Religious Experience and the Divisible Self: William James (and Frederic Myers) as Theorist(s) of Religion

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Scholars have understood William James's unattributed reference to a discovery made in 1886, which he described as "the most important step forward in psychology since [he had] been a student of that science," as a reference to the British psychical researcher Frederic Myers, rather than, as I argue, the French psychologist Pierre Janet. Correctly understood, this discovery illuminates the experimental (Janet) and theoretical (Myers) underpinnings of *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* surfaces the comparative method and the experimentally based theory of the divisible self that informed James's work, and clarifies James's efforts to explain how persons might subjectively experience a presence that they take to be an external power, *when such was not necessarily the case.* Approaching the *Varieties* in this fashion allows us to specify more clearly the kinds of experience that most interested James. This, in turn, circumscribes his explanation of religious experience and, in my view, makes it more compelling.

WILLIAM JAMES structured *The Varieties of Religious Experience* around two large questions about religion: What does it do (a question of function), and whence does it come (a question of origins) (1985: 13–14; Taves: 273)? But, as he made clear in his opening lecture, his central concern was not so much with religion broadly conceived as with the

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experience of persons who could be considered "'geniuses' in the religious line," those whose original experiences set the pattern for others, rather than "ordinary religious believers" whose religion was made by others, communicated through tradition, and maintained by habit (1985: 15). In his concluding lecture, he addressed the deeper question that in his view informed the question of origins, that is, whether the claims of such exceptional persons could be "literally and objectively true" (1985: 405). Were such persons literally and objectively "moved by an external power" —in the context of prayer, prophesy, inspiration, or visionary experience—or were they not (1985: 403)?[1] James's question was not simply whether such experiences had value for life but, rather, whether they could be understood as true in relationship with "other truths that also have to be acknowledged" (1975: 40–41).[2]

In the *Varieties* James offers a theoretical explanation of how persons might experience a sense of an external presence of something they take to be divine that was congruent, in his view, with the various truths—experiential, theological, and scientific—that he felt need to be acknowledged. His theoretical explanation rested on an unattributed discovery made in 1886, which he referred to in the *Varieties* as "the most important step forward in psychology since [he had] been a student of that science" (1985: 190). The discovery revealed, he said, "an entirely unsuspected peculiarity in the constitution of human nature," specifically "that, in certain subjects at least, there is . . . a set of memories, thoughts, and feelings which are extra-marginal and outside the primary consciousness altogether, but yet must be classed as conscious facts of some sort, able to reveal their presence by unmistakable signs" (1985: 190). "This discovery of consciousness beyond the field," James argued, "casts light on many phenomena of religious biography" (1985: 190). This unattributed discovery and its application to religious experience mark, in my view, an important and underappreciated contribution to discussions of theory and method in the study of religion.

This reading of the *Varieties* owes a debt to Eugene Taylor (1984, 1996, 1999a: 176–182), whose work on exceptional mental states and consciousness beyond the margin effectively made the case that the *Varieties* is a

[1] See also where James asks, "What is the objective truth of their content?" (1985: 401). According to James, "The word 'truth' is here taken to mean something additional to bare value for life" (1985: 401n).

[2] In his later essays on pragmatism James distinguished between two levels of truth. Speaking of theology, he said, "If theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much. For how much more they are true, will depend entirely on their relation to the other truths that also have to be acknowledged" (1975: 40–41). I infer from his overall argument in the *Varieties* that in this context he was inquiring about truth in this second sense.

psychological book informed by psychological theory.[3] James scholarship in religious studies owes a similar debt to Wayne Proudfoot (1985: 156–157), whose book on religious experience brought the *Varieties* out of the psychology of religion, where it was regularly honored, if not deeply probed, and into wider philosophical discussions about religious experience. [4] Since then other philosophers of religion, including Grace Jantzen (1989), David Lamberth (1999), and William Barnard (1997, 1998), have taken up the *Varieties* in relation to larger questions in the philosophy and theology of religion.[5] James is rarely cited, however, in contemporary discussions of theory and method, despite Henry Levinson's pioneering work on James as a scientist of religion (71–159). Indeed, David Wulff, author of a leading textbook in the psychology of religion, recently concluded that the influence of the *Varieties* was "largely general . . . for in it *James elaborated neither a specific theory nor a particular method,* beyond the judicious use of personal documents" (28, emphasis added). Levinson's discussion, which is particularly helpful in relation to James's evolutionary understanding of religion, is limited in other ways. Specifically, it does not explore James's use of comparative method, delineate the relationship between his method and his theory, or identify the whole of James's theory of religion as such.

As I have presented my own reading of James's theory and method elsewhere (Taves: 273–286), my aim here is to lift up those aspects of his theory and method that I think are most worth recovering. Doing so requires resurfacing his conversation partners in the field of experimental psychology and psychical research.[6] I begin by using the unattributed discovery of 1886,

[3] A number of related studies have also contributed; see, for example, Kenny, Flournoy, and Hacking.

[4] Proudfoot notes that "the *Varieties* has been widely read and commented upon, but its significance for contemporary issues in the philosophy of religion has often been overlooked" (1985: xvii).

[5] Proudfoot and Jantzen both acknowledge James's explanation of religious experience. Proudfoot sets it aside, however, because he views James as fundamentally uninterested in questions of origins (1985: 161–166). Jantzen dismisses it because it does not seek to explain the sorts of experiences that Christian mystics, considered historically, actually took to be central (1989: 296–300). Lamberth tends to downplay consciousness beyond the margin (1994, 1999). Barnard recognizes the significance of consciousness beyond the margin for the *Varieties* and discusses it at length (1997: 7, 170–179, 1998: 182–188). His reading, while largely compatible with mine, is oriented toward the philosophical discussions of mysticism, not theory and method in the study of religion.

