

# TRADITIONAL WESTERN CONCEPTS OF SELF

PREPARED BY JAMES LOW IN 1984-85 FOR THE SCHOOL OF  
INDEPENDENT STUDIES AT NORTH EAST LONDON  
POLYTECHNIC

## **Contents**

<i>Introduction</i>	2
<i>The Christian view of man</i>	2
<i>Democratic faith</i>	3
<i>Secular trends</i>	4
<i>Naturalism</i>	4
<i>Romantic idealism</i>	5
<i>Rationalism versus idealism</i>	6
<i>19th Century views</i>	8
<i>William James</i>	9
William James' vision of the complete person	12
<i>References</i>	13

## Introduction

What I am seeking to do is to give a brief account of some of the key concepts of the Self that have evolved in Western thought during the last two thousand years. Space has prohibited a more detailed discussion and time has dictated a rather tentative schema of presentation, yet the effort feels worthwhile for it has caused me to revise my notions of the self in Western thought.

I had imagined that, as could be done with many Eastern philosophies, it would just be a matter of consulting books, noting definitions and seeing how they were employed in context. Instead of which, I have found that from the period of [René Descartes](#) onwards there has been wave upon wave of theory progressing, and perhaps regressing, through countless permutations. There have been some healthy offspring from well-conducted cross-fertilisation but also many shrivelled runts arising from incest and mismatching.

Human nature, self, soul, mind, personal identity, personality — there is a plethora of terms each with a wide range of usage. The concept of ‘self’ in whatever form has rarely been separated from the issues of perception and valid cognition, and the presentation will reflect this. I have intentionally avoided giving my own definition and have tried to allow the flavour of the various theories to come across just as they are without being tied up. From the Enlightenment onwards one can discern a growing interest to appreciate the infinite richness of the modes of manifestation for their own sake — though the systematizers were always ready to snip off any inconvenient loose ends. From the Christian view, of man as a rather lost dimension of the divine, we see an almost continuous re-evaluation winding through various degrees of atheism and pantheism to [William James](#)’s view of the divine as one of the facets of multi-dimensional man.

Although my original intention was to explore the concepts of alienation associated with each view of the self, I found that this was impossible since the abstract nature of most of the theories gave their authors little interest in pathological states, and they seldom enquired into the polarities of normal / abnormal. In the Christian view of original sin we do find a theory of alienation yet even there the concern is more for the health of the immortal soul than with patterns of human life; for all human existence, apart from Christ and perhaps the saints is, de facto, alienated.

## The Christian view of man

The Christian view of man has dominated western thought since the third century a.d. when it swept away most of the concepts of classical philosophy and incorporated the remainder. Through time, many scholastic simplifications and sectarian divisions arose much as the views and practices of the Benedictines, Dominicans, Franciscans etc., but until the rise of Protestantism, these were mainly related to technicalities of dogma, styles of worship, and severity of vows, since the centralised church was swift to stamp out the heretical tendencies that regularly arose.

Due to the ‘original sin’ of Adam and Eve, their disobedient enquiry into forbidden matters, man (and of course woman), though created out of the substance of God, was cut off from God by his own foolishness. Only by relying on Christ and following his moral code could he be redeemed and find lasting happiness in the presence of God. Therefore, this life was a battleground between good and evil, temptation was everywhere but the individual had only himself to blame if he succumbed. His immortal soul could be forgotten while he revelled in the joys (‘sins’) of the flesh — but this life was brief and uncertain while heaven and hell lasted for infinity, and so he was reminded repeatedly of the need for faith supported by virtuous conduct. The Devil was presented as a talented and skilful seducer and man, as a weak and pitiful sinner was unable to help himself and relied on the saving power of Christ aided by the intercessions of Mary and the multitude of saints, as well as the rituals of the priests and the pardons of the popes.

So life was a continuous series of choices as each situation evoked responses which could lead one up or down with the final tally and verdict occurring at death. Man had an immortal soul which although being absolute in the sense of enduring due to its divine nature, could be directed in the wrong way, and defiled by the more worldly processes of thought emotion and will, with conscience acting as the connecting link. The upward path was straight and narrow and since few, even in the church, could follow it; hypocrisy was rife, especially in the late medieval period.

