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What Dies? Eternalism and the Afterlife in William James

Jonathan Bricklin *

"A luminous and helpful idea is that time is but a relative mode of regarding things; we progress through phenomena at a certain definitive pace, and this subjective advance we interpret in an objective manner, as if events moved necessarily in this order and at this precise rate. But that may be only our mode of regarding them. The events may be in some sense in existence always, both past and future, and it may be we who are arriving at them, not they who are happening. The analogy of a traveler in a railway train is useful; if he could never leave the train nor alter its pace, he would probably consider the landscapes as necessarily successive and be unable to conceive their coexistence ... We perceive, therefore, a possible fourth dimensional aspect about time, the inexorableness of whose flow may be a natural part of our present limitations...."

—Sir Oliver Lodge, a pioneer of wireless technology, and a principal investigator of trance medium, Leonora Piper¹

Preface

Three weeks before he died, Einstein sent a condolence letter to the wife of his recently deceased friend, Michele Besso. His friend's departure "from this strange world," Einstein told her, "signifies nothing." Death signified nothing to Einstein because in his eternalistic block universe, all events co-exist permanently. Parmenides (Karl Popper's nickname for Einstein) expressed it this way: "Nor was it ever, nor will it be, since now it is, altogether one, continuous."² Or as Einstein himself expressed it in his letter: "[T]he separation between past, present, and future, is an illusion, however stubborn."³ If the block universe is real there are

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other illusions in play, as well. In my book *The Illusion of Will, Self, and Time: William James's Reluctant Guide to Enlightenment*,⁴ I explore some of them, mostly by separating what anti-block-universe James wanted to believe, based on common sense, from what his deepest insights—insights from both altered-states and introspection—led him to believe. I conclude that James's *neutral monism* is ultimately contextualized by his end-of-life, eternalistic, mystical suggestion, which he proposed as a “veridical revelation of reality”: Consciousness is not generated moment by moment but exists, rather, “already there, waiting to be uncovered.”⁵

In an eternalistic block universe, no events actually happen—at least not within the commonsense past/present/future-context for happenings (the temporal sequence McTaggart famously labeled the “A series”). All events, rather, simply *are*. As James proposed his eternalistic reality in the last year of his life, knowing the end was near, he may well have been writing a condolence note to himself. But as an avid supporter of the possibility that the human personality survives bodily death, James could write two very different condolence letters. Here we will try to make the case for both of them.

James's Windrosed Mandala

Although free-will-champion James publicly derided what he called the “iron block universe,”⁶ the mystic-minded James contributed much to its feasible consideration. A year before he *suggested* the veridicality of an eternalistic universe, he proposed that our individual selves might “form the margin of some more really central self in things,” like a “windrose in a compass.”⁷ And for many years before that he had well prepared the way for this marginalization: homogenizing consciousness and matter,⁸ and decommissioning the autonomous self's commandeering of the “stream of consciousness” into a mere “passing thought” as “thinker.”⁹ His last preparatory step toward eternalism was to convert the passing thought stream's flow into pulses of “time drops.”¹⁰ While the early kinematic experiments in James's day were too choppy to generate a seamless flow of reality from individual still moments, all of the seamless reality we witness on our ubiquitous screens today are generated from just such still *whole* moments that James came to advocate. When these time drops are combined with his mystical suggestion of an “already there” consciousness waiting “as if in a field that stood there always to be known,”¹¹ the “confluently active” radii of his windrose

become confluent activated radial endpoints. The one consciousness, already *there* being uncovered, is divided functionally into the knowing and the known, with the knowing (centerpoint) eternally activating the known (circumference).

James, unaware of the relativity revolution underway, believed that his mystical suggestion would “not be understood by this generation or the next.”¹² But he might have looked to the distant past, as revived by a contemporary he knew well: Nietzsche. For James’s windrosed mandala suggests that beyond the illusion of events *happening*, another layer of illusion is in play: linear time. This illusion was not pervasive in the ancient world. The hugely influential Pythagoras, for one, believed, like Greek professor Nietzsche, in eternal recurrence. But linearity was insisted upon in the Judeo-Christian worldview, most emphatically by St. Augustine. Eternalism and eternal recurrence are both “strange worlds” indeed, but surely no stranger than Augustine’s *Bible*. Moreover, James’s wind-rosed mandala, like Parmenides’ “perfectly rounded sphere ... from a center equally matched everywhere,”¹³ provides a more feasible divinity than the angry Jehovah. A sense of such divinity was suggested by James’s mystical coach, the ether-prophet, Benjamin Paul Blood—who emphasized to James how the universe might well exist as a pre-existing block¹⁴—and whose central teaching James identified with eternal recurrent Nietzsche’s *amor fati*.¹⁵ “Never,” Blood declared, “shall we know the meaning nor the end of this eternal life; but what though we may not comprehend the universe—what boots the circumference, when each of us is the centre, and the apple of God’s eye.”¹⁶

McTaggart’s Three Series

Eternalists—divinely inspired or otherwise—could easily bail on the question of an afterlife, dismissing the very premise that death is real and signing off with one of many millennial bromides, such as the Bhagavad Gita’s “Of the impermanent, one finds no being. One finds no non-being of the permanent. Indeed, the certainty of both these has been perceived by seers of the truth.”¹⁷ But belief in a block universe (whether or not played out in eternal recurrence) does not preclude beliefs about the aftermath of what *appears* as death. For although the aftermath of what *appears* as death is, in a block universe, no less an event that *happens* – since “all the ensemble of events constituting space-time exist prior to our knowledge of them”¹⁸ – there are significant, inferable details about those appearances. From the vantage point of

eternalism, McTaggart's temporal A series cannot be an ultimately legitimate context for after-life evidence (any more than it is one for during-life evidence); but afterlife evidence *does* fit into McTaggart's B series of before/after, as well as his C series of a permanently fixed relation of terms, like the alphabet. James's and his colleague's evidence of an afterlife are in no way inconsistent with a fixed sequence of pre-existing events.