[6] Both psychologists engaged in clinical research and psychical researchers referred to themselves as "experimental psychologists" at the turn of the last century. Their use of the term was contested by physiological psychologists in the German laboratory tradition. Although the narrower definition came to predominate in academic circles during the first decade of the twentieth century, my use of the term in this article reflects the broader and more inclusive understanding of the term promoted by the figures at issue here: Pierre Janet, Frederick Myers, and William James. On the different approaches to psychology from 1880 to 1930, see Taylor 1999b, 2000. On the involvement of psychical researchers in the International Congresses of Experimental Psychology, see Cerullo: 97–100.

which in my view has been consistently misinterpreted, to illuminate the experimental and theoretical underpinnings of the *Varieties*. In the process, I lift up both the comparative method and the experimentally based theory of the self that informed James's work. Approaching the *Varieties* in this fashion allows us to specify more clearly the kinds of experience that interested James. This, in turn, circumscribes his explanation of religious experience and, in my view, makes it more compelling.

This approach to the text is admittedly partial but not, I think, unfair to James's aims in writing the *Varieties*. James was a psychologist, a philosopher, and a metaphysician at a time when those roles were not always sharply distinguished. The *Varieties* can be read from any of these vantage points. In the *Varieties,* however, James also takes on the role of the scientist of religion, whose task, as he saw it, was to formulate a hypothesis about religion to which "physical science need not object" (1985: 402). As scientist of religion, he operated within a set of self-imposed constraints in an effort to come up with a theory of religious experience that was faithful to the experience of believers, the phenomenological contentions of the theologians, and the plausibility structures of the scientists. Only in the final pages of the book does he go beyond this to admit to his own "over-beliefs" (1985: 359–360, 402–405).[7] Although some have sought to reread the *Varieties* without these constraints to get a fuller picture of James's own metaphysical views, I will leave them in place for the purposes of this article.

THE EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE FOR SECONDARY SELVES

A fuller understanding of James's theory of religious experience must begin by unpacking what he meant by "consciousness beyond the field." We cannot understand what he meant without knowing whom he was crediting with its discovery. Most James scholars have concluded, with little or no compelling evidence, that James was referring to Frederick Myers, one of the founders of the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR) (Barnard 1997: 173; James 1985: 452; Levinson: 116; Powell: 156; Taylor 1996: 87).[8] Without diminishing the importance of Myers's work

[7] In lecture X, James tips his hand regarding his over-beliefs in a long footnote acknowledging both the self-imposed constraints that he assumed while speaking as a scientist of religion and their possible limitations (1985: 192–193).

[8] Although these scholars all agree that James was referring to Myers, they do not agree on the particular publication that marks this discovery. In the notes accompanying the critical edition, Ignas K. Skrupskelis cites Myers 1886a; Powell cites Myers 1886b; Levinson and Taylor do not cite any text. Barnard cites Myers 1891–92 following Barzun (229–230).

for James, there is substantial evidence to suggest that James was referring not to Frederick Myers but to the French experimental psychologist Pierre Janet, whose first published report of a co-conscious "secondary self" in an experimental subject—a so-called hysterical somnambule identified as Léonie—appeared in 1886 (see 1886a).[9] In their exegesis of the James passage, scholars have confused James's appropriation of Myers's particular understanding of the subconscious with the discovery of co-conscious "secondary selves" that undergirded Myers's theory. This basic discovery, which James silently attributed to Pierre Janet in the *Varieties* and in other contexts to Janet, James Gurney, and Alfred Binet, was the distinguishing feature of what Alan Gauld has referred to as the "golden age of the subconscious" (1992: 412).[10]

Although there is evidence to suggest that Myers anticipated Janet's discovery and that, indeed, Janet was aware of and drew on Myers's work, I am less interested in questions of precedence than in clearly identifying the basic discovery to which James was referring. Specifically, I want to suggest that James was referring to the discovery of simultaneously *coexistent* states of consciousness, referred to by Janet and Myers as "secondary selves," as opposed to *alternating* (i.e., noncoexistent) personalities, which were widely discussed in the earlier era of animal magnetism. Janet, according to both Myers and James, provided the first widely acknowledged experimental evidence for such secondary selves in his 1886 article (Gauld 1992: 369–375).[11]

Myers *did* to some extent anticipate Janet's findings on the basis of his and Gurney's work with telepathy and automatic writing (Shamdasani; Williams).[12] In an article published in 1885 and cited by Janet in 1886, Myers recognized the limits of the older theory of "unconscious cerebration" for explaining the case of "Clelia," a spiritualist medium.[13] In the

[9] The results of Janet's experiments were published serially in the *Revue philosophique* between 1886 and 1889 (see 1886a, 1886b, 1887, 1888) and provided the basis for his thesis, *L'automatisme psychologique*, published in 1889 (Myers 1889–90: 186).

[10] On Janet and the "subconscious," see Ellenberger: 412n82, Janet 1907: 58, and Myers 1891–92; on Freud's concept of repression, see Hale: 168–169 and Singer.

[11] Janet writes: "We have insisted on these developments of a new psychological existence, no longer alternating with the normal existence of the subject, but absolutely simultaneous" (Gauld 1992: 372–373). Gauld describes Léonie as a case of "three personalities coexisting as autonomous streams of consciousness, even though only one could be dominant at any given time" (1992: 378).

[12] According to Shamdasani, "Williams focuses on the significance of the fact that Myers and his colleagues were putting forward the only alternative psychological and non-pathological view of trance states" (124n14).

