THE AIMS AND POSSIBILITIES OF A GENERAL THEORY SUCH AS WE PROPOSE TO DEVELOP

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In his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James attempted to say something about what a science of religion should look like and what would be required in its establishment. In the process he presented certain ideas that can be of great use in our work on a general theory.

TASKS FOR PRODUCING A GENERAL THEORY

In his chapter on Philosophy, having criticized philosophical theology for its exaggerated claims, James concludes:

> Conceptual processes can class facts, define them, interpret them; but they do not produce them, nor can they reproduce their individuality. There is always a *plus*, a *thisness*, which feeling alone can answer for. Philosophy in this sphere is thus a secondary function, unable to warrant faith's veracity, and so I revert to the thesis which I announced at the beginning of this lecture. In all sad sincerely I think we must conclude that the attempt to demonstrate by purely intellectual processes the truth of the deliverances of direct religious experience is absolutely hopeless. (*Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 455)

But he does not leave it at this. He goes on to say what those who want to say something true and useful about religion can do so. He writes:

> It would be unfair to philosophy, however, to leave her under this negative sentence. Let me close, then, by briefly enumerating what she *can* do for religion. If she will abandon metaphysics and deduction for criticism and induction, and frankly transform herself from theology into science of religions, she can make herself enormously useful.
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> The spontaneous intellect of man always defines the divine which it feels in ways that harmonize with its temporary intellectual prepossessions. Philosophy can by comparison eliminate the local and the accidental from these definitions. Both from dogma and from worship she can remove historic incrustations. By confronting the spontaneous religious constructions with the results of natural science, philosophy can also eliminate doctrines that are now known to be scientifically absurd or incongruous.
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> Sifting out in this way unworthy formulations, she can leave a residuum of conceptions that at least are possible. With these she can deal as hypotheses, testing them in all the manners, whether negative or positive, by which hypotheses are ever tested. She can reduce their number, as some are found more open to objection. She can perhaps

> become the champion of one which she picks out as being the most closely verified or verifiable. She can refine upon the definition of this hypothesis, distinguishing between what is innocent over-belief and symbolism in the expression of it, and what is to be literally taken. As a result, she can offer mediation between different believers, and help to bring about consensus of opinion. She can do this the more successfully, the better she discriminates the common and essential from the individual and local elements of the religious beliefs which she compares. (pp. 455-6)

From these ideas, and some of my own, I would like to propose a list of elements that should be taken into account in coming to a general theory of reality that embraces the fullness of human experience and allows for the possibility of personal survival of death.

1. To know clearly what such a theory can and cannot do.

To "abandon metaphysics and deduction for criticism and induction" means to give up hope that through philosophical speculation one can arrive at a coercive proof of any particular view of the ultimate nature of reality. There are many speculative theories that have strong points to make, but they also have their weaknesses and contradictions. In the end we, as individuals, chose those theories that are most in line with out personal inclinations, which have their roots in our individual constitutions, our cultural and subcultural backgrounds, and our individual experiences. That is why there will never be a speculative theory that convinces all. Our theory making must rule out that kind of vain hope. Nevertheless, there is much we can do.

2. To identify "local" or non-essential elements in the formulation of past theories.

Because "the spontaneous intellect of man always defines the divine which it feels in ways that harmonize with its temporary intellectual prepossessions," an intelligent theory building will examine those prepossessions as they manifest in various religious systems, eliminating the "local" and "accidental" from ideas arising from these prepossessions. Here is where our comparative study of spiritual systems and their traditions of practice is so important. This should put us in a good position to filter out the merely "local" and "accidental" in those formulations. This comparative study may also yield new empirical data that must be added to the list of those which any general theory must take into account.

3. To eliminate all aspects that are contradicted by the established findings of science.

Furthermore, the intelligent theorizer should confront the "spontaneous religious constructions" arising from these prepossessions with the findings of natural science and eliminate those that are scientifically "absurd or incongruous." This will leave intact only those theoretical elements that are not contrary to well-established scientific findings. This approach has been and remains a central, if the *the* central, element in the work of our group. Our work has involved identifying established scientific findings relating to the wide array of human physiological and psychological capacities. It has also led to the investigation of quantum mechanics and its implications for a

general theory. This includes raising questions pertaining to the compatibilities between the more unusual established human capacities and quantum mechanics.