The temporal status of the church inhibited its spiritual censoring power against erring kings and barons — though several popes saw no difficulty in exchanging the armour of Christ for the armour of steel. Ascetics like St. Francis soon found their spiritual endeavours exploited by those who developed organisations in their name.

## **Democratic faith**

By the end of the 15th century the economic transformations of the collapse of the feudal system and the rise of the bourgeoisie encouraged the more democratic orientation of Protestantism which, while accepting original sin, the infinity of the after life and the saving power of Christ, swept away the edifice of priestly bargaining and saintly intercession. Life was still, in essence, a trial; whatever happened in it was not important in itself, but only in terms of offering choices of the right or wrong paths, so that one’s final orientation could be judged. Man would find salvation through prayer and faith in Christ on the one hand, and by good actions in the world on the other. God wanted you to work hard, live respectably and obey his laws. The inner and other dimensions of man’s life were clearly defined; obedience would ensure good results on every level. Indeed a train of thought developed that God rewarded the virtuous in this life also, and punished sinners with poverty and sickness.

The theorists of the Reformation, serious, strong-minded men like [Martin Luther](#), [John Calvin](#) and [John Knox](#), were more concerned about redefining the structure of divine-worldly interaction than with examining the presence of man on earth as something meaningful in itself. However, with the democratic

removal of papal and priestly influence on God, man now had to take total responsibility for his own salvation.

Two trends developed from this: intense faith and positive action. Nothing and nobody was to come between man and his God and so a deep and intimate trust evolved aided by the translation of the scriptures into the various mother tongues of the believers. There was also the feeling that rather than being impressed by specifically religious behaviour as the Catholics held, God would be happy to see man making the most of his life in a way that was socially useful. This tendency was supported by references to parables like those of the talents, and the sowing of seeds on good or on bad soil. Aided by the freethinking of the Enlightenment these ideas were quickly adapted by the new manufacturing middle-classes and formed a philosophy which supported the growth of capitalism.

## Secular trends

In the Renaissance of the 15th century, Florentines reclaimed the achievements of Rome and Athens and dismissed the intervening ages as merely 'dark ages' or 'middle ages'. Although attention was focused away from Christian 'culture' there was no systematic appraisal of the divergences and it was a period of myth and innocence rather than critical thought.

Descartes (1596-1650) had prepared the way for the French Enlightenment of the 18th century by opposing the prevailing absolutist theories of morality and knowledge. Seeking to emulate the scientific approach of Kepler and Galileo he tried to establish that experience and behaviour, have a direct relation to impinging stimulation. However, he was unable to reconcile the human grasp of abstract and universal propositions and their creative use of language to an empiricist epistemology that would ground all knowledge in sensory experience. He concluded that there were aspects of human cognition which could not be accounted for in terms of sensation, memory or experience, and which, therefore, had to be understood as irreducibly mental attributes.

Descartes' enquiries clearly set out the two enquiries into body-mind, and freewill versus determinism. These have continued to excite theorising, debate, and experimentation up to the present day which is why he has been termed "the father of modern philosophy".

His view of the body-mind dichotomy and his defence of independent mental states were strongly attacked by some of the leading figures of the Enlightenment. Voltaire, for example says in his *'The Ignorant Philosopher'*; *"It would be very strange that all the planets should obey fixed and eternal laws, and that a little creature, five feet tall, should act as he pleased, solely according to his own caprice."*

## Naturalism

However, the main drift of the Enlightenment was not radical materialism but a more general 'naturalism' which sought to find the laws by which the world's

phenomena become precisely described and faithfully predicted. This was occurring particularly in Catholic France, which had not experienced the forces of the reformation as strongly as had its northern neighbours. In effect, this intellectual enquiry was a struggle against authoritarian dogmatic control — a struggle which would encourage the revolution of 1789 against King and Church.

Social structure and individual personality were seen as evolving in response to human nature. [Thomas Hobbes](#), [John Locke](#), [David Hume](#) and [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](#), although of different political persuasions, were united in their naturalistic approach. Man was the creator of his world and divine forces or plans were essentially irrelevant. Abandoning biblical and logical deductive justifications for government, these theories substitute historical and psychological lines of evidence and so the traditional theological and rationalistic defences give way to an analysis of human passions and desires. The ‘original sin’ of free enquiry is liberated from its numbing stigma and is elevated as the sole means of attaining true knowledge of reality and humanity.