[13] As James explained in his *Principles of Psychology*, theories of "unconscious cerebration" assumed the existence of unconscious mental states, that is, mental states that were not conscious of themselves, to explain various "automatic" phenomena. James argued against the idea of unconscious mental states in the *Principles*, suggesting two alternative explanations, which he considered more plausible: "One is that the perceptions and volitions in habitual actions may be performed

case of Clelia he observed a "kind of active duality of mentation," a "colloquy between a conscious and an unconscious self" (1885: 24). He referred to the second center of consciousness as "a *secondary self,*" which he defined as "a latent capacity, . . . in an appreciable fraction of mankind, of developing or manifesting a second focus of cerebral energy which . . . may possess, for a time at least, a kind of continuous individuality, a purposive activity of its own" (1885: 27). Based on Myers's 1885 article, which Janet cited in 1886 (see 1886a: 588), Nathan Hale (126–127) concluded that Janet got the idea of a secondary self from Myers.

Nonetheless, Myers did not see the Clelia case or the somewhat similar observations he made in a note appended to *Phantasms of the Living* (1886b) as the point at which his basic understanding of the self took shape. Rather, in his introduction to his posthumously published *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death,* Myers indicated that "this conclusion [i.e., his basic understanding of the self] . . . assumed for me something like its present shape some fourteen years since," that is, in 1887 (1903: 13).[14] Myers cited in this regard his article "Automatic Writing—III," which appeared in January 1887 and was devoted in part to the evidence put forth by Janet in his 1886 article. In this 1887 article Myers credited Janet with "discover[ing] a method by which, in an exceptionally sensitive subject, hypnotic writing, prolonged by suggestion into the normal state, could be made into a means of communication with the hypnotic self, *coincidentally* with ordinary verbal intercourse with the waking self" (1887: 246, emphasis added). According to Myers, Janet's experiments with Léonie, the subject of Janet's 1886 article, "mark the highest degree yet obtained of proof of the origination of automatic writing in the recesses of the writer's own identity" (1887: 236).

With the publication in 1887 of experiments conducted by James Gurney, Myers's colleague in the British SPR, Myers and James began giving credit to both Gurney and Janet when they summed up the experimental evidence for secondary selves. In *The Principles of Psychology,* James wrote:

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consciously, only so quickly and inattentively that no *memory* of them remains. Another is that the consciousness of these actions exists, but is *split-off* from the rest of the consciousness of the hemispheres" (1983: 167). He noted that there were "numerous proofs of the reality of this split-off condition of portions of consciousness," which he planned to discuss later in the book (1983: 167).

[14] Myers's statement of his basic position reads: "The 'conscious Self' of each of us, as we call it—the empirical, the supraliminal Self, as I should prefer to say,—does not comprise the whole of the consciousness or of the faculty within us. There exists a more comprehensive consciousness, a profounder faculty, which for the most part remains potential only so far as regards the life of earth, but from which the consciousness and the faculty of earth-life are mere selections, and which reasserts itself in its plentitude after the liberating change of death" (1903: 13). That "fourteen years since" is a reference to 1887 is corroborated by an earlier statement that the publication of *Phantasms of the Living* in 1886 occurred fifteen years earlier (Myers 1903: 9).

> The experiments of Gurney and the observations of M. Pierre Janet and others on certain hysterical somnambulists seem to prove that it [the posthypnotic suggestion] is stored up in consciousness; not simply organically registered, but that *the consciousness which thus retains it is split off, dissociated from the rest of the author's mind*. We have here, in short, an experimental production of one of those "second" states of personality of which we have spoken so often. Only here the second state coexists as well as alternates with the first. (1983: 1213; see also 1890: 373, 1983: 200–209, 1208)[15]

Inspired by Janet's research, Gurney, according to James, had "the brilliant idea of *tapping* this second consciousness [in normal subjects] by means of the planchette," the Ouija board–like device used by spiritualists to spell out words (1983: 1213). Gurney himself described his experiments as novel, "though tame and rudimentary enough, compared with the only hitherto recorded case to which they seem at all akin—the dramatic self-duplication of Prof. Janet's patient" (292). He added that "they present at any rate this advantage, that they had no connection with hysterical conditions, but were conducted with normal healthy 'subjects'" (292–293).

In later references James added Alfred Binet's name to Janet's and Gurney's when referring to the experimental evidence for the splitting of consciousness. Binet, whose *Les altérations de la personnalité* appeared in 1892, extended Janet's work on hysterical subjects while at the same time including chapters on "the plurality of consciousness in healthy subjects" and the "division of personality and spiritism" (Binet; Gauld 1992: 380–381).[16] It was perhaps because Binet's volume effectively linked Janet's experiments with hysterical subjects and Gurney's with healthy ones that James recommended it to readers of the *Varieties* desiring an account of the evidence on which the idea of a "consciousness existing beyond the field" was based (1985: 190).

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[15] In a review of French research Myers referred to "the important point which M. Janet in France and Mr. Gurney in England have largely helped us to establish,—namely, the persistence of the hypnotic self, as a remembering and reasoning entity, during the reign of the primary self" (1888–89b: 377).

[16] In 1892 James wrote: "Gurney shares, therefore, with Janet and Binet, whose observations were made with widely differing subjects and methods, the credit of demonstrating the simultaneous existence of two different strata of consciousness, ignorant of each other, in the same person" (1986d: 95). "Gurney, Janet, Binet and others" are cited in a review essay in 1896 as "prov[ing] that mutually disconnected currents of conscious life can simultaneously coexist in the same person" (James 1987: 527–529). In 1903 James stated, "That these other currents may not only alternate but may co-exist with each other is proved by Gurney's, Binet's, and Janet's discovery of Subjects who, receiving suggestions during hypnosis and forgetting them when wakened, nevertheless then wrote them out automatically and unconsciously as soon as a pencil was placed in their hands" (1986c: 205).

