Self, God and Immortality

Fontinell, Eugene

Published by Fordham University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/67378

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2371801
CHAPTER 3

James: Toward a Field-Self

An ulterior unity, but not a factitious one. . . .
Not facetitious, perhaps indeed all the more real
for being ulterior, for being born of a moment of
enthusiasm when it is discovered to exist among
fragments which need only to be joined
together; a unity that was unaware of itself,
hence vital and not logical, that did not prohibit
variety, dampen invention.

—Marcel Proust
Remembrance of Things Past

The self in which I believe with a primordial
certainty is not a thinking thing enclosed within
itself. It is open to a field of independent persons
and things with which I am intimately and really
connected by my cares and concerns.

—John Wild
"William James and the
Phenomenology of Belief"

On the surface, James’s doctrine of the self would seem to have developed
through three stages. Beginning with a methodological dualism in his Principles of
Psychology, James apparently moved to a “no-self” doctrine in the
Essays on Radical Empiricism, and finally to the affirmation of a substantive
self in A Pluralistic Universe.¹ This three-stage view is basically sound and
helpful as long as it is not understood as suggesting any clear, linear, and
unequivocal development. In fact, there are tensions, shifts, inconsistencies,
and even contradictions, not only between but also within these broad
stages. Throughout, James is much less clear and confident about his
positive affirmations and solutions than he is in describing the problems and
what he wishes to avoid.²

The most serious threat to the interpretation suggested in this essay, as we
shall later see, is found in those texts in which James appears to opt for a
materialistic or behavioristic account of the self, or in which he seems drawn
toward a denial of the reality of the “self” or the “ego.” While in other texts
he affirms opposition to such views,³ it will only be by keeping in mind his
overall philosophy, including his ethical and religious doctrines, that we can
confidently deny materialistic or “no-self” interpretations of James’s philos-
ophy of self. It is also important to remember that fidelity to experience in all its variations and ambiguities was his primary concern, rather than any systematic conceptual consistency. Ralph Barton Perry has well noted that James feared “thinness” much more than “inconsistency.”

Rather than attempting to follow the twists and turns, the argumentative subtleties and obscurities that accompany the historical development of James's doctrine of self, let us simply assume that he is from the first moving toward a field view of the self. Hence, I will select and concentrate on those texts and aspects of this thought which contribute to such a field view and ignore or minimize whatever may point in another direction.

James at times speaks primarily in terms of experience that is neither mental nor physical, and at other times in terms of consciousness. Both terms can easily and properly be encompassed under the rubric of “field,” which, as we have already seen, is one way of understanding “pure experience” and which, as we shall see, is also one way to understand “consciousness.” In what follows, we must keep in mind what has previously been said about fields as processive-relational complexes. Most important is the point that if the self is a complex of fields—“fields within fields within fields . . .”—then there is no “self in itself.” This does not, of course, solve traditional questions such as “who” or “what” is doing the acting or thinking—questions that gave rise to doctrines of the substantial soul or transcendental ego or to the denial that there is any “who” or “what.” A field perspective or assumption does, however, shift the focus of our attention and present us with the task, at least initially, of describing the characteristics of those activities constituting the self.

If we were restricted to citing one text from James that describes most concretely the field character of the self, the following would do as well as any:

My present field of consciousness is a centre surrounded by a fringe that shades insensibly into a subconscious more. I use three separate terms here to describe this fact; but I might as well use three-hundred, for the fact is all shades and no boundaries. Which part of it properly is in my consciousness, which out? If I name what is out, it already has come in. The centre works in one way while the margins work in another, and presently overpower the centre and are central themselves. What we conceptually identify ourselves with and say we are thinking of at any time is the centre; but our full self is the whole field, with all those indefinitely radiating subconscious possibilities of increase that we can only feel without conceiving, and can hardly begin to analyze. The collective and disruptive ways of being coexist here, for each part functions distinctly, makes connexion with its own peculiar region in the still wider rest of experience and tends to draw us into that line, and yet the whole is somehow felt as one pulse of our life,—not conceived so, but felt so. (PU, 130)

This passage includes explicitly or implicitly most of the characteristic features of the self that I will be emphasizing. First, however, I wish to focus
briefly on the implication of the last phrase of the text—"not conceived so, but felt so." That implication is the primacy and pervasiveness of "feeling" throughout the life and work of James. This point was touched upon earlier when we discussed James's acceptance, in his last work, of Bergson's invitation to "dive back into the flux." We noted then that, for James, the "thickness" of reality could not be grasped by means of concepts or conceptualization. Stating this point now in more positive language, we might say that the "thickness" of reality can be "felt" but cannot be known conceptually, since there is a "gaping contrast between the richness of life and the poverty of all possible formulas" (TC, II:127).

I earlier called attention to pragmatism's concern for the concrete; in James's stress upon the primordiality of "feelings" in contrast—though not in opposition—to concepts, we have further evidence of this concern. In any effort to describe our experience, of course, we are compelled to use words and concepts, and this gives rise to the danger that James designated "vicious intellectualism." The perennial temptation of the rationalistic temper is to confuse "reality" with the concepts that we necessarily employ in our efforts to render more satisfactory our transactions with and within reality. James's concern for the concrete and his suspicion of abstract concepts were present almost from the start of his intellectual journey, but it was only in his later years and with the aid of Bergson that James felt that he had broken the "edge" of intellectualism. In A Pluralistic Universe, the last full-length work published during his lifetime, he unequivocally affirms that "feeling" exceeds both conceptualization and verbalization. After all the talking, James tells us, "I must point, point to the mere that of life, and you by an inner sympathy must fill out the what for yourselves" (PU, 131). If we break reality into concepts, we can "never reconstruct it in its wholeness." There is "no amount of discreteness" out of which it is possible to "manufacture the concrete." On the other hand, "place yourself at a bound, or d'emblée, as Bergson says, inside of the living, moving, active thickness of the real, and all the abstractions and distinctions are given into your hand" (PU, 116).