Much of what follows plays out in what James called "consciousness *beyond the margin*,"¹⁹ "a sphere of life larger and more powerful than usual consciousness" and whose "farther margin ... being unknown ... can be treated as an Absolute mind."²⁰ Almost all of it would crack what James called "the levee [of] scientific opinion" that prevents "the overflow of the Mississippi of the supernatural into the fields of orthodox culture."²¹ While Einstein's eternalism (in 1905, codified into space-time by Minkowski in 1908) is almost C-series contemporaneous with James's eternalism in 1910, Einstein's is based on physics, James's on mysticism: two paths to the same strange world. Parmenides' eternalism would seem to offer a third path – logic – strongly defended by his disciple Zeno. But a second path for Parmenides, more in line with James's, has recently been uncovered, and it provides the ideal starting point for any consideration of death and the afterlife, eternalist or otherwise, for it posits a boundary of consciousness that cannot be crossed, before or after apparent death.

Parmenides' Gap

Here's what we *can't* imagine happening when we die: nothingness. We can go to black—in fact we *do* go to black, every night, and (if not dreaming) come out of black every morning. Black, though, is far from nothingness, and black-*outs* are merely black-*ins* in which the last moment of blackness is recalled before "coming to." The unimaginableness of absolute nothingness, its unknowableness, its unpointable-to-ness—indeed, its actual non-existence—was first posited in the West by Parmenides, the man whom Plato called *Father*, and the only philosopher he referred to as deep (*bathos*).

Though Parmenides' insight has most persistently been understood as proto-logic, we now know, through the pioneering research of Greek scholar and self-proclaimed mystic Peter Kingsley, a more compelling origin: Parmenides was what the Greeks called a *pholarchos* (a "cave leader"), who supervised deep meditative states, or "incubations," in total darkness.²²

Prior to Kingsley, other scholars had drawn attention to Parmenides's affinity with Vedantic and yogic philosophy,²³ but it is the revelation of Parmenides as a *pholarchos* that compels us to consider his injunction against absolute nothingness as an altered-state insight, rather than a mere philosophical ban on what cannot be imagined or pointed to.²⁴ For as an adept of such incubation, Parmenides might well have become acquainted with the ancient yogic insight that what appears to be an "absence of all consciousness" in deep, dreamless sleep, is only the absence of self in an ongoing "undifferentiated darkness" with "some form of awareness," if only awareness-in-itself.²⁵

Avoidance of "Father"'s injunction against imagining a total annihilation of consciousness practically defines us, of course, as fearful, mortal beings. But precisely because absolute oblivion is exactly the unsayable, unimaginable, unthinkable "delusive array of words"²⁶ that Parmenides asserts it to be, our avoidance requires an alliance with what is thinkable and pointable. Enter the corpse.

There is no mystery, or even controversy, about the death of the body; it is stark and conclusive: that part of our "I" becomes an inanimate object, akin to a doornail, with no apparent consciousness, let alone subjectivity. This inanimate object is essential to our concept of death, since it is the only *percept* of it we have. What we imagine as death—fearful death—is actually a specious amalgam: an unimaginable percept/concept of nothingness mixed with an all too vividly imaginable percept/concept of a corpse. One can imagine consciousness dimming down *toward* annihilation, but never actually arriving. As the philosopher whom James called a goldmine of insight, Shadworth Hodgson, put it: "The lowest form of being, beyond which it would be meaningless, is perceivability."²⁷ And the only route from fully-embodied conscious life to an empty-consciousnessed *dead* corpse is through a non-existent space of non-being: what I have called "Parmenides' Gap."²⁸

James's White Crow

That a corpse is a red herring, analogous to the dead skin sloughed off by a still live snake, rather than a final repository *of* the snake, came into startling focus for me in my third decade of researching and writing about William James. What took me so long to come around to that conviction was James's own dilatoriness, his "undecided verdict ... after so many years"

of earnest inquiry into the possibility of an afterlife.²⁹ James believed that the highly specific messages conveyed by the trance medium Leonora Piper, through both speech and automatic writing, purportedly from beings whose personalized consciousness had apparently survived death, were “the most baffling thing I know.”³⁰ Yet his final assessment of the evidence from Piper fell short of the spiritist conclusion of full personality survival. I say “fell short,” but I could easily say “leapt long.” For James’s belief that the supernormal knowledge transmitted from an apparent afterlife entity might, instead, be issuing from a “continuum of cosmic consciousness” in a “panpsychic ... universe” against which all apparent “individualit[ies]” (embodied or otherwise) are but “accidental fences,” radically reconfigures birth, death, and all in-between.³¹ And it was this same long leap that I took with him in my book, weaving the supernormal knowledge James went “on record” as favoring with his radical empirical ontology. But after taking a closer look at the detailed reports of Piper, James’s “white crow,”³² I have come to accept a shorter, intermediate, step as well: the formidable illusion of our individuated, skin-encased egos forging a linear path in an indifferent object-universe is followed by an encore reappearance in a subtler facsimile form.