4. To devise methods for testing proposed hypotheses.

The intelligent theory builder will then find ways to investigate the hypotheses involved in any proposed theory, "testing them in all the manners, whether negative or positive, by which hypotheses are ever tested." In the process, it may very well be found that some do not stand up well and can be eliminated from the store of potentially fruitful hypotheses. I believe that it is because of our group's awareness of the importance of this point that we have at times been a bit impatient with theories with scant empirical weight and little potential for empirical verification.

5. To discard hypotheses that are excessively idiosyncratic.

The intelligent theory builder also puts hypotheses to another kind of scrutiny. This involves looking at the candidate hypotheses to sift out those which are formulated more symbolically or as naive "over-beliefs," as James calls them. ("buildings-out performed by the intellect into directions of which feeling originally supplied the hint" *VRE*, p. 431). Here the symbolism or "building-out" is done intellectually, and, while not explicitly contradicting empirically established data, seems far removed for them. These hypotheses, being highly idiosyncratic to the person who formulated them and characterized more by fantasy than substance, should be discarded. (Below I will say more about the *usefulness* of over-beliefs. Let me just say here that I believe that the over-beliefs of the members of our group tend to be highly informed by critical comparative work and awareness of scientific findings, and so have served as fruitful stimuli for our theoretical thinking.)

6. To work toward a consensus in regard to theoretical formulation, insofar as that is possible.

Finally, the intelligent theory builder will be able, as a result of carrying out the process described, to mediate between various possible theories and, through discussion, make more likely the possibility of a consensus. In talking about this element, James once again emphasized the importance of the comparative work that sifts out the essential from the individual and local elements that influence the theory-building process. I believe that our group intends to move in this direction. I also believe that this intention especially informs the work of Esalen CTR.

OVER-BELIEFS AND THE "MORE"

Over-beliefs might be thought of as hypotheses about ultimates. While showing a certain skepticism about the place of "over-beliefs" in the process of establishing a science of religion, James did not intend to say that such beliefs have no constructive role to play. In fact, in his

Conclusion to the *Varieties*, he presents his own over-beliefs in regard to the big picture of the fundamental nature of reality. He seems to distinguish between something that is an "innocent" over-belief, deriving from various culturally conditioned sources and uncritical in their formulations, and an over-belief that is informed by a critical attitude that can identify "local" incrustations and take account of scientifically established facts. In this sense, and over-belief may be simply the formulation of a hypothesis that emerges from going through a process such as that described above. As he wrote:

> At the end of my lecture on Philosophy, I held out the notion that an impartial science of religions might sift out from the midst of their discrepancies a common body of doctrine which she might also formulate in terms to which physical science need not object. This, I said, she might adopt as her own reconciling hypothesis, and recommend it for general belief. I also said that in my last lecture I should have to try my own hand at framing such an hypothesis. (*VRE*, p. 510)

Then writing about the "farther side" of The More, he says:

> Here the over-beliefs begin: here mysticism and the conversion-rapture and Vedantism and transcendental idealism bring in their monistic interpretations and tell us that the finite self rejoins the absolute self, for it was always one with God and identical with the soul of the world. Here the prophets of all the different religions come with their visions, voices, raptures, and other openings, supposed by each to authenticate his ow peculiar faith. (*VRE*, p. 513)

But I must go back a step in order to make full sense of this statement. I must discuss in more detail James's idea of The More.

In my view, understanding the concept of The More in the writings of James is crucial to grasping his overall thought. In his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (p. 71), he says, "Our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view. Both are fringed forever by a *more* that continuously develops, and that continuously supersedes them as life proceeds." In Perry (Vol. 2, p. 370 he states that "the "more" is more than the vividly presented or felt;" it refers to what lies beyond the center of the field of consciousness.