James's concern for the concrete and his recognition that "life exceeds logic" should not be interpreted as a mode of irrationalism or antiintellectualism except insofar as rationalism and intellectualism are understood as confusing concepts or ideas with the full richness of experience and reality. Similarly, his insistence on the centrality of "feelings" should not be understood as a mode of "emotionalism" or "pseudo-mysticism." This is not to say, of course, that James denies the reality and importance of our emotive or affective life, as well as authentic mystical experiences. What is important, however, is that his insistence on taking mysticism seriously stems from his profound desire to explore concrete experience in all its richness, depth, variety, and vagueness. In Some Problems of Philosophy, published posthumously, James maintains that "the deeper features of reality are found only in perceptual experience. Here alone do we acquaint ourselves with
continuity, or the immersion of one thing in another, here alone with self, with substance, with qualities, with activity in its various modes, with time, with cause, with change, with novelty; with tendency, with freedom” (SPP, 54).

For our purposes “feeling” and “perceptual experience” can be considered the same, and this text and its implications will be repeatedly reflected when we come to discuss more specifically the various aspects of James’s “self.” The point here is that “feelings” is the term James employs to keep us focused on and open to original experience. Perry has emphasized this and at the same time cautioned against a narrow reading or misreading of James’s use of “feelings.”

It may, I think, be said that James’ works contain the most thoroughgoing attempt which has ever been made to carry all the terms of discourse back to the original data of sense, or to other immediately discriminated qualia. Like Whitehead, he suggested that “feelings” was the best term to employ for these originals. “Sensation” is too narrowly associated with apprehension through recognized end-organs. “Thought,” “ideas,” and “representations,” all of which have been used for this or a similar purpose, are too closely associated with the processes of the intellect. If the term “feelings” is used, this term must also be freed from its own characteristic limitations, its exclusive association, namely, with affective or emotional states. The term must be used in a sense that makes it natural to speak of a “feeling of relation,” or a “feeling of identity,” or a “feeling of drink-after-thirst,” or a “feeling of pastness and futurity.”

Are “feelings,” then, physical or psychical? As with “experiences,” we must say, at least initially and descriptively, that they are neither and both, the purpose of this paradoxical response being to prod us to look “beyond” the traditional categories of “physical” and “psychical.” Thus, by employing the term “feelings,” James alerts us to the irreducibility of our concrete experiences. “It is hard to imagine,” he tells us, “that ‘really’ our own subjective experiences are only molecular arrangements, even though the molecules be conceived as beings of a psychic kind.” How much more difficult it would be to imagine, James implies, if molecules were conceived as beings of a material kind. He continues by noting:

A material fact may indeed be different from what we feel it to be, but what sense is there in saying that a feeling, which has no other nature than to be felt, is not as it is felt? Psychologically considered, our experiences resist conceptual reduction, and our fields of consciousness, taken simply as such, remain just what they appear, even tho facts of a molecular order should prove to be the signals of appearance. (SPP, 78)

The distinctiveness and irreducibility of “feelings” are further manifested in the fact that we can feel more than we can name. Thus James contends that “namelessness is compatible with existence.”
There are innumerable consciousnesses of emptiness, no one of which taken in itself has a name, but all different from each other. The ordinary way is to assume that they are all emptinesses of consciousness, and so that same state. But the feeling of an absence is *toto coelo* other than the absence of a feeling; it is an intense feeling. (*PP*, 1:243–44)\(^9\)

This last sentence succinctly and vividly illustrates that some phenomena are available only through immediate experience. No kind of "argument" or "external" evidence could possibly compel one to affirm what is here described. I will later suggest that there is a "depth" or character to the self which a field view illuminates even if it does not "explain" it. Something of this "depth" is indicated, though in dualistic language, in James's claim that "tendencies" are grasped from "within" as well as from "without":

Now what I contend for, and accumulate examples to show, is that "tendencies" are not only descriptions from without, but that they are among the objects of the stream, which is thus aware of them from within, and must be described as in very large measure constituted of feelings of tendency, often so vague that we are unable to name them at all. (*PP*, 1:246)\(^10\)

It is . . . the reinstatement of the vague and inarticulate to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention. (*PBC*, 150)

James's desire to reinstate the "vague and inarticulate" is therefore not a defense of obfuscation or romantic cloudiness. Paradoxically, it is an effort to describe our experience as rigorously as possible and to avoid any procrustean cutting of experience so as to fit it neatly into what can be named or conceptualized. Thus, in our attempt to construct a field model of the self we will draw generously from James's descriptions and his approach, which takes seriously our own experience. Robert Ehman has noted that James "is suspending consideration of those dimensions of the self that are accessible through inference or through the observation of a third-person witness. He appeals to our own first-person experience and describes the self as it appears prior to theoretical elaboration."\(^11\) This in no way denies the legitimacy and even necessity of extrapolating from or speculating upon our personal experiences. It does, however, caution against explaining away that which is present in our immediate experience. We must begin from this experience; indeed, we must return to it—though if our speculative and imaginative forays are successful, the experience to which we return will be immeasurably richer and more complex than that from which we began.\(^12\)

THE "SELF" OF THE *PRINCIPLES*

The chapter entitled "The Consciousness of the Self," one of the longest chapters in *The Principles of Psychology* (*PP*), is filled with a richness of detailed description and observation which to this day remains worthy of reflective consideration, quite apart from its technical and theoretical aspects. James presents us with a view of the self that has been read by some as
anticipating behaviorism and by others as proto-phenomenology. Without doing violence to the text and in keeping with the fundamental thrust of James's thought, I believe it can also be read as moving toward a doctrine of the self as a complex of fields. The processive-relational characteristics of all fields is much in evidence in every important feature of James's "self." Whatever obscurities, inconsistencies, and gaps attach to this doctrine, it is quite clear that it excludes any view of the self as a finished, permanent, essentially enclosed entity or thing. At the outset, James notes "that we are dealing with a fluctuating material" (PP, I:279). This is not surprising, given all we have previously said about James's process metaphysics. It is not accidental that the chapter on the self immediately follows the most famous chapter in the *Principles*, the one in which "stream" is introduced as the primary metaphor for "thought" or "consciousness." As already noted, throughout the *Principles* James assumes a methodological dualism, which he will deny in his later metaphysics, but there is widespread agreement among the commentators that the more imaginative and insightful aspects of the book resist being incorporated within any ontological dualism. Let us assume, therefore, that any dualistic language we encounter is to be read only as expressing a diversity of functions—a functional dualism. Hence, the implicit dualism in the phrase "stream of consciousness" is easily circumvented, and is more in keeping with James's fundamental intentions, by designating it "stream of experience." Similarly, when we find James speaking of the "me" as objective and the "I" as subjective, we will remember that in his more developed metaphysics he views "objective" and "subjective" as functionally rather than ontologically distinct. Thus, in discussion of the "me" or the "I," the "object" or the "subject," it will be understood that we are not referring to different orders of being but rather focusing on different aspects or functions of the self. As James himself noted: "the words I and me signify nothing mysterious and unexampled—they are at bottom only names of emphasis" (PP, I:324n.).

