Self, God and Immortality

Eugene Fontinell

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PART I

Personal Immortality: Possibility and Credibility
Now I will do nothing but listen,
To accrue what I hear into this song, to let sounds
contribute toward it.
I hear bravuras of birds, bustle of growing wheat,
gossip of flames, clack of sticks cooking my meals,
I hear the sound I love, the sound of the human voice,
I hear all sound running together, combined, fused or following,

I am cut by bitter and angry hail, I lose my breath,
Steep’d amid honey’d morphine, my windpipe throttled
in fakes of death,
At length let up again to feel the puzzle of puzzles,
and that we call Being.
—Walt Whitman
“Song of Myself”

We know existence by participating in
existence. . . . Existence then is the primary
datum. But this existence is not my own
existence as an isolated self. If it were, then the
existence of any Other would have to be proved,
and it could not be proved. What is given is the
existence of a world in which we participate.
—John Macmurray
Persons in Relation

Some years ago John J. McDermott suggested that it was “unfortunate that
James did not stay with the language he utilized in preparing for his Psycho-
logical Seminary of 1895–1896. At that time, he resorted to the metaphor of
‘fields’ in order to account descriptively for the primal activity of the process
of experience.”1 While I share McDermott’s view, my concern here is not
primarily to explicate James’s metaphysics in terms of fields but to utilize his
language as well as that of others to construct a “field” model, for which my
primary purpose is to employ it in the development of a “self” open to the
possibility of personal immortality. Since a key feature of both the self and
the mode of immortality I wish to suggest is their continuity with the expe-
rienced world or reality, it will be necessary first to present the distinguish-
ing characteristics of this world, beginning with “fields” as the primary
metaphor, in an effort to understand all reality. It must be stressed that there is no pretense of giving a mirror image of some outer "reality in itself" when reality or the world is described as a plurality of fields. A pragmatic approach consciously employs its primary terms metaphorically, having as its chief aim the development of a metaphysical language that will serve to expand, deepen, and enrich human life through varied and diverse modes of participation in reality, rather than claiming that such language gives us a conceptual "picture" of a reality essentially independent of human experience.

Let me begin with a consideration of James's notes for the Psychological Seminary, in which "fields" is employed as the central category. James considers three suppositions necessary "if . . . one wants to describe the process of experience in its simplest terms with the fewest assumptions." Before looking at these suppositions, we should focus on the sentence just cited. As so often happens with James, his graceful style and felicitous expression mask the profound and complex question with which he is struggling. In this instance, of course, it is nothing less than the perennially simple and recurring question: "What is reality?" For James, this question, like all questions, must be answered in terms of experience, but that attempt immediately gives rise to the allied question, "What is experience?"

Now one might concede that such ponderous questions are the stock-in-trade of those usually genial but often peculiar beings called philosophers, but for those who live by "common sense," they are of little concern. As I have already indicated, though few of us—even those involved in the philosophical game—are metaphysicians in the full sense of that term, we are all metaphysicians in the sense of thinking and acting within a set of ideas, principles, and assumptions. When James and other pragmatists suggest a language shift, then, they are not trying to refute "common sense" so much as they are trying to make us aware of ways of looking at reality that are obstacles to richer ways of living. While the concern of this essay is not with the technical specifics and the historical polemics in which the pragmatists were engaged, it is still important to note that they were attempting to bring forth ways of thinking that were in sharp conflict with many deeply ingrained perspectives and intellectual customs.

This is best illustrated, perhaps, by presenting James's three "field" suppositions and indicating some of the notions to which they are opposed.

(1) "Fields" that "develop," under the categories of continuity with each other—[categories such as]: sameness and otherness [of] things [or of] thought streams, fulfillment of one field's meaning in another field's content, "postulation" of one field by another, cognition of one field by another, etc.

From the first part of this supposition we learn that reality is pluralistic ("fields"), processive ("develop"), and continuous ("continuity"). If we add "relationality," which is implied in the categories described, we have four distinctive features of the world within which I will develop my views on
the self and immortality. For the moment it is sufficient to note that what is implicitly rejected by this field, or processive-relational, view is any reality that is unchanging or unrelated.

(2) But nothing postulated whose whatness is not of some nature given in fields—that is, not of field-stuff, datum-stuff, experience-stuff, content. No pure ego, for example, and no material substance.

In this supposition we have James’s radical rejection of all modes of essentialism, whether materialistic, idealistic, or dualistic. The fuller implications of this supposition will emerge as the character and role of fields is described, but it is already evident that to view reality as “fields” excludes any underlying substance having universal and unchanging essential characteristics.

(3) All the fields commonly supposed are incomplete, and point to a complement beyond their own content. The final content . . . is that of a plurality of fields, more or less ejective to each other, but still continuous in various ways.3

The importance of this supposition for my purposes cannot be exaggerated. It provides the ground for the recognition of individuals while avoiding any atomistic individualism or isolating egotism. While all fields are “incomplete” and continuous with others, they are not so continuous that reality is reduced to an undifferentiated monistic flux. “Plurality” is just as real as “continuity,” and when we add to these three suppositions James’s later notes that there is “around every field a wider field that supercedes it . . . (the truth of every moment thus lying beyond itself),” we are presented with a world that can be most succinctly described as “fields within fields within fields . . .”4

“What have we gained,” James asks, by substituting fields “for stable things and changing ‘thoughts’?”