The reason I missed the most startling details of Piper’s mediumship is that James himself left them out of his extensive essay on Piper, “Report on Mrs. Piper’s Hodgson-Control.” Before looking at that excluded evidence from what James called an unprecedented “conjunction of a good medium with a thorough investigator,” and why he did not include it in his extensive report, let us look at how it came to be.³³

Richard Hodgson was a leading skeptical investigator and psychical debunker of his day, whose investigation of London’s professional mediums had led him to conclude that “nearly all” were “a gang of vulgar tricksters.”³⁴ On the strength of his record and determination to expose counterfeit psychical claims, he was hired by the *Society for Psychical Research* to investigate the Boston medium Leonora Piper, with whom James had had a couple of startling sessions. Two examples: Inquiring about his Aunt Kate, James was first told “doing poorly” then “she has arrived.” James returned home an hour later to a telegram announcing her death.³⁵ Piper also described James’s recent killing, with ether, of a grey-and-white cat, describing how it had “spun round and round” before dying.³⁶ For the next 18 years until his sudden death in 1905, Hodgson searched for any evidence to contradict what he, like most people, had assumed: “Mrs. Piper was

fraudulent and obtained her information previously by ordinary means, such as inquiries by confederates, etc.”³⁷ Hodgson supervised her sittings 3 days a week, imposing scrupulous protocols (such as forbidding umbrellas to be placed in the foyer where a confederate’s note might be conveyed to Piper by Piper’s maid) and pursued a no-stone-unturned approach, such as hiring private detectives to follow her in her off hours. But he never detected the slightest trace of fraud.

Nor did anyone else. Even the *Society for Psychical Research’s* chief, thorn-in-their-side, skeptic and critic, Frank Podmore — noting “how numerous and precise” Piper’s trance statements were, “taken as a whole,” and how “the possibility of leakage” to her “through normal channels in many cases was so effectually excluded”— declared “it is impossible to doubt that we have here supernormal agency of some kind.”³⁸ Not that attempts at credible doubt have not been made, challenging those, like James, who believed “absolutely” that “the hypothesis of fraud cannot be seriously entertained.”³⁹

James, himself, after his few initial, remarkable sessions with Piper, stepped away from direct exploration, content to learn second-hand from Hodgson’s investigation. But Hodgson’s death and subsequent re-emergence as Piper’s “spirit Control” led James to directly re-engage what he called this “queer chapter in human nature.”⁴⁰ Published in the penultimate year of his life (almost simultaneously with his “Confidences of a Psychical Researcher”) James’s 2-part “Report on Mrs. Piper’s Hodgson-Control” appeared to be his ultimate word on the Piper phenomenon. But as it turns out Hodgson was, in fact, a highly problematic control to evaluate because his 18 years with Mrs. Piper made it almost impossible to distinguish information coming out of the entranced Piper via the new (deceased) Hodgson from information that had gone into her from the old (alive) Hodgson. As James put it, the Hodgson control was “vastly more leaky and susceptible of naturalistic explanation than is any body of Piper-material recorded before.”⁴¹ Moreover, the body of Piper material James found most convincing, those of George Pellew (a/k/a Pelham)—the material that most convinced Hodgson and other prominent researchers of the survival of the human personality—James left out of his report. He omitted these most compelling details, he said, because he had “no space for twice-told tales” and he assumed that the reader was “acquainted, to some degree at any rate, with previously extensive printed accounts of Mrs. Piper’s mediumship,” principle amongst which were Hodgson’s reports

in 2 separate volumes of the *Society for Psychical Research Proceedings*.⁴² My own suspicion is that James was wary and weary of his role as a “genuinely scientific inquirer” of the “supernormal” (James never used the word *paranormal*) pitted against the “ignoramus ‘scientist’” who “pressed with all the weight of their authority against the door which certain ‘psychical researchers’ are threatening to open wide enough to admit a hitherto discredited class of facts.”⁴³ One of the most renowned and respected scientists of his day, James was all too aware that mediums were considered “scientific outlaws, and their defendants ... quasi-insane.”⁴⁴ He certainly had ample opportunity to respond to debunkers, such as Columbia Professor James Cattell, who publicly castigated James for even considering Piper worthy of his attention. James’s plea to Cattell for fair play resonates strongly today:

Any hearing for such phenomena is so hard to get from scientific readers that one who believes them worthy of careful study is in duty bound to resent such contemptuous public notice of them in high quarters as would still further encourage the fashion of their neglect.⁴⁵