The field or processive-relational character of James's doctrine of the self is present at the outset of the "Self" chapter: "In its widest possible sense . . . a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account" (PP, I:279). Recall that in Chapter 1, I made the point that "relations" are not extrinsic to the "essence" of a being, something accidentally added on to its substance. Rather, they are constitutive of it; they enter into the very fabric of a being, making it what it is. Let us look at the text just cited within this perspective. There is no "self" to which are extrinsically added a body, clothes, wife, or lands; these are relations that continue to form and fashion, build and diminish, expand and narrow, enrich and impoverish that reality referred to as "the self."
James describes "the Constituents of the Self." These are first divided into "the empirical self" (me) and the "pure Ego" (I), with the former further divided into the material, social, and spiritual selves. I will first consider the empirical self and its constituents; after an excursus on "the body" I will return in the next chapter to the "pure Ego" in relation to James's important but controversial doctrine that the thinker is the "passing Thought."

To begin with, we must be on guard against understanding the terms "material," "social," and "spiritual" in a traditional, commonsense, or dualistic manner. Not surprisingly, James tells us that "the body is the innermost part of the material Self." What is a bit surprising—and may be an effect of James's Victorian milieu—is that "clothes come next," after which he adds family, home, and property (PP, I:280). Now it is not for a moment being suggested here, or in the consideration of the other selves, that all constituting relations are on the same plane and enter into the self with the same degree of intimacy. The role played by different relations and their relative weight in the determination of the self cannot be determined a priori; nor are these set once and for all. The self is a constantly changing self, and a relation that may be an intimate constituent today may be peripheral tomorrow and nonexistent the day after. Whether there are any relations without which an individual self would cease to be is a question that must be considered later when we focus more explicitly on the possibility that the self is immortal. The point to be stressed here is that the relations being described are "real" constituents of the self—in a sense each is the self or at least a part of the self. "Our immediate family," James states, "is a part of ourselves. . . . When they die, a part of our very selves is gone. If they do anything wrong, it is our shame." This is no pious or sentimental or romantic expression on James's part, for he also insists that our clothes, home, and property are "with different degrees of intimacy, parts of our empirical selves" (PP, I:280–81).

Turning to the "social self," we see that the ways in which we are regarded by our fellow humans determine us to be the selves we are. Just as we should properly have spoken of our material selves (rather than self), we should speak of our social selves, since "a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind" (PP, I:281–82).

Whatever one may think of the suggested interpretation of the material and social selves, the phenomena described by James are relatively unproblematic, and most thinkers would agree that they have some bearing upon the self, though the precise nature of this bearing might be disputed. The case of the "spiritual self" is quite different, beginning with the very designation "spiritual," for it is James's description of this self that lends the support to a materialistic or behavioristic reading.

He begins innocently enough: "By the Spiritual Self, so far as it belongs to the Empirical Me, I mean a man's inner or subjective being, his psychic
faculties or dispositions, taken concretely" (PP, I:283). Nor is it particularly
upsetting, despite a degree of vagueness, when James goes on to speak of
the feeling that we have of “a sort of innermost centre within the circle, of a
sanctuary within the citadel, constituted by the subjective life as a whole”
(PP, I:285). When he asks, “What is this self of all the other selves?” his initial
description seems appropriate to a self that is designated “spiritual.” He
notes that “probably all men would describe it” as
the active element in all consciousness. . . . It is what welcomes or rejects. It
presides over the perception of sensations, and by giving or withholding its
assent it influences the movements they tend to arouse. It is the home of in­
terest. . . . It is the source of effort and attention, and the place from which
appear to emanate the fiats of the will. (PP, I:285)

The basic consensus begins to dissipate, however, when an effort is made
to define more accurately the precise nature of this central self. “Some
would say that it is a simple active substance, the soul, of which they are
conscious; others, that it is nothing but a fiction, the imaginary being de­
noted by the pronoun I; and between these extremes of opinion all sorts of
intermediaries would be found” (PP, I:286). James puts to the side for the
moment the question of what this “central active self” is, preferring to begin
by attempting to describe as precisely as possible how it is felt, for “this
central nucleus of the Self, . . . this central part of the Self is felt.” His gener­
al description of how “this palpitating inward life” feels is still relatively free
of problems. “I am aware,” James tells us, “of a constant play of fur­
therances and hindrances in my thinking, of checks and release, tendencies
which run with desire, and tendencies which run the other way” (PP, I:286–
87). The bombshell is dropped (at least for those who resist a materialistic or
behavioristic interpretation of James) when he tells us that forsaking general
descriptions and

coming to the closest possible quarters with the facts, it is difficult for me to detect
in the activity any purely spiritual element at all. Whenever my introspective glance
succeeds in turning round quickly enough to catch one of these manifestations of sp­
tonatey in the act, all it can ever feel distinctly is some bodily process, for the most part
taking place within the head. (PP, I:287)