## Romantic idealism

One development of this naturalism was the romantic idealism of the 19th century, which installed passion, intuition and natural instinct as the supreme arbiters of human existence. [William Wordsworth](#), [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#), [Percy Bysshe Shelley](#), [Johann Wolfgang Goethe](#), [Friedrich Schiller](#), etc., saw no real distinction between art and philosophy. Despite their differences they all believed in a universal principle of consciousness whose activity in the affairs of life is entirely indifferent to time and place; and that the poetic imagination, the artist’s genius is the agency of its discovery. By a process of introspection, the artist was to become familiar with the patterns of his own thoughts and feelings and how they arise, and then, by being in tune with these habits of his mind, he would blindly follow their impulses and this would constitute artistic authenticity. Such was the view expressed by Wordsworth in 1800 in his preface to *‘Lyrical Ballads’*.

Another important source for these romantic idealists was the ideas of [Immanuel Kant](#), who sectioned the universe into the merely ‘phenomenal’ realm of purely subjective experience which is the total range of subject’s experience of object, and the concealed realm of true, objective, ‘noumenal’ being which is the realm of objects as they really are in themselves. In Book One of his *Critique of Pure Reason* he explores the ‘transcendental aesthetic’ which is *‘the science of all principles of a priori sensibility’* — a priori being prior to experience. These are the principles that we discover when we strip experience of its cognitive and sensory overlay so that nothing may remain save pure intuition and the mere form of appearances.

Kant established time and space as the very conditions of experience rather than as objects of experience. The artist would have to search beyond both sense and reason for that noumenal reality which is absolute, timeless, transcendent, the realm of freedom, that which ‘posits itself’ and is unconditioned.

However, the romantic idealism of the 19th century had to contend with the criticisms of science, and the hopeful naturalism of the Enlightenment developed into a war between schools.

The empiricist attitude to human nature that had been set out in Locke's theory of the development of knowledge (the view of the 'association' of ideas arising from a sense perception) was developed by David Hume. Hume's notion was that sensory experience gave rise to 'impressions' (which were both sensation and emotional feelings), and to 'ideas' (which were less vivid copies of the former and were made up of mental 'elements' corresponding to thought and reason). These ideas could interact according to the three-fold laws of association-contiguity; resemblance; and cause and effect. That is to say, ideas will associate if in spatial and temporal proximity, and they will enter association more easily if they resemble each other.

Furthermore, it is a fixed feature of the mind to regard an idea that regularly occurs after another idea, to be an effect, with the prior idea as cause. Therefore, whatever relations of cause and effect we see in the outer world are not truly so, but are just a reflection of the mind's own habits.

The only reality then was that of the individual on the basis of his own experience. The differences between people was just the history of their 'impressions', and morality was a matter of maximising pleasure and minimising pain. In the words of Daniel Robinson<sup>1</sup>,

*'In their empiricist epistemologies, the philosophers of the Enlightenment were presenting man as something of a passive witness, a spectator in a crowded and cluttered world of his own sensations; a pleasure-seeking, pain-avoiding survivor finding rude solace in the chimerical productions of his own imagination; a luckless truth-seeker whose triumph turned out to be no more than the mirror image of his own sensations and feelings; a solitary being driven to society by considerations no more noble than fear, no more elevated than self-interest.'*

Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* pointed out that the mind in the very act of observing itself, alters itself, It does not stay in place or retain its content with the constancy a Newtonian science would require. He pointed out that there was no possibility of a truly scientific psychology grounded in observation, experiment, and general laws. In the 'soul', "*everything is in a continual flux and there is nothing abiding except (if we must so express ourselves), the 'I' which is simple solely because its representation has no content*". (A: 381)

## **Rationalism versus idealism**

I will examine this divergence of view between rationalists and idealists from different perspectives because it appears to me that the basic issue of the degree of freewill or determination that prevails in human nature, and the extent to

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel N. Robinson. *Toward a Science of Human Nature*. (Columbia University Press 1982)

which that degree can be altered, is one of tremendous importance. It has never been resolved, and continues in the body-mind debate and in the contentions between behaviourists and humanists in psychology.

