

James and the Problem of Intersubjectivity: An Interpretive Critique¹

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Introduction

One of the basic problems of modern philosophy is the so-called problem of other minds – the problem of intersubjectivity. This problem may be formulated in two questions: "Is intersubjective experience possible? And if so, *how* is it possible?" These questions arise from many sources in modern thought, but especially from the subjectivist implications of Cartesian Dualism and from the atomistic analysis of experience which is a product of British Empiricism. Descartes drove consciousness inward to a Mind separated from Matter; and then, on the basis of a sensationalist description of perception, the Empiricists atomized consciousness in a thoroughgoing subjectification of experience. The philosophy of William James is, in large part, an attack upon these doctrines and an attempt to restore the unity of consciousness and its objects. James's notion of "pure experience," of a neutral "stuff" of which object and subject are merely "functions," is aimed at bridging the gap created by Cartesian Dualism. And his "theory of relations," according to which conjunctions are as characteristic of experience as are disjunctions, is developed in opposition to the atomism of the Empiricist tradition.

But in presenting a non-dualistic account of consciousness and a relational theory of experience, James does not thereby escape the problem of intersubjectivity. On the contrary, the need to discover and explain the nature of intersubjective experience is deep-rooted in James's thought. This is a consequence of the "subjective turn" of his philosophical method. James defines his philosophical perspective as a "radical empiricism." "To be radical," he writes, "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."² The starting-point of James's radical empiricism "is the fact of thinking itself,"³ or, more broadly, the stream of consciousness. And consciousness, as James describes it, is fundamentally *personal* in nature.⁴ From *The Principles of Psychology* to his last writings on radical empiricism and pluralism, James's thought is cast almost exclusively in first-person terms. "Like Augustine, like Erigena, like Descartes, like Husserl, James turns to *the*

¹ This article was published in *The Philosophy of William James*, ed. W.R. Corti (Hamburg, Germany: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1976), 221-244.

² *Essays in Radical Empiricism and A Pluralistic Universe* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1971), p. 25. (Cited hereafter as ERE.)

³ James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1950), I, p. 221. (Cited hereafter as *Principles*.)

⁴ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 226-227.

experience of oneself experiencing as the fundamental fact, the starting point for philosophy...."⁵ Given this subjective orientation to experience, the phenomena of human sociality and intersubjective experience are necessarily problematic for James. And his attempt to account for these phenomena, as we shall see, is thoroughly conditioned by his initial commitment to the subjective turn of descriptive (or "phenomenological") psychology.

In the following pages, I shall review (1) James's definition of the problem of intersubjectivity; (2) James's attempt to solve the problem; (3) the description of the "life-world" of perception and praxis, by which James seeks to avoid subjectivism; and (4) James's theory of nonperceptual consciousness. My general contention, throughout this analysis, is that James never quite succeeds in his efforts to solve the problem of intersubjectivity, although he does lay the groundwork for a possible solution.

(1) James on the Problem of Intersubjectivity

James's definition of the problem of intersubjectivity is posed in terms of his doctrine of relations, i.e., his view that the relations, conjunctions, and transitions which are felt in experience are just as "real" as are the "substantive *qualities* and *things*"⁶ encountered in the stream of consciousness. Now James is careful to point out that relations may be either conjunctive or disjunctive. In his descriptions of relations between persons, he tends to lay the accent upon disjunction rather than conjunction. It is "a fundamental psychological fact," he writes, that

No mind can take the same interest in his neighbor's *me* as in his own. The neighbor's *me* falls together with all the rest of things in one foreign mass, against which his own *me* stands out in startling relief.... [The Other] is for me a mere part of the world; for him it is I who am a mere part. Each of us dichotomizes the Kosmos, [i.e., draws the line between the "me" and the "not-me"] in a different place.⁷

When it comes to the interaction of different minds, James considers that

Each of these minds keeps its own thoughts to itself. There is no giving or bartering between them. No thought even comes into direct *sight* of a thought in another personal consciousness than its own. *Absolute insulation, irreducible pluralism, is the law* [italics mine]. It seems as if the elementary psychic fact were not *thought of this thought* or *that thought*, but *my thought*, every thought being *owned* [James's italics]. The breaches between such

⁵ James M. Edie, "Notes on the Philosophical Anthropology of William James," in *An Invitation to Phenomenology*, edited by James M. Edie (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), p. 121.

⁶ *Principles*, I, footnote, p. 258.