Now what is significant here is that James explicitly includes acts of at­
tending, assenting, negating, making an effort, remembering, and reason­
ing. These acts usually designated mental or immaterial or spiritual are felt
by James “as movements of something in the head” or nearby. Thus the
rather startling conclusion is reached that the central nucleus of the “Spirit­
ual Self,” the “‘Self of selves,’ when carefully examined, is found to consist main­
ly of the collection of these peculiar motions in the head or between the head and
throat.” James quickly adds that he does “not for a moment say that this is all
it consists of,” and a few pages later he concedes “that over and above these
there is an obscurer feeling of something more.” I will later attempt to ex-
ploit this "something more," which is a recurring phenomenon in James's thought, in favor of a nonreductionistic field-self. It must be acknowledged, however, that in this section of *The Principles of Psychology*, James is perilously close to a denial of the subject or self and an affirmation of a reductionistic behaviorism. This becomes manifest when he speculates on the consequences of what he concedes is a hypothesis: namely, "that our entire feeling of spiritual activity, or what commonly passes by that name, is really a feeling of bodily activities whose exact nature is by most men overlooked" (*PP*, I:288). The key consequence of this hypothesis would be that "all that is experienced is, strictly considered, objective"; hence, it would be more appropriate to describe the stream of thought as "a stream of Sciousness" rather than "consciousness," which would be a "thinking its own existence along with whatever else it thinks." It would follow, according to James, that "the existence of this thinker would be given to us rather as a logical postulate than as that direct inner perception of spiritual activity which we naturally believe ourselves to have." He goes on to say that such a speculation violates common sense and that he will henceforth avoid it (*PP*, I:291). When we come to consider his notion of the thinker as the "passing Thought," however, we will again have to ask whether James's doctrine can be utilized in the construction of the kind of substantive self that would allow for a belief in immortality.

Ehman makes a corrective criticism of James's view of the self that would have to be incorporated in the model of the self suggested in this essay. Briefly stated, the criticism is that in his description of self-feeling and self-love James overlooks the reflexive character of these experiences and hence loses, or appears to lose, the "self." A central feature of James's doctrine is that the material, social, and spiritual selves are all manufactured out of "objects" that are interesting and arouse the desire to appropriate them "for their own sakes." In bodily self-love, social self-love, and spiritual self-love, what is loved is always some object—a comfortable seat, the image of me in another's mind, my loves and hates. In none of these instances do I love a pure principle of self or a Pure Ego (*PP*, I:303-7). Ehman does not deny the accuracy of James's description, but he does question whether it is exhaustive. What James fails to recognize is "the felt reflexivity, the felt reference back to self, that is present in all self-feeling and self-love on the adult human level" (*NEP*, 260). Ehman makes a similar point concerning James's claim that the "present pulse of our conscious life" can become an object of knowledge only when it has passed. Conceding this, Ehman nevertheless insists that our present pulse can "feel prereflectively its own existence in its very act."

The present pulse must feel itself as the central self; it cannot have the central self as a mere object before it. For in this case it could not in a radical sense feel bodily motions, sensations, attitudes, and locations as its own; and in appropriating peripheral objects to its bodily center, it would not appropriate them to itself. In order for the present pulse to feel the warmth and intimacy of the
body and bodily life, it must feel that this is close to itself. There is a moment of self-relation in the very experience of intimacy: intimacy is intimacy to; and for an anonymous, nonreflective consciousness everything would simply appear as present, as objective; nothing would appear warm and intimate. The body would always in this case appear as an external object, never as its own body, as the location of its own life. *(NEP, 263–64)*  

I believe that Ehman is here more faithful to the overall thrust of James’s thought than is James himself when he suggests that the self may be nothing more than a collectivity of “objects” within an impersonal stream of consciousness. Recall the earlier stress placed upon James’s notion of “feelings” and his insistence that we can feel more than we are able to conceptualize. He is consistent in denying that the self can be known directly, since through reflective consciousness we are always presented with “objects.” To say, therefore, that we can directly know the self or the subject of our activities would be to say that the subject can be known as an object. This is why James (as well as Hume) can never discover the self through an introspective or reflective act. But given the weight that James (unlike Hume) attaches to “feeling,” it is not inconsistent to acknowledge a prereflective felt awareness that accompanies all our conscious acts.  

This crucial notion of the self’s felt awareness will be considered again when the “passing Thought” and its relation to unity, continuity, and identity are analyzed. Before doing so however, I must briefly discuss a most complex and bedeviling topic: the “body” and how it might be understood within a field view of the self.

**EXCURSUS: “THE BODY”**  
We have already seen that James has described the activities of the “spiritual self” in terms of bodily feelings. I wish to consider those and other texts in which James apparently presents the “self” and the “body” as interchangeable. My purpose is to underline the ambiguity involved in James’s use of the term “body” and try to show how a field interpretation of “body” is more consistent with his thought than is a materialistic or behavioristic interpretation.  

First, however, I would like to call attention to the fact that any ambiguity attached to the term is by no means unique to James. In the West this explicit ambiguity goes back at least as far as Paul, who, in response to the question, “How are dead people raised and what sort of body do they have when they come back?” answered by distinguishing “earthly bodies” from “heavenly bodies.”  

Christian thinkers have been debating and speculating on Paul’s meaning from the earliest times, and they continue to do so. Not surprisingly, there is a great range and variety of interpretations; in spite of this diversity, however, it is safe to say that on one point there is a consensus—the “resurrection body” cannot be simply and unequivocally identical with the body as it is commonly known and experienced.  

The absence of univocal meaning in “body” language is not, of course,
found only in the West. In Eastern thought there are lengthy treatises on the “astral,” “subtle,” and “etheric” bodies, all of which are differentiated from the “physical” body. In addition, there is a long tradition within Buddhism of the “Triple Body of the Buddha.”

Since Plato, the Western philosophical tradition has endeavored to restrict the meaning of the term “body” so as to highlight the nonbodily aspect of human nature usually designated “soul,” “spirit,” “reason,” or “mind.” In a sense, this effort culminated in Descartes’s “clear and distinct” division of human beings into two essentially different substances—mind and body—to which subsequent modern philosophy has responded in one of three ways: acceptance of two ultimate substances (dualism); reduction of matter to mind (idealism); reduction of mind to matter (materialism). It is only in the twentieth century that there have emerged various philosophical efforts to articulate an understanding of “the body” that does not easily fall into any of the three traditional classifications. I believe that pragmatism is one such effort.