But to the degree that James himself (and later Piper researcher, physicist Sir Oliver Lodge, in his autobiography) left out the most striking details of the Piper phenomena—referring their readers to the *Proceedings of the Society of Psychical Research*—they inadvertently encouraged neglect of a body of material that marked, in James’s assessment, “an epoch in our knowledge of trance-states.”⁴⁶ While this epoch-making knowledge, however often “intolerably tedious and incoherent reading,”⁴⁷ has languished mostly unread in its long form (*Proceedings of the Society of Psychical Research* Volumes 6, 8, 13, 15 & 16), it is now available free online. And two recent books—Deborah Blum’s *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of the Afterlife* and Michael Tynn’s *Resurrecting Leonora Piper: How Science Discovered The Afterlife*—offer enough excerpts and response to skeptics to affirm James’s belief that there were “unmistakable indicators” of “supernormal knowledge ... as if from beyond.”⁴⁸

Consider, for example, the following transcription of a sitting with the parents of a five year old girl who had died a few weeks earlier, recorded in Hodgson’s “Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance,” in Volume 13 of the *Proceedings*, and edited here by Blum (with

Hodgson's original bracketing). The parents did not identify themselves or mention their recent tragedy, but brought with them 2 items their daughter had played with: a silver medal and a string of buttons.

“Where is Papa? Want Papa. [The father takes from the table a silver medal and hands it to Mrs. Piper] I want this—want to bite it. [She used to do this.] ... I want to call Dodo [her name for her brother George]. Tell Dodo I am happy. [Puts hands to throat] No sore throat any more. [She had pain and distress of the throat and tongue] ... Papa, want to go wide [ride] horsey [She pleaded this throughout her illness.] Every day I go to see horsey. I like that horsey ... Eleanor. I want Eleanor. [Her little sister. She called her much during her last illness.] I want my buttons. Where is Dinah? I want Dinah. [Dinah was an old rag doll, not with us]. I want Bagie [her name for her sister Margaret]. I want to go to Bagie ... I want Bagie...”⁴⁹

Of similarly startling sessions from the Hodgson reports, the most compelling stem from George Pellew (a/k/a Pelham and, in “spirit mode,” G.P.), a 32-year old philosophy student and acquaintance of Hodgson, who died from falling off a horse, emerging 5 weeks later via Piper. Two years before he died, Pellew had had a friendly debate about the afterlife with Hodgson, with Pellew denying the possibility of consciousness surviving the death of the brain. According to Hodgson, Pellew ended the debate by “pledging” that although he found an afterlife “incredible” he would “do all that he could to establish it if he died before me and found that there was a future life after all.”⁵⁰ James, for one, felt he may well have kept his pledge, since he found the G.P. evidence to be the most compelling of all the Piper evidence.⁵¹

Evidence such as the following: Of 150 sittings with different visitors that Hodgson supervised with Pellew, only 30 were his friends. But although no clue was given to differentiate friends from strangers, G.P. had no problem immediately identifying all his friends. There was only one exception: a girl he had known when she was 10 and was now 18. Once her identity was revealed, though, G.P. immediately teased her about her violin playing, just as he had done when he knew her.⁵²

One of the friends brought 3 pictures for G.P. to identify. He correctly identified the first as his friend's (the sitter's) summer home and the second (a rural setting) as a place where he had stayed, correctly describing a small brick henhouse that was *not* in the picture. He could not identify the third picture. He had, in fact, never seen it.⁵³

As there are hundreds of equally compelling such sessions, I can only urge the reader to either access directly the aforementioned free, online *Proceedings of the Psychological Society*, or read Braude's, Gauld's, Tymn's or Blum's book, rather than succumb to contemporary debunkers fitting James's description of "critics who, refusing to come to any close quarters with the facts, survey them at long range and summarily dispose of them at a convenient distance by the abstract name of fraud."⁵⁴

My own perusal of this voluminous evidence has led me to believe that consciousness does indeed survive bodily death, and can exist without the material body, however much it requires someone else's material body to manifest to materially embodied beings. While James and other Piper researchers (including Eleanor Sidgwick and E.R. Dodds) believed Piper's supernormal clairvoyance might be evidence more of telepathic (a word coined by Myers) access to a field of consciousness, rather than that her physical body has been supplanted by their astral body, I agree with Hodgson that consciousness may well assume (that is, *appear to dwell in the form of*) the "astral facsimile of a material body," (as G.P. describes it).⁵⁵ In his debate with the embodied Pellew, Hodgson proposed that "the gross material body might be tenanted by a more subtle organic body composed of the luminiferous ether."⁵⁶ One striking corroboration of such is an encounter with a spirit entity called Newell, communicating through Piper in eleven sessions with his friend, an artist, Rogers Rich. During one of the sessions Rich observed Mrs. Piper making an odd movement with her hand that appeared to be "twirling an imaginary moustache" which Rich knew Newell to have frequently done when he was alive.⁵⁷ Another was a description by one spirit entity of another spirit entity, a woman identified only as "Q" whom Hodgson had known before she died. The spirit entity Q was described as having a brown right eye with a spot of light blue in the iris. Hodgson confirmed the blemish (though he had remembered it as gray).

But, as I said, this is just my short leap of faith, based on an unprecedented convergence of some of the finest scientifically trained minds of their day⁵⁸ investigating an honest, straightforward woman with apparent access to supernormal knowledge. My longer leap is one with James's late-life eternalistic mystical suggestion of consciousness already there waiting to be uncovered. Whatever there may be of an afterlife, including reincarnation, it is still the eternal playing out of fixed before-after moments (McTaggart's C series), "as if in a field that always stood there always to be known."