We certainly have gained no stability. The result is an almost maddening restlessness. . . . But we have gained concreteness. That is, when asked what we mean by knowing, ego, physical thing, memory, etc., we can point to a definite portion of content with a nature definitely realized, and nothing is postulated whose nature is not fully given in experience-terms.

The goal of “concreteness”—fidelity to concrete experience—would appear to be simple and easy of realization, but it is deceptively so, as a diverse group of late modern and contemporary philosophers have attested. John Herman Randall, Jr., maintains that metaphysics can best be described as “the criticism of abstractions.” He further claims that this is the metaphysical method of Bradley, Dewey, Whitehead; of the Hegel upon whom they all draw; of the continental post-Hegelians, criticizing the “intellectualism” of the Hegelian tradition in the light of “life” (the Lebensphilosophie of Nietzsche and Dilthey) or Existenz (Kierkegaard); of the phenomenologists, criticizing the formalism of the Neo-Kantians (Husserl), and of the existentialists (Heidegger, Jaspers, Tillich); of Bergson, opposing experienced
Randall is not suggesting that the specific features of the views of such a variety of thinkers are identical or even always compatible. Whatever the differences, however, the importance of their converging emphasis upon the primacy of concrete experience and the rigorous reflection demanded for its apprehension should not be minimized. Throughout this essay, therefore, I will repeatedly stress the necessity of relating any speculations, extrapolations, or models to the experienced world within which we live, think, and act. What attracts me to James is his passionately relentless effort to be as faithful as possible to the range and varieties of experience. Something of this effort is expressed by Ralph Barton Perry:

Thus by the inclusion of experiences of tendency, meaning, and relatedness, by a recognition of the more elusive fringes, margins, and transitions that escape a coarser sensibility, or a naive practicality, or an unconsciously artificial analysis—by such inclusion, the field of immediately apprehended particularity becomes a continuum which is qualified to stand as the metaphysical reality. (TC, I:460)

Another important aspect of James's emphasis upon and quest for concreteness is its strongly personalistic character. Many years ago, Robert Pollock stressed this relation between James's concern for concrete reality and his celebration of personal activity:

Evidently, for James, pragmatism is an "attitude of orientation" by which man can achieve a vital contact with concrete reality and along innumerable paths, by aiming not simply at the abstract relation of the mere onlooker but at a relation that is personal, direct and immediate, and involving participation with one's whole heart and being. . . . James was endeavoring to take seriously the fact that reality does not address itself to abstract minds but to living persons inhabiting a real world, to whom it makes known something of its essential quality only as they go out to meet it through action. It is this concrete relation of man and his world, realized in action, which accounts for the fact that our power of affirmation outruns our knowledge, as when we feel or sense the truth before we know it. To James, therefore, pragmatism was a doctrine designed to enlighten the whole of human action and to give meaning to man's irrepressible need to act.⁶

One final point concerning the centrality of concrete experience in the thought of James has to do with differentiating his view from narrow and excluding modes of empiricism. A text from Perry will suffice to underline the openness of James's world: "This fluid, interpenetrating field of given existence, as James depicts it, embracing the insight of religious mysticism and of Bergsonian intuition, is far removed from the sensationalistic atomism of the discredited empiricists" (TC, I:461).
CHARACTERISTICS OF "FIELDS"

There is an inevitable circularity involved in discussing or analyzing any alleged "ultimate" category of reality. For example, if reality is best described in terms of "fields," as is being suggested here, then it would seem that we must describe fields themselves in terms of "fields." Since pragmatism does not aim at or believe possible any definitive conceptual description of reality, however, this circularity is neither vicious nor particularly unsettling. The aim of pragmatism is participation in, rather than abstract representation of, reality. Any circularity involved in the analysis of fields, therefore, must be judged on its ability to expand and enrich experience in both its explanatory and lived dimensions.

Bearing in mind that "field" is a metaphor and that images or concepts are employed in its analysis for the purposes of insight and utilization rather than definitive description, let me touch briefly upon the chief characteristics of a "field." A field can be described as a processive-relational complex, but this term would be grossly misleading if we imagined that "things" called processes and "things" called relations have combined to make a field. Nor is it adequate to posit a plurality of processes that subsequently enter into relations such that fields result. Given the limitation of language and its inevitable tendency to reify and detemporalize reality, perhaps the best we can do is to express the constitution of fields dialectically. Hence, we must insist that processes are relational and relations are processive. There are no unrelated processes and no nonprocessive relations. The concrete reality (actually realities) is always a unity involving an ever changing multiplicity. Depending on the specific field, these multiple "elements" will be variously named: for example, electrons, neutrons, and protons in the atomic field; molecules, cells, and genes in the organic field; planets in the solar field.

Now negatively speaking, this field view rejects any "ultimate" elements or atoms or particles understood as indivisible, impenetrable, unchangeable units. This does not, however, exclude all modes of metaphysical atomism. Whitehead, for example, maintains that "the ultimate metaphysical truth is atomism. . . . But atomism does not exclude complexity and universal relativity. Each atom is a system of all things." \(^7\) Whitehead's label for these ultimate atoms is "actual entities," which he describes as "drops of experience, complex and interdependent" (PR, 28).