The movement that has brought forth the most explicit, developed, and technical expression of the ambiguity belonging to “the body,” however, is phenomenology. Any in-depth consideration of this issue is beyond both the limits of this essay and the competency of its author. Still, since I will later utilize several phenomenological commentators on James in suggesting a field interpretation of his use of the term “body,” it might be helpful to show from the works of prominent phenomenologists that James is not alone in referring to the body in ambiguous, vague, and even confusing ways.

The indispensable insight in all “soul” views is that the human person or self is “more” than what is commonly understood as “the body”: that is, an object that can be weighed, measured, located in mathematically exact spatial and temporal coordinates, and reduced to precise kinds and quantities of chemicals. The task confronting all nonmaterialistic philosophies is to account for this “more” in a way that does not create such problems as the classical Cartesian one of having to explain how two essentially different substances can interact in such a way as to form one being. Without claiming to be able to prove that James and the phenomenologists succeed in this task, I believe it is important to keep in mind what they are attempting if we are to make any sense of their often elusive language. Negatively, they wish to overcome the difficulties and lack of adequate explanatory power in dualism, materialism, and idealism. More positively, they wish to describe human beings in a manner distinct from but not in opposition to science, and faithful to human experience in its most concrete and subtle expressions.

The explicit distinction between “thing-body” and “lived body” probably originated with Max Scheler, but the phenomenon he describes is a concern of all phenomenologists. A few excerpts from the thought of Jean-
Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Gabriel Marcel will suffice to indicate a similarity of intent and direction among these thinkers and between them and James, the differences of overall philosophy and technical language notwithstanding. For my purposes, a key similarity is that all these thinkers speak in terms of processes and relations—fields—rather than in terms of underlying substance and unchanging principles or essences.

Sartre distinguishes between the body as a “being-for-itself” and a “being-for-others,” and he insists that “they cannot be reduced to one another.”

Being-for-itself must be wholly body and it must be wholly consciousness; it cannot be united with a body. Similarly being-for-others is wholly body; there are no “psychic phenomena” there to be united with the body. There is nothing behind the body. But the body is wholly “psychic.”

Whatever else may be said about this far from self-evident text, it is clear that Sartre is calling attention to a phenomenon—the body as being-for-itself—that eludes both scientific and commonsense observations. One other passage can be cited to exemplify the relational character of the body as being-for-itself: “We know that there is not a for-itself on the one hand and a world on the other as two closed entities for which we must subsequently seek some explanation as to how they communicate. The for-itself is a relation to the world” (BN, 306).

The irreducible distinctiveness of the lived body as well as its processive-relational character is also affirmed by Merleau-Ponty:

The outline of my body is a frontier which ordinary spatial relations do not cross. This is because its parts are interrelated in a peculiar way: they are not spread out side by side, but enveloped in each other. . . . Psychologists often say that the body image is dynamic. Brought down to a precise sense, this term means that my body appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task. And indeed its spatiality is not, like that of external objects or like that of “spatial sensations,” a spatiality of position, but a spatiality of situation.

Whether Gabriel Marcel can properly be called a phenomenologist is perhaps open to dispute, but there can be no doubt that his reflections on the body, halting and unsystematized as they may be, are strikingly relevant to the concerns of this essay. One aspect of Marcel’s view of the body is of particular importance: his strong personalistic emphasis. Thus he reminds us that “it is not a body, but my body, that we are asking ourselves questions about.” He goes on to say that “speaking of my body is, in a certain sense, a way of speaking of myself”; hence, it is proper to say, “I am my body.” As soon as we do so, however, we encounter that ambiguity to which we have previously referred, and Marcel is explicit in denying that the identification with “my body” can be properly understood as a mode of materialism. “I am my body only in so far as for me the body is an essentially mysterious
type of reality, irreducible to those determinate formulae (no matter how interestingly complex they might be) to which it would be reducible if it could be considered merely as an object" (MB, I:103). Marcel concedes that there is a strong temptation to treat the body in a detached fashion as a "kind of instrument... which permits me to act upon, and even intrude myself into, the world" (MB, I:99). On the contrary,

I am my body in so far as I succeed in recognizing that this body of mine cannot, in the last analysis, be brought down to the level of being this object, an object, a something or other. It is at this point that we have to bring in the idea of the body not as an object but as a subject. (MB, I:101)

These views of Marcel, expressed in his Gifford Lectures of 1949, were anticipated many years earlier in his Metaphysical Journal. In a note written in 1923 he acknowledged the nonconceptualizable and nonobjectifiable character of "my body."

Since the fact for my body of being my body is not something of which I can genuinely have an idea, it is not something that I can conceptualize. In the fact of my body there is something which transcends what can be called materiality, something which cannot be reduced to any of its objective qualities... The non-objectivity of my body becomes clear to our mind as soon as we remember that it is of the essence of the object as such that it does not take me into account. In the measure in which it does not take me into account my body seems to me not to be my body. (MJ, 315-16)

Two other aspects of "my body" as understood by Marcel should be noted: namely, "my body" as "felt," and as extending beyond the envelope of the skin. Marcel maintains "that my body is mine inasmuch as, however confusedly, it is felt... If I am my body this is in so far as I am a being that feels" (MJ, 243). A key idea in Marcel is "feeling as a mode of participation." While he only hints at it, he does suggest that we participate in reality only insofar as we are bodies; more, we "feel" reality only insofar as we feel our bodies.