Precognition and Retrocognition

Whether or not Parmenides did, in fact, derive this same eternalistic perspective—"Nor was it ever nor will it be, since now it is, altogether, one, continuous"—from altered trance-induced states, James certainly did: his mystical suggestion is immediately preceded by the precognitive experience of an ether-induced correspondent of his, Frederick Hall.⁵⁹ James supported other credible precognitive experiences as well, such as a farmer's wife who saw highly specific details of her son's death being mourned, by people she had never known, days before she arrived on the exact scene.⁶⁰ But precognition is only half the corroboration of eternalism. The other half is retrocognition, as in Piper's capacity to revisit exactly the precise spinning movements of James's dying cat. According to the eminent classicist, E.R. Dodds, an expert on ancient oracles, who saw Piper as an authentic trance medium,⁶¹ divination (*mantikē*) referred to both precognition and retrocognition, the "typical diviner" being Homer's Kalchas, "who knew things past, present, and to come."⁶² Indeed, says Dodds, the most celebrated seers would sometimes "exhibit supernormal knowledge of past events as evidence that their vision of the future will prove true."⁶³

Far less threatening to James's most cherished belief in free will, a belief scorned by Blood,⁶⁴ evidence for retrocognition was found by James in a thoroughly investigated incident of it from the only other person than Piper for whom he claimed a "supernormal faculty of seership," a New Hampshire woman, Mrs. Titus. In a trance state, Titus accessed a missing young woman's previous day's fall from an icy bridge miles away, locating the exact spot beneath the surface of the murky lake and the exact position of her body: "head down, only one foot with a new rubber showing and lying in a deep hole."⁶⁵ Titus even shivered with cold in

her trance as she accessed this scene. (Recall how Piper, too, so “inhabited the scene” of James’s recent etherization of a cat, describing how it spun around.) The professional diver, who had reluctantly returned to the location he had already searched at the urging of the victim’s employer who had hired him, later told investigators that he was not afraid of the body when he found it 20 feet below the dark surface of the lake, but of the “woman on the bridge” pointing to it. “How can any woman come from miles away and tell me where I would find this body?”⁶⁶ Just how far away “Mrs. Titus herself had travelled to retrieve that information accounts for the fear exchange — encountering clairvoyance over encountering a corpse.

Together, precognition and retrocognition provide the supernatural evidence for block universe eternalism. And it is worth emphasizing that the first physicist to reintroduce it into the modern age was not Einstein, but Sir Oliver Lodge. Lodge, one of the founders of wireless technology, was also one of the principle investigators of Leanora Piper, whose *clairvoyance* he found to be genuine.⁶⁷ The quotation with which we began was published the year Einstein was given his first geometry book.

What dies?

Eternalism, however, is anathema to most people, and especially James, the zest-seeking champion of free will, who waited until the very end of his life to propose it as “veridical revelation.” But for those for whom the persistent thought (however ill-formed) of total annihilation is the deepest curse of all, and the inevitable loss of both cherished attributes and beloved companions the ongoing tragedy of life—it offers the compensation that each moment may well be eternal, existing like frames in a completed film of fixed sequences, endlessly revivable.

Endlessly revivable for whom? As early as the *Principles of Psychology*, James “confessed” that whenever he became “metaphysical” he found “the notion” of some sort of *anima mundi* thinking in all of us to be a more promising hypothesis, in spite of all its difficulties, than that of a lot of absolutely individual souls.”⁶⁸ In that same classic early work he defined the thinker as “the passing Thought.”⁶⁹ In the eternalistic worldview of his mystical suggestion, all passing thoughts, including the passing-thought-that-feels-itself-to-be the thinker,

is an endless movement of the one knower consciousness, one *anima mundi*, through myriad knowns—knowns laying as if in a field, waiting to be uncovered.

Of course, consciousness cannot exist as an eternalistic field of pre-existing known moments unless the apparently non-conscious objects that contribute to that known—to what we are mostly conscious *of*—participate as well. Eternalism *requires* the non-heterogeneity of matter and consciousness. Hodgson once published an essay in the journal *Mind* in which he wrote that the fundamental distinction in the world is between the *me* and the *not-me*.⁷⁰ In eternalism the distinction between the *me* and *not-me* has a relative status only—like different characters, landscapes, and objects in a single dream. Both Parmenides and James opened the door to this unification, and its relevance to the fear of death cannot be overstated. For even those who believe we become a sort of astral spirit may well mourn the loss of an embodied, material substance. One thinks of the Greek afterlife below, in Hades, with their ghost-like inhabitants craving a drop of blood from the physical world above, according to Homer. But if the physical external world of matter is no less an aspect of consciousness than thought—if, in other words, consciousness creates matter, and not the other way around—the ultimate rhetorical question death would pose is not Stephen Levine’s “Who dies?” but “What dies?”

“...[T]he same thing is there for thinking and being,” the famous “fragment 3” of Parmenides, has various translations and interpretations,⁷¹ but it is certainly fair game to align it with this tenet from James’s radical empiricism: “Things and thoughts are not at all fundamentally heterogeneous; they are made of one and the same stuff, stuff which cannot be defined as such but only experienced; and which one can call, if one wishes, the stuff of experience in general.”⁷² So what dies?