The field metaphor that I am constructing must acknowledge a character of interdependence both "within" and among fields (I use quotation marks to call attention to the relative character of "withinness"). An adequate field theory, from my perspective, must allow for a multiplicity of distinct individuals while avoiding any enclosure or isolation of these individuals. As the James text with which we began indicates, fields are continuous with other fields; hence there are no absolute, definitive beginnings and endings of any individual field. Whitehead expresses something of this continuity: "When we consider the question with microscopic accuracy, there is no defi-
nite boundary to determine where the body begins and external nature ends. . . . The body requires the environment in order to exist."8 Of course, it must be quickly added that discreteness is just as real and fundamental as continuity. We cannot sharply mark off the borders of an individual field—there are no such borders to be marked off, given that fields insensibly shade into other fields; nevertheless, fields really are distinct (not separate) from each other, and pluralism—not monism—is the metaphysical view suggested here. Given this perspective, there must be a real and significant sense in which we can speak of discrete individuals having irreducible centers. This point will be extremely important to the view of the individual self that I will present, but for the moment I wish to maintain that whatever discrete realities exist, they are all characterized by being "centers of activity." As James expressed it in his unpublished notes: "Be the universe as much of a unit as you like, plurality has once for all broken out within it. Effectively there are centres of reference and action. . . . and these centres disperse each other's rays" (TC, II:764). In a similar vein, Dewey states: "In a genuine although not psychic sense, natural beings exhibit preference and centeredness."9

Note that Dewey does not equate centered activity with psychic activity. To the end, James flirted with panpsychism, and there is a difference among the commentators as to whether or not he succumbed. I think that Dewey's approach is the more fruitful and thus would suggest that panactivism is a more accurate description of reality than panpsychism. Panactivism excludes any completely passive entities or Whiteheadian "vacuous actualities" and, while affirming centered activity as the mark of all real beings, restricts "psychic" to a specific mode of such activity. In a world of "fields within fields," of course, a field that has its own center of activity will simultaneously be a constituent of another field with its own center of activity. This is most simply illustrated in the case of an organism where the individual cells are centers of activity while also constituting organ or tissue fields, which in turn are constituents of the organism as a "whole," which also has its distinctive center.

DEWEY'S "SITUATION"

While not using field language as his dominant terminology, Dewey does present a mode of field metaphysics. A brief consideration of Dewey's meaning and use of "situation" will illustrate this and amplify certain field characteristics already introduced. Dewey suggests that his use of the term "situations" antedated "the introduction of the field idea in physical theory."10 What is important, however, is not priority of use but the utility of Dewey's situational view for the construction of an adequate field metaphysics.

"Situation," Dewey maintains, "stands for something inclusive of a large number of diverse elements existing across wide areas of space and long
periods of time, but which, nevertheless, have their own unity.” Elsewhere, Dewey emphasizes the nonisolational character of situations, objects, and events. Objects and events are never experienced or known in isolation “but only in connection with a contextual whole . . . called a ‘situation.’” Dewey does not deny the reality of objects and events but insists that they are special parts, phases, or aspects “of an environing experienced world—a situation.” Hence, there is “always a field in which observation of this or that object or event occurs.”

I mentioned earlier that a field view must acknowledge interdependence both within fields and between or among fields. This “interdependence” is most forcefully expressed in Dewey’s notion of “transaction.” In 1949, he coauthored a work with Arthur F. Bentley in which “transaction” was introduced as a more apt term than “interaction” for purposes of describing reality and knowing. “Interaction” was judged inadequate because it conveyed the impression that change involves action between substantially complete and unchanging entities. From a situational, contextual, or transactional perspective there are no such independent entities; therefore, “in a transaction, the components themselves are subject to change. Their character affects and is affected by the transaction.” As another commentator expressed it: “Within the various transactional situations, the related aspects are indeed mutual and completely interdependent, as they are in any ‘field.’” Hence, when terms are “understood transactionally, . . . they do not name items or characteristics of organisms alone, nor do they name items or characteristics of environments alone; in every case, they name the activity that occurs of both together” (KK, 71).

Reverting to field language, we can say that it is the “nature” of every field to flow into or shade off to other fields in such fashion that the fields so related are mutually constitutive of each other. This will be of crucial importance later, when I will extrapolate a relation between the human and divine fields that renders belief in personal immortality plausible. To prepare the ground for this extrapolation, let me here draw upon Dewey’s insightful descriptions of the relationship between an organism and its environment. Because this is, of course, a transactional relationship, what he says about it can serve to reinforce points already made. “We live and act,” Dewey tells us, “in connection with the existing environment, not in connection with isolated objects” (L, 68). When experience is viewed as an organism-environment transaction, this must not be understood as the coming together of two essentially complete and separate realities—“organism” and “environment.” Indeed, we can now more aptly describe this relationship as between wider and narrower fields that are distinct though not separate. Thus Dewey is led to say that “an organism does not live in an environment, it lives by means of an environment” (L, 25). When Dewey elsewhere speaks of seeing “the organism in nature, the nervous system in the organism, the brain in the nervous system, the cortex in the brain,” he quickly adds that
“when thus seen they will be seen in, not as marbles are in a box but as events are in history, in a moving, growing never finished process” (EN, 295).16

It should be noted that “environment” is an open-ended term as Dewey uses it. “Environment,” we are told, “is whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes and capacities to create the experience which is had” (EE, 42). Another aspect of Dewey’s transactional experience that I will utilize in my later extrapolation (though in a way that would probably not please Dewey) is his description of organic life as a process of activity involving an environment as “a transaction extending beyond the spatial limits of the organism” (L, 25).

