The Psychologist's Dilemma: To Subject The Self To Science —
Or Science To The Self?¹

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William James, one of the major founders of modern scientific psychology, spoke often about "the psychologist's fallacy." This fallacy resulted (and still results) from the tendency of psychologists to confuse their analyses of subjective experience with the nature of so-called objective reality. A related, though less attended problem revolved (and revolves) around what I shall call "the psychologist's dilemma." Although this latter problem was shared by other psychologists at the turn of this century, I will discuss it with special reference to the thought and work of William James. I have chosen to do so partially because James's own psychological and philosophical works reflect the import and centrality of this dilemma in the history of the human sciences, and partially in recognition and honor of the one hundredth anniversary of James's two-volume masterpiece, The Principles of Psychology, which will be celebrated in 1990. As I hope will be clear, this dilemma continues to be relevant to the concerns of contemporary psychologists.

The psychologist's dilemma, experienced intensely by James and to varying degrees by other founders of scientific psychology, can be stated rather simply. It is: whether to create a science of the self, objectively considered, or a science compatible with the self, as subjectively experienced. The dilemma pivots around the fact that science itself, as an activity of human selves, falls within the domain of psychology, thus making a "science of the subject," or of "the subjective," doubly problematic. For, as James realized, if science is to be honestly and accurately "self-reflective," it must present itself as an activity that depends upon (however much it might also construe) human subjectivity. This dilemma—essentially, whether to objectify the self by submitting it to traditional scientific methods of analysis, or to subjectify science by submitting its procedures to a psychological analysis—innervated James's consciousness and work from the very beginning, and represents an important dimension of the conceptual context within which James and others tried to define the subject, methods, and prospects of a scientific psychology at the turn of our century. Its repercussions continue to echo in the psychology and philosophy of science of our own day.

When James, with his basic training in the medical sciences, turned to the new physiological psychology in the 1860's and early 1870's, he was already keenly aware of the increasing friction between modern science and the more traditional humanistic modes of understanding. In the 1860's, in fact, he became virtually convinced that modern science, and in particular the assumptions surrounding the influx of Darwinian notions into the biological sciences of the time, led inevitably to the conclusion that, as he put it, "we are Nature through and through, that we are wholly conditioned, that not a wiggle of our will happens save as the result of physical laws" (letter to Thomas W. Ward, March 1869, in H. James III, 1920, Vol. 1, pp. 152-153). His presumption then, with respect to psychology, was that a truly objective, scientific treatment would reveal the human self to be an epiphenomenal byproduct of the working out of inexorable physical laws.

This presumption—to James a very dreadful one—conflicted with his fundamental desire (and what he took to be a common human desire) to "make my nick, however small a one, in the raw stuff the race has got to shape, and so assert my reality" (letter to Ward, January 1868, in H. James III, 1920, Vol. 1, p. 132). In the end, after suffering the ravages of depression and facing the prospect of suicide, James grasped in desperation to "the thought of my having a will" and, relatedly, to the thought "of my belonging to a brotherhood of men" (p. 130). Resolving to act "as if" he were free, though he could not justify the notion of freedom from any scientific point of view, he found that his prospects took on a better hue, and he gained hope that he could in fact enter into what he called "real relations" (not just causal relations) with others, which he took to be a necessary prelude to making a difference in his life.

It was in this biographical context—a context shared by many other first-generation psychologists who experienced a similar conflict between their view of the human self as real and efficacious, on the one hand, and their commitment to causal modes of scientific explanation, on the other—that James came to reconsider the fundamental assumptions underlying the scientific enterprise. In a letter to the editor of The Nation in 1874 (James, 1874/1987), he started to reveal and to work out his new views on science, complaining about the hauteur of scientists who presumed a level of authority far outstripping any proof they could offer regarding the validity of their assumptions and arguments. A little later, in one of his first substantive articles (James, 1878/1978), James began to clarify what he regarded as misguided in the positivist epistemology of his day, primarily the presumption that there is such a thing as disinterested knowledge.

We are all fated to be, a priori, teleologists whether we will or no. Interests which we bring with us, and simply posit or take our stand upon, are the very flour out of which our mental dough is kneaded. . . . Not a cognition occurs but feeling is there to comment on it, to stamp it as of greater or less worth. . . . The knower is not simply a mir-
ror floating with no foot-hold anywhere, and passively reflecting an order that he comes upon and finds simply existing. The knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth on one side, whilst on the other he registers the truth which he helps to create. Mental interests, hypotheses, postulates, so far as they are bases for human action—action which to a great extent transforms the world—help to make the truth which they declare. In other words, there belongs to mind, from its birth up ward, a spontaneity, a vote. It is in the game, and not a mere looker-on. (pp. 18,21)

In other words, the mind can make a difference.

This thesis about the role of the knowing self in the generation of knowledge—in science just as much as in the humanities and in everyday life—was to become a central theme in James’s thought, informing his psychology at the most fundamental level and radically transforming the philosophy underlying his scientific work. Indeed, having rejected his earlier presumption that science dictated a reduction of the self to materialistic and deterministic bases, James saw that his new insight into the nature of human cognition mandated an entirely new view of the scientific enterprise. In particular, it mandated a view that recognized the centrality of the human self and the end of what he called “literal objectivity.” As he wrote later in his life,

Up to about 1850 almost everyone believed that sciences expressed truths that were exact copies of . . . realities . . . . The suspicion is in the air nowadays that the superiority of one of our formulas to another may not consist so much in its literal ‘objectivity,’ as in subjective qualities like its usefulness, its ‘elegance’ or its congruity with our residual beliefs. Yielding to these suspicions, and generalizing, we fall into something like the humanistic state of mind. Truth we conceive to mean everywhere, not duplication, but addition; not the constructing of inn r copies of already complete realities, but rather the collaborating with realities so as to bring about a clearer result. (James, 1909/1975b, pp. 40-41)

This is precisely the sort of philosophy of science that he elaborated— a philosophy in which the universe, like a block of stone, can be carved up in different ways, according to the particular perspective and skills of each scientist.