For most of his life as a psychical researcher, James held out for the existence of a relationship between “cosmic consciousness” and “subtler forms of matter.”⁷³ But his late life mystical suggestion brought duality of even this subtlest matter into question, suggesting consciousness *alone* is the ultimate substrate of both matter and energy. As early as the *Principles*, James wrote that “Matter,” as “something *behind* physical phenomena,” is just “a ‘postulate’ of thought.”⁷⁴ This postulate would apply to the brain (however many today believe

consciousness is a mere “biological feature *of*”⁷⁵), no less than the wave of light photons that becomes a particle when observed (as in the double-slit experiment). So what dies?

Take any given phenomenon of so-called matter, such as a wooden desk. What matter, what substance is postulated as behind it? A wooden desk, as James’s former student Dickinson Miller pointed out, can be seen as either a “light brown total or unit,” a “wilderness of woody fiber,” or “a host of ordered molecules or atoms.”⁷⁶ A desk, like a body—live or otherwise—*appears* to have substance—whether encountered awake or in a dream—but “all that the word substance means,” says James, “is the fact that *experiences* do seem to belong together.”⁷⁷ No apparent substance, however, belongs together with all its phenomenal aspects. For as Miller says of those three different phenomenal aspects of a desk: considered together they create a “monstrous medley.”⁷⁸

The body—its substance, its matter—decomposes, rots, and disappears, even its bones eventually. But how much substantive reality did it ever have? The deeper we try to penetrate behind the phenomena of matter, as with our ever-more-powerful electromagnetic microscopes, we find it, as Bohm says, “turning more and more into empty space with an evermore tenuous structure.” A “tendency” he says “carried further by quantified theory, which treats particles as quantized states of a field that extends over the whole of space.”⁷⁹ So what dies?

In his essay “Human Immortality,” James posited that the brain may well act more like a transmitter of consciousness, like a radio, than a generator. And a lifetime of psychical research led him to corroborate “extra-marginal” consciousness, “outside of the primary consciousness altogether,” with its body-centered “set of memories, thoughts and feelings.”⁸⁰ The physical brain is more the radio than the orchestra. So what dies?

The Self

The life’s work of James’s afterlife research colleague, Frederic Myers, was given a highly specific title, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, because a self essentially continuous with our embodied self is what we want to survive. But even an embodied underlying self, suggested James, as early as his *Principles*, is no less a postulate of thought than matter.⁸¹ Descartes got it wrong. “I think therefore I am” is *not* the ultimate

foundation of certainty. “I” is a wavering, ill-defined term. By the time “I” get to “I am” it has turned into “I thought.” James’s dictum, “[T]he passing thought is itself the thinker,” speaks directly to the cogito’s specious claim as a foundation of ultimate certainty. The ultimate foundation of certainty precedes the “I”—indeed, is what the “I” arises out of: *sciousness*, or consciousness without consciousness of self.⁸² The irreducible foundation of certainty is not an “I” but merely a knowing and a known. Frequently, as James states in the *Principles*, the known includes the sense “I,” but does not need to:

“I may have either acquaintance-with, or knowledge-about, an object O without thinking about myself at all,” says James:

It suffices for this that I think O, and that it exist. If, in addition to thinking O, I also think that I exist and that I know O, well and good; I then know one more thing, a fact about O, of which I previously was unmindful. That, however, does not prevent me from having already known O a good deal. O *per se*, or O *plus* P, are as good objects of knowledge as O *plus me* is.⁸³

So, too, the *knowing* is most frequently, as with Descartes, assumed to be that of a knower “I.” But, again, that is an assumption not a certainty. In the closing passages of his revised version of the *Principles*, James declared that “*who the knower really is*,” “correlative to all this known” may well be “wide open,” not ultimately issuing from a self’s consciousness, but from wide open “*sciousness*.”⁸⁴ Through both his radical introspections and his psychical research, James kept widening that opening, culminating in the widest opening possible, his end-of-life mystical suggestion.

Of course if “consciousness is already there ... as if in a field that always stood there to be known,” then the known and the knower must be homogenized, beyond the simple non-heterogeneity of “things and thoughts” of his radical empiricism.⁸⁵ Either things must become thoughts (a/k/a the hardest problem), or thoughts become things. But thoughts, as it turns out, *do* become things—apparent things—to all who dream, as many do, in highly specific detail. As James says: “If I dream of a golden mountain, it no doubt does not exist outside of the dream, but *in* the dream the mountain is of a perfectly physical nature or essence, it is *as*

physical that it appears to me.”⁸⁶ In an eternalistic world everything physical is only, ultimately, “*as physical.*” So what dies?

Curious Autonomy

Recall the fear of the diver. Repeatedly in the literature of clairvoyant incidents, fear, even horror, is a response to an eternalistic clairvoyant revelation. Such fear is appropriate, since eternalism issues a mortal blow to the sense of self-agency, replacing what James called our “show” of “curious autonomy, *as if* we were small active centers on our own account” with what we have always known at least “in one sense” we are: “passive portions of the universe.”⁸⁷