In "What Psychical Research Has Accomplished" (1892) and later in *The Will to Believe* (1896) James again credited Janet, Gurney, and Binet with "demonstrating the simultaneous existence of two different strata of consciousness, ignorant of each other, in the same person" (1986d: 95). But here he added, "*This discovery marks a new era in experimental psychology, and it is impossible to overrate its importance*" (1979: 230, emphasis added). It was this new era that Janet inaugurated in 1886 when he published the first experimental evidence of the simultaneous existence of two strata of consciousness, and it was this discovery to which James referred in the *Varieties*.

THE DIVIDED SELF: NORMAL OR PATHOLOGICAL?

The idea of secondary selves or strata of consciousness, which this new research claimed to demonstrate, was premised on the notion that consciousness is divisible. Janet referred to this as the *désagrégation* of consciousness, and James, to the splitting off or dissociation of portions of consciousness (1983: 1213).[17] Those who accepted the dissociative model of consciousness understood the self or selves in relation to "chains of memory." While memories were "associated" within a chain, they were "dissociated" between chains. Through hypnosis researchers engaged (and created) chains of memory that were dissociated from the chain of memory that constituted the person's usual sense of self (Myers 1888–89b: 387; Williams: 242–243). The new theory, in effect, postulated that chains of bodily memories, if sufficiently extensive and elaborate, could in turn constitute distinct selves or personalities. These dissociated memory chains, which could be tapped and extended by means of hypnosis and automatic writing, offered a theoretical model whereby two "selves" could coexist in one body.

Although Janet, Binet, Gurney, Myers, and James all presupposed a dissociative model of consciousness, they disagreed about the conditions under which the splitting of consciousness could occur. Janet, who followed his mentor, the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, on this point, viewed all manifestations of a secondary self as symptomatic of hysteria and, thus, as inherently pathological. He stood apart from Binet, Gurney,

[17] According to Hacking, Janet "formulated a theory of multiplicity, and its dynamics, a model suggested by his choice of French words such as *dissociation* and *désagrégation*. The word 'dissociation' entered English in 1890 thanks to William James, who was fascinated by French psychology, and who was deeply impressed by Janet as a person. Morton Prince, . . . also used the word in print in 1890, after his visit to France, and it was he who cemented it into English" (44). On this last point, see also Taylor 1999b: 466, 2000: 1030–1031.

Myers, and James, who, like Charcot's rivals at Nancy, believed that secondary centers of consciousness could exist in healthy persons (Gauld 1992: 369–381; Williams: 234–235, 240).[18] Although they all accepted the evidence for the dissociation or splitting of consciousness, they disagreed on what it meant for understanding the self. The basic question was whether "all the phenomena of hypnotism, double consciousness, &c.," as Myers put it, could be explained "as mere morbid disaggregations of the empirical personality" (1891–92: 301). Was the healthy mind unified and the diseased mind divided, as Janet maintained? Or was the mind, as Myers was to conclude, naturally "multiplex"?

THE MULTIPLEX PERSONALITY

Myers's primary contribution to the experimental psychology of the subconscious was not, in James's view, as an experimental researcher but, rather, as a theorist. His theory of the subliminal consciousness, as James noted (1987: 529), provided the chief alternative to Janet's theory of pathological mental *désagrégation*. Although James was convinced that secondary centers of consciousness could exist in healthy persons through his observations of the spiritualist medium, Leonora Piper, and his participation in the census of hallucinations conducted by the SPR, Myers developed a theory to account for this evidence.

Automatic Writing

Myers developed his theory of the multiplex self from the same basic ideas as Pierre Janet: secondary personalities, chains of memory, and automatic writing. Whereas Myers began with cases of spontaneous automatic writing reported by Spiritualists and other presumptively healthy people, Janet began with patients diagnosed as hysterics and induced automatic writing by means of hypnosis. Myers's essays on automatic writing unfold, as Sonu Shamdasani points out (111), around the question "Who writes?" Myers pursued this question in his 1887 article using a detailed account of a series of Spiritualist-style experiments with the planchette conducted by the Oxford philosopher F. C. S. Schiller and his

[18] Janet, like Charcot, equated hysteria and hypnotism. Their views were challenged by the research of Liébeault and Bernheim of the Nancy school, who claimed that virtually all hypnotic phenomena up to and including somnambulism could be induced in mentally normal individuals (Gauld 1992: 297–362). Frederic Myers, his brother A. T. Myers, Edmund Gurney, and Morton Prince all visited Nancy (Gauld 1992: 336). In his discussion of hypnotic trance in the *Principles* James attributed it not to animal magnetism or "neurosis" (Charcot) but primarily to "suggestion" (Nancy), with the caveat that hypnosis does involve a change in the state of consciousness, that is, "hypnotic trance" (1983: 1199–1201; Gauld 1992: 352; Taylor 1996: 38).

siblings.[19] In his article Myers compared Schiller's spontaneous examples of automatic writing with the automatic writing produced in response to hypnotic suggestion by Janet's patient Léonie. Whereas "a new and separate invading personality" might have been assumed in spontaneously occurring cases of automatic writing, it was clear, Myers wrote, that in the case of Léonie "the 'communicating intelligence' was of so obviously artificial a kind that it could scarcely venture to pretend to be either a devil or Louise's [Léonie's dead] grandmother" (1887: 239–240). Janet, in other words, was able to demonstrate what until that time could only be inferred: that what seemed subjectively to come from outside the self could originate "in the recesses of the writer's own identity" (Myers 1887: 236–237, 245). In light of this and other comparisons, Myers felt that "the apparent uniqueness of such a phenomenon as the Schiller messages—the apparent externality of the dictating intelligence,— . . . [grew] fainter and more questionable" (1887: 216). He did not, however, conclude from this that the automatic writing was necessarily "something morbid, retrograde, or hysterical" (1887: 216).

