

WILLIAM JAMES AND LIFE AFTER DEATH

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William James' views about life after life death can be summed up in two words, *not proven*. Over the course of his career he encountered the question repeatedly. He considered it, he pondered it, and he explored it. In the end his views did not significantly change. At the same time he found the idea fascinating and was continually intrigued by the possibility of it. James interest in the question of life after death appears to have grown out of his interest in psychic research. After first briefly reviewing the sources of that interest, some of James' writings about eternity, immortality and life after death will be presented chronologically. The approach will confirm the consistency of his views over time despite subtle variations.

In order to understand William James' views about life after death certain common misconceptions about him need clarification. First, he was a psychologist not a philosopher. Second, he sought a firm scientific basis for all his views. Third held that ultimately scientific validity could be found in human matters that cannot be quantified. Fourth, he accepted the reality of individual human experience even when the experience transcended perceptual knowledge. Note even when accepting personal reality he never presumed the universality of that reality.

According to Eugene Taylor (1996) two early-unsigned articles by James show he had a major interest in the nature of consciousness by 1865. This interest may well have led James to explore the sub-conscious and multiple states of consciousness. It became a central concept in his psychology. As a result he became interested in psychical research as well as the hypnotic states being explored in France. In 1869, because of this interest he wrote a review of a book about psychical research by Epes Sargent (James, 1986). Much of the review dealt with

Sargent's discussions of spiritualists and mediums. The question of life after death is implicit when observing mediums who avow they communicate with the dead. James' review expressed fascination with psychical research but said it called for verifiable facts.

In 1870 he wrote in his diary about a hallucination he personally experienced (James, 1967). This personal encounter with an altered-state of consciousness may also have heightened James' interest in psychical research. His interest led him to be associated with the London Society for Psychical Research. Here James encountered the thinking of F. W. H. Myers, one of the founders. Myers wrote extensively about life after death. James was also familiar with the work of Gustav Fechner one of the German psychophysics experimentalists. He often refers to Fechner's opinions in his writings about psychical research (James, 1986). Like Myers, Fechner wrote about life after death. In 1903 James reviewed a book by Myers that concerned the survival of human personality after death, and in 1904 he wrote the introduction for the English translation of Fechner's book theorizing life after death. James comments on these will be deferred until they occur chronologically.

James' became interested in the spiritualism of psychic mediums who claimed communication with the dead (Taylor, 1996). Validity of the psychic experiences of mediums directly involved the existence and meaning of life after death. In 1885 through his wife James became acquainted with a Boston medium, Mrs. Piper. She was one of the mediums who claimed to communicate with the spirit world. James' observations of Mrs. Piper's séances and his communications with and about her also show his views on life after death.

Last James referred to the question of life after death in his lectures, books, and correspondence. Much of James' writings about psychical research remained unpublished and unknown for decades. This began to change when Gardner Murphy and Robert Ballou edited a

selection, *William James on Psychological Research* (1960). It contains one or two items not found in Harvard University's volume, *Essays in Psychological Research*, part of their critical edition of James' complete works (James, 1986). Though a significant amount of James' writings concerning psychological research does not include views on life after death, it is found in a number of places.

James' review of Sargent's book has already been mentioned. As a result of his association with the London Society for Psychological Research James became one of the founders of the American Society for Psychological Research in 1884. In 1886 James was one of the authors who on behalf of the Society wrote a circular soliciting spiritual mediums to present the society with evidence of their powers (James, 1986). Like the earlier review the concept of life after death is implicit. However the circular places a great deal of emphasis on the need for demonstrable evidence rather than speculative reports. This supports James' unwillingness to accept speculation.

James thoughts about mediums and spirits are discussed in *Principles of Psychology* (James, 1890). The question arises in Chapter 10 (Section 62.3). He refers to the medium in a trance communicating with an unknown as if they were foreign. He notes that the medium's voice and language are changed. James explicitly states that the medium "purports" that the communication is with a spirit from the dead. James is skeptical and notes that the general tenor and style of most unknown communicators seem highly stylized and similar. Again, he thinks it may be possible but is skeptical.

In 1898 James gave a lecture on immortality at Harvard one in a series of Ingersoll lectures (James, 1986). According to Murphy and Ballou (1961) the lecture was subsequently revised and incorporated into *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*. In the revised version James

rejects the idea that his beliefs are pantheistic. He goes on to say that immortality is not incompatible with brain-function theory (James, 1961, p. 280). He sets up two questions: Is it true, as science asserts, that all inner life depends on a functioning brain? James goes on to speculate that possibly “our brains are a colored lens in the wall of nature admitting light from the super-solar source but at the same time tingeing or restricting it ...” (p. 293). The brain becomes a veil blocking access to a universal reality that transcends consciousness. He restates it in terms of the brain being a transmitter of human personality that continues when the brain ceases functioning. This seems like an assertion of immortality until it is remembered that James begins by clearly stating this is speculation built on unproven assumptions. He does not offer it as either a proof or a belief. Rather, it is only a possibility.