⁷ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 289-290.

thoughts are the most *absolute breaches in nature...* [italics mine]. The universal conscious fact is not "feelings and thoughts exist," but "I think" and "I feel."⁸

But James recognizes that human interactions may be, on occasion, conjunctive as well as disjunctive. In his analysis of various types of conjunctive relations, James argues that "merely to be 'with' one another...is the most external relation that terms can have," whereas the "most intimate of all conjunctive relations" is the "passing of one experience into another when they belong to the same self." And when speaking of interpersonal experience as conjunctive, it is "this bare relation of *withness*" that James has in mind.⁹ While my intra-subjective experience is "sensibly continuous" in the sense that it is "warm," "intimate," and "immediate," such is not the case with my experience of another person; there, I have only indirect and discontinuous experience.¹⁰ "My experiences and your experiences are 'with' each other in various external ways, but mine pass into mine, and yours pass into yours in a way in which yours and mine never pass into one another." Thus, interpersonal relations are infected with an unavoidable "discontinuity-experience;" and this (at best) "imperfect intimacy" is at the core of the problem of intersubjectivity.¹¹

(2) James's "Solution" of the Problem of Intersubjectivity

"Absolute insulation" or a seriously "imperfect intimacy": are these the alternatives that characterize human interaction? James is disturbed with this possibility and makes several attempts to discover a deeper, authentically *intersubjective*, bond between human beings. These attempts are especially interesting, for they reveal both the suggestive power and the ultimate weaknesses of James's approach to the problem of intersubjectivity.

In his *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, James makes the claim that a radically empirical approach to perception reveals "a world of pure experience," a world that is neither objective nor subjective, a world in which "object and subject *fuse* in the fact of 'presentation' or sense perception."¹² A "pure experience," according to James, is "a bald *that*, a datum, fact, phenomenon, content, or whatever neutral or ambiguous name you may prefer to apply."¹³ Experience as such is a neutral "stuff" which can, in retrospect, be defined as either objective or subjective; e.g., a pen can be taken as a physical thing "but there" or as a mental event "in here," but the pen *as such* is a pure (i.e., neutral) presentation, a "that" and not a "what."

⁸ Ibid., I, p. 226. Italics added.

⁹ ERE, pp. 26-28.

¹⁰ *Principles*, I, pp. 238-239.

¹¹ ERE pp 27-28.

¹² Ibid., p. 104.

¹³ Ibid., 65.

In his essay, "How Two Minds Can Know One Thing" (published in 1905), James turns to a consideration of how a unit of pure experience can be appropriated by two different streams of consciousness. This is a problem because there appears to be a significant difference between the phenomena of consciousness and physical things: i.e., "While physical things...are supposed to be permanent and to have their 'states,' a fact of consciousness exists but once and is a state." Thus, the question arises as to how "my" phenomenon can be the same as "your" phenomenon. James begins his response to this problem with a description of how a unit of pure experience is appropriated into a single stream of consciousness: The "continuous identity of each personal consciousness," James explains, is "a name for the practical fact that new experiences come which look back on the old ones, find them 'warm,' and greet and appropriate them as 'mine,'" He then breaks this explanation down into four phases: (a) a new experience (e.g., of a pen) "has past time for its 'content,' and in that time a pen that 'was';" (b) the present experience (of a pen) has the "warmth" of pens past, has feelings (especially feelings of "interest") which are associated with pens past, and is recognized for what it is on the basis of pens past; (c) these feelings are centered in a self, in a "me;" and (d) associations with pens past (and other past experiences) were and are "mine." The important point here, according to James, is that this appropriation of the pen "is *part of the content of a later experience* wholly additional to the originally 'pure' pen."¹⁴ The "pen-experience in its original immediacy is not aware of itself, it simply *is*, and the second experience is required for what we call awareness to occur."¹⁵ Consciousness requires retrospection.

James notes that pure experiences are unaffected by the appropriative act: the use of a pure experience "is in the hands of the other [conscious] experience, while it [the pure experience] stands, throughout the operation, passive and unchanged." On this basis, he continues, it is quite clear how two minds can know the "same thing." "All that we should have to postulate would be a second subsequent [conscious] experience, collateral and contemporary with the first subsequent one, in which a similar act of appropriation should occur. The two acts would interfere neither with one another nor with the originally pure pen." Furthermore, there is no reason why these two streams of consciousness cannot regard their (separate) experiences as being *of* a physical thing which is the same for both consciousnesses. There is, James concludes, "nothing absurd in the notion of its [the pure experience] being felt in two different ways at once, as yours, namely, and as mine." "The paradox," then, "of the same experience figuring in two consciousnesses seems thus no paradox at all," since there is no logical difficulty in the idea that two consciousnesses can appropriate the same object. As experience is presented, i.e., as "pure," an object can be both "mine" and "yours" simultaneously or at different times, can be 'owned' by both of us "just as one undivided estate is owned by several heirs."¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 67-68.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 70.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 69-70.

But while James's analysis of the appropriative act shows how two minds can be conscious of the same objects, it does not make clear how these two minds can communicate their thoughts to one another. The radical insulation of consciousness from consciousness is left unremedied in James's description of the mutuality of objective reference. James is apparently aware of this difficulty and, in another (earlier) essay on "A World of Pure Experience" (published in 1904), he makes an explicit attempt to discredit the solipsistic view that there are "no transitions" and no points of contact between different minds, that different minds "are wholly out of connection with each other." One escape from this "'cold, strained, and unnatural'" psychology is the so-called "argument from analogy." James puts this argument as follows: "Why do I postulate your mind? Because I see your body acting in a certain way. Its gestures, facial movements, words and conduct generally, are 'expressive,' so I deem them actuated as my own body is, by an inner life like mine."¹⁷ But the argument from analogy, while it may be a statement of a "reason" for postulating other minds, is a theoretical leap beyond the "directly experienced facts" and must therefore be excluded from a radically empirical consideration of the question of intersubjective experience.

