

Survival of Bodily Death
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The Later James and the Influence of Myers
Ed Kelly

Ed Kelly followed Crabtree with a series of quotations from the later James, the period from 1900 to 1910 when he died. First off, Ed Kelly pointed out that Myers wrote an insightful critique of *The Principles of Psychology*, and this critique proved influential on James's later thinking. As it turned out, later in his life after he had given his famous Gifford lectures that were published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James returned the favor when he wrote a review of Myers's great tome *Human Personality*, which was published in 1903.

Although in *The Principles* the concept of an *Anima Mundi* is mentioned, James did not fully develop it. Nor did James accept the notion of a unified self. Kelly pointed out some context for James's position at that time, namely that the dominant theory in the 1880s was atomism, much in the manner of David Hume's philosophy of a century earlier. Thus, in *The Principles* James rejected the idea that there was some glue that held together these atomistic bits.

In 1895 James gave the Lowell lectures at Harvard, at which time he discussed extensively Myers's concept of the subliminal self. Kelly suggested that in the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James essentially applied Myers's model to the study of religious experience. Stylistically, James followed Myers's approach of starting at the outer edges of the topic and then proceeding to work his way inward to the core issues. By the end of *The Varieties* James suggested that the experiences he has just described can best be accounted for by Myers's model of the self. In particular, James agreed with the idea that beyond ordinary consciousness there is a subliminal region continuous with it that we can contact. Even though at that time James thought that psychology was already big enough to provide a natural way of thinking about mystical experiences, he nonetheless was quite curious about the farthest reaches of them.

In the postscript to *The Varieties*, James offered a short prelude to his last book *A Pluralistic Universe*. In it he took a different tone because he was writing primarily for philosophers, such as advocates of absolute idealism like Josiah Royce. For James absolute idealism had much in common with the notion of a block universe, in which everything is already present. James did not care for this view and quipped that it was comparable to an unintelligible pantheistic monster.

The fundamental issue James wrestled with in *A Pluralistic Universe* was that of the One and the Many. He noted that between the ordinary supraliminal consciousness and the absolute described by philosophy, there may be a whole series of progressively higher integrations of experience. James's starting point in exploring into this idea was the German founder of psycho-physics Gustav Fechner. Standard psychology textbooks honor Fechner for this historical role he played, but they neglect to mention that Fechner was also a mystic who explored such speculative ideas. After reviewing Fechner's work, James accepted with great difficulty the idea that there can be these higher integrations of experience. By that time in his life, James had had too much experience of the para-normal, with such phenomena like multiple personality, to dismiss this idea. After Kelly finished, Eric Weiss pointed out that in the first third of *The Life Divine*, Aurobindo lays out a coherent view of the relationship between the One and the Many. In his description, what Aurobindo calls the Supermind is the factor that mediates between the One and the Many.

At the end of the conference Kelly recited one last beautiful quotation from James's essay titled "Final Impressions of a Psychological Researcher," published in 1909. Kelly said that this quotation reveals just how far James had moved in the later part of his life toward a mystical view of psychology:

Out of my experience such as it is (and it is limited enough), one fixed conclusion dogmatically emerges, and that is this, that we with our lives are like islands in the sea or like trees in the forest. The maple and the pine may whisper to each other with their leaves and Conanicut and Newport hear each other's fog horns, but the trees also co-mingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the islands also hang together through the ocean's bottom. Just so, there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several lines plunge as into a mother-sea or reservoir. Our "normal" consciousness is circumscribed for adaptation to our external earthly environment, but the fence is weak in spots and fitful influences from beyond leak in, showing the otherwise unverifiable common connexion. Not only psychic al research but metaphysical philosophy and speculative biology are lead in their own ways to look with favor on some such "panpsychic" view of the universe as this. Assuming this common reservoir of consciousness to exist, this bank upon which we all draw and in which so many of earth's memories must in some way be stored, or mediums would not get at them as they do, the question is, What is its own structure? What is its inner topography? This question, first squarely formulated by Myers, deserves to be called "Myers's problem" by scientific men hereafter. What are the conditions of individuation or insulation in this mother-sea? To what tracts, to what active systems functioning separately in it do personalities correspond? Are individual "spirits" constituted there? How numerous and of how many hierarchic orders may they be? How permanent? How transient? And how confluent with one another may they become?

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