However, one must constantly be alert to the wide variety of meanings pinned on to terms. The ideal categories of Kant are the prerequisites of knowledge and are quite different from the ideas discussed in the subjective idealism of Hume. There is a pattern of ideas scattered through such otherwise diverging philosophies as those of Kant, [Hegel](#), and the 'Common Sense' school (which goes by different names, Intuitionism, Transcendentalism, and Absolute Idealism). They all take for granted that knowledge or truths of a certain kind precede experience, or 'transcend' it, or make it possible, or give it its characteristic marks and contours.

[Thomas Reid](#), 1710-96, was the founder of the 'Scottish School of Common Sense' which held that 'common-sense' is the very activities of the mind and the laws of conduct by which life becomes possible. These principles regulate both the thinking and the 'unthinking' members of the human race. It was by means of this that man made contact with 'the thing signified', which is the thing itself. Thus, he refuted the idealist notions that the mind perceives only its own contents and that these contents are but the images or copies or impressions of the senses.

Locke had taken the concept of self to refer to no more than whatever experience had planted in consciousness, requiring an essential identity between self and memory. All that the 'I' could refer to were these recollections unique to the particular 'I'. However, as Reid pointed out this 'I' as a substance or personal identity could not really exist since then the self would be damaged by forgetfulness.

Hume rejected the memory theory and attempted to reduce the self to an assembly of causal relations obtaining among the impressions furnishing the mind. This is part of his general associationist theory that a term either refers to something given in experience or it refers to nothing having real existence — the self is nothing but a 'bundle of perceptions'.

Reid was firmly convinced that any philosopher genuinely sceptical of his own existence was not fit to be reasoned with. For Hume to look for his self there must be a Hume doing the looking, a Hume distinct from anything that might be found through the search. Reid took the self to be a 'substance' in the older scholastic sense of the word; an immaterial, undetermined agent necessarily implied by the facts of experience and intending actions. He thus freed himself from the scepticism of Hume and the other idealists who saw mental events as essentially separate from the outer reality of which they were images.

Hume tried to establish that human knowledge begins and ends with perception and its various residuals, while Kant attempted to show that perception itself proceeds according to necessary principles, which cannot themselves be derived from experience i.e. that perception arises out of cognition, and not vice-versa. Kant believed that the individual can only aspire to a coherent understanding of

phenomena, forever bereft of a knowledge of ‘things-in-themselves’ (noumena), for the real world, as it is represented in consciousness, is mediated by the organs and principles of perception. Our knowledge of this world inescapably bears the imprint of these utterly subjective influences. When we attempt to go beyond this, we achieve merely rational reconstructions of our own experiences, and not some additional knowledge of reality itself. The reconstructions of our own experiences, and not some additional knowledge of reality itself. The reconstructions are universally valid since the rational principles on which they are based are an endemic feature of the mind; that is to say, they are *the ‘pure categories’*, the conceptually necessary precondition for knowledge. (Here one might recognise many of the features of the structuralist concepts of [Ferdinand de Saussure](#), [Claude Lévi-Strauss](#), and [Naom Chomsky](#) etc.). This seemed to silence the Enlightenment notions of human perfectibility, the limitless reach of man, the authority of experience, a true science of man and society.

Kant also explored the implications of his concepts for morality and developed the notion of categorical and hypothetical imperatives. Thus one ordinarily acts from a hypothesis about cause and effect: that this or that sort of action will give rise to happiness. Thinking *‘I ought to do this because I wish for that’* is contingent and conditional and does not spring from an autonomous will. Whereas the categorical imperative is focused not on the content of the process but upon the structure of the process itself. It is an attitude that is an end in itself and is not conditioned on the outcome.

## 19th Century views

These are the main theories of human nature or self, which were discussed up until the late 19th century. Most of the new writers and theoreticians of that century have very definite and obvious debts to the developers of these ideas and the later elaborators like Hegel. Philosophy covered the whole gamut of human enquiry and the theories tended to be abstract and personal.