Having dispensed with analogical constructions, James turns to the world of lived experience for evidence of true intersubjectivity, and this turn brings him to the notion of what phenomenologists have called the "lived-body." Here, we must digress briefly. In *The Principles of Psychology*, James presents a theory of the self in which he attempts to describe personal experience without reference to a substantial ego or soul which transcends the stream of consciousness. And it is this "non-egological"¹⁸ approach to the self that gives rise to his concept of the lived-body. James makes a distinction "between thought as such, and what it is 'of' or 'about,'" a distinction which he regards as a primal fact of human psychology.¹⁹ It is this distinction that makes possible the "subjective turn" toward a consideration of "the Spiritual Self" (i.e., "a man's inner or subjective being"). We can, James points out, consider the process of thought independently of its objects; we can, that is, "*think ourselves as thinkers*."²⁰ When we make this turn, we discover that what we call our personality consists of "the incessant presence of two elements, an objective person, known by a passing

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁸ Edie, "William James and Phenomenology," *The Review of Metaphysics*, XXIII, no. 3 (March, 1970), pp. 509-519.

¹⁹ James does not, in this context, attempt to explain this distinction; he simply treats it as "given" in the stream of consciousness. This is one aspect of his nascent theory of intentionality which has aroused so much interest of late in some quarters of the philosophical establishment. Cf. Edie, "William James and Phenomenology," pp. 481-526; John Wild, *The Radical Empiricism of William James* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1969); and Bruce Wilshire, *William James and Phenomenology: A Study of THE PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGY* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1968).

²⁰ *Principles*, I, p. 296.

subjective Thought and recognized as continuing in time." James refers to the objective side of personality as the "me," and to the subjective side as the "I."²¹

On this basis, James contends, we can understand the phenomenon of personal identity without any appeal to a "Pure Ego." James treats the "I" as a "pulse of consciousness" which inherits the self which precedes it; and that preceding self has, in its own right, inherited all that *its* preceding self "owned," and so on. Each "I," then, stands as the "*representative* of the entire past stream," having adopted the "objects already adopted by any [previous] portion of this spiritual stream." This "I" is not an overarching transcendental ego; it "is still a perfectly distinct phenomenon from that Other [which preceded it in the stream of consciousness]...." "The Thought which, whilst it knows another Thought and the Object of that Other, appropriates the Other and the Object which the Other appropriated...."²² "It may feel its own immediate existence...but nothing can be known *about* it till it be dead and gone. Its appropriations are therefore less to *itself* than to the most intimately *felt part of its present Object, the body, and the central adjustments*, which accompany the act of thinking, in the head. These are the real nucleus of our personal identity...."²³ The self, then, *is* the lived-body. I identify experiences as "mine" on the basis of a felt "warmth and intimacy."²⁴ Such feelings are *bodily* feelings, e.g., "organic emotion in the shape of quickened heart-beats, oppressed breathing, or some other alteration, even though it be a slight one, in the general bodily tone."²⁵ Thus, we identify "distant selves" (e.g., past experiences) as "ours" on the condition that these selves are *felt* as warm and intimate, and also on the condition that they are *felt* as "continuous" parts of our total experience of self; and this total experience of self is "embodied."²⁶ The lived-body is thus the "primitive object...of egoistic interests," and all other objects of interest are derivatives of the body, its social extensions, and its "spiritual [i.e., subjective] dispositions."²⁷ The concept of the transcendental ego or soul, then, "is at all events needless for expressing the actual subjective phenomena of consciousness as they appear."²⁸

²¹ Ibid., p. 371.

²² Ibid., I, pp. 339-340.

²³ Ibid., I, footnote, p. 341.

²⁴ Ibid., I, p. 331.

²⁵ Ibid., I, p. 333.

²⁶ "Whenever my introspective glance succeeds in turning around quickly enough to catch one of these manifestations of spontaneity in the act, all it can ever feel distinctly is some bodily process, for the most part taking place within the head" (Ibid., I, p. 300; James's italics deleted). "In a sense, then, it may be truly said that ... 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 throat.... [And] it would follow that our entire feeling of spiritual activity, or what commonly passes by that name, is really a feeling of bodily activities whose exact nature is by most men overlooked" (Ibid., I, pp. 301-302; James italics deleted). See also James's interesting discussion of the relation between consciousness and breathing in ERE, pp. 21-22.

²⁷ *Principles*, I, p. 324.

²⁸ Ibid., I, p. 344.

