

PRAGMATISM AND THE SECRET SELF

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Abstract: Can pragmatism account for the private aspect of the self? The classical pragmatists – Peirce, James, Mead, and Dewey – mount various attacks on the Cartesian view of the self, and they offer varied and attractive positive accounts of the person. But does pragmatism adequately acknowledge privacy or personal “inwardness”? I explore here the pragmatic picture of the self, drawing on all the classical sources, and I assess the adequacy of pragmatic resources for describing and explaining the puzzles of personal privacy.

Can the pragmatists account for the private aspect of the self? Do they want to? The classical pragmatists – Peirce, James, Mead, and Dewey – mount various attacks on the Cartesian view of the self, and they offer varied and sometimes attractive positive accounts of the person. But does pragmatism adequately acknowledge privacy or personal “inwardness”? I explore here some aspects of the pragmatic pictures of the self, organizing my attention through some problems about privacy. While I touch on all the classical figures of pragmatism, the topic at stake is large and these philosophers’ interest in it is deep, so I can here only begin to survey some high points in the landscape of their discussion. Given the internal conversations on this topic among the classical pragmatists, it makes sense to begin this exploration at the beginning, with Peirce.¹

To focus his famous attack on the Cartesian understanding of the self, Peirce suggests an alternative framework for the fact of self-consciousness. At the outset Peirce grants what Descartes maintains, that “we are more certain of our own existence than of any other fact” (CP 5.237). We need not, however, on account of that certainty, suppose that there is an intuitive, immediate awareness of a private, personal self. The mistake the Cartesian makes, according to Peirce, is to assume that such a firmly grounded certainty must itself be foundational, that it cannot be resting on uncertain premises, cannot be inferred from other facts. But it can, Peirce contends: Consider, for comparison, our belief that a particular event has occurred. Our assurance may be drawn from the general credibility we grant each of the dozen witnesses who testify on oath to the event’s occurrence. In the end, however, after each witness tells the same tale, our certainty about the occurrence far outweighs our

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certainty about any one of the witnesses. So, Peirce says, “[i]n the same way, ...[one’s] own existence is supported by *every other fact*, and is, therefore incomparably more certain than any one of these facts” (CP 5.237).

Peirce may thus beat the Cartesian on a point of logic, but an interesting question arises. How, for Peirce, do other facts support the idea of personal existence? In “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man,” Peirce sketches a developmental account of the dawning of self-consciousness; an account acknowledged as conjectural, but presented as an hypothesis adequate and plausible enough to defeat the necessity of intuitive self-consciousness. Peirce takes the phenomenon of self-consciousness to be the consciousness of a personal, private self, so in the course of this conjecture about how a child might come to self-awareness, Peirce discloses his own sense of what should be understood to define this self.

The proposed account of child development has a contemporary ring. The infant is portrayed as a being without a self, a creature not yet distinguishing itself from the world, but gradually coming to locate its own body as crucial to all tendencies and central to all occurrences, the center of the passing show. The advent of language allows and then requires the revision of this understanding, as the remarks of others suggest to the child the limits of his or her view of and place in the world. Others say the stove is hot, but the little boy denies this. The infantile reality was a matter of present impingements, and the little boy is not presently touching the stove. But now, in this verbal dispute, he reaches out, and he finds the others’ testimony painfully confirmed, his own error and ignorance revealed. This, Peirce claims is the dawning of self-consciousness. The child begins to make a distinction between appearance and reality, and it becomes “necessary”, Peirce says, “to suppose a *self* in which... ignorance [of reality] can inhere” (CP 4.233).

As plausible as we may find Peirce’s conjecture about the rise of self-consciousness, we must note that there is in fact no *necessity* attached to the hypothesis he suggests. The tiny human theorist he describes could instead settle into some form of solipsism; could persist in thinking others wrong in wide regions of their claims; could use temporal indexing of others’ remarks in order to avoid the abandonment of an idea of reality constructed basically out of changing impingements – and so on. The hypothesis of the fallible self, a self understood primarily as a locus for ignorance and error, is not really forced. Peirce’s suggestion to the contrary may, then, simply indicate his own attachment to this view of the self, his own mature conviction that the self is characterized by privation, by ignorance, and error.

