breathe" instead of "I think". He did not clearly grasp that the self was not completely given in any *one* of its momentary acts, and that the concept of self was unintelligible without introducing the notions of *possibility* and *potentiality*. The self, truly speaking, is to be understood as the potentiality of free creative acts, rather than being identical with any *one* of such acts. As such it (the self) could be "given" only as the possibility of creative action unfolding itself in the ongoing continuum of the actualities of *experienced* acts. James wavered on the verge of recognizing this truth during the last years of his life.

One last point is worth discussing. How does James' account of free creative activity stand against a possible objection raised by Professor Hospers derived from researches in psychoanalysis? After dramatizing through various illustrations how *unconscious motivation*, as revealed by researches in psychoanalysis, plays an ubiquitous role in determining the actions of both the so-called normal and abnormal persons, Professor Hospers clinches the issue thus,

"The position, then is this: if we *can* overcome the effects of early environment, the ability to do so is itself a product of early environment. We did not give

ourselves this ability; and if we lack it we cannot be blamed for not having it."²⁹ (italics given in the original).

What Professor Hospers is saying here is in headlong collision with what James maintained on this issue. For James, this capacity to try, this exertion of effort, this heroic striving to overcome the entire past is an "underived" and "original" contribution which we make to the idea at the moment of decision and action. Each such act is a *creative* one and is "indeterminate" and "adventitious" in advance. According to Professor Hospers those of us who have the ability to overcome are just plain lucky and this fact should prevent us "from indulging in righteous indignation and committing the sin of spiritual pride."³⁰ Could we resolve this dispute with the help of the contemporary technique of explaining away the problem by saying that words when pushed outside their context make no sense. As a matter of fact Hospers came very near utilizing this strategy in his book *Human Conduct* (p. 516). But I would like to quote Hospers against himself:

"In every case, of course, it remains trivially true that 'it all depends on how we choose to use the word'. The facts are what they are, regardless of what words we choose for labelling them."³¹

The question then is: Are the *facts* on the side of James or Hospers? James appealed to the fact of our *immediate consciousness* of effort to overcome an impulse. Hospers appeals to the facts of scientific knowledge derived from psychoanalysis in pointing out that one "may even *think* he knows why he acted as he did, he may *think* he has conscious control over his actions, he may *think* he is fully responsible for them; but he is not."³² Suppose one becomes *aware*, either through psychiatric treatment or other means, of his early environmental conditioning, and (for the sake of the argument) also of the fact that this will to energise and make effort has been adversely affected, is it *still not possible* for him to overcome an impulse and act against his entire past? In other words, can *awareness* of the weak-

ened will arouse a person to make a heroic effort now? Is *consciousness* of any datum not an "original and indeterminate" factor which *makes* a difference to that datum? James would say: yes, it is. Such a "subjective" and "spiritual" possibility is always there as a genuine factor for turning one's back on one's past and making a new beginning. This is the creative edge of human possibility.

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NOTES

1. (a) Aron Gurwitsch, "Williams James' Theory of the 'Transitive Parts' of the Stream of Consciousness" in *Studies in Phenomenological Psychology*, Evanston, 1966.
 (b) Alfred Schutz, "William James' concept of the Stream of Consciousness, Phenomenologically Interpreted," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, No. 4, Vol. 1, 1941.
 (c) James M. Edie, "Notes on the Philosophical Anthropology of William James" in *An Invitation to Phenomenology*, edited by James M. Edie, Chicago, 1965.
 (d) John Wild, *The Radical Empiricism of William James*, Doubleday and Company, Inc., New York, 1969.
 (e) Hans Linschoten, *On the Way Toward a Phenomenological Psychology*, edited by Amedeo Giorgi, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1968.
 (f) Bruce Wilshire, *William James and Phenomenology*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1968.
2. John Passmore, *A Hundred years of philosophy*, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1966, Note 4, p. 592.
3. Husserl is known to have read carefully the two volumes of *The Principles*, as well as the essay, "The Knowing of Things Together."
4. William James, *Pragmatism*, The World Publishing Company, Cleveland, Ohio, 1955, p. 14.

5. "The Experience of Activity," *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, Longmans, Green and Co., New York, 1947, (1912), pp. 159-60.
6. *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. I, p. 254.
7. I shall deal with the central issue raised by Hospers in his article "What Means This Freedom?" published in *Determinism and Freedom in the Age of Modern Science*, ed. Sidney Hook. Though Professor Hospers' views as expressed in Chapter 10 of *Human Conduct* through a dialogue show a slight change in as much as he emphasized the *context* within which the meanings of freedom, responsibility and deserts make sense, his position in the above mentioned article affords a better confrontation with James' treatment of freedom.
8. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part IV, Section VI, quoted in *The Philosophy of David Hume*, ed. by V. C. Chappell, The Modern Library, New York, 1963, p. 174.
9. *The Principles*, Vol. I, p. 350.
10. *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943), p. 42.
12. Op. cit., pp. 297-8.
13. Op. cit., p. 298.
14. Op. cit., p. 339.
14. Op. cit., 339.
15. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, p. 37.
16. Op. cit., p. 43.
17. From: "Diary", *Letters of William James*, ed. by Henry James, Jr., Vol. I, p. 147-148, (Boston, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920).
18. "The Dilemma of Determinism" quoted in *The Writings of William James*, ed. by John J. McDermott, The Modern Library, New York, 1968, p. 591.
19. *Psychology, Briefer Course* quoted in the *Writings of William James*, ed. by John J. McDermott, The Modern Library, New York, 1968, p. 705.
20. Op. cit., p. 715.
21. Op. cit., p. 716.

22. Quoted in *The Writings of William James*, ed. by John J. McDermott, p. 290, footnote 184.
23. Op. cit., p. 283.
24. Op. cit., p. 284, footnote.
25. Op. cit., p. 289.
26. *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 283.
27. Op. cit., p. 344, n 8.
28. "What Psychical Research Has Accomplished?", *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Longmans, Green and Co., New York, 1897, p. 321.
29. "What Means This Freedom?" first published in *Determinism and Freedom in the Age of Science*, ed. Sidney Hook. Quoted in *The Problems of Philosophy*, ed. Alston and Brandt, Allyn and Bacon, Inc., Boston 1967, p. 366.
30. Op. cit., p. 366.
31. "Free Will and Psychoanalysis" first published in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1950. Quoted in *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. Edwards and Pap, The Free Press, N.Y., 1967, p. 85.
32. "What Means this Freedom", Op. cit., p. 356.