Now let us return to James's essay, "A World of Pure Experience," and see how he utilizes the concept of the embodied self in his effort to build a theory of intersubjective experience. He begins by observing that if there is a "you" beyond my perception of "your body," then "we belong to different universes..." for my evidence of "you" *is* your bodily expressiveness. But concrete experience militates against the possibility that "you" are disconnected from your body. "...In that perceptual part of *my* universe which I call *your* body, your mind and my mind meet and may be called conterminous."²⁹ For "your objects," James argues (in an analysis similar to that offered in "How Two Minds Can Know One Thing"),

are over and over the same as mine.. If I ask you where some object of yours is, our old Memorial Hall, for example, you point to *my* Memorial Hall with *your* hand which I see. If you alter an object in your world, put out a candle, for example, when I am present, *my* candle *ipso facto* goes out. It is only as altering my objects that I guess you exist....

Practically, then, our minds meet in a world of objects which they share in common, which would still be there if one or several of the minds were destroyed.³⁰

Intersubjectivity, then, is grounded in the lived-body and is focused on objects which embodied minds can hold in common.

But what does this account prove? In James's own words, the argument merely demonstrates that "the common-sense notion of minds sharing the same object offers *no special logical or epistemological difficulties...*;" there is nothing absurd or logically contradictory in supposing intersubjectivity to be possible and actual.³¹ This leaves dangling in the air the *empirical* question as to whether our minds *do in fact* "terminate" in the same perceptual phenomena. James answers this question negatively. Perceptually, our minds are far apart, even when they are in rough agreement; for we occupy different perspectives and have different interests which *condition* our perceptions of objects. "Is natural realism, permissible in logic, refuted then by empirical fact? Do our minds have no object in common after all?" At this point, James indicates the *phenomenon of space* as the common perceptual ground (or object) of our minds. "...There is no test discoverable," he writes, "by which it can be shown that the place occupied by your percept of Memorial Hall differs from the place occupied by mine." James concludes by grounding his concept of the lived-body in perceptual space and by defining the space of the lived-body as the ultimate matrix of intersubjectivity. Your body-space and my percepts of the location of your body and of points on your body *are in the same place*, "and it is *through* that space

²⁹ ERE, p. 42.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44. Italics added.

that your and my mental intercourse with each other has always to be carried on...."³²

It is puzzling that James focuses explicitly on the spatial but not on the temporal structure of intersubjectivity since, in the *Principles*, he regards the perception of space and the perception of time as "analogous" and comments that "date in time corresponds to position in space." A radically empirical approach to the phenomena of consciousness would seem to indicate that the "original experience of both space and time is always of *something already given as a unit*...."³³ If James employs the notion of lived-space in his effort to explain how different minds can share the same objects, might not the notion of lived-time be utilized in the same way? Is there any way of determining that the time in which your percept of the present table is located is different from the time occupied by my percept of the present table? Is it not clear that the table is present for both of us "now"? Our present interaction has temporal as well as spatial structure, is taking place both "now" *and* "here," and this spatio-temporal structure is what it is because of the ways in which our bodies are presently oriented. The lived-body, then, carries with it a spatio-temporal aura or halo through which perceptual experiences, which for James are primarily subjective, might become *intersubjective*. In this way, James's description of the "specious present,"³⁴ i.e., the durational and subjective time of perceptual experience, can be applied to a description of what might be called "dialogical time," i.e., the durational and *intersubjective* time of perceptual experience.

James speaks of the specious present as the "original intuition of time"³⁵ and regards it as the primary temporal structure of the life-world. Because it is the time of perceptual experience, the specious present is the "original paragon and prototype of all conceived times."³⁶ James's distinction between perceptual and conceptual time is basic to his account of lived experience and is fruitful for an understanding of intersubjectivity. Conceptual time (e.g., memory, history, clock-time) is, for James, a symbolic extension of lived-time into past and/or future. Beyond the borders of the specious present "extends the immense region of conceived time, past and future, into one direction or another of which we mentally project all the events which we think of as real, and form a systematic order of them by giving to each a date."³⁷

How can this notion of conceptual time contribute to an understanding of intersubjective experience? In a penetrating passage on James's theory of memory, John Wild attempts to show how the "remote events" of history can enter into and become a part of concrete personal experience. I have a memory of my past, i.e., of

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

³³ *Principles*, I, p. 610.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 608-610.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, I, p. 642.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, I, p. 631.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, I, p. 643. James's italics omitted.

past events which I have appropriated to my present experience on the basis of their felt warmth and intimacy. "It is this past that belongs to me," Wild writes, "which gives me a sense of a past direction in time, and makes remote history something more than a mere imaginative construction. No matter how distant these remote events may be, they stretch continuously through historical records and traditions to the past that I remember, and to the present that I am living through and directly know."³⁸ Thus, a collective time (history) becomes a defining characteristic of the personal time of memory and the specious present.