Indeed, Peirce’s commitment to this view of the self is strikingly revealed in the details of his account of the acquisition of emotional predicates in particular, that is, predicates known to the developed human being, but not the very young child, *as* emotional. These involve, Peirce says, claims made by the little child that are “continually contradicted by testimony,” “judgments generally denied by others” (CP 5.234). And Peirce supposes that the child “has reason to think that others, also, have such judgments which are quite denied by all the rest. Thus, [the child] adds to the conception of appearance as the actualization of fact, the conception of it as

something *private* and valid only for one body” (CP 5.234). General invalidity is what marks the dawning of privacy. Peirce characterizes the child’s awareness of emotion as the appearance for the child of “error,” and, again, he says the self must then be hypothesized as a locus for this error. The picture Peirce presents of emotions and of privacy is a picture of estrangement and isolation. His conclusion is that “[i]gnorance and error are all that distinguish our privates selves from the absolute *ego* of pure apperception” (CP 5.235). So again, the facts from which Peirce would have us securely infer our existence, the facts that everywhere testify to it, are the facts of ignorance and error.

A queer intersection with Descartes appears in this derivation of the self. Peirce takes himself to be writing in clear opposition to “the spirit of Cartesianism” (CP 5.264), but he finds the self through and in doubt, as Descartes does. Recall that the method of doubt leaves Descartes at least hypothetically deprived of his childhood reality; and, in the moment when doubt is most radical, when his own body is not only disallowed its central importance but altogether dismissed as a chimera, Descartes determines the truth of his own existence and begins the reconstruction of reality.

This momentary coincidence of philosophy, occurring as it does in the Peircean assault on the Cartesian doctrine, is certainly striking, yet it may be quickly forgotten as Peirce cuts an orthogonal path through the Cartesian territory. Descartes, after all, takes the *cogito* as foundational, and Peirce is developing an epistemology freed of any need for foundations. Descartes intuits his “I,” while Peirce counters the possibility of intuition with a depiction of inference. Still, Peirce does slip into the language of *necessity* when human doubt is supposed to bring the individual to a grasp of the self – just as Descartes, reduced by doubt and the supposition of deception, finds himself enabled to “conclude that ... *I am, I exist* is necessarily true” (Descartes 1984: 17). It is only in the move from this necessity to other acceptable claims, including claims about the self, that Peirce and Descartes are once again distanced.

Both need to overcome the difficulties of doubt, but while Descartes argues for the power of the solitary thinker, Peirce argues against the possibilities of introspection and asserts the need for a community of inquirers. Why? Peirce himself, ruminating on his presumption in claiming that the practitioners of a whole branch of science – psychology, as it happens – have misconceived their field, remarks that “in the history of science, majorities short of unanimity have more often been wrong than right. Majorities do not form their opinions rationally” (CP 7.367).

Why, then, does he prize the community of inquirers? (Cf., e.g., CP 5.265, 311, 314, etc.) If majorities are typically irrational, if even communities of *scientists* are more often wrong than right, should we expect a sudden wisdom when *all* agree? Why can’t one go one’s own inquisitive way? Why, in particular, shouldn’t one look to oneself when the puzzle *is* the self? Peirce’s answer can be cast as epistemology, metaphysics, or morals.

In a note of explanation attached to a statement of the pragmatic maxim, Peirce alludes to the importance for him of “the great principle of continuity,” and he says that when that principle is made clear,

it will appear that individualism and falsity are one and the same. Meantime, we know that man is not whole as long as he is single, that he is essentially a possible member of society. Especially, one man's experience is nothing, if it stands alone. If he sees what others cannot, we call it hallucination. It is not "my" experience, but "our" experience that has to be thought of; and this "us" has indefinite possibilities. (CP 5.403)

The example of hallucination helps to clarify the epistemological aspect of Peirce's identification of individualism and falsity, and it captures a familiar ground for community inquiry. The hallucination is not a *veridical* perception, and its experience can be understood as a kind of individualism, "seeing what others cannot." The truer alternative, trusting to "'our' experience," has, however, Peirce claims, virtues beyond the epistemological.