Yet may we not affirm, along with Hodgson, Myers, Lodge, and other investigators of the Piper phenomenon that the *show* of curious autonomy might well survive? There will be gaps in self-identification for sure—just as there are every night; there may be a painful separation from the body we have been identified with (“like tearing limb from limb” as the aforementioned spirit Newell put it, adding “but once free how happy one is”);⁸⁸ but our curious autonomy curiously seems to continue, not only as astral facsimiles of our embodied selves, but as re-embodied incarnations of new “centers of autonomy.” Human personality *does* appear to survive. The Piper transcriptions, combined with Ian Stevenson’s compelling research on reincarnation, frees us from James’s fear of a vacuous “white-robed harp-playing heaven,”⁸⁹ or of a further dispersal into a depersonalized cosmic consciousness, however joyous our personal appreciation of such cosmic consciousness may be, as in G.P.’s “Love is spirit; love is everything; where love is not, there nothing is,”⁹⁰ or the more down-to-earth, ether-induced altered-state experience that prompted James to first speculate on the prime reality of “sciousness”:

During the syncope there is absolute psychic annihilation, the absence of all consciousness; then at the beginning of coming to, one has at a certain moment a vague, limitless, infinite feeling—a sense of existence in general without the least trace of distinction between the me and the not-me.⁹¹

James himself, described coming out of a chloroform anesthesia as “to wake to a sense of my own existence as *something additional* to what had previously been there.”⁹² And it has been

well imagined that one *dies* to some sort of limitless, infinite experience. But like the woman in Arthur Deikman's famed meditation-on-a-blue-vase experiments, in which a "diffuse blue occupied the entire visual field" and participants experienced different degrees of "merging with the vase," I might well, as she did, resist the notion of being "merged completely with that diffuseness ... bringing myself back in some way from it."⁹³ (Though it is more difficult to imagine resisting what one of Piper's spirits described as an early, post-death encounter with an inconceivable, unimaginable white light, "the most brilliant and yet the softest moonlight you ever saw.")⁹⁴

I am all for an ongoing nature "born for the conflict" as James says,⁹⁵ or, at least, the ongoing illusion of conflict. Perpetual conflict, with a throughline of subtle aspects—subtler than any physical instruments can detect—a throughline of each "body-mind" that "reassociates with phenomenal conditions of bodily existence upon rebirth," as Da Free John says⁹⁶—individual striving forever with no end in sight and no beginning, a defining characteristic of a perfect circle.

It makes no difference that in such a fixed monism of consciousness the conflict is not ultimately real. Has there ever been any eternalist, from Parmenides to Einstein, who fully believed in such a pre-ordered universe? Indeed, full belief in such a pre-ordered universe absent any veridical, individual initiative might well invoke despair, before deeper penetration into the belief eliminates the despairer as an independent agent making things happen and renders her or him at best a mere arriver in each moment. But can penetration into the belief ever be total?

Did Einstein's eternalism truly console him? Does it, in our own time, console block universalists Julian Barbour or Vesselin Petkev? Has there ever been anyone who so completely inhabited a pre-ordered universe that they would, like the conflict-free (a/k/a enlightened) Buddha, arrive fully present in each moment, "having ... abandoned favoring and opposing?"⁹⁷

Let us assume, then, that even in the eternally recurring fixed relations of a windrosed mandala, "from a centerpoint equally matched everywhere," there is always something to apparently do, something to apparently strive for, whether physically embodied or not. Embodied or "astral," each radii is precisely and eternally what it is, and never more than what it is, so that there is no thickening or layering in each *uncovering* moment, just as there is none in a

looped film's endless journey through a projector, or the full moon's periodic beam upon a lake. Although from the perspective of commonsense duality "I" might be increasingly enriched by each glimpsed moonglow or by each repeated viewing of a film, a wind-rosed mandala of consciousness being eternally uncovered has no such cumulating vantage point.

Nor is any moment of consciousness “definitely closed off unto itself”⁹⁸—a point James emphasized frequently—however much the illusion of such enclosed consciousness is forcefully suggested by the apparent individuation of our apparently physical bodies. James, the eternalistic mystic, was not as ready as Einstein, the eternalistic physicist, to offer eternalist consolations for the apparent doom awaiting our bodies. But he had recourse to another consolation. “When that which is you passes out of the body, he wrote to his perpetually invalid sister, Alice, as she lay dying, I am sure there will be an explosion of liberated force and life til then eclipsed and kept down.”⁹⁹ And although he knew his sister was not a fan of Mrs. Piper, he did not withhold from her where his assurance for the survival of “that which is you” came from. However tentatively offered, and however tentatively—and, til the end of his life, sporadically—believed in by James himself,¹⁰⁰ such assurance may well be, even for eternalists, the best assurance we have: “...enlargements of the self in trance, etc., are bringing me to turn for light in the direction of all sorts of despised spiritualistic and unscientific ideas.”¹⁰¹

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Notes

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- 1 Lodge, 1891, p. 554
 - 2 Parmenides, fr. 8
 - 3 Zohar, 1983, p. 118
 - 4 Bricklin, 2015
 - 5 James, 1910a, p. 1280
 - 6 James, 1897, p. 570
 - 7 James, 1909, p. 131
 - 8 James, in Bricklin, 2007, p. 110
 - 9 James, 1890a/l, p. 346
 - 10 James, 1909, p. 104. For an extended discussion of such pulsing as a foundation of both Buddhist meditation and quantum physics, see Bricklin, 2015.
 - 11 James, 1910a, p. 1274
 - 12 James, 1910a, p. 1280
 - 13 Parmenides, fragment 8, lines 43-44
 - 14 See Bricklin, 2015, p. 224
 - 15 James, 1910b, p. 1312
 - 16 Blood, 1860, p. 130
 - 17 Verse, 2.6, translated by Schweig, 2006, p. 40
 - 18 de Broglie, quoted in Schlipp, 1974, p. 114
 - 19 James, 1988b, p. 70
 - 20 James in Skrupskelis, 2001, p. 501
 - 21 James, 1986, p. 252
 - 22 See Kingsley, 2003
 - 23 See Bricklin, 2015, pp. 306-307
 - 24 Parmenides, fr. 2
 - 25 Gupta, 1998, p. 27. See discussion in Bricklin, 2015, p. 124
 - 26 Blood, 1920, p. 153