Here we get the development of what James began in the *Principles,* where he talked about a "center" of consciousness surrounded by a "fringe" or awareness. Now he adds that the fringe "shades insensibly into a subconscious more" (*A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 288). But he insists that although it may appear that he talking about three different things (focus, fringe, and more), what we have is in fact "all shades and no boundaries" (p. 288). In this matter, consciousness functions with a remarkable flow:

> Which part of it properly is in my consciousness, which out? If I name what is out, it already has come in. The centre works in one way while the margins work in another, and

> presently overpower the centre and are central themselves. What we conceptually identify ourselves with and say we are thinking of at any time is the centre; but our *full* self is the whole field, with all those indefinitely radiating subconscious possibilities of increase that we can only feel without conceiving, and can hardly begin to analyze. (p. 288-9)

At any one moment, the "margins" of our consciousness provide a boundary within which we can easily turn from one center of attention to another, as our interests direct us. Those new potential centers of focus, available at our choice, relate to the present momentary center of consciousness as its "fringe." What is beyond the margin, what is *felt* but not accessible at will to conscious *thought*, is The More. The full self, says James, is the *whole* field, not just what is within the momentary margin, not just focus and fringe, but also The More.

Always the empiricist, James wanted to provide a way for psychologists to be able to relate to the concept of The More in terms of their own findings, and he believed he had found it:

> We must begin by using less particularized terms; and, since one of the duties of the science of religions is to keep religion in connection with the rest of science, we shall do well to seek first of all a way of describing the "more" which psychologists may also recognize as real. The subconscious self is nowadays a well-accredited psychological entity; and I believe that in it we have exactly the mediating term required. Apart from all religious considerations, there is actually and literally more life in our total soul than we are at any time aware of. The exploration of the transmarginal field has hardly yet been seriously undertaken, but what Mr. Myers said in 1892 in his essay on the Subliminal Consciousness is as true as when it was first written: "Each of us is in reality an abiding psychical entity far more extensive than he knows–an individuality which can never express itself completely through any corporeal manifestation. The Self manifests through the organism; but there is always some part of the Self unmanifested; and always, as it seems, some power of organic expression in abeyance or reserve." (*VRE*, p. 511-512)

This set-up allows James to proceed with his full exposition of The More. He says that this More which is beyond the margins of consciousness has, as it were, two sides: the *farther* side and the *hither* side. The More to which religious feelings connect us is on its hither side, *the subconscious continuation of our conscious life*. This is the first aspect of experience that we cannot access at will. This is how the discussion of The More stays in contact with science–through this scientifically recognized aspect of human experience, the subconscious or subliminal life. Thus, the sense of being in touch with a something "higher," a something that influences or even controls us, is attained *through* the subliminal. And now I must bring in the full quotation only partly referenced above:

> This doorway [the subliminal or subconscious] into the subject seems to me the best one for a science of religions, for it mediates between a number of different points of view. Yet it is only a doorway, and difficulties present themselves as soon as we step through it, and ask how far our transmarginal consciousness carries us if we follow it on its remoter

> side. Here the over-beliefs begin: here mysticism and the conversion-rapture and Vedantism and transcendental idealism bring in their monistic interpretations and tell us that the finite self rejoins the absolute self, for it was always one with God and identical with the soul of the world. Here the prophets of all the different religions come with their visions, voices, raptures, and other openings, supposed by each to authenticate his own peculiar faith. Those of us who are not personally favored with such specific revelations must stand outside of them altogether and, for the present at least, decide that, since they corroborate incompatible theological doctrines, they neutralize one another and leave no fixed results. If we follow any one of them, or if we follow philosophical theory and embrace monistic pantheism on non-mystical grounds, we do so in the exercise of our individual freedom, and build out our religion in the way most congruous with our personal susceptibilities. Among these susceptibilities intellectual ones play a decisive part. Although the religious question is primarily a question of life, of living or not living in the higher union which opens itself to us as a gift, yet the spiritual excitement in which the gift appears a real one will often fail to be aroused in an individual until certain particular intellectual beliefs or ideas which, as we say, come home to him, are touched. These ideas will thus be essential to that individual's religion;--which is as much as to say that over-beliefs in various directions are absolutely indispensable, and that we should treat them with tenderness and tolerance so long as they are not intolerant themselves. As I have elsewhere written, the most interesting and valuable things about a man are usually his over-beliefs. (*VRE*, pp. 513-515)

By calling over-beliefs essential, James emphasizes that we cannot stop with unexpressible mystical experiences. As human beings, we are compelled to associate those experiences with ideas, and the ideas chosen will vary from person to person and from group to group: when we chose our ideas, and therefore our language, we do so “in the exercise of our individual freedom.” In the process we build up our over-beliefs, which are in essence hypotheses about elements of reality which, in their inexpressible nature, transcend perspectivally created concepts. We cannot avoid constructing these over-beliefs, and, in James’s opinion, our over-beliefs are usually “the most interesting and valuable things” about us.