The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. In a sense the statue stood there from eternity. But there were a thousand different ones beside it, and the sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest. Just so the world

of each of us, howsoever different our several views of it may be, all lay embedded in the primordial chaos of sensations . . . Other sculptors, other statues from the same stone! Other minds, other worlds from the same monotonous and inexpressive chaos! My world is but one in a million. . . . How different must be the worlds in the consciousness of ant, cuttle-fish, or crab! (James, 1890/1983, p. 277)

Or to make the comparison to humans, how different can be the experience of different persons, as illustrated by James’s example of four Americans traveling in Europe:

Let four men make a tour of Europe. One will bring home only picturesque impressions—costumes and colors, parks and views and works of architecture, pictures and statues. To another all this will be non-existent; and distances and prices, populations and drainage-arrangements, door- and window-fastenings, and other useful statistics will take their place. A third will give a rich account of the theatres, restaurants, and public balls, and naught beside; whilst the fourth will perhaps have been so wrapped in his own subjective broodings as to tell little more than a few names of places through which he passed. Each has selected, out of the same mass of presented objects, those which suited his private interest and has made his experience thereby. (James, 1890/1983, pp. 275-276)

As this quotation suggests, at the root of James’s new approach to science was his conviction, bred of experience, that the interests of the scientist himself or herself are the sine qua non of his or her distinctive insights into reality. Indeed, these interests, being part of reality, help to shape its contours and prospects. As James (1890/1983) wrote, “The fons et origo of all reality, whether from the absolute or the practical point of view, is thus subjective, is ourselves.” Reality starts “from our Ego,” shedding itself “from point to point,” extending to whatever holds the “immediate sting of interest” for us (pp. 925-926). By thus shaping reality through our selective attention and emphasis,

we are creative. We add, both to the subject and to the predicate part of reality. The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands. Like the kingdom of heaven, it suffers human violence willingly. Man engenders truths upon it. (James, 1907/1975a, p. 123)

To James, the self became the “centre of knowledge & interest,” and its function was “positional,” to define the vantagepoint or perspective from which all perception, all conceptualization, all appreciation, all judgment,
and all behavior proceed (James, 1897-1898/1988a, p. 234). As a result, science necessarily assumed what might be called a "selfish" quality: however constrained by scientific methods and rigor, the scientist's view of the world is not uniquely privileged—it is not absolute or "literally objective." 1

In this situation, in which he subjected knowledge to interest and science to the self, James (1890/1983) felt that "the personal self rather than the thought [or consciousness]" could be treated as "the immediate datum in psychology" (p. 221). Indeed, James was strongly convinced that "no psychology...can question the existence of personal selves. The worst a psychology can do is so to interpret the nature of these selves as to rob them of their worth" (p. 221).

Despite this claim, and despite the efforts of his pupil Mary Whiton Calkins to establish self-psychology at the center of the discipline, a psychology did come about that questioned the existence of personal selves as well as robbed them of their worth. During the heyday of behaviorism, which was coextensive with the dominance of logical positivism in the philosophy of science, the self was clearly subjected to science—that is, to the traditional (nineteenth-century) presumptions and strictures of materialism and determinism. Not that no one felt caught in what I have called "the psychologist's dilemma." But those who felt and respected the dilemma—Gordon Allport, Henry Murray, Carl Rogers, and others—were clearly in the minority, or on the periphery of the discipline, however great their individual reputations.

Interestingly, all of this began to change in the late '50s and '60's as positivism came in for systematic critique and as the self began to reappear in psychology. Now, in the late 1980's, post-positivist philosophy of science and post-behaviorist self-psychology are thriving industries; and in both industries, various forms of constructionism and pragmatism—which is to say, Jamesian modes of thought—are central to ongoing developments.

Although I have focused on a single historical case, it may not be inappropriate on the eve of the anniversary of James's masterpiece, to offer the hope that these recent developments in the philosophy of science and in the psychology of the self will be drawn together, once again, as they were in James's thought. If some integration or at least coordination of discussions on these topics can be achieved, the place of the subjective—in science as large as in psychology in particular—may yet be established and appreciated by more than the relatively few individuals who have had the courage to face the dilemma implicit in modern scientific psychology.

Footnotes

1Some of the material used in this article was drawn from my forthcoming chapter, "William James on the Self and Personality: Clearing the Ground for Subsequent Theorists, Researchers, and Practitioners," which will provide a comprehensive historical and conceptual analysis, as well as extensive primary and secondary documentation, regarding James's self-psychology (Leary, forthcoming). However, my thesis about "the psychologist's dilemma" is unique to the present article and to the presentation upon which it is more immediately based. This presentation was part of a symposium on "Subjectivity and Pluralism in the Human Sciences at the Turn of the Century," held at the annual meeting of the History of Science Society, University of Florida, Gainsville, FL, 28 October 1989.

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