Peirce discerns and decries both moral falsity and a metaphysical mistake in the individualist's position. It is doubly wrong to say, "I am altogether myself and not at all you":

[Y]ou must abjure this metaphysics of wickedness. In the first place, your neighbors are, in a measure, yourself, and in a far greater measure than ... you would believe. Really, the selfhood you like to attribute to yourself is, for the most part, the vulgarest delusion of vanity. (CP 7.570)

This attribution of vice suggests a bitter irony. Peirce believes the concept of the self is a fault, since the separate individual is a vain notion, empty, a negation. (Compare the poignant conclusion of "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities":

The individual man, since his separate existence is manifested only by ignorance and error, so far as he is anything apart from his fellows, and from what he and they are to be, is only negation. This is man,
 '...proud man,
 Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
 His glassy essence.' (CP 5.317)

And yet the exhortation to self-abnegation, to recognition of one's continuity with all, contains within itself the recognition that the metaphysics of the separate self is among the things most commonly shared – it is "the *vulgarest delusion*.")

A compelling indication of Peirce's tortures over this problem of the separate self can be seen in his vituperative notes on William James's *Principles of Psychology*. Confronting James's assertion of the "absolute insulation" of one "personal consciousness" from another, James's claim that the barriers between different "personal minds" "are the most absolute beaches in nature" (James, 1950: 226), Peirce is provoked to an almost surrealistic jeremiad. He begins lightly enough:

Everybody will admit a personal self exists in the same sense in which a snark exists; that is, there is a phenomenon to which that name is given. It is an illusory phenomenon; but it is a phenomenon. It is not quite *purely* illusory, but only *mainly* so. It is true, for instance, that men are *selfish*, that is, that they are really deluded into supposing themselves to have some isolated existence; and in so far, they *have* it. To

deny the reality of personality is not anti-spiritualistic; it is only anti-nominalistic. It is true that there are certain phenomena, really quite slight and insignificant, but exaggerated, because they are connected with the tongue, which may be described as personality. The agility of the tongue is shown in its insisting that the world depends on it. The phenomena of personality consist mainly in ability to hold the tongue. This is what the tongue brags so about. (CP 8.82)²

Once again, Peirce does not dwell on the paradox of his claim that the metaphysical mistake of supposing a separate self is self-correcting in that it is self-fulfilling. He moves instead to extend these peculiar ruminations on the tongue.

He writes that “physicians are highly privileged” in being able to “ask to see people’s tongues; for this is inspecting the very organ of personality.” Personality is “so vivid” because the tongue is “so sensitive,” “so agile and complex a muscle.” The idea that the “muscular habits [of the tongue] are the basis of personality” (all quotes here: CP 8.84) may be a play on James’s much maligned introspective conclusion that the self consists “mainly of ... peculiar motions in the head or between the head and the throat” (James, 1950: 301); but Peirce goes even further in this strange game. His comment that “cases of double personality show that the cunning right hand can in a measure replace the tongue” (CP 8.86) seems prompted by James’s discussion of “possession” and automatic writing, but Peirce proceeds to an almost Nietzschean parable. James suggests that these strange cases show that consciousness can be split, that, in some persons, one part of consciousness can be private from another. Peirce contends that the “principal personality” still resides in the tongue, that its “superiority is shown by this” –

if [it is] cut out the person soon gets along and talks very well with the remaining fragments. Farmers sometimes slit the tongues of self milking cows. But they soon learn to make use of the slit tongue just the same. So if a man’s right hand is cut off, it is marvelous how much he can do with the stump. But the hand altogether lacks the extreme subtilty of the tongue. The school-boy writes with his tongue. That is the tongue teaching fingers language. Some people roll up their tongues, or bite them, or shove them down when they do something sly or tricky. Some people stick them in their cheeks. These are the gestures of pure egotism. The tobacco chewer shifts his quid when he betrays his vanity. All animals capable of domestication have good tongues. (CP 8.86)

The baffling motto that ends these eccentric remarks should not check our appreciation of Peirce’s inversion of some standard philosophical grotesqueries. In the literature of personal identity, examples of physical amputation are often used to suggest the inessentiality, to personal identity, of elements of the body. Peirce seems, on the contrary, to identify the individual with those body parts, and then to look for functional equivalence between an original organ or limb and whatever surgery has left behind.

Moreover, if we remember that Peirce’s opposition to James’s view of the separation of selves is but one instance of Peirce’s general opposition to discontinuities, we should also note the name Peirce gives to his great principle of continuity.

Synechism," "the tendency to regard everything as continuous," is said by Peirce to come from a Greek word meaning "continuity of parts brought about by surgery." (CP 7.565) "Surgery" is, in fact and in etymology, *handwork*. There is a hint in these word choices that Peirce recognizes that making connections may require effort and skill, that continuity may be an achievement and not just an artless fact. Peirce may have to *effect* synechism with his own "cunning right hand," writing persuasively against James's claims of personal separation.