But Wild does not carry his analysis far enough. I do not only "remember" (i.e., reconstruct) past events "forward" into my present experience; I also "re-member" my present experience "backward" into my own personal past and thence into the historical past. In this manner, I enter into the experience of others who are no longer living but who, through my appropriative acts, "live on" in the symbolic images of historical thought. This is, of course, a one-sided "communication" since it is I, and not those once living, who defines the meaning of the historical past. But there is a sense in which historical consciousness is *actually* intersubjective, i.e., in the sense that different minds may look back to *a common historical past*. When we discuss classical civilization, for example, and even when we disagree about its meaning and significance, do we not in fact occupy a common, although symbolic, world, a world in which we are actually *communicating* (in the sense of "communing") with one another?

This same sort of analysis can be applied to future time with reference to which different minds might "live together" in common hopes, fears, expectations, etc. And even clock-time, the most abstract because the least bodily form of time, has intersubjective significance as a method by which different minds coordinate (i.e., make common) their acts. But these and other aspects of James's theory of time which are relevant to a full account of intersubjectivity must be left undeveloped at this point. Reasonable limits on the length of this paper require that I content myself with having suggested a few of the ways by which a Jamesian account of the temporal structure of intersubjectivity might be constructed.

(3) The Problem of Subjectivism in James's Thought

But even when we have supplemented James's *spatial* analysis of intersubjectivity with an account of the temporal structure of lived experience, a difficulty remains. James defines the self "in its widest possible sense" as "the sum total of all that...[a man] CAN call his, not only his own body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account."³⁹ It would appear that this definition might lead James to a conception of the self as presupposing aspects of

³⁸ *The Radical Empiricism of William James*, p. 172.

³⁹ *Principles*, I, p. 291.

the "not-self," including other persons. But such is not the case. James's description of the self is entirely intra-subjective, a product of his methodological subjectivism: he presupposes the living, experiencing body and attempts to evolve an awareness of others out of that subjective center. Given this orientation, it is inevitable that James must beg the question of authentic sociality and regard awareness of others as "my" awareness. "You" appear as an object, but not necessarily as a subject, in *my* spatio-temporal experience.

The subjectivist tendency of James' theory of the self is mitigated to an extent by his description of the "paramount reality" of lived experience. There is a world in which we live and in which we are conscious. As James points out, consciousness is interested, attentive, and selective. Perceptual consciousness, for example, selects, on the basis of practical interest, certain "sensible qualities" of the world and constructs these qualities into "things" by means of "substantive names" which are given to certain configurations of experience. James compares the operations of the mind to work of the sculptor who "extricates" his statue from the mass of rock around it.⁴⁰ This process of selectivity, of course, has a tendency to "*ignore* most of the things before us," and this tendency is perhaps the most important form of selection.⁴¹

Now, according to James, selective consciousness presupposes a world which offers us "various orders of reality" or "sub-universes" (e.g., the worlds of perception, science, common-sense, madness).⁴² It is from these various orders that we must select our "realities." Ordinarily, objects of experience are accepted as real so long as they are consistent other objects that we take to be real. "The sense that anything we think of is unreal can only come," according to James, "...when that thing is contradicted by some other thing of which we think. Any object which remains uncontradicted is *ipso facto* believed and posited as absolute reality."⁴³ But when two objects *are* in contradiction to one another, on what grounds are we to choose one rather than the other as "real"? Here, James turns to a description of the "world of 'practical realities'" which is the basis of our epistemological choices. "Each thinker..." he writes, "has dominant habits of attention [which are expressions of practical interests]; and these practically elect from among the various worlds some

⁴⁰ Ibid., I, pp. 288-289.

⁴¹ Ibid., I, p. 284.

⁴² In the *Principles*, James outlines seven of the "most important sub-universes": (1) the world of perceptual experience; (2) the world of scientific objects (e.g., atoms, electrons, etc.); (3) the world of "logical, mathematical, metaphysical, ethical, ...aesthetic propositions;" (4) the world of common sense; (5) the world of supernaturalism and mythology; (6) the world of individual opinions; and (7) the world of madness; II, pp. 292-293.

⁴³ Ibid., II, pp. 288-289. James's italics omitted. Following Brentano, James distinguishes between conception ("imagining a thing") and belief. An object of thought (conception) "may exist as something quite distinct from the belief in its reality" (Ibid., II, p. 286). Belief is an "acquiescence" in the existence of the object thought of (Ibid., II, p. 283).

one to be for him the world of ultimate realities."⁴⁴ Objects that appear as "interesting and important" to us are, generally, considered real; and objects which do not appear as interesting and important are branded as unreal or irrelevant. "The *fons et origo* of all reality, whether from the absolute or the practical point of view, is thus subjective, is ourselves."⁴⁵

But James recoils from the blatant subjectivism of the above remarks and seeks to ground the world of practical interest in the deeper and "paramount" reality of the world of sensation, the world in which objects must compete with one another for recognition as realities. After all, I may be "interested" in discovering a golden mountain without actually finding such an entity in the lived "world of sense;" and I may *not* be "interested" in the Rocky Mountains, and yet they are *there* in perceptual experience. Thus, James concludes, the "world of orderly sensible experience" is the ultimate arbiter of reality,⁴⁶ and all other "realities" (objects of imagination, dreams, idealities of science and mathematics, the world of "practical realities" itself) are derivatives of this paramount reality.⁴⁷ "Our ideas and concepts and scientific theories pass for true only so far as they harmoniously lead back to the world of sense."⁴⁸ If knowledge is conditioned by interest, then interest begins in, arises out of, and points back to the "life-world" of perceptual experience, the world in which we, as embodied selves, live and are capable of "various noetic attitudes"⁴⁹ toward the world. And noetic attitudes must be testable against the paramount reality of perception.