Throughout this section I have stressed the characteristic of transactional mutuality among all related fields, and the following texts indicate how far Dewey was willing to push this mutuality.

Adaptation, in fine, is as much adaptation of the environment to our own activities as our activities to the environment.17

Habits are like functions in many respects, and especially in requiring the cooperation of organism and environment. Breathing is an affair of the air as truly as of the lungs; digesting an affair of food as truly as of tissues of stomach. Seeing involves light just as certainly as it does the eye and optic nerve. Walking implicates the ground as well as the legs; speech demands physical air and human companionship and audience as well as vocal organs.

Honesty, chastity, malice, peevishness, courage, triviality, industry, irresponsibility are not private possessions of a person. They are working adaptations of personal capacities with envoirning forces.18

Such phenomena as are described in these and other field-supportive texts constitute in part the experiential ground from which I will extrapolate the transactional character of the relations between the divine and human fields.

JAMES’S “PURE EXPERIENCE” AS PRIMORDIAL FIELD
It is one thing to call attention to the difficulties of an ontological dualism and quite another to show how such a dualism is to be overcome. Nowhere is this more evident than in James’s radical empiricism or theory of pure experience. This theory is notorious for its lack of clarity, its inconsistencies, and its incompleteness; to render it clear, consistent, and complete would be a formidable achievement.19 No pretense of doing this or even showing that it is possible is here made. In keeping with my general approach, I will consider James’s theory of pure experience insofar as it can contribute to the construction of a field model of the self. More specifically, I will indicate those aspects of the pure experience doctrine that seem in conflict with an adequate field metaphysics and those that are congenial with and supportive of such a perspective.

We have already suggested that James’s primary philosophical concern
was to devise a method that would enable us to have greater access to and more intimate participation in "the concrete"—which, as I have noted and will continue to stress, is the feature of a "fields" model that most commends it to the purposes of this essay. A quest for the concrete was the dominating motive in James's construction of his theory of pure experience. There is an irony of sorts here in that this is perhaps the most technical and vague of James's doctrines, and often characterized by that very "abstractness" which he frequently criticized in others.

Of course, James is not the only twentieth-century thinker who in an effort to realize concrete experience has appeared to bring forth the airiest of abstractions. Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger immediately come to mind. One might justifiably say of these thinkers, mutatis mutandis, what McDermott said of James: "He does not utilize the notion of 'pure experience' to close off the analysis of the real but to give it new impetus and send it away from traditional but narrow categories. Perhaps he meant it as a heuristic device, as a sort of waiting game" (WWJ, xlv). These words are equally applicable to the incipient field theory which is the focus of our concern. I would add, and hope to show, that had James employed more widely and consistently his "field" language rather than his "pure experience" language, he would have better realized his goals while avoiding some unfortunate interpretations of his doctrine. As already noted, however, my concern throughout my exposition of James's doctrines is not with these doctrines in themselves but insofar as they, as I interpret them, are a rich resource for doctrines of self and God that are congenial to and consistent with belief in personal immortality.

James was of the opinion that the traditional doctrines and assumptions of dualism, idealism, and materialism had run their course. Without denying that each had its insight and relative utility, he maintained that each gave rise to problems that were unsolved and would remain insoluble unless certain fundamental presuppositions were surrendered. The key presupposition was that mind and/or matter are ultimate substances or essential modes of being. The dualist held that both are "real"; the idealist, that mind alone is "real"; the materialist, that matter alone is "real." Of course, James was not denying that mind and matter are in some sense "real," but the metaphysical question was, "In what sense are they real?" While it is not quite accurate and indeed, as we shall see, is misleading, let us give an initial Jamesian response to this question within the framework of the classical quest for the "Wurzstof" or ultimate character of reality. Thus we would say that reality is ultimately neither mind nor matter, neither subjective nor objective, but is instead "pure experience" or "pure experiences." We would then account for mind and matter, subjective and objective, in terms of pure experience, showing how they are derived from this reality as a result of diverse functions and relations.

James presented his doctrine of pure experience in a series of essays pub-
lished individually between 1905 and 1907 and later collected under the title *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Though much in these essays is technical, elusive, inconsistent, and misleading, a few texts from them, combined with some unpublished notes, will be sufficient for my purposes.

In an unpublished note written around 1904, James indicates the intention of his theory of pure experience.

By the adjective “pure” prefixed to the word, “experience,” I mean to denote a form of being which is as yet neutral or ambiguous, and prior to the object and the subject distinction. I mean to show that the attribution either of mental or physical being to an experience is due to nothing in the immediate stuff of which the experience is composed—for the same stuff will serve for either attribution—but rather to two contrasted groups of associates with either of which . . . our reflection . . . tends to connect it . . . . Functioning in the whole context of other experiences in one way, an experience figures as a mental fact. Functioning in another way, it figures as a physical object. In itself it is actually neither, but virtually both. *(TC, II:385)*

In his well-known if not well-understood essay “Does Consciousness Exist?” James contends that in answering this question negatively, he means “only to deny that the word stands for an entity, but to insist most emphatically that it does stand for a function. There is, I mean, no aboriginal stuff or quality of being, contrasted with that of which material objects are made, out of which our thoughts of them are made” *(ERE, 4).*