Often, however, Peirce writes as if personal continuity is simply a given. Thus he says that "personal existence is an illusion and a practical joke": "Those that have loved themselves and not their neighbors will find themselves April fools when the great April opens the truth that neither selves nor neighborselves were anything more than vicinities." (CP 4.68)

There is a moral edge in Peirce's insistence, but he makes his claim that "in this ...world, [we are] mere cells in a social organism" (CP 1.647 & 1.673) as a matter of plain metaphysics. The person is evidently structured as a sort of community, and the community may be regarded as in some ways a super-person:

a person is not absolutely an individual. His thoughts are what he is "saying to himself," that is, ... to that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time.... [Moreover, a] man's circle of society (however widely or narrowly this phrase may be understood), is a sort of loosely compacted person, in some respects of higher rank than the person of an individual organism. (CP 5.421)

Peirce asserts the existence of "corporate minds" and personalities, "generalizations of feeling" beyond one person's body to a whole group. "*Esprit de corps*, national sentiment, sym-pathy, are no mere metaphors. None of us can fully realize what the minds of corporations are, any more than one of my brain cells can know what the whole brain is thinking." (CP 6.271)

In the idea that individuals exist essentially in relation to society, there may seem to be an anticipation of pragmatic developments typically associated with G.H. Mead and John Dewey. These later pragmatists, however, exhibit a keen interest in actual social arrangements, a sharp desire to make philosophy out of reflection on real politics. Dewey might be complaining of Peirce, as well as Hegel, the announced exemplary target, in this passage from *Reconstruction in Philosophy*:

What we want light upon is this or that group of individuals, this or that concrete human being, this or that special institution or arrangement.... They tell us about *the* state when we want to know about *some* state.... [T]he tendency of the organic point of view is to minimize the significance of specific conflicts. Since the individual and the state or social institution are but two sides of the same reality,... the conflict in any particular case can be but apparent.... [W]hy [then] pay much attention to the fact that in *this* state a whole group of individuals are suffering from oppressive conditions? (Dewey, MW: 188,189)

Self or group assertion against a larger whole may suggest too much individualism for Peirce, suggest a deluded and pernicious attempt to enhance a

substanceless point, or a neighborhood of points, when those “vicinities” in fact exist only through their location in the whole. Mead, on the other hand, like Dewey, not only advocates group and individual efforts to reform and reconstruct specific communities: he also claims that the individual may be warranted in simply *withdrawing* from some societies – for example, caste orders – just because they restrict full personal development. (Cf., e.g., Mead, 1962: 318.) Peirce sees chiefly vanity in the quest for individual development and in the assertion of private, personal perspectives; and the ethic of his synechism seems to leave no theoretical room for a morally positive estrangement from one’s fellows.

Synechism may also prevent an adequate estimation of the separation inherent in our human embodiment. Peirce’s story of child development does feature the body in a supporting role, but there is a deprecating slant in that drama. First the infant wrongly supposes its body to be the center of the world. This mistake is eventually corrected, but only by taking the body’s situation as a source of worthless partiality; the body’s situation, its limitation, in time and place can, should, and will be overcome by participation in language. Peirce’s striking identification of human beings and language, man and word, “the man-sign,” has as one of its express aims a detachment of focus from what he calls “animal life.” (Cf. CP 5.313-15 and 7.582-96.) Moreover, even when animal life is specifically in view, the idea that we are separate organisms is not what Peirce wants most to display.

His fundamental division within the ‘special sciences’ is between the physical and psychological sciences, and when the proper subdivisions of anthropology are in question, Peirce dismisses somatology as “purely physical, except that it strangely includes psychology.” (CP 1.232 and 1.264). He admits that some “anatomy and physiology” must be taken into account in order to understand animals’ minds, but the relevance of these physical inquiries will be “quite trifling”: “Very little psychology is needed by the biologist; and no very deep biology is needed by the psychologist”; these sciences are different, even though they may overlap, because “the study of animals’ bodies is a study of efficiency, while the study of their minds is a study of finality” (CP 1.264). Physics is the basic science of all bodies, Peirce says, and a chemical classification of bodies can go on to divide the physical field into inorganic structures and living organisms (“a distinction between that kind of structure which gives rise to forms without power of truth [true?] growth or inorganic structures, and the chemistry of protoplasm which develops [or] living organisms” (CP 1.512). But Peirce would have the *teleology* of any living body understood not as intrinsic to it, but as a function of that body’s participation in a larger force: “[F]inal causality ... appears in three *guises*; first quite detached from any biological organism; second, in biological individuals *as vehicles*; third, in societies, ranging from the family to that public which includes our indefinite “posterity” (CP 1.267, emphasis added).