The 19th century, however, saw the birth of specialisation; [Auguste Comte](#) coined the term ‘sociology’; and there was a growing interest in the nervous system and the brain (phrenology). [Wilhelm Wundt](#) 1852-1920, held by many to be the founder of the modern psychology, made a compelling critique of psychological materialism, preserving the independence of psychology from physiology. He attacked associationism and defended voluntarism. For him the fact of mental life is its activity, not passivity; its direction by the will, not its subservience to external objects; its conceptual and not merely perceptual character.

Apart from the earlier mentioned Christian view, there is little concern in any of these theories with the concepts of mental health and pathology. Even the most empirical of them were still examining human nature in the abstract in the sense that they are trying to establish interpretive systems based on logic and internal coherence rather than an analysis of purely descriptive data — fact and theory bend toward each other. It was only when [Spalding](#), Ramones, and others took the experimental method as it was developing in the later half of the 19th century, and added it to the comparative method made famous by Darwin, that



there was any real concern to establish the symptoms and development of insanity and compare it with the development of healthier mental states. It was from this that the study of pathological states developed, a course of enquiry that caused a sharpening of definition for the modes of the ‘healthy’ or ‘normal’ self.

As pointed out earlier, introspection was the method favoured by the romantic idealists and their antecedents and they saw their task as that of developing artistic sensitivity so as to attain a more authentic way of being, a coming in tune with man’s higher nature. Whereas the associationists and the empiricists took much more account of the influence of social patterns on the development of personality. The general attitudes of these philosophers were ‘person centred’, anticlerical, antiauthoritarian, and they provided a broad infrastructure of ideas that was utilised by many 19th century thinkers like Comte, Marx, and Durkheim. However it was not just a simple development of the earlier ideas for many of those who accepted the rejection of a ‘higher self’ or any kind of obtainable absolute were concerned to stress the importance of the will, the individual’s power to decide and act — this capacity being elevated to an almost spiritual quality. One can notice this tendency in Karl Marx, particularly in the early *Philosophical Manuscripts* where the influence of Hegel is obvious.

## William James

I will conclude this brief discussion of some of the principle pre-twentieth century concepts of human nature, by looking at the views of the American [William James](#), 1842-1910, whose *Principles of Psychology* 1890, with its persuasive holistic approach is at present enjoying a new burst of popularity amongst those tired of the loss of perspective consequent on specialist fragmentations. The ‘*Principles*’ founded a discipline, but its sound philosophical base, its anti-scientism and clear conception of where physiology ends and psychology begins were all too rapidly discarded by James’s successors along with difficult to place topics such as will and belief. James presents consciousness not as something composed as the sum of many little ideas-pieces but as a constantly moving flux on which the beam of attention plays, now here, now there.

*“My present field of consciousness is a centre surrounded by a fringe that shades insensibly into a subconscious wave... Our full self is the whole field, with all those indefinitely radiating subconscious possibilities of increase that we can hardly begin to analyse<sup>2</sup>.”*

The feeling of thunder, for instance, is also a ‘*feeling of silence as just gone*’. In addition, many elements in the flux are not so much substantive as transitive: “*We ought to say a feeling of and a feeling of and a feeling of, quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold*”. Even the gaps in the thought-stream have a distinct existence: “*When I vainly try to recall the name of Spalding, my consciousness is far removed from what it is when I vainly try to*

---

<sup>2</sup> From *A Stroll with William James* by Rosemary Dinnage in TLS. Feb. 17, 1981.

*recall the name of Bowles*". James prides himself on, "*the reinstatement of the vague and inarticulate to its proper place in our mental life.*"

For James the experiencer of the stream shapes it into patterns, and eventually into an individual world-view, by the direction of his beam of attention; consciousness is thus a function, not an entity. To make experience manageable the individual classifies, sorts, arranges, and comes up with concepts. As a pragmatist James saw these concepts as the enemy rather than the ideal, for they stifle the particularity and plurality of these things as they really occur. Feeling and knowing go together and so it is artificial to separate concepts from feelings. Pointing to the limitations of the abstractionists James favoured the man who lives '*in the light of the world's concrete fullness*'. He saw truth as simply a name for verification processes, i.e. '*what works*'.