Methodologically, Myers was convinced that to understand alleged supernormal phenomena, "we must first compare them, as fully as possible, both with normal and abnormal phenomena" (1887: 213). Similarities, he argued, were to be expected and should not lead us to class all such phenomena as morbid, for both abnormal and supernormal phenomena, should they exist, would likely manifest themselves in similar ways (1887: 213). James incorporated these methodological presuppositions into the *Varieties*. He acknowledged at the outset that the religious geniuses that most interested him were often "subject to abnormal psychical visitations" (1985: 15). Like Myers, James claimed that "we [could] not possibly ignore these pathological elements of the subject" (1985: 17). He provided a long excursus attacking medical materialism in order to assure his listeners that "the bugaboo of morbid origin" need not "scandalize [their] piety" (1985: 26). Indeed, like Myers, he suspected that "if there were such a thing as inspiration from a higher realm," the "neurotic temperament" might furnish "the chief condition" for receiving it (1985: 29). Perhaps most notably, James believed that his wide-ranging comparisons were the distinguishing feature of his lectures. At the conclusion of his first lecture, he stated outright that "the only novelty that I can imagine this course of lectures to possess lies in the breadth of the apperceiving mass," that is, "the mass of collateral phenomena, morbid or healthy,

[19] In his report to Myers, Schiller commented on what he took to be the "more remarkable points" without, however, endorsing either the "Spiritualist explanation" or the "'unconscious-self' theory" (Myers 1887: 216).

with which the various religious phenomena must be compared in order to understand them better" (1985: 29).

Myers's conviction that the normal mind is potentially multiplex or fissiparous grew out of his comparisons between the spontaneous automatic writing of Spiritualists and the hypnotically induced automatic writing of hysterics. Both resulted in the manifestation of multiple personalities in one body. "The graphic automatist [e.g., Spiritualist medium] tells us," Myers wrote, "of insurgent quasi-personalities,—not momentary, but of indefinite persistence . . . susceptible of considerable multiplication, as one new 'guide' or 'control' is added to another, without appreciably disturbing the ordinary current of life" (1887: 254). But, he added, "we have seen that this fissiparous multiplication of the self,—if I may so term it—is by no means so rare a phenomenon as has sometimes been supposed" (1887: 254). Generalizing from the cases—normal and pathological—that he had examined, he suggested that "whenever there is any habitual alteration, physiological or pathological, of the threshold of consciousness we shall find an incipient formation of a secondary chain of memories, linking together those periods of altered consciousness into a series of their own. And when once a second mnemonic chain is woven, the emergence of a secondary personality is only a matter of degree" (1887: 225).

Two years later he elaborated on this point, theorizing that "each of us contain the potentialities of many different arrangements of the elements of our personality, each arrangement being distinguishable from the rest by differences in the chain of memories which pertains to it" (1888–89b: 387). The "normal or primary self . . . with which we habitually identify ourselves" consisted, according to Myers, of that part of the self selected (in the evolutionary sense) for its fitness in dealing with our "ordinary physical needs" (1888–89b: 387). Myers did not view it as "necessarily superior in any other respect to the latent personalities which lie along side it" (1888–89b: 387). Moreover, he said, "we can at present assign no limit . . . [to] the fresh combinations of our personal elements that may be evoked by accident or design" (1888–89b: 387). A variety of normal and pathological phenomena, according to Myers, might evoke such fresh combinations. Thus, he said, "dreams, with natural somnambulism, automatic writing, with so-called mediumistic trance, as well as certain intoxications, epilepsies, hysterias, and recurrent insanities, afford examples of the development of what I have called secondary mnemonic chains,—fresh personalities, more or less complete, alongside the normal state" (1888–89b: 387).

Automatisms

The concept of the automatism provided Myers with the crucial theoretical link between the SPR's experiments on automatic writing and

Janet's research on hysteria. Working by analogy, Myers argued in 1889 that "automatic writing is but one among a whole series of kindred automatisms which have been intermittently noted, divergently interpreted, since history began" (1888–89a: 522–523). According to James, his was "the first attempt in our language, and the first thoroughly *inductive* attempt in any language, to consider the phenomena of hallucination, hypnotism, automatism, double personality, and mediumship as connected parts of one whole subject. No one seems to me to have grasped the problem in a way both so broad and so sober as he has done" (1890: 373; see also 1986d: 98, 102). James later referred to this as a "great simplification" that in one stroke placed "hallucinations and active impulses under a common head, as *sensory* and *motor automatisms*" (1986b: 198; see also 1986a: 132–133).

The common feature that led Myers to group these disparate phenomena under the heading of "automatisms" was their "message-bearing or nunciative" character (Myers 1888–89a: 523). Subjectively, these messages—whether words, images, or movements—come to consciousness "*as though from some extraneous source*" (Myers 1888–89a: 524, emphasis added). The messages appear to consciousness "as *an automatic product whose initiation lies outside the conscious will*" (Myers 1888–89a: 524, emphasis added). They suggest, Myers added, "that some strain of intelligence, whether without us or within, *which is not our conscious waking intelligence of the moment,* is in some fashion impressing or informing the conscious self" (1888–89a: 524, emphasis added). "Originating," he said, most often "in some deeper zone of a man's being, they float up into superficial consciousness as deeds, visions, words, ready-made and full-blown, without any accompanying perception of the elaborate process which has made them what they are" (1888–89a: 524).