Consistent with his perspective, James could also have written an essay entitled “Does Matter Exist?” Had he done so, he would have denied and affirmed the reality of matter in the same sense in which he denied and affirmed consciousness. James did not write such an essay, because he believed that his point concerning matter as an ultimate substance had already been made by George Berkeley: “Consciousness as it is ordinarily understood does not exist, any more than does Matter to which Berkeley gave the coup de grâce” *(ERE, 271).*

Well, if ultimate reality is neither mind nor matter, what is it? James’s answer appears to be quite simple: “There is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and . . . we call that stuff ‘pure experience’” *(ERE, 4).* And elsewhere, after denying the heterogeneity of thoughts and things, he adds: “They are made of one and the same stuff, which as such cannot be defined but only experienced; and which, if one wishes, one can call the stuff of experience in general” *(ERE, 271).* The simplicity of this answer, of course, is most deceptive, for in the same essay in which he speaks of “private stuff,” he states that “there is no general stuff of which experience at large is made. There are as many stuffs as there are ‘natures’ in the things experienced” *(ERE, 14).*

Whether employed in the singular or the plural, the notion of “pure experience” gives rise to a host of difficulties and inconsistencies at worst, and at best is grossly misleading when it is understood as the ultimate substance(s)
out of which all things are made. James must unquestionably be held at least partially responsible for this result, but it must be borne in mind that he made no pretense of having given a finished doctrine. Further, he was persuaded of the need to break out of the classical cul-de-sac, and there is a decided exploratory and experimental cast to all his writings concerned with pure experience. Some of the confusion, I would suggest, arises from his tendency to conflate the epistemological and ontological perspectives. I am not contending that they can be completely separated, but methodologically, at least, they must be distinguished.

Let us briefly consider an epistemological explanation and show how, when this is taken without further qualification as an ontological explanation, we land in a doctrine that would seem to be unreconcilable with James's overall philosophy. After asserting "that there is only one primal stuff" and designating "that stuff 'pure experience,'" James goes on to say that "knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter. The relation itself is a part of pure experience; one of its 'terms' becomes the subject or bearer of knowledge, the knower, the other becomes the object known" (ERE, 4–5). It would seem that, for James, "pure experiences" become either physical or psychical depending on the context or relations into which they enter. Thus, he maintains, "experiences are originally of a rather single nature." When, however, these experiences "enter into relations of physical influence . . . we make of them a field apart which we call the physical world." When they enter into a different set of relations, when "they are transitory, physically inert, with a succession which does not follow a determined order but seems rather to obey emotive fancies, we make of them another field which we call the psychical world" (ERE, 270).21 James expresses this same view concerning the "neutrality" of experiences considered in themselves in "How Two Minds Can Know One Thing":

This "pen," for example, is, in the first instance, a bald that, a datum, fact, phenomenon, content, or whatever other neutral or ambiguous name you may prefer to apply. I call it . . . a "pure experience." To get classed either as a physical pen or as some one's percept of a pen, it must assume a function, and that can only happen in a more complicated world. (ERE, 61)22

Whatever the uses this doctrine might have as an epistemological or phenomenological expression, it is most inadequate if translated without qualification into an ontological doctrine. As such it suggests that reality in itself is a multiplicity of "thats" or "pure experiences," which are transformed into mind or matter as a result of their relations and functions. A. J. Ayer, among others (beginning with Bertrand Russell), labels this theory "neutral monism."23 Richard Stevens comments that "Ayer seems to imply that James envisaged the units of pure experience as a series of ontologically neutral building blocks . . . as elementary atomic particles" (JH, 17–18).
While I think Stevens suggests a more fruitful interpretation of the doctrine of pure experience, there can be little doubt that James gives good grounds for interpreting his radical empiricism as a mode of "neutral monism," though this is quite evidently in conflict with other aspects of his philosophy. James stated that "the pure experiences of our philosophy are, in themselves considered, so many little absolutes" (ERE, 66).24 John Wild, commenting on this passage, notes that as "little absolutes" these "pure experiences" would be "without relations to anything outside." Such a view, Wild correctly points out, would lead to "that abstract atomism" that James so often attacked. "How can this be reconciled," Wild asks, "with the field theory, according to which every focused experience is surrounded by a halo of fringes from which it cannot be separated except by a reductive abstraction?"25

It is James's desire to describe mind empirically, to avoid locating it "outside" or "beyond" experience, that undoubtedly contributes to the unacceptable interpretation of his doctrine of pure experience labeled "neutral monism." As a minimum, therefore, we can say (with Elizabeth Flower and Murray G. Murphey) that "the point he is making is that experience is what is given before any categorization at all—before the divisions of internal-external, subjective-objective, apparent-real, and therefore certainly before phenomenal-physical and the rest."26 While it would not have "solved" the related problems, James might have at least avoided some of the confusion to which his doctrine of pure experience has given rise if he had used the more neutral term "field" or "fields" to call attention to that inclusive feature of reality within which categorizations such as those just listed are constructed. I will return to this when discussing pure experience as "primordial field," but first a word should be said about the ambiguity of experience and of the term "experience."

