

Survival of Bodily Death
An Esalen Invitational Conference
May 22 to 27, 2005

William James and the Nature of the Personal "I"
Adam Crabtree

On Thursday morning both Adam Crabtree and Ed Kelly read key passages from William James on the topic of human identity and the nature of the "I". Michael Grosso was supposed to make a presentation on James at this conference, but he could not make it at the last minute, so Crabtree and Kelly gave an impromptu one in his absence.

Adam Crabtree started with a number of quotations from James's 1890 book *The Principles of Psychology*. When discussing the nature of the personal self, James wrote:

Every psychological experience belongs to someone and is personal. It's my thought, your thought, your feeling, his intention. Everything belongs to somebody. Every thought is owned. There is no such thing as a thought, intention, or an experience of that kind that doesn't belong to somebody. . . No psychology can doubt the existence of personal selves.

There are two types of selves for James:

1) The pure I 2) The objective or empirical self

Crabtree provided another quotation from James on the empirical self:

A man's self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes, and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his land and horses, and yacht and bank account. James wrote that there are many selves within us. The "me" as material, social, and spiritual. But is there a self of selves? Is there a substance behind it all? Again, from *The Principles*:

As psychologists, we need not 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.

In sum, all we need is the passing thought, not a soul or substance.

But Crabtree noted that James continued to comment on broader metaphysical issues throughout *The Principles*:

I find the notion of some sort of an Anima Mundi, or World Soul, thinking in all of us to be a more promising hypothesis in spite of its difficulties than that of a lot of absolutely individual souls.

In another statement by James taken from an article by David Leary (chapter 5 from *Reflections on The Principles of Psychology: William James After a Century*) Crabtree read about James's views on the limits of a personal soul in light of evidence that points beyond it:

One great use of the soul has always been an account for and at the same time a guarantee of the closed individuality of each personal consciousness, but it would be rash in view of the phenomena of thought transference, Mesmeric influence, and spirit control, which are being alleged nowadays on authority better than every before, to be too sure about the point. The definitely closed nature of personal consciousness is probably an average statistical result of many conditions not an elementary fact or force.

Next, Crabtree turned to some quotations by James regarding the nature of personality. Crabtree noted that James said there must be two elements in the nature of personality: 1) an objective person known by 2) a passing subjective thought, which are both recognized to continue in time. Showing the influence of Myers, James links memory to personal identity:

The commonest element of all, the most uniform, is the possession of the same memories. These changes in "me" recognized by the "I" (or by outside observers) may be grave or slight. The change in identity may be small or large.

Later in *The Principles*, James discussed alterations of personality, such as the concept of false memories. Showing further influence from Myers and Janet, James also discussed alterations in the present self, including insane delusions, alternating selves, and mediumship and possession. In fact, James cited Myers and Janet several times in *The Principles*. In response to these quotations, Eric Weiss pointed out that for James continuity is in the objective realm of our memories. The objective continuity is in the objects of the "I" not the "I" itself. And Crabtree added that at this point in his career James was not commenting on the metaphysical or ontological status of these issues.

Crabtree continued by citing some of James's comments on the nature of human interest and reality. Further along in *The Principles*, James wrote:

The fons et origo (source and origin) of all reality, whether from the Absolute or in the practical point of view is thus subjective--is ourselves. . . . As thinkers with emotional reaction, we give what seems to us a still higher degree of reality to whatever things we select and emphasize, and turn to WITH A WILL. These are our living realities and not only these but all other things which are intimately connected with these. Reality, starting from our ego, thus sheds itself from point to point, first upon all objects which have immediate sting of interest for our ego in them, and next upon objects most continuously related with these. It only fails when the connecting thread is lost. The whole system may be real if it only hangs to our ego by one immediate stinging term.

Thus, in sum, interest comes from the subject and continuity comes from the object.

Crabtree then offered a quotation from James's next book after *The Principles* called *A Briefer Course* :

When then we talk of psychology as a natural science, we must not assume that that means a sort of psychology that stands at last on solid ground. It means just the reverse. It means a psychology particularly fragile and into which the waters of metaphysical criticism leak at every joint—a psychology all of whose elementary assumptions and data must be considered in wider connections and translated into other terms.

Then five years later during his address to the American Psychological Association in 1895 James amplified this view when he said:

No convention can keep metaphysical and so-called epistemological inquiries out of the psychology books.

Finally, Crabtree closed with a well-known quotation from *The Varieties of Religious Experience* concerning personalities that exist outside of the ordinary field of consciousness. In this quotation the influence of Myers is very apparent (and explicitly acknowledged elsewhere in the book), particularly Myers notion of the subliminal self:

Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness, as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. . . No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.

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