As Myers expanded his theory from automatic writing to automatisms he bolstered his argument against a purely pathological interpretation of such experiences by including both everyday and historically significant examples. Dreams, he argued, could be regarded as the "commonest form of message-bearing automatisms; that is to say, they are phenomena, whose origin is within ourselves, but yet outside our habitual stream of consciousness" (1888–89a: 535). Explicitly shying away from the more controversial cases of "religious fanaticism or ecstacy" that James would later embrace, Myers lifted up Socrates ,"the Founder of Science himself,—the permanent type of sanity, shrewdness, physical robustness, and moral balance,—[who] was guided in all the affairs of life by a monitory Voice," and Joan of Arc, "the national heroine of France," as historical figures guided by voices or visions, whose sanity no one was willing to question (1888–89a: 538, 543).

Automatisms, the primary means of communication between the subliminal and supraliminal levels of consciousness in Myers's fully developed theory of the self, played a central role in the religious biographies examined by James in the *Varieties*. Where Myers shied away from religious examples as too controversial, James took George Fox as his exemplary case, acknowledging up front that, despite his spiritual soundness, he was "from the point of view of his nervous constitution, . . . a psychopath or *détraqué* of the deepest dye" (1985: 15–16). "In point of fact," he argued in his penultimate lecture, you will "hardly find a religious leader of any kind in whose life there is no record of automatisms" (1985: 376). He added that he was referring not simply to "savage priests and prophets" but to "the whole array of Christian saints and heresiarchs, including the greatest, the Bernards, the Loyolas, the Luthers, the Foxes, the Wesleys, [all of whom] had their visions, voices, rapt conditions, guiding impressions, and 'openings'" (1985: 376–377).

Subliminal Consciousness

Myers unfolded his own fully developed alternative to Janet's theory of pathological *désagrégation* in a series entitled "The Subliminal Consciousness," published in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* between 1891 and 1892. Many of the central ideas had already appeared in his earlier articles on automatic writing and in his reviews of the French research. His explicit aim in these essays was to construct an alternative to the explanations of the French schools at Paris (hysteria) and Nancy (suggestion) by bringing together the research on hypnotic trance, automatic writing, alternations of personality, telepathy, and clairvoyance (1891–92: 299–300).[20] He summarized his alternative theory in a much-quoted paragraph:

> I suggest, then, that the stream of consciousness in which we habitually live is not the only consciousness which exists in connection with our organism. Our habitual or empirical consciousness may consist of a mere selection from a multitude of thoughts and sensations, of which some at least are equally conscious with those that we empirically know. I accord no primacy to my ordinary waking self, except that among my potential selves this one has shown itself the fittest to meet the needs of common life. I hold that it has established no further claim, and that it is perfectly possible that other thoughts, feelings, and memories, either isolated or in continuous connection, may now be actively conscious, as we say,

[20] Gauld provides an extended discussion of Myers's idea of the subliminal consciousness but does not root it firmly enough, in my view, in the research on secondary selves (1968: 275–299, 1992: 393–400).

> "within me,"—in some kind of co-ordination with my organism, and forming some part of my total individuality. (1891–92: 301)

Two new developments are worth highlighting: his change in terminology and his expanded understanding of the ways in which messages might manifest themselves. First, with respect to the terminology, Myers settled on *subliminal* and *supraliminal* as a more adequate way to refer to what he had been calling secondary and primary selves. *Subliminal* referred to all the "psychical action" occurring "below the threshold of our habitual consciousness," and *supraliminal,* to the habitual consciousness (or the "empirical self"). To refer to the "subliminal" as the "'unconscious,' or even 'subconscious,'" he said, "would be directly misleading; and to speak (as is sometimes convenient) of the *secondary* self may give the impression either that there cannot be more than two, or that the *supraliminal* self, the self above the threshold,—the *empirical* self, the self of common experience—is in some way superior to other possible selves" (1891–92: 305).

Second, as his theory developed, Myers's understanding of "message-bearing" phenomena expanded. In his earliest essays he focused on automatic writing; in 1889 he turned to automatisms more generally; and in 1892 he described four modes of manifestation, which included and went beyond automatisms narrowly defined to include alterations of consciousness, which, in his words, "tend to occupy the whole psychical field, and to pass on into states of trance, or of alternating personality" (1891–92: 313). In his ongoing effort to link these more unusual experiences with the everyday, Myers offered sleep as "a first familiar example of that shifting of the strata of personality," wherein "the subliminal self may displace the supraliminal" (1891–92: 314, 325–326).

We can, at this point, highlight certain distinctive features of Myers's understanding of the subliminal consciousness or self that derived from the research on secondary selves. First, "'the Subliminal Self' was a name for *an aggregate of potential personalities,* with imperfectly known capacities of perception and action" (Myers 1891–92: 308). Myers is better understood as claiming that we, as aggregates of *potential* personalities, have a *capacity* to develop or manifest such personalities than as depicting them as a permanent feature of the subliminal self. The self, as conceived by Myers, is fissiparous. Second, he indicated that, because these personalities may emerge and develop and then disappear, they do not have the characteristics that philosophers usually ascribed to "an incorporeal soul." Third, the subliminal self could be implicated in both pathological and supranormal phenomena. In emphasizing the possibility that supranormal phenomena such as ecstasy and genius might manifest through the subliminal self, Myers did not mean to suggest that "the sub-

liminal self is free from disturbance and disease" (1891–92: 309). Rather, his intent was to free both hypnotism and the aggregate of subliminal (formerly, secondary) selves from the purely pathological interpretation attributed to them by Janet.

Myers's theory of the subliminal self provided a new psychological framework for understanding a wide range of phenomena, including many religious phenomena, without reducing them to epiphenomena of psychopathology or necessarily ruling out influences beyond the self. When Myers began formulating his theory, he recognized that his explanation of the "trance of the automatist" was "by no means identical" with that of the Spiritualists, "who say that the writing medium is 'mesmerized by the controlling Spirit'" (1888–89b: 389). He added, however, that "in putting forward this new explanation, which refers the trance to a mere change of cerebral equilibrium—a mere shifting of the psychical centre of energy within the personality of the automatist himself,—I do not mean to deny the possibility that some influence external to the writer's may at times be operative" (1888–89b: 389). By placing the pathological, the normal, and the potentially supranormal within a common frame of reference, Myers created a theoretical space (the subliminal) through which influences beyond the individual, should they exist, might be expected to manifest themselves. In explaining spirit possession as a "shifting of the psychical centre of energy *within the personality of the automatist*" without ruling out "the possibility that *some influence external* to the [automatist] may at times be operative," Myers modeled the open-ended approach to explanation that James later adopted in the *Varieties*.