Stevens notes "an unresolved ambiguity" in James's use of the term "experience." In the Principles of Psychology, James makes personal ownership the first characteristic of consciousness: "It seems as if the elementary fact were not thought or this thought or that thought, but my thought, every thought being owned" (PP, I:221). Stevens points out, however, that "elsewhere, James seems to mean by 'experience' a kind of neutral and unowned given-ness which is prior to the emergence of any act of personal appropriation. This linguistic ambiguity may account for the obscurity which seems to permeate his insufficiently articulated theory of pure experience" (JH, 92).27

James might well reply that the terminological ambiguity is grounded in experiential ambiguity. Several texts from his essay "The Place of Affec-tional Facts" will indicate the direction such a response might take.

There is no original spirituality or materiality of being, intuitively discerned, then; but only a translocation of experiences from one world to another; a grouping of them with one set or another of associates for definitely practical or intellectual ends (ERE, 74).
World or Reality as "Fields"

If "physical" and "mental" meant two different kinds of intrinsic nature, immediately, intuitively, and infallibly discernible, and each fixed forever in whatever bit of experience it qualified, one does not see how there could have arisen any room for doubt or ambiguity. But if, on the contrary, these words are words of sorting, ambiguity is natural.

The obstinate controversies that have arisen prove how hard it is to decide by bare introspection what it is in experiences that shall make them either spiritual or material. It surely can be nothing intrinsic in the individual experiences. It is their way of behaving towards each other. Their system of relations, their function; and all these things vary with the context in which we find it opportune to consider them. (ERE, 76–77)

Had James utilized his field language in the considerations expressed in these passages, I think he would have retained his focus upon the concrete, would have taken account of the ambiguity and fluidity accompanying such terms as "physical" and "mental," "spiritual" and "material," while safeguarding his doctrine against any metaphysical atomism or metaphysical dualism. This would have necessitated, however, affirning relation, function, context, and the like as fundamental features of all realities rather than additions to some ultimate realities designated "pure experiences."

But if we do not understand "pure experiences" as irreducible metaphysical atoms, how are we to understand this doctrine? Charlene Seigfried makes a most helpful suggestion by noting that James has submitted "pure experience" as a supposition or hypothesis. Further, she points out that to use "the words 'stuff' and 'material' in connection with pure experience is misleading. It is not a clay-like materia prima out of which other things are fashioned" (CC, 39). Seigfried goes on to say that "James is not asserting a metaphysical sub-stratum" (CC, 40). but is presenting pure experience as a hypothesis that "gives a better explanation of knowing, of subject and object, thought and thing, perception and conception, than does the alternate hypothesis of primordial dualism" (CC, 50).

If pure experience is taken as a hypothesis, we are faced with the rather peculiar consequence that it is neither "pure" nor "experience": that is, as "pure" it is not experienced, and as experienced it is not pure. Let me try to indicate the difficulty by considering texts where James does appear to claim instances in which experience can be had in its purity.

The instant field of the present is always experienced in its "pure" state, plain unqualified actuality, a simple that, as yet undifferentiated into thing and thought, and only virtually classifiable as objective fact or as someone's opinion about fact. (ERE, 36–37)

The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the "pure" experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality or existence, a simple that. (ERE, 13)
The inclusion of tensed language in these passages—"as yet," "for the time being"—suggests an interpretation fraught with great difficulty: namely, the positing of an existential "that" which is not a "what." The difficulty would seem to be compounded if we posit a multiplicity of heterogeneous "thats," for this would seem to imply that, for example, the pure experiences of "pen" and "table" are differentiated in the absence of any essential (what) differentiating characteristics. Despite his language, therefore, James would not seem to be saying that literally there is a time in which we grasp a "that" which is chronologically prior to our grasping it as a "what."

The closest he comes to saying something like this is in the following text: "Only new-born babes, or men in semi-coma from sleep, drugs, illnesses, or blows, may be assumed to have an experience pure in the literal sense of a that which is not yet any definite what, tho' ready to be all sorts of whats" (ERE, 46). The operative phrase here is "may be assumed," for while (as I will shortly indicate) there are some experiential grounds for this assumption, its hypothetical or suppositional character must be constantly kept in mind. Seigfried is again helpful here, for after asking in what sense pure experience can be spoken of meaningfully if it is never "pure as experienced," she replies, "I think that it can be as a limit concept which enables James to dethrone dualism as the primordial beginning of all experience" (CC, 49). Seigfried goes on to refine the nonexperiential character of pure experience:

James does not say that pure experience is never experienced, but that it is never immediately experienced and communicated as such because as soon as anyone is conscious in a human sense, he already structures that consciousness according to conceptual and verbal categories. Pure experience is indeed the immediate flux of life which furnishes the raw material to later reflections, which is inextricably intertwined with conceptual categories. (CC, 51)

In pointing out that the "immediate flux of life" can be experienced but not communicated, she is indicating what I believe to be one of the more fruitful features of James's radical empiricism. Attention was earlier directed to James's claim that experience exceeds logic, that verbalization and conceptualization—however necessary and useful—are never adequate to nor exhaustive of the concrete flow of experience.29 When the doctrine of pure experience is grasped as an effort to keep us open and present to reality in its overwhelming richness, depth, and experience, the difficulties previously noted are not removed but become peripheral and secondary. Even, then, if "pure experience" can never be experienced "as such," postulating it serves the purpose of keeping us aware of the fact that categorizations, conceptualizations, theories, and the like are not mental representations of concrete reality. The further recognition that categories, concepts, and theories are derived from a wider, overflowing field gives a measure of "experiential" justification for postulating pure experiences that are neither physical nor
ment, subjective nor objective, spiritual nor material. In this way dualism, idealism, and materialism are, if not disproved, at least shown to be themselves derivative modes of human thought and experience.