But while James's conception of the paramount reality of perceptual experience does ground the lived-body in a lived-world, it does not, by itself, overcome the subjectivist element in James's thought. To accomplish this, James would have to delineate the *social* structure of the life-world. As James ably points out, the "whole function of conceiving, of fixing, and holding fast to meanings, has no significance apart from the fact that the conceiver is a creature with partial purposes and private ends."⁵⁰ And he never tires of indicating that the selectivity of consciousness is directed by "habits of attention" which, in turn, are determined by "practical interests." But what determines interests? To this question, James provides no answer. To answer this question adequately (which I cannot do in this paper), it would be necessary to uncover the fundamentally social nature of the lived-world as the ground of interests. For, as Habermas states, "knowledge-constitutive interests take form in the medium [sic] of

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, II, P. 293. James's italics omitted.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 296-297. James's italics omitted.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, II, P. 301.

⁴⁷ As both McDermott and Wilshire have noticed, James's later writings on "pragmatism" are developments of his early explorations into the life-world and the lived-body of concrete experience. See John J. McDermott, "Introduction" to *The Writings of William James*, edited by McDermott (New York: Random House, 1967), p. xxxiv; and Wilshire, p. 19.

⁴⁸ ERE, p. 107.

⁴⁹ Edie's phrase, "William James and Phenomenology," p. 508.

⁵⁰ *Principles*, I, p. 482. James's italics omitted.

work, language, and power;" and these latter are the definite means of social organization." Habermas defines language in a manner consonant with the findings of Mead and his followers, i.e., as "the communication system of social life-world."⁵¹ Language, as Mead demonstrates, is not merely a logical structure, but also a social system (see below, pp. 13, 15).

There is, however, an absence of explicitly social analysis in James's approach to experience. James contends that radical empiricism is "essentially a *social* philosophy; a philosophy of 'co,' in which conjunctions do the work."⁵² But is it a social philosophy in the full sense, i.e., in the sense of an elucidation of human social reality and the forces which form it? Or is James's philosophy of "co" an onto-psychological description of first-person experience? On the one hand, radical empiricism does open the door to a truly social philosophy in that relations between persons are described as *given* in concrete experience and must therefore be taken into account. But, on the other hand, James does not follow up on this opening with a description of the specifically *social* ground of the lived-world – i.e., those forces ("work, language, power") which determine "interests" and perceptual "perspectives."

Thus, James suffers from a kind of solipsism as a result of his subjective starting-point. Rather than beginning with social experience and moving on to an account of individual consciousness (as do, for example, Marx and Mead), James's method is to attempt to generate an analysis of social experience out of the structures of intra-subjective life. He does not, I have argued, succeed in this attempt, since social experience is a *condition* and not a consequence of personal consciousness. To bring James's analysis of lived experience to a full appreciation of intersubjectivity, it appears that it would be necessary to supplement his intra-subjective descriptions with a social theory based upon the work of Mead and Marx. James opens the door to a social critique of the lifeworld, but he does not pass through.

(4) James's Theory of Conceptions

There is yet another strain that runs through James's writings and which is relevant to the problem of intersubjectivity. In an essay of 1897 on "Human Immortality," James speaks of "an invincible blindness from which we suffer, an insensibility to the inner significance of alien lives...." And yet, he goes on, others (including animals and perhaps even plants) "realize themselves with the acutest internality, with the most violent thrills of life." But how can we know this to be the case? As James points out repeatedly, "but private power of sympathetic vibration with other lives gives out so soon...,"⁵³ that we do not recognize the inner lives of others. James, however, states that his comments express the "point of view of all the other individual beings...,"⁵⁴

⁵¹ Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon 1971), p. 313.

⁵² *ERE*, p. 102.

⁵³ In *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), appendix, pp. 37-40.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

and that point of view is broad enough to include, not only all human minds, but the "inner lives" of all plants and animals as well! How is this possible, given James's views on intersubjectivity as they have been outlined above? James apparently believes that he has moved beyond the purely private "blindness" of human psychology.⁵⁵ By critical reflection on our "blindness," James has rendered it thematic and therefore subject to a higher (and self-transcendent?) consciousness. The reflexivity of consciousness, it appears, can take us beyond our purely privatized existence and can put us in touch with others, indeed with "all...other individual beings."