James used Myers's theory of the subconscious, that is, his theory of the fissiparous or multiplex self, to explain how the claims of the religious genius to have been "moved by an external power" could be literally and objectively true for both the scientist and the believer. James's argument came to a head in his last lecture. Building on his definition of religion in terms of religious experience in lecture II, and his further specification of religious experience in terms of the sense of the presence of an unseen reality in lecture III, he then located the transformative power of this unseen reality at the heart of religion in general in lecture XX (Proudfoot 1985: 162, 2000). Identifying the common nucleus of religion as an uneasiness and its solution, James argued that "the essence of religious experience" lay in the sense that we are saved from this uneasiness by becoming conscious that the higher part of ourselves is "*coterminous with and continuous with a* more *of the same quality*" (1985: 400). It is the "unseen reality" of the "more," and the potentially transformative power of engagement with it, that James sought to explain theoretically in terms acceptable to both believers and scientists.

It was at this point that he raised the question of "objective 'truth'" of the "more." "Is such a 'more,'" he asked, "merely our own notion, or does it really exist? If so, in what shape does it exist? Does it act, as well as exist? And in what form should we conceive of that 'union' with it of which religious geniuses are so convinced?" (1985: 401). Theologians from the various traditions, James believed, "all agree that the 'more' really exists," though they understand it very differently: "They all agree, moreover, that it acts as well as exists, and that something really is effected for the better when you throw your life into its hands" (1985: 401). The challenge for James was to formulate this "common body of doctrine" in terms "to which physical science need not object" (1985: 402).

In formulating an explanation, James sought, as a scientist of religion, to avoid the particularistic vocabularies of the theologians and "to keep religion in connection with the rest of science." In order to do so, he said, "we shall do well to seek first of all a way of describing the 'more,' which psychologists may also recognize as real" (1985: 402). Claiming that "the *subconscious self* is nowadays a well-accredited psychological entity," he turned to it as "the mediating term required" (1985: 402), explicitly equating it with the subliminal consciousness of Myers's 1892 essay. Building on what he took to be the "recognized psychological fact" of the subconscious, James "propose[d], as an hypothesis, that whatever it may be on its *farther* side, the 'more' with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life" (1985: 402–403; Levinson: 159–164).

This hypothesis had two key features, according to James. First, "we seem to preserve a contact with 'science' which the ordinary theologian lacks" (James 1985: 403). Second, "the theologian's contention that the religious man is moved by an external power is vindicated, for it is one of the peculiarities of invasions from the subconscious region *to take on objective appearances,* and *to suggest to the Subject* an external control" (James 1985: 404). This second claim is interesting and potentially misleading. Taken as a whole, it is clear that the theologian's contention is vindicated not epistemologically but simply phenomenologically.[21] Invasions from the subconscious *seem* objective and *suggest to the subject* an external control. James is not endorsing the theologian's truth claims here; he is offering a theoretical explanation of how persons might subjectively

[21] Barnard misses this crucial point when he describes James as aligning "himself with the scientific authority and respectability of a psychological understanding of the subliminal origins of religious experiences, while simultaneously siding with the theological conviction that the 'higher power' that is contacted during salvific experiences is objective and external to the individual" (1998: 187; on this point, see also Levinson: 143).

experience a presence that they take to be an external power, when such is not necessarily the case. Although James did not rule out the possibility of higher powers that are truly outside the self, in his view it is "*primarily* the higher faculties of our own hidden mind which are controlling" (1985: 404, emphasis added).

James's reliance on Myers and Janet reframes our understanding of the *Varieties* at three key points. First, as just noted, he explained the religious person's experience of an unseen presence in terms of the subliminal or subconscious self. All the varieties of religious experience that he considered—conversion, inspiration, sainthood, and mysticism—demonstrated, as he put it, "that in religion we have a department of human nature with unusually close relations to the transmarginal or subliminal region" (1985: 381). Second, in linking religious experience with the subliminal, he located it as part of the "one whole subject" constituted by hallucination, hypnotism, automatism, double personality, and mediumship. For James, the act of locating religious experience within this broad comparative framework was the distinguishing feature of his lectures (1985: 29). Third, his frame of reference, while broadly comparative, left room for religious belief. Indeed, for James the real beauty of Myers's (as opposed to Janet's) understanding of the subconscious was that it ultimately said very little about origins. In adopting Myers's conception, James left open the question of where the subconscious ended, whether in the personal self or beyond it, and thus placed *ultimate* questions about origins outside the purview of the science of religions.[22] Although James was willing to account for most experiences of an unseen reality in terms of the "higher powers of our own hidden mind," his open-ended understanding of the subconscious allowed for other possibilities as well. We are left, then, with a theory that is intended to explain much, but not necessarily all, of what James took to be religious experience in terms of shifting psychical centers of energy within a self that is understood to be inherently fissiparous.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE *VARIETIES* TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION

While the importance of the subconscious or subliminal in James's theory of religion has not escaped most readers, both the experimental

[22] Given the ambiguity of subconscious origins, James emphasized that all that emerged from (or through) the subconscious had to be tested in terms of "the way in which it works on the whole." This, James said, was his "empiricist criterion; and this criterion the stoutest insisters on supernatural origin have also been forced to use in the end" (1985: 24–25).