- 27 Hodgson, S., 1898/l. p. 455
28 Bricklin, 2006, pp. 16-17
29 James, 1986, p. 494
30 James, 1896, p. 190
31 James, 1986, p. 374
32 James, 1986, p. 131
33 James, 1986, p. 188
34 Hodgson in Tymn, 2013, p. 18
35 James, 1986, p. 436
36 James, 1986, p. 131
37 Tymn, 2014, p. 18-19
38 Podmore, 1910, p. 222.
39 James, 1986, p. 188. The frequently excellent science writer, Martin Gardner, for one, offers what I believe can be best described as an under-researched, overly speculative essay: "How Mrs. Piper Bamboozled William James" (Gardner, 204, 252-262). And Gardner's essay was used by both the daily and Sunday *New York Times'* book reviewers in their review of Blum's book to torpedo anyone's advance toward Piper. Gardner, at his best, can hold his own with James when it comes to assessing valid empirical research. But that little essay—window-dressed as "a long exposé" by the Sunday Times reviewer—cannot survive an extended examination of the actual sessions, and the rigorous context in which they were conducted. (See, especially the books by Tymn, Braude, and Gauld, listed in the bibliography). There is also a deft point by point-by-point exposure of what James might have called Gardner's "humbug" (his terms for critics guided more by narrow preconception than honest exploration): Michael Prescott's "How Martin Gardner Bamboozled his Readers"
http://michaelprescott.typepad.com/michael_prescotts_blog/2007/08/how-martin-gard.html . See also Greg Taylor's detailed response to Gardner: <http://www.dailygrail.com/essays/2010/11/skeptical-skeptic>
40 James, 1986, p. 372
41 James, 1986, p. 360
42 James, 1986, p. 254
43 James, 1986, p. 217
44 James, 1986, 185
45 James, 1986, p. 184
46 James, 1986, p. 188
47 James, 1986, p. 188
48 1986, p. 255
49 Blum, 206, p. 218
50 Hodgson, R., 1896, p. 364
51 James, 1986, p. 496
52 Blum, p. 217, and Gauld, p. 259
53 *ibid.*
54 James, 1986, p. 191
55 Hodgson, R., 1896, p. 301
56 Hodgson, R., 1896, p. 364
57 Tymn, 2013, p. 91
58 In addition to James and Lodge, Nobel physiologist Charles Richet, chemist Sir William Crookes.
59 James, 1910b, 1279-1280
60 Myers, 1903, pp. 402-405. For how precisely detailed accurate precognitive visions can be contrasted with apparent precognitive visions that do not "realize" see Bricklin, 2015, pp. 99-100.
61 Dodds, 1934
62 Dodds, 1973. P. 160
63 Dodds, 1973, p. 160
64 Blood, 1920, pp. 82-203
65 James, 1986, p. 239

- 66 James, 1986, p. 239
- 67 Lodge, 1931, p. 212
- 68 James, 1890/I, p. 346
- 69 James, 1890/I, p. 346
- 70 Hodgson, R. (1885)
- 71 See Palmer, 2009, 118-122
- 72 James, 1905, p. 110
- 73 James, 1986, p. 374
- 74 James, 1890/I, p. 304
- 75 Searle, 1992, p. 90
- 76 Miller, in Taylor, 1996, p. 185
- 77 James, 1911, p. 1045
- 78 Miller, in Taylor, 1996, p. 185
- 79 Bohm & Hiley, 1993, p. 322
- 80 James, 1902, p. 218
- 81 James, 1890/I, p. 185
- 82 James, 1890/I, p.304
- 83 *Ibid.*, p. 274
- 84 James, 1892, p. 433
- 85 James, in Bricklin, 2007, p. 110
- 86 James, in Bricklin, 2007, pp. 94-95
- 87 James, 1897, p. 476, emphasis added
- 88 Tymn, 2013, p. 24
- 89 James, 1897, p. 583
- 90 Tymn, 2013, p. 93
- 91 James, 1890/I, p. 291
- 92 *ibid.*
- 93 Deikman, 1963, p. 337
- 94 Tymn, 2013, p. 131
- 95 James, 1902, p. 338
- 96 John, 1983, p. 185
- 97 Mahatanhasankhaya, Sutta 38, in Nanamoli & Bodhi, 1995, p. 360
- 98 James, 1890/I, p. 350
- 99 James, in Skrupskelis, 1999, p. 178
- 100 The year before he died, James summarized his lifelong struggle with spiritism in his "Report on Mrs. Piper's Hodgson-Control": "I myself can perfectly well imagine spirit-agency, and I find my mind vacillating about it curiously" (James, 1986, p. 284).
- 101 James, in Skrupskelis, 1999, p. 178