Human beings can, then, be examined in their physical being – observed, for example, as among the organic matter under study in the science of biochemistry. Or mind can be the subject of science – that *share* of mind for which a human (or any other organism) may serve as the vehicle; or the section of mind developed by

a social unit; or even mind apart from biological incarnation altogether. Peirce's approach to these matters undoubtedly offers fresh vistas to those stuck in the closed mazes of Cartesian dualism. One can hear, for example, a precursor of a Rylean formulation in Peirce's claim that "one must not take a nominalistic view of Thought as if it were something that a man had in his consciousness.... Thought... is more without us than within. It is we that are in it, rather than it in any of us." (CP 8.256)

But Peirce's "great principle of continuity" requires a more ethereal understanding of humans than the concept associated with Gilbert Ryle, and there could be no mistaken inclination to identify as a behaviorist the author of this touching cry:

...are we shut up in a box of flesh and blood? When I communicate my thought and my sentiments to a friend with whom I am in full sympathy, so that my feelings pass into him and I am conscious of what he feels, do I not live in his brain as well as my own – most literally? True, my animal life is not there but my soul, my feeling thought attention are. (CP 7.591)

Just how continuous, though, how frequent even, is "full sympathy"? Peirce's particular joining of metaphysics and morals may obscure some of the everyday facts that he himself agrees should be the subject of philosophy. (Cf., e.g., CP 1.241; 5.120.) The problem here is not merely the relative rarity of "living in another's brain," of feeling that one's feelings have passed utterly into another. In order to test Peirce's synechism, we need to remember other, relatively uncommon, but still too frequently occurrent, antagonistic features of social life. If we consider, for example, some terrible kinds of "physical infringement" – battery, rape – we may be shocked into doubts about synechism and about the moral adequacy of Peirce's neglect, his depreciation, of our separate embodiment. We may be less eager to embrace an account of privacy that insists its assertion is always erroneous, always the mark of vanity, of the epistemologically wayward and metaphysically unreal.

Even on the level of more ordinary despair and disappointments, Peirce's disparagement of individualism ascribes selfishness to one who feels isolated; but such a feeling is seldom willfully sought, and it need not be associated with callousness toward, or exploitation of, others.

Sometimes, indeed, the feeling of isolation is occasioned by a sense that others are unreachable, despite one's desire to connect. It seems that developing appropriate individuality, respecting and overcoming separateness are all equally real human tasks and problems. Peirce's law of continuity can make communication and communal life, the achievement of community, sound too easy.³

Peirce's more gregarious, more socially successful colleague, William James, did not hesitate to acknowledge the difficulties of connecting with others. James claims not only that the insulation of all personal minds is "absolute," that the "breaches" between different personal selves are "the most absolute ... in nature" (James, 1950:226); he also stresses the difficulty of communicating adequately the nuances and subtleties of what he famously calls, "the stream of thought." Studying

the mind “from within,” James laments again and again the inadequacy of our vocabulary, the problems set for us by both our ordinary language and our assumptions about its powers.

He asks for reflection on the “fringes” of our consciousness, on the transitional phases, on a range of peculiar and often overlooked states of mind. He talks, for example, of the qualitative difference between the awareness of a sudden thunder clap – “thunder-breaking-upon-silence-and-contrasting-with-it” (James, 1950: 240) – and the awareness of a continuation of thunder. He asks us to consider the experience of trying vainly to remember a name, and the difference between trying to remember the name, say, “Spaulding” and the name “Bowles.” He says there is an active gap in each case, but a definite and definitely different gap in each, so that if wrong names are proposed to us, we immediately reject them; and we are led on in our struggle, as if by the ghost of the missing word, with accompanying feelings that we are closer to or farther away from what we seek. We cannot in this case clearly designate the felt difference between trying to recall “Spaulding” and trying to recall “Bowles”; the names, after all, are precisely what are not yet in our minds. But that just shows, says James,

that our psychological vocabulary is wholly inadequate to name the differences that exist, even such strong differences as these. But 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 rhythm of a lost word may be there without a sound to clothe it; or the evanescent sense of something which is the initial vowel or consonant may mock us fitfully, without growing more distinct. Everyone must know the tantalizing effect of the blank rhythm of some forgotten verse, restlessly dancing in one’s mind, striving to be filled out with words. (James, 1950: 251-2)