From this point of view it seems, therefore, that my body is endowed with an absolute priority in relation to everything that I can feel that is other than my body itself; but then, strictly speaking, can I really feel anything other than my body itself? Would not the case of my feeling something else be merely the case of my feeling myself as feeling something else, so that I would never be able to pass beyond various modifications of my own self-feeling? (MB, I:101)

The "felt" character of "my body" is closely bound up with its relational character; that is, the fact that it cannot be localized within narrow spatial and temporal coordinates. "I am inclined to think," Marcel tells us, "that there can only be a body where there is an act of feeling, and for there to be this feeling the distinction between the here and there needs to cease to be rigid" (MJ, 270). I will later argue that the self's relations to a more encom-
passing reality are the grounds for a plausible belief in its immortality. The experiential ground for such an extrapolation, however, is the evidence that we are here and now constituted by relations that extend the reality of the self "beyond" the confines of the "skin." This "transcending" relational feature has already been noted in reference to James's doctrine of "selves." The following text from Marcel can be cited as reinforcement for such a view:

I am my body; but I am also my habitual surrounding. This is demonstrated by the laceration, the division with myself that accompanies exile from home (this is an order of experience that Proust has expressed incomparably). Am I my body in a more essential way than I am my habitual surrounding? If this question is answered in the negative, then death can only be a supreme exile, not an annihilation. This way of stating the problem may at first sight seem childish. But that, I think, is mistaken. We must take in their strictest interpretation words such as belong to (a town, a house, etc.): and the word laceration. It is as though adhesions are broken. (MJ, 259)

Marcel and James, I suggest, use a similar phenomenon in their "belief," "faith," "extrapolation" concerning the divine. What is significant, however, is that the phenomenon itself is recognized by many who would not also share the "faith" of a James or a Marcel. Sartre bears this out: "My body is everywhere: the bomb which destroys my house also damages my body in so far as the house was already an indication of my body" (BN, 325).

JAMES'S "BODY-TEXTS"
Let us return now to the previously cited body-texts of James to see how they may be interpreted so as to avoid a materialistic or physicalistic interpretation. Recall that James referred to the "Spiritual Self" as the "central active self," the "central nucleus of the Self," and "this self of all the other selves." The startling and confusing feature of James's doctrine emerges when, in attempting to describe this self as concretely as possible, all he "can ever feel distinctly is some bodily process." Even such acts as attaining, negating, and making an effort are—so James claims—"felt as movements of something in the head." It is not surprising, then, that those sympathetic to materialism as well as many unsympathetic to it should interpret James's doctrine of the self materialistically or behavioristically. "There is perhaps nothing in James," Ehman contends, "that has been more radically misinterpreted than his account at this point, and he has often been taken as a mere materialist." Ehman insists that there is no materialism here, "no denial of thought or emotion, but simply the observation that we are unable to grasp these as purely psychical, as nonbodily" (NEP, 262).

While I obviously share Ehman's rejection of a materialistic reading of these texts, the issue is, I believe, a bit more complicated. The complication is evident as soon as we ask not what James is denying but what he is affirming. It is always easier to see what a creative thinker is denying than what he
is affirming, and James is no exception. James shared the difficulty of our own contemporary thinkers who desire to overcome dualism but are hampered in their efforts by the dualistic language that is so deeply embedded in the culture and in our psyche-body. Still, the direction is evident, whatever difficulties James and we have in articulating that direction. Ehman helpfully proposes that “when James asserts that the ‘acts of attending, assenting, negating are felt as movements in the head,’ the term as ought to be taken literally” (NEP, 262). This at least suggests that James cannot be understood to assert any simple unequivocal identity between the “self” and the “body.” Indeed, James seems to acknowledge a distinction when—a few lines before describing the feelings of the spiritual self as bodily movements—he states that “when it [the spiritual self] is found, it is felt; just as the body is felt” (PP, 1:286).

In spite of the fact that materialism cannot be reconciled with James’s overall philosophy and that, as we have seen, he explicitly rejects it as inadequate to fundamental human needs, textual support for a materialistic interpretation of his doctrine of the self is not confined to a few passages in his early work, The Principles of Psychology. In an equally notorious text from his essay “Does Consciousness Exist?”—some fourteen years after publication of his Principles—James added more fuel to the flames of the controversy. In the penultimate paragraph, and after conceding that “to many it will sound materialistic,” he states:

I am as confident as I am of anything that, in myself, the stream of thinking (which I recognize emphatically as a phenomenon) is only a careless name for what, when scrutinized, reveals itself to consist chiefly of the stream of my breathing. The “I think” which Kant said must be able to accompany all my objects, is the “I breathe” which actually does accompany them. . . . Breath, which was ever the original of “spirit,” breath moving outwards, between the glottis and the nostrils, is, I am persuaded, the essence out of which philosophers have constructed the entity known to them as consciousness. (ERE, 19)

Harsh words, indeed (“and some would walk with him no more”), but as with an earlier sayer of “harsh words,” it is not perfectly clear what is being said. The more tender-minded will take comfort in James’s acknowledgment that these words will sound materialistic, to which the more tough-minded will make the “if it looks like a duck . . .” response. The phenomenologically oriented commentators (who can be classed as either tender-tough-minded thinkers or tough tender-minded ones) are, I believe, responsive to the texts under consideration while remaining consistent with James’s broader philosophical concerns and congenial to a field view of the self. To begin with, there is no dispute concerning James’s effort to find an alternative to the traditional “soul.” Richard Stevens suggests:

Such crudely materialistic language seems to have been chosen by James as part of a strategy designed to eliminate the last vestiges of soul-theory which
he felt led infallibly to a misunderstanding of the body. If spiritual activity is attributed to an incorporeal separate entity, then the body is inevitably looked upon as a mere instrument. 28

The next point of agreement is that James “refuses to view the body, in the fashion of traditional dualism, as an extended mass in space” (JH, 73). 29 Closely allied to this is that the “body” James is positively affirming is, in less technical language, the “lived body” of the phenomenologists. “It is not,” John Wild maintains, “the body of traditional dualistic thought, the mere mass of matter extended in space. It is the moving, living, conscious body which expresses our emotions, and is the non-objective centre of my world.” Thus, according to Wild, James came to see “that the self is neither a physical body, nor a separated consciousness, nor any combination of the two. . . . It is a living, sentient body dependent on the things among which it has been thrown, and inseparable from the world in which it exists.” 30

Finally, there can be little doubt, as Ehman has pointed out, that James opens the door to misunderstanding by failing to distinguish clearly between the body as a mere physical object as studied by physiology and the body as we feel and live through its movements in our actual conscious experience. The body as a physiological entity containing the central nervous system and brain is an object for the detached attitude of science; it is not our localized, felt subjective self. (NEP, 262)

An important aspect of all of this is that the ambiguity of James’s body references is not merely a terminological ambiguity. Earlier, in discussing his doctrine of pure experience, I made the point that the terminological ambiguity “is grounded in experiential ambiguity”; in support, I cited several passages from his essay “The Place of Affectional Facts,” in which James maintains that “our body is the palmary instance of the ambiguous. Sometimes I treat my body purely as part of outer nature. Sometimes, again, I think of it as ‘mine.’ I sort it with the ‘me,’ and then certain local changes and determinations in it pass for spiritual happenings” (ERE, 76). 31 I suggested that James’s doctrine would have benefited from the use of field language, and I would like now to expand this point a bit with reference to his doctrine of the “body.”