With this, James has taken us to what he calls the “farther” side of The More--the second aspect of experience we cannot access at will:

> The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely "understandable" world. Name it the mystical region, or the supernatural region, whichever you choose. So far as our ideal impulses originate in this region (and most of them do originate in it, for we find them possessing us in a way for which we cannot articulately account), we belong to it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world, for we belong in the most intimate sense wherever our ideals belong. Yet the unseen region in question is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world. When we commune with it, work is actually done upon our finite personality, for we are turned into new men, and consequences in the

> way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change. But that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we had no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal. (*VRE*, pp. 515-516)

From here James takes a bold step: suggesting that we may form an idea of the ultimate of The More, commonly thought of as God, which can be a *real hypothesis* He admits that this means starting with a hypothesis that is a over-belief, but it is one that may be fruitful in the world of action after all:

> That the God with whom, starting from the hither side of our own extra-marginal self, we come at its remoter margin into commerce should be the absolute world-ruler, is of course a very considerable over-belief. Over-belief as it is, though, it is an article of almost every one's religion. Most of us pretend in some way to prop it upon our philosophy, but the philosophy itself is really propped upon this faith. What is this but to say that Religion, in her fullest exercise of function, is not a mere illumination of facts already elsewhere given, not a mere passion, like love, which views things in a rosier light. It is indeed that, as we have seen abundantly. But it is something more, namely, a postulator of new *facts* as well. The world interpreted religiously is not the materialistic world over again, with an altered expression; it must have, over and above the altered expression, a natural constitution different at some point from that which a materialistic world would have. It must be such that different events can be expected in it, different conduct must be required. This thoroughly "pragmatic" view of religion has usually been taken as a matter of course by common men. They have interpolated divine miracles into the field of nature, they have built a heaven out beyond the grave. It is only transcendentalist metaphysicians who think that, without adding any concrete details to Nature, or subtracting any, but by simply calling it the expression of absolute spirit, you make it more divine just as it stands. (pp. 518-519)

With this, James makes the bold claim that facts or experienceable events will be *different*, depending upon whether you ascribe to an over-belief that the divine *acts* on the world or one (the transcendentalist view) that says that all is predetermined, that all that happens is already determined and is simply the expression of absolute spirit. James writing here give us a peek at the dilemmas that he had to deal with. As an avowed empiricist and respecter of science, he felt that he was stuck with a physical world that really did not leave any openings for the action of mind and free will, much less the interventions of an outside higher power, because the orthodox physics of the day was Newtonian. He could say, as he often did, that the notion that we cannot affect the physical world was absurdly contrary to everyday experience, but he could not square that with the physical theory of his day. So how could the world have "a natural constitution different at some point from that which a materialistic world would have"? The dilemma is repeated in different form in the following passage:

> I believe the pragmatic way of taking religion to be the deeper way. It gives it body as

> well as soul, it makes it claim, as everything real must claim, some characteristic realm of fact as its very own. What the more characteristically divine facts are, apart from the actual inflow of energy in the faith-state and the prayer-state, I know not. But the over-belief on which I am ready to make my personal venture is that they exist. The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in. By being faithful in my poor measure to this over-belief, I seem to myself to keep more sane and true. (p. 519)

Here he states his firm belief in other worlds of consciousness beyond this one which, nonetheless have meaning for us. Although they are usually separate, he says, he holds that they must somehow become continuous at certain points, where "higher energies filter in," and he says that his maintenance of this over-belief keeps him sane. It seems to me that had James had the benefit of quantum theory, his problems with discontinuities would have been, at least to some extent, alleviated. With an everyday world in which mind and free will are built into the reality at a fundamental level perhaps his faith in the continuity of things would not have to have been quite so blind.

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The "More" in William James

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