evidence and the comparative methodology that informed it have largely been lost. Reconstructing this aspect of James's thought through the writings of Janet and Myers highlights the following points with respect to the contemporary study of religious experience:

1. Comparison between religious and nonreligious phenomena is crucial for the construction of theories of religion. Recognition of the methodological underpinnings of the *Varieties* locates James and Myers as pioneers of a form of comparison between religious and nonreligious phenomena not usually embraced by scholars of religion. We should pay greater heed to Myers's methodological dictum: "If we are to understand supernormal phenomena[,] . . . we must first compare them, as fully as possible, both with normal and with abnormal phenomena" (1887: 213). While Myers's questions may differ from ours, his dictum still carries weight. Limiting our comparisons to phenomena we deem religious at the outset can function as a protective strategy, insofar as it obscures contestations over what counts as religion. Openness to contested phenomena, such as the unusual experiences studied by James, and openness to comparing experiences understood as religious with experiences understood as nonreligious or even pathological, as advocated by Myers, allow us to explore the construction (and deconstruction) of religious experiences and, thus, the construction and deconstruction of religion as a category. Such work is inherently interdisciplinary and is one way, as William Paden has pointed out, to help "reestablish the connection that has been lacking between religious studies and the other human sciences" (187–188, 190).
2. Through the appropriation of Myers's notion of the subliminal/subconscious, James was able to offer a theoretical explanation of religious experiences that located them on a continuum with the "ordinary phenomena of mental dissociation," without necessarily reducing them to psychopathology or ruling out influences beyond the individual (1986c: 203).[23] James moved beyond Myers, not in terms of theory or method but in terms of his interest in religious experience per se and, consequently, in terms of the range of religious phenom-

[23] To quote James more fully, "The few [neurologists] who admit them [the 'evolutive,' 'superior,' or 'supernormal' phenomena that interested Myers] . . . are more likely to see in them another department of experience altogether than to treat them as having continuous connection with the ordinary phenomena of mental dissociation" (1986c: 203). The situation has not changed dramatically since James wrote these words, although the current edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is groping, rather haltingly, toward a less completely pathological understanding of dissociation (American Psychiatric Association: 454–455, 486–487, 488, 728–729).

ena—conversion, inspiration, saintliness, and mysticism—that he brought under the theoretical umbrella constructed by Myers. This was a crucial move on James's part and one that can rightly be criticized (Jantzen 1989: 298–299, 1990: 66, 69–71). The central problem, I would argue, is *not* with locating *some* forms of experience that *some* would consider religious on a continuum with ordinary phenomena of mental dissociation but, rather, with defining religious experience in such a way that it is explained, quite circularly, by the theory one has set out to propound. This problem, of course, is endemic in the theoretical literature on religion (Arnal: 22; Taves: 276–278).

3. The theoretical contributions of Myers and James are more evident (and more circumscribed) if we surface the features that the experiences they compared had in common. In Jonathan Z. Smith's well-known words, comparison by definition "lifts out and strongly marks certain features within difference as being of possible intellectual significance, expressed in the rhetoric of their being 'like' in some stipulated fashion" (52). Smith emphasizes the scholar's agency in this process. "Comparison," he stresses, "provides the means by much *we* 're-vision' phenomena as *our* data in order to solve *our* theoretical problems" (52). Myers and James lifted up similar features of the phenomena they were comparing. The key feature for Myers was that of messages coming to consciousness "as though from some extraneous source," and, for James, the subjective sense of being "moved by an external power." In both cases they attempted to explain experiences in which the subject's sense of agency was altered or absent. Both articulated what the experiences had in common from the perspective of the experiencer, even though they did not necessarily think that their subjects' explanations of their experiences were correct. Clearly articulating what a set of experiences has in common is crucial if we want to avoid overgeneralization. Articulating what a set of experiences has in common *from the standpoint of the experiencer* before offering our own explanation is crucial if we want to avoid descriptive reductionism, as Wayne Proudfoot has cogently argued (1985: 196–198).
4. Myers's conception of the self as multiplex provides an important theoretical lens for understanding religious claims that involve a subjective sense of being moved by an external power. In explaining the experience of an external power in terms of the subconscious/subliminal self, James adopted an open-ended view of the self and relegated ultimate questions of causality to the realm of what he called "over-beliefs." James viewed "over-beliefs" as "indispensable" and willingly offered his own view that there is indeed a "mystical region" at the "further limits of our being" (1985: 405). James obviously also thought

that specific over-beliefs could be tested experimentally, as he demonstrated through his involvement with the Society for Psychical Research and his experiments with Mrs. Piper. In offering the subconscious as a penultimate explanation, he left the ultimate interpretation of any specific instance of feeling oneself moved by an external power open—whether to dogmatic assertion, pragmatic testing, or scientific investigation. In doing so, he enshrined what Stewart Guthrie has referred to as the chronic ambiguity of the perceptual world at the heart of his theory (1993: 411–461, 2000: 237).

5. Finally, Myers's conception of the self not simply as multiplex but as "fissiparous" provides a point of connection with wider conversations on the instability of identity and the fragmentation of the self in various contexts, including religionists' discussions of taking on multiple roles or identities in relation to the people or practices they study, sociological discussions of the effects of modernity on the self, and controversies over the authenticity of recovered memories in situations of abuse. The capacity to create and dissolve alternate "personalities" with associated chains of memory strikes me as theoretically rich, especially if we place the more sharply dissociated notion of "personalities" on a continuum with the more common, weakly dissociated experiences of multiple identities, roles, and voices. The idea of the fissiparous self seems especially powerful when embedded socially in relation to the demands of negotiating the multiple, fragmented communities of discourse and practice that characterize the contemporary world.

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