Bruce Wilshire points out that James “treats the body as a topic known always as the same within an Object that has field-like as well as stream-like characteristics” (WJP, 128). 32 A brief consideration of the manner in which James understands “topic” and “Object” will clarify Wilshire’s statement and indicate some grounds for the field view being suggested. The terms “topic,” “kernel,” and “fractional object” all mean the same for James. They point to or express a “part” of the Object which is really the thought’s “entire content or deliverance, neither more nor less.” James illustrates this point with the thought, “Columbus discovered America in 1492.” Most people, if asked what in such a case is the object of one’s thought, would
reply “Columbus” or “America” or “the discovery of America.” According to James, however, “it is nothing short of the entire sentence, ‘Columbus-discovered-America-in-1492.’” Further, if we wish to feel the idiosyncrasy of this thought, we must reproduce it just “as it was uttered, with every word fringed and the whole sentence bathed in that original halo of obscure relations, which, like an horizon, then spread about its meaning” (PP, I:265–66). Now if, as Wilshire suggests, “the Object in its prereflective totality” is the “field of consciousness” (WJP, 128), and the body is a “topic” within an “Object,” it seems apt to describe it as a “field within a field.” Such a description receives support, I believe, from James’s claim that our bodies “are percepts in our objective field—they are simply the most interesting percepts there. What happens to them excites in us emotions and tendencies to action more energetic and habitual than any which are excited by other portions of the ‘field’” (PP, I:304).

Remember, I am not claiming that James is here, or in the other texts cited, consciously and deliberately constructing a field doctrine of the self. I am and will continue suggesting, however, that these experiential descriptions lend themselves to incorporation within such a field metaphysics, and the utility of these texts for fashioning such a metaphysics—rather than the explicit intention of James—is my primary concern. Consider, for example, the way in which he speaks of the multiplicity of selves that constitute the empirical self or “me” (we have still to consider that other constituent of the self—the pure Ego). Surely James does not mean that each of these is an entity somehow stacked up within a container self. No physicalistic imagery will convey the fact that each of these selves is the self through and through. But a field metaphor would seem eminently appropriate here, since fields are overlapping and inclusive, able to come and go with both continuity and discontinuity. As I have repeatedly acknowledged, the utilization of the field metaphor does not “explain” how such overlapping simultaneity of multiple yet unified realities is possible (though it does turn us away from a number of dead-end pathways while keeping us focused upon the concrete experiential flow)—no more, for example, than does speaking of the “lived” or “live body” explain how, according to Merleau-Ponty, “its parts are inter-related in a peculiar way: they are not spread out side by side, but enveloped in each other.” Whatever they are trying to say, it is clear that when James and Merleau-Ponty refer to “parts,” whether of the self or of the body, they do not mean “parts” in the same sense as when speaking of parts of an automobile or even parts of our object-body.

There remains one other crucial body-text to consider—a text at once a suggestion of and an obstacle to the field view of the self. What I would like to do is to read this text in terms of the field assumptions previously posited, conceding the somewhat procrustean character of such an effort. The text in
question is part of a lengthy footnote to “The Experience of Activity,” originally delivered in 1904 as the Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association.  In this note James is responding to a critic who had taken him to task “for identifying spiritual activity with certain muscular feelings,” basing the charge on the text we have already discussed. James’s first point is that his intention was to show that “there is no direct evidence that we feel the activity of an inner spiritual agent as such.” He goes on to distinguish three “activities.” First is the activity in “the mere that of experience, in the fact that something is going on.” For my purposes, I will refer to this as the stream of experience—the general flowing field of reality. Within that field James further distinguishes “two whats, an activity felt as ‘ours,’ and an activity ascribed to objects.” He insists that in the disputed text his concern was to determine which activity within the “total experience-process” could properly be designated “ours.” In language whose surface sense is surely materialistic or behavioristic, he states: “So far as we are ‘persons,’ and contrasted and opposed to an ‘environment,’ movements in our body figure as our activities, and I am unable to find any other activities that are ours in this strictly personal sense.”

James concedes that there is “a wider sense in which the whole ‘choir of heaven and furniture of the earth,’ and their activities, are ours, for they are our ‘objects.’ ” In this sense, however, “‘we’ are . . . only another name for the total process of experience, another name for all that is.” This last has an almost monistic ring to it insofar as it suggests that there is one process constituting all that is. When James’s later doctrine concerning the self-compounding of consciousness is considered, we will encounter this notion again and with a pantheistic flavor. It will be seen that James is eager to stress the “intimate” character of the divine but in a way that does not deny the reality of individuals. Hence, there will be an overlapping of consciousness (“fields within fields”) that allows for both individuality and the encompassing character of the divine. I am contending that the note under consideration anticipates this later doctrine and that in both instances James’s insight is better expressed in field language. To illustrate further, let us return to the text in which James says that it is not “we” as the “total process of experience” but the individualized self that was the focus of his concern in the previously cited texts concerning the spiritual self and movements in the head. He then reinforces his early expression:

The individualized self, which I believe to be the only thing properly called self, is a part of the world experienced. The world experienced (otherwise called the “field of consciousness”) comes at all times with our body as its centre, centre of vision, centre of action, centre of interest. Where the body is is “here”; when the body acts is “now”; what the body touches is “this”; all other things are “there” and “then” and “that.” These words of emphasized position imply a systematization of things with reference to a focus of action
and interest which lies in the body. . . . The body is the storm centre, the 
origin of co-ordinates, the constant place of stress in all that experience-train.
Everything circles round it, and is felt from its point of view.