This rather naive pragmatism has been criticised by philosophers for its simplistic view of causation. However, for James a proposition is not to be considered so much true as truthful, a kind of useful map, and no single theory should be taken for absolute reality. Thus we should take what we find useful from as many as possible. So, with reference to the specific topic of the 'self' to which he devoted one chapter in his *Principles of Psychology*, the principle is the same: – inclusiveness. Far better a flaw in logic than the exclusion of any inconvenient part of the multiplicity of experience.

He was writing at a time when hypnotic and hysterical phenomena were having an immense influence on current notions of mentality. Men such as Flournoy, Richet, Buhler, Krafft-Ebbing, Binet, Charcot, and Myers were grappling with the idea that the self is not a simple, single unit but a grouping that can split and can become dissociated. By the early 1890's James was already writing about the healing that can come from reconnecting isolated parts of the mind to awareness.

James's unconsciousness differs from Freud's in not being sharply demarcated from the conscious, in not being fixed during childhood, and in including within it collective and transcendent aspects. He opposed simplistic healthy-mindedness for he saw evil facts as "*a genuine portion of reality*", and considered that "*they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth.*"

Seeing consciousness as function rather than entity, his concern is with the continuity of thought, the stream of consciousness as a whole. This is not however vague theorising. Rather, it is the result of his honest introspection. James's ontology begins and ends with real experience; experience as it is had, as it is given, as it is immediately and reflectively known.

It is on the introspective method that we "*have to rely on first and foremost and always*", for it ranks above the experimental and comparative methods in being the only one that can directly produce that living and actual mind that functions in the real world. It is a method however, that lends itself to abuse, to varieties of the 'psychologist's fallacy' by which the investigator comes to think of thought as identical to the mental fact as the psychologist sees it — just as

sociologists can confuse the social facts, the reified data they study, with the dynamic continuum of social existence. That is, the structure of the mode of investigation is imposed upon, transferred to, the flow of reality under investigation. It is this fallacy which nourishes and is nourished by the mind-stuff theory, for when it is committed it produces those utterly artificial elements of thought of which no actual thought is composed.

For James the point of psychology is to lay bare the constellation of laws and principles capable of explaining the course and facts of mental life. And for all the precision of the experimental methods then being developed there was no gain in adopting a method that reliably and accurately missed the point.

If this point is not to be missed, the phenomena of mental life must be taken as they come, not stripped of their dynamic properties, of their wholeness, of their immediacy. From the point of view of psychology, the mind and the brain must be taken as they, in fact, reveal themselves – as process ideally suited to the achievement of significant ends, regulated continuously by selective and directive functions and interacting in such a manner as to minimise chaos. With this dynamic functional view, James in Chapter 9 of his *Principles of Psychology* sets out on the basis of his introspection, the five indubitable attributes that thought displays:

1. It is 'owned' in the sense that the thinker 'has' it.
2. It constantly changes in vividness or content.
3. It is known not to change by its owner.
4. It is taken by its owner as something independent of its object.
5. It chooses its objects from an array of possibilities. No two ideas are ever identical and no thought, once lost, ever returns as itself

*“Experience is remoulding us every moment, and our mental reaction on every given thing is really a resultant of our experience of the whole world up to that date.”* (Principles vol. 1. p. 254.)

Although James was opposed to the hypostatization of consciousness, taking it to be nothing more than the actual stream of thought, this still entailed a subject, a 'self'. He was quite familiar with the arguments for an irreducible or unified self that are grounded in the continuity of experiences and memories. James was strongly opposed to these 'spiritualists' as he called them, and he attacked their substantialist theory that when there is a thought there must be a thinking subject a 'self', that can only be comprehended as a unified, irreducible, immaterial substance; in a word a 'soul'.

At that time, the neo-Hegelians were presenting their transcendentalist doctrine of 'pure ego' and James did not mince his words in condemning them. *“Transcendentalism is only Substantialism grown shame-faced and the ego only a 'cheap and nasty edition of the soul... the Ego is simply nothing: as ineffectual and windy an abortion as Philosophy can show...”* Nevertheless, James also rejected the radical materialism derived from the associationism of Hume, which sees the self as a 'bundle of perceptions'. So avoiding the two extremes, he defined two broad categories of self: the public and the private. To the public

self he assigned a material self and a social self. To the private self, he assigned a spiritual self and the pure ego.