It is, however, when pure experience is treated as a primordial flowing field(s) that it offers the richest possibilities for a field metaphysics. The phenomenological grasp and description of this field as the immediately given or immediately present or immediate appearance is congenial to a speculative effort toward the construction of a metaphysics of fields. While it is not their principal concern, both Stevens and Seigfried in their analyses of pure experience can be useful in the development of such a metaphysics. Though it is merely a matter of emphasis, I wish to rely on Stevens in describing the “givenness” of this primordial field and Seigfried in stressing its flux or processive character. In both instances, of course, relations are inseparably present.

Stevens maintains that James’s “resolute return to the data of experience” is a “rediscovery of an absolute sphere of givenness, which antedates every entitative distinction” (JH, 15). If the “original field of givenness, i.e., the data of pure experience,” is rigorously analyzed, we do not discover the dualistic “distinction between a subject-entity and independent-object entities.” We find “only interrelated patterns of givenness” (JH, 68). As an “absolute sphere of givenness, which embraces both mind and body, conscious states and their contents,” pure experience cannot be reduced to or identified with “a subjective stream” (JH, 12). Hence, as we saw earlier, “pure experience is intrinsically neither objective nor subjective, but a larger area within which the functional differences between consciousness and the physical world can be defined.” As Stevens notes, this “larger area” or pure experience is viewed by James as “a neutralized sphere or field” (JH, 10).

One further point concerning this primordial field is noted by both Stevens and Wilshire: namely, the phenomenological, though not necessarily ontological, self-sufficiency and self-containedness of this field. Stevens contends that “the whole purpose of James’s theory of Radical Empiricism was to promote the discovery of an absolute field of experience, a zone of pure givenness which would depend upon nothing beyond itself for justification” (JH, 115). In a similar vein, Wilshire writes:

I think that James’ notion of the “originals of experience,” which he develops in the Principles, is the root-notion of his later metaphysics of pure experience. The key idea of that metaphysics is that experience is pure in the sense that “it leans on nothing”—it is the self-contained foundation. A pure experience is a “specific nature”—a “fact” in the sense that it has an irreducible meaning, not in the sense that it is necessarily a truth about the actual physical world. (WJP, 167)

Let me suggest now how this primordial given might be expressed in more speculative and metaphysical field language. Suppose we postulate
pure experience as a primordial inclusive field(s) capable of being differenti­
ated into distinct fields such as the mental and the physical. Since both the
mental and the physical are within the field of pure experience, there is no
ultimate ontological dualism. This in itself, of course, does not tell us what
it is that determines fields to be physical or mental, but it keeps us focused
upon concrete experience in our effort to make such determination. By hav­
ing to make any distinction such as mind and body, subjective and objec­
tive, spiritual and material in terms of distinct functions and relational pro­
cesses, we are enabled to continually expand our awareness of the concrete
while not confusing it with any theoretical entities such as sense data, phys­
icochemical atoms, ideas, and the like. Any distinctions made will be recog­
nized as derivative rather than ultimate and will have to be justified in terms
of their experiential fruitfulness rather than as allegedly mirroring or corre­
sponding to different ontological entities or orders of being. By grasping
reality or experience relationally rather than atomistically, we are led to rec­
ognize both its continuities and its discontinuities. By grasping it pro­
cessively, we avoid locking reality into one form or another but instead
recognize its characteristics of shifting, overlapping, fusing, and separating.

As I indicated in the general discussion of “fields,” a larger field is always
constituted by narrower fields that are both continuous with and distinct
from the wider field. This wider field is homogeneous, being neither re­
ducible to nor simply identical with its narrower fields. Since the wider
field, like all fields, is dynamic, it is continually giving rise to new fields.32
Hence, for example, one “portion” of this field acting upon another gives
rise to a distinction that can be designated as knower and known, or mean­
ing and content, or subject and object. The important point in terms of
James's radical empiricism is that there is no need to go outside or beyond
experience (ever widening field) to account for “real” distinction and dif­
fERENCE OF FUNCTION OF ONE PORTION OF THIS FIELD (EXPERIENCE) UPON ANOTHER.
They are really distinct because they are two different functions involving
two distinct sets of relations, but they are not ontologically different because
they are and remain two different functions of the same experience (field).33

Just as important as the “givenness” character of the primordial field(s) of
pure experience is its “flux” character. James’s recognition of and emphasis
upon the processive, changing, or developmental features of reality are pre­
sent in his earliest writings, but only in his final years does he draw out the
full metaphysical implications of the experience of reality as changing. For a
period of about two and a half years between 1905 and 1908, James recorded
his reflective efforts to meet certain criticisms of his doctrine of “pure expe­
rience.”34 In a 1906 note, James raises against himself a crucial question:
“May not my whole trouble be due to the fact that I am still treating what is
really a living and dynamic situation by logical and statical categories?” He
goes on to say that “if life be anywhere active, and if its activity be an
ultimate characteristic, inexplicable by aught lower or simpler, I ought not
to be afraid to postulate activity” (TC, II:760). In his Hibbert Lectures—delivered in 1908–09 and later published under the title A Pluralistic Universe—James, encouraged by his encounter with Bergson, bites the metaphysical bullet and makes “flux” the heart of his metaphysics. In doing so, he does not deny the utility and necessity of concepts and conceptualization, but he explicitly rejects their ability to give us reality in its “thickness.” He readily grants that direct acquaintance and conceptual knowledge are complementary,