Recalling the previously made distinction between the “thing-body” and 
the “lived body,” our initial response to this text is, “To which of these 
bodies is James referring?” The question is seriously misleading, of course, 
if it implies that there are two bodies; it would then land us back in that 
ontological dualism James was continually striving to overcome. On the 
other hand, if we take “body” in the scientific or commonsense meaning, 
we cannot avoid materialism. If there is implicit in James, as the commen­
tators have maintained, a distinction between the body as a physiological 
entity and as “lived,” then it can only be a distinction of focus and function. 
The thing- or object-body can only be the lived body viewed more nar­
rowly, viewed as a limited field within a more inclusive field. James is point­
ing, I believe, to that more inclusive body field which, while not separate 
from the “thing-body,” is also neither reducible to nor simply identical with 
it.

In Stevens’s commentary on the text under consideration, there is, in my 
opinion, support for the kind of field reading being presented: “These terms 
designate a network of positions, a system of coordinates, whose focal point 
is always the body. No experience is possible for us, unless it fit into this 
oriented system of references” (JH, 74). While he does not say so explicitly 
in this passage, Stevens is clearly referring to the lived body, as is evident in 
a later passage in which he states that Husserl and James “both agree on the 
ambiguous situation of the animate body which reveals itself simultaneously 
as a Thing in the world and as the center of coordinates to which the rest of 
the world is related” (JH, 88). Stevens describes the body as “the func­
tional center of my consciousness,” and as “the zero-point, the locus of 
every field of consciousness” (JH, 143, 86).

One other segment of James's lengthy footnote merits consideration. It 
immediately follows the last passage cited:

The word “I,” then, is primarily a noun of position, just like “this” and 
“here.” Activities attached to “this” position have prerogative emphasis, and, 
if activities have feelings, must be felt in a peculiar way. The word “my” 
designates the kind of emphasis. (ERE, 86n.)

Apart from the relational character of the “I,” this passage can be read as 
implying, or at least not foreclosing, the reality of a personal self that is 
“more” than an object in what Ehman called “an anonymous stream of 
consciousness” (NEP, 263). Recall that Ehman criticized James for the failure 
to acknowledge “the felt reflexivity, the felt reference back to self,” in many 
of our experiences. In his desire to stress that when we reflect, we always 
encounter the self as an object within the stream of experience, James flirts 
with a “no-self” doctrine. The corrective for this tendency, as Ehman in-
sists, is to acknowledge the self's prereflective awareness of its own existence. Does the passage just cited recognize this awareness? It depends, I believe, on how we understand the "peculiar way" in which the activities attached to the "I" are felt. Is the "prerogative emphasis" an act of prereflective self-reference without which the self would be reduced to just another object in "an anonymous stream of consciousness?" If so understood, it would certainly soften the "materialistic" implications of those passages previously cited.

Important as they are, I do not believe that James's doctrine of the self can be constructed from these "body-texts" alone. Nevertheless, I have dwelt upon them at some length in order to show that they need not be read in a materialistic or behavioristic sense and that they can properly be read as pointing toward a field view of the self. Since I have chosen to speak in terms of "self" rather than "body"—even "lived body"—it is important to reemphasize why James was attracted to "body" language. The point has repeatedly been made that James wished to account for the data of experience without recourse to any nonexperiential spiritual or transcendental principle or any immaterial soul. But he also had a more positive reason for describing experience in bodily terms: namely, that such language keeps us aware of the concreteness, immediacy, otherness, uniqueness, and centeredness that characterize the stream of experience while protecting us against a deenergizing absorption in empty abstractions.37

These are also the features James wishes to emphasize when he makes sensation, as Perry says, "the prototype of experience." But Perry notes the same kind of ambiguity attached to "sensation" that was earlier noted in reference to "body." Sensory experience is not, for James, what it is for those empiricists who "reduce the concreteness of experience to sensational atoms" or "limit the qualia of experience to the 'six senses'" (SWJ, 47-48). Nevertheless, according to Perry, "sensory experience is still typical of existence in respect of that character of fullness, direct presence, and shock of externality which distinguishes it from thought, memory and imagination" (SWJ, 70).38 Since concreteness and its allied characteristics are the claimed advantages of the field metaphor, and inasmuch as it has been suggested that the body can be understood in field terms, why use, as I do, "self language" instead?

To some extent the difference in speaking of "self field" or "body field" is only terminological. Nevertheless, I would maintain that in view of the aims of this essay (and I would say the overall aims of James's philosophy), "self" is a less misleading term than "body" for referring to the full reality of the human being. Notice that I say "less misleading," for the danger in speaking of the "self" is that while it is a more palatable term for contemporary thinkers than "soul" or "spirit," it may simply mask an unacceptable dualism. Still, I believe the likelihood that "body" terminology will eventuate in materialistic reductionism is greater than that "self" terminology will
dissipate into vacuous spirituality. The reason for this, I would suggest, is that we apparently have more “exact” language for the body both in science and in common sense. The very vagueness of the term “self” is an advantage in that it keeps us open to dimensions of human reality never adequately grasped when speaking of the “body.” This is reflected, I believe, in ordinary language that expresses a long-standing belief, insight, intuition, or perhaps prejudice that we are “more” and “other” than our bodies.

But the distinction between the self and the body is not restricted to common sense or to the various forms of dualism. George Herbert Mead, who is within the pragmatic tradition, shares many assumptions and principles with James and Dewey, and has given us a very rich philosophy of the self as social. Nevertheless, he explicitly asserts that “we can distinguish very definitely between the self and the body,” since “the self has a character which is different from that of the physiological organism proper.”

Finally, it is more consistent with and faithful to James’s more developed view of the self, which will be presented later, to speak in terms of the self rather than the body. Hans Linschoten has pointed out that “to James, the Self was a property of a body, although it can, and sometimes even must, be described as something different from the body.” Even in that section of The Principles of Psychology in which James describes the spiritual self as “movements in the head” or “bodily feelings,” he still seems to distinguish, as previously noted, the spiritual self from the body: when insisting that the spiritual self “is felt,” he immediately adds, “just as the body is felt” (PP, 1:286). If this were an isolated text, it would prove nothing, but it is consistent with the kind of distinct meaning that belongs to what James will later call the “full self” (PU, 130).