By the 'material self' James meant not only each person's actual body but his physical possessions and familial ties, towards both of which he is impelled by instinctive inclinations. Regarding the 'social self', James contended "*a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him and carry an image of him in their mind.*" This social self is close in meaning to what should be called one's personal identity in contrast with one's self-identity. Regarding the private versions of the self, James offered first that spiritual self which is the gift of introspection: the 'empirical me' by which we are able to think of ourselves as thinkers. Moreover, James himself concluded, "*in a sense then, it may be truly said that, in one person at least, the 'self of selves', when carefully examined, is found to consist mainly of the collection of these peculiar motions in the head or between the head and the throat.*" (p. 301.) There may be more to it than this, but James found nothing else in his own introspection.

Regarding the pure self or 'inner principle of personal unity', James is careful to separate his view from traditional soul theories by claiming that none of the subjective phenomena of mind require the concept of a soul for an explanation. Indeed as "*psychologists we do not need to be metaphysical at all. The phenomena are enough, the passing thought itself is the only verifiable thinker, and its empirical connection with the brain-process is the ultimate known law.*"

He tried to avoid the pitfalls of associationism, which he attacked for artificially cutting up the continuity of the stream of consciousness and then playing about with the resulting bits. He also wished to avoid substantialism as something not required for a full account of empirical experiences. Given the awareness and its contents, and in the light of there being no plausible counter-claimant, thought arrives as 'consciousness of self'.

James's radical empiricism demanded that these views of his be judged in the light of experience. This 'common sense' experience is immune to the 'psychologist's fallacy' referred to above, however, in trying to utilize key concepts of associationism and substantialism without being trapped in their limitations, he ended up playing word games that established nothing new. The 'pure ego' that we have an empirical sense of, he wished to present as 'judging thought' in order to avoid the danger of substantialism. Yet if there is a formal identity between 'pure ego' and 'judging thought', (and given that the latter is solely empirical, containing nothing that is not yet tied to an ensemble of feelings) this means the loss of the privately but universally recognised subject of every feeling. Indeed, empirically, I have no evidence whatever of a thought thinking itself, only of myself thinking.

### **WILLIAM JAMES' VISION OF THE COMPLETE PERSON**

However pragmatism was no idle word for James and it, like his functionalism in psychology, grew out of the recognition that life is lived; that action is the means by which we enter the world; that all our perceptions and cognitions are for this end. The function of thought is action. His openness to the lack of

simplicity and tidiness in ourselves and the universe finally led him to pluralism in which “*all that we are required to admit as the constitution of reality is what we ourselves find empirically realised in every minimum of finite life.*”<sup>3</sup>

The vastness of the universe intrigued him for, as he wrote in the ‘*Will to Believe*’ (p50.),

“*Our science is a drop, our ignorance the sea. Whatever else be certain, this at least be certain — that the world of our present natural knowledge is enveloped in a larger world of some sort, of whose residual properties we can frame no positive idea.*”

And yet fundamentally the individual has to look within and trust his own judgement, as he says in the chapter headed ‘*Self*’ in *Principles of Psychology* when considering the question of the variety of possible identities,

“*The seeker of his truest strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully, and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation. All other selves thereupon become unreal, but the fortunes of this self are real.*”

## References

*The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. E. Haldane and G.R.T. Moss, (New York; Dover 1955)

John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), (Chicago: Regnery, 1956)

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), (London: Clarendon Press, 1973)

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Norman K. Smith, (London: Macmillan, 1929)

G.E. Vaughan, *The Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. (Cambridge University Press, 1915)

Comte, *A General view of Positivism*, tr. J.H. Bridges, (New York: Robert Speller 1957)

*Philosophical Works of Thomas Reid*, ed. Harry Bracken, (Hildersheim: Georg Olms 1967)

William James, *Principles of Psychology*, (New York: Dover 1950)

William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism and a Pluristic Universe*, ((New York, Longmans Green, 1947)

H. B. Perry. *The Thought and Character of William James*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1948)

---

<sup>3</sup> *Essays in Radical Empiricism and the Pluristic Universe*, (London 1947), p. 322

Daniel N. Robinson, *Towards a Science of Human Nature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)