But unfortunately, James does not explain how critical reflection is possible; he simply indulges in it. This leaves the phenomenon of intersubjectivity rather mysterious. This follows from James's failure to develop an explicitly social theory of language and other symbol-systems. For to account for the reflexivity of consciousness, as Mead has demonstrated at length, it is necessary to begin, not with personal consciousness, but with the social world out of which individual selves arise; and the means by which selves arise is the incorporation of socially defined symbols into individual consciousness via "symbolic interactions" (i.e., social interactions which take place by means of shared symbols such as gestures, words, definitions, rituals, etc.) in which the individual assumes the roles of others and views himself from the standpoint of these assumed roles. We become capable of self-reflection and self-criticism as a result of taking the attitudes of others toward ourselves.⁵⁶ Without this sort of explicit social and symbolic analysis of human existence, James's account of intersubjectivity remains ungrounded.

Now there is present in James's philosophy a framework upon which a theory of language and symbolism might be built, although James himself does not carry the project to fruition. In an attempt to account for the sameness which characterizes different experiences (e.g., my recognition of a table on different occasions, my having the same dream over and over, my thinking the same thought again and again), James formulates what I shall call his "theory of conceptions." According to this theory, I can conceive of many objects of thought, and these objects may be either perceptual (e.g., tables) or purely ideal (e.g., mermaids and mathematical functions). James defines conception as "neither the mental state nor what the mental state signifies, but the relation between the two, namely, the function of the mental state in signifying just that particular thing."⁵⁷ In other words, the conception of an object is the *meaning* of the object, is the way in which a thought *means* ("intends") its object. Moreover, conceptions, unlike thoughts and objects, do not change. "Each conception," James states, "...eternally remains what it is, and never can become another." For example, a piece of white paper which is scorched black

⁵⁵ He makes the same move in another essay of 1899, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," in *The Writings of William James*, pp. 629 ff.

⁵⁶ Cf. *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), *passim*.

⁵⁷ *Principles*, I, p. x-61.

does not affect "my conception 'white'," which remains what it is independently of perceptual or intellectual alterations of consciousness. "Thus, amid the flux of opinions and of physical things," James goes on, "the world of conceptions, or things intended to be thought about, stands stiff and immutable, like Plato's Realm of Ideas."⁵⁸

The quality of sameness in different thoughts or percepts, then, may be explained by what James calls "the principle of constancy in the mind's meanings." On this principle, "the mind can always intend, and know when it intends, to think of the Same".⁵⁹ I can recognize the "same" table," the "same" dream, the "same" mermaid because the conceptions of those objects are always present in my mind and ready to be "meant out" toward the appropriate appearances.

In support of his theory of conceptions, which is set out in the *Principles*, James returns to the fray in his later essay, "Does Consciousness Exist?," and now, of course, he is armed with his doctrine of pure experience. And, on the basis of this doctrine, he demonstrates that there is a world of objective consciousness which is "nonperceptual" in nature. In order to do this, he "brackets" the world of percepts, for the association of conceptions with percepts (i.e., as "representative of," as "thoughts of," or as "ideas of" percepts) tends to subjectify nonperceptual experience. It is James's contention that "nonperceptual experiences have objectivity as well as subjectivity" and that such experiences, like percepts, may be regarded either as objects or as mental states depending upon the contexts in which they are taken.⁶⁰ Conceptions, like percepts, are "bits of pure experience," *thats* which have yet to become *whats*. A conceived room, for example, may be considered as a "thought-of-an-object" or as an "object-thought-of" – it can function as both.⁶¹ The important point to notice is that the world of nonperceptual experience, like the world of perceptual experience, is a world in which objects are "intended" by conscious acts by way of conceptions (or meanings).

Now it is clear that these meanings are the stuff that language and other forms of symbolism are made of. And there is some evidence that James does indeed notice this implication of his theory of conceptions. But from the standpoint of the problem of intersubjectivity, James's view of language leaves a great deal to be desired. He defines language as a "system of signs, different from the things signified, but able to suggest them." He then contrasts human language with the sign-systems of some animals (e.g., dogs): Man, says James, "has a deliberate intention to apply a sign to everything."⁶² Language is a result of the ability to conceive of "a sign as such, apart

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, I, p. 462.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 459. James's italics omitted.

⁶⁰ ERE, pp. 10-12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁶² *Principles*, II, p. 356. James's italics omitted.

from any particular import...,⁶³ i.e., to recognize the general function of signs as tools of signification. In his description of the development of language in the child, James notes the social context of language acquisition, but puts the emphasis upon the "instincts" of "vocalization," "loquacity," and "imitativeness."⁶⁴ Human beings, he implies, have a natural ability to acquire and use symbolized meanings.