Taylor (1996) prints a letter from James to Henry Rankin written in 1901 (p. 90). He was responding to entreaties from Rankin about Christianity. In it James says, “I believe myself to be (probably) permanently incapable of believing the Christian scheme of vicarious salvation....” He acknowledges there is a larger, more powerful “sphere of life” than our normal consciousness. Harking back to his Ingersoll lecture James says we know this through a “subliminal self, with a thin partition through which messages make interruption.” In the letter he does not relate this concept to immortality. Looking ahead to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he says that ultimately the nature of religion is the mystical experience of an individual. I would infer that his concept of the larger sphere of life evolves into a concept of a mystical realm. While accepting the idea of a ‘larger realm’ there is nothing in James’ letter that implies an acceptance of life after death.

Undoubtedly James’ best known work about spiritual matters is *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James, 1902, 2009). As would be expected mention of immortality, life

after death, and eternity repeatedly occur. However, the references uniformly support the contention that subject of the book is the psychology of religion not the philosophy of religion. Nor is it a theological tract. It also clearly articulates two key elements in James' psychology, pragmatism and radical empiricism. It reflects radical empiricism as it is based on the metaphysical reality and validity of spiritual matters and mysticism. It is pragmatic as he absolutely accepts the usefulness of beliefs about the eternal for those who hold them. His views remained unchanged. Life after death is possible but not known.

In the story of Dr. Bucke we see one clear example of someone with a profound belief in a form of eternal life. He said "I saw that all men are immortal; that the cosmic order is such that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all" (p. 231). There are several similar examples. In all cases James accepts the reality of the experience and belief without expressing any opinion. His own position is stated in the Postscript. Remembering that Myers believes in a form of life after death and Hodgson is Mrs. Pipers spirit intermediary, we can see he is reiterating his unwillingness to accept immortality when he writes,

"It seems to me to be eminently a case for facts to testify. Facts, I think, are yet lacking to prove "spirit return," though I have the highest respect for Messrs. Myers, Hodgson, and Hylop, and am somewhat impressed by their favorable conclusions. I consequently leave the matter open..." (p. 305)

In 1903 James wrote a review of Frederic H. W. Myers' book, *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*. It was published by the English Society for Psychical Research. James

agrees with Myers' thoughts about a subliminal region of consciousness and hypnotism. He begins to question Myers' thought as it moves from the concept of subliminal to cosmic. James views the relationship between the two as poorly defined. In the end James credits Myers with providing the only scientific attempt to demonstrate such a thesis and says that others should not reject it but use it as a basis for further investigation (Murphy & Ballou, 1960). Again he says all of this is possible but it must be researched further.

When Gustav Fechner's *Little Book of Life After Death* was translated into English, William James provided an introduction (Fechner, 1904). Fechner's view about life after death was firmly within traditional Christianity. James clearly profoundly respects Fechner. At no point does he criticize the book. He does not reject Fechner's thinking as he had previously in the letter to Rankin (Taylor, 1996). I believe there are two reasons for this. Practically it is rare for the author of an introduction to reject the thesis of a book. This is generally considered 'bad form.' James may well have accepted the invitation as he had profound respect for Fechner and had been greatly influenced by Fechner's scientific research. I believe we can discern this as James talks about Fechner's imaginative thinking and refers to him as a philosopher not a scientist. At one point he also contrasts a philosophical viewpoint with a psychological one. James admires the way Fechner deals with the complexities of his theory. In the end James states that Fechner's theory remains speculative. Yet again James does not accept the idea of eternal life but does not say it is impossible.

James closely observed and followed the work of the Boston medium Mrs. Piper from 1885. Mrs. Piper's most common spirit intermediary was named Hodgson. In 1909 James made a major report to the American Psychical Society on Hodgson (James, 1986). In this report he compares two theories about Hodgson's nature, telepathic and spiritualistic. What James says is

that the spiritualist in is the more convincing of the two but he is not convinced and “is compelled to suspend judgment” (p. 322). Later in the same report he allows the idea of Hodgson’s being is “just short of proof” (p. 359). Both Taylor (1996) and Murphy and Ballou (1961) say this is a close as James ever came to accepting the idea of life after death. It remains that over the course of decades he was always ready to allow for the possibility or even the probability, but as a psychologist he remained unwilling to scientifically accept it.

A brief survey such as this can only touch lightly the voluminous published writings of William James let alone the massive quantity of material stored in the Harvard archives in Cambridge (Murphy & Ballou, 1960). Even so the survey found nothing inconsistent with the cited material. The views James expressed about life after death are quintessentially consistent with his psychology. William James was willing grant the reality of a human realm not subject to radical positivism. Consequently he was willing to entertain the possibility, even probability of life after death. He also acknowledged the reality of concepts of immortality in terms of their value to individuals who held them. As a psychologist and scientist he was not ready, at that time, to accept the idea as objectively real. It remained undemonstrated but not necessarily undemonstratable. So it can truly be said that William James’ view about life after death was the ancient Scottish verdict of *not proven*.

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