but if, as metaphysicians, we are more curious about the inner nature of reality or about what really makes it go, we must turn our backs upon our winged concepts altogether, and bury ourselves in the thickness of those passing moments over the surface of which they fly, and on particular points of which they occasionally rest and perch. . . . Dive back into the flux itself, then, Bergson tells us, if you wish to know reality, that flux which Platonism, in its strange belief that only the immutable is excellent, has always spurned; turn your face toward sensation, that flesh-bound thing which rationalism has always loaded with abuse. (PU, 112–13)

James goes on to say that “the essence of life is its continuously changing character,” and it is this distinctive feature of reality as given “in the perceptual flux which the conceptual translation so fatally leaves out.” Since “our concepts are all discontinuous and fixed,” we can make them coincide with life only by supposing that life intrinsically contains “positions of arrest.” This effort to make our concepts congruent with life or reality is doomed to fail, since “you can no more dip up the substance of reality with them than you can dip up water with a net, however finely meshed” (PU, 113).

This “flux” emphasis is already present in James’s doctrine of “pure experience”: in “The Thing and Its Relations,” published early in 1905, he states, “‘Pure experience’ is the name which I gave to the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories” (ERE, 46). I earlier called attention to Seigfried’s suggestion that “pure experience is a limit concept, an explanatory hypothesis which can be postulated but not experienced as such.” Given the definition of pure experience “as the instant field of the present, the immediate flux of life before categorization,” she further points out that “the stream of consciousness provides an experiential correlate which comes closest to pure experience and therefore is a useful model for explicating the more obscure hypothesis.” A fruitful consequence of “proposing a continuous, unbroken flux as the basic paradigm of experience” is that we will thereby “be induced in our ordinary, interpreted experience to take continuity and flux seriously and will, consequently, experience the transitions and not be fixated on the objectified world” (CC, 51–53).35

James’s evident concern—indeed passion—for the concrete in no way diminishes the importance of concepts, abstractions, theories, symbols, be-
liefs, and the like; rather it increases their importance so long as we continue to recognize that these are not ends or entities in themselves but processes or activities by which we are enabled to participate ever more fully in that ongoing reality whose depth can be touched and appreciated but never exhausted through either perception or conception.

Later, with specific reference to personal immortality, the important implications and consequences of this continuing dialectic between the human field(s) in its individual and collective modes and the wider field(s) of reality will be explored. For now, let me call attention to the character of “activity” as belonging to all fields. “Bare activity,” Seigfried points out, “is predicable of the world of pure experience.” Such distinctions as actor and acted upon, cause and effect, do not apply to experience in its immediacy, though they can quite properly be introduced “when the field of experience is enlarged.” Seigfried contends—quite correctly, I believe—that “the meaning of activity, in its immediacy, is just these experiences of process, obstruction, strain and release” (CC, 96). This phenomenological description seems to me supportive of a metaphysical extrapolation that would postulate activity as characteristic of all realities. As mentioned above, panactivism rather than panpsychism would seem to be a more fruitful way of characterizing James’s metaphysics, despite his own language. Bruce Kuklick interprets *A Pluralistic Universe* as an affirmation of panpsychism and a rejection of neutral monism. I find Kuklick closer to James’s tendency on this matter than Perry, who laments James’s compromising the “theory that mind is a peculiar type of relationship among terms which in themselves are neither physical nor mental . . . through identifying the continuum of experience with consciousness great and small” (TC, II:592). It is just this identification that Kuklick reads as expressive of James’s view as expressed in his last philosophy. Having gotten beyond conceptualization, James found that “neutral experience was now not neutral, but throbbing, alive, constantly coalescing and recoalescing. This conscious experience was not unitary but contained ever-widening spans of consciousness within some of which human consciousness might lie” (RAP, 333).

This notion of “ever-widening spans of consciousness” is most important for the purposes of this essay. It is not necessary, however, to posit spans of consciousness as coextensive with reality. Here again, field language can keep us open to this feature of reality without universalizing it and giving rise to the problems attached to panpsychism. To employ Kuklick’s language, we might say that *all* fields—from electronic to divine—are “throbbing, alive, constantly coalescing and recoalescing.” There is no need, however, to conclude that all fields are “conscious” as long as we do not, a priori, identify “consciousness” and “activity.” Further, there is an ambiguity in the way Kuklick employs the term “neutral.” While “pure experience” can be neutral as regards the physical or psychical, it cannot be neutral as regards process and relation. By this I mean that pure experience is open to man-
manifestation as either physical or psychical, but it is not open to being non-processive or nonrelational. Since all fields, as we have seen, are processive and relational, hence "constantly coalescing and recoalescing," reality has a continuity and commonness that exclude ontological dualism. Since, however, the processes and relations constituting any field are multiple and variegated, we avoid any monism, affirming instead metaphysical pluralism. Our distinguishing conscious fields from nonconscious fields, therefore, must be based upon distinct functions rather than ultimately different kinds of being.