Without denying the role of instinct in symbolic behavior, it appears that James's concentration upon the biology of consciousness prevents him from answering a key question concerning lived experience, i.e., "*Where do the meanings by which consciousness intends its objects come from?*" Are they simply innate ideas? That he does not think so is suggested by James's comment that the mind "*gradually comes into possession* of a stock of permanent and fixed meanings, ideal objects, or conceptions, some of which are universal qualities, like...black and white..., and some individual things."⁶⁵ But how does this happen? James never answers this question because he never makes the "intersubjective turn" toward a *social* theory of language nor, for that matter, toward social theory as such. Thus, it was left for Mead to carry out the intersubjective implications of James's theory of conceptions. As we have seen, Mead *begins* his analysis of consciousness with the social process of communication and, on that foundation, makes the other an integral part of self-understanding. Intersubjectivity is to be explained in terms of that "meeting of minds" which occurs in "conversation, learning, reading and thinking...", i.e., in "that part of logic which has to do with the technique of communication either with others or with one's self...." It is on the basis of such socio-symbolic interactions and by means of the conceptual symbols of the communicational process that "successful reference to identical objects...by different selves" is possible.⁶⁶

But this is not a paper on Mead. Suffice it to say that Mead's view that the mind and the self are fundamentally social in nature makes possible an approach to human intersubjectivity which is impossible for James. For as Mead's work establishes, other minds and selves are *presuppositions* of, and not phenomena to be discovered by, self-consciousness.

Conclusion

James's failure to explain the possibility and nature of intersubjective experience is based upon his failure to develop a socio-symbolic critique of the life-world. And the absence of social theory in James's work is, in turn, a consequence of his fatal methodological move toward the structures of subjective consciousness. It is for this reason that phenomenological interpretations of James's thought, while they are certainly interesting and valuable, cannot develop the needed critique of his intra-

⁶³ Ibid., II, p. 357. James's italics omitted.

⁶⁴ Ibid., II, pp. 357-358, x-07-x+11.

⁶⁵ Ibid., II, p. 644. Italics added.

⁶⁶ Mead, *The Philosophy of the Act* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), pp. 52-53.

subjective approach to experience; for phenomenology, like radical empiricism, operates from within the "subjective turn." This common starting-point is indeed the basis for the current interest in James's philosophy among phenomenologists. But the phenomenological interpreters do not, by and large, take note of the problem of intersubjectivity in radical empiricism.⁶⁷ Wilshire, for example, takes James to task for not formulating a completed theory of intentionality, i.e., a theory of the "necessary and internal relation between act of thought and intentional object."⁶⁸ Leaving aside the question as to the accuracy of this appraisal, it is clear that Wilshire's central concern is with the relation of consciousness and its objects; he does not raise the question of the relation of one mind to other minds.

As we have seen, without a systematic elucidation of symbols as social in nature and therefore as intersubjective, the phenomenon of intersubjectivity and the necessary and internal character of its relational structure cannot be understood. Consciousness is related to consciousness necessarily and internally through language and other communicative symbolisms. There is evidence that Husserl, in his later work, recognized the limitations of the intra-subjective approach to consciousness and made a preliminary attempt to move to the intersubjective level by viewing language as an intrinsically social phenomenon.⁶⁹ But the phenomenological tradition, generally, has not successfully extricated itself from the subjectivist cast of Husserl's hitherto published writings and continues to operate within the context of the subjective turn. Thus, James's phenomenological critics are either disturbed (Wilshire) or elated (Wild) with his treatment of intra-subjective consciousness, but do not point out at any length or depth the limitations of James's analysis of intersubjectivity. Edie, for example, has written an essay on James's "philosophical anthropology" without so much as a hint at the absence of social theory in the Jamesian theory of man.⁷⁰ Edie is, however, laudatory when it comes to describing James's subjective (and "phenomenological") point of departure.⁷¹ But, of course, a philosophical anthropology without an explicit account of intersubjectivity,

⁶⁷ Wild, it is true, goes to torturous lengths to save James from his subjectivism. 'My existence,' Wild states, "is not enclosed within the *limits* of an atomic self or substance. I exist in the groups to which I belong, and in the 'relation' of love, my entire 'organic' being exists in the person of the loved." This statement comes at the end of a passage in which Wild discusses James's notion of the "social self." *The Radical Empiricism of William James*, pp. 80-84. This is the closest James gets to an authentically social theory of self: he deals with the imagery of oneself in the "minds" of others, and suggests that his imagery is created by our own actions as we act out roles in the various groups to which we belong. But there is no analysis of the role of symbols in this context, nor does James deal with role-playing as explicitly interactional. Human relations remain external. *Principles*, I, pp. 293-296.

⁶⁸ Bruce W. Wilshire, *William James: The Essential Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971), p. liv and *passim*.

⁶⁹ Donn Curtis Welton, "The Temporality of Meaning: A Critical Study of the Structure of Meaning and Temporality in Husserl's Phenomenology" (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Southern Illinois University, 1973), pp. 273-281.

⁷⁰ "Notes on the Philosophical Anthropology of William James," *passim*.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

without a social critique of the life-world, is a deficient (although perhaps creative) theory of man. The corrective of James's philosophy is to be found, not in Husserl, but in Marx; and its fulfillment is to be found, not in Merleau-Ponty, but in Mead.