James suggests that the problems of the description of our inner lives are somehow ineluctable – “no existing language is capable of doing justice to all [the] shades [of our feelings]” (James, 1950: 245) – but he still lays special blame on those he calls “associationists,” sometimes “sensationalists,” sometimes just “empiricists” – those who would claim that the mind can be understood in compositional terms, as built up from simple sensations or ideas. Ordinary language may be the first source of psychological error, of inaccuracy in the description of thought, because, James says, it arose and remains mostly employed in order to deal with substantive “outward things,” so the vocabulary for “subjective facts” is undeveloped. But the empiricists have exacerbated this problem, according to James, by dwelling on only one side of the influence of language on the story of philosophy’s practice of hypostatization. They have derided our tendency to suppose that if there is a name, there must be a substantive entity that the name denotes, and they have thus, rightly, James says, denied the existence of a variety of abstract entities. But they have said nothing about the obverse error of assuming that, if there is no name, there can be no entity, and they have thus done their part to suppress recognition “of phenomena whose existence would be patent to us all, had we only grown up to hear [them] recognized in speech” (James, 1950: 195; cf. also 246).

Moreover, the “entire English psychology derived from Locke and Hume” and “the entire German psychology derived from Herbart” have been strangled by a hidden noose of the very snare of language the empiricists have so often decried (James, 1950: 196). Because there so often is a correlation between name and object, and because, further, we often designate our thoughts in terms of their objects, we tend to assume, James says, “that as the objects are, so the thought must be.” (James, 1950: 195). Empiricists have traded on this assumption, concluding that the thought of distinct things must be distinct thoughts, that recurrent thoughts of an object’s self-identity imply the self-identity of recurrent thought, and so on. The consequence is an atomistic picture of thought, an inaccurate representation of the mental stream.

In addition to these problems of language there is what James calls “the Psychologist’s Fallacy” – the confusion of the psychologist’s standpoint with that of the mental fact or mental state about which the psychologist reports. This may take the form of a psychologist’s assuming that *his* way of knowing an object is the same as that of some cognition he is studying or of his supposing that, because he is conscious of a particular mental state, that mental state must be conscious of itself (James, 1950: 196-198). These sorts of confusions may seem very crude, James says, but he insists that no psychologist has altogether succeed in avoiding them. There is a particular liability to this confusion, one might think, in the introspective method that James identifies as the basis for psychology, and that may be why James himself repeatedly underscores his conviction that “introspection is no sure guide to truths *about* our mental states” (James, 1950: 197).

Introspection may be what psychology must rely on “first, foremost, and always” (James, 1950: 185), but introspective observation yields only subjective facts; reports *on* introspection take those subjective facts as their objects, relate them to other objects, and may then be true or false in their claims about these relations. This, James thinks, is why the Psychologist’s Fallacy poses such problems, but it is also, he claims, what allows psychology the status of a natural science:

If to *have* feelings or thoughts in their immediacy were enough, babies in the cradle would be psychologists, and infallible ones. But the psychologist must not only *have* his mental states in their absolute veritableness, he must report them and write about them, name them classify and compare them and trace their relations to other things. Whilst alive they are their own property; it is only *post-mortem* that they become his prey. And as in the naming, classing, and knowing of things in general we are notoriously fallible, why not also here? (James, 1950: 189)

When James is focused on articulating the scope and methods of psychology, and claiming for it the standing of a natural science, his general conclusion is that “*introspection is difficult and fallible; and ... the difficulty is simply that of all observation of whatever kind*” (James, 1950: 191). But when James is trying to capture the prey that are the data of psychology, the observational problems seem special, for the epistemological difficulties of introspection are intertwined with metaphysical ones. The chief problem for James, articulated in the controlling

metaphor of his discussion, is that the stream is constantly flowing. Before one can catch the inner phenomena, they slip away. It seems one can grasp them only in memory. A memory of a mental state is itself a mental state, however, and so itself only accessible as memory. The inner life seems sufficiently lubricious that it is difficult to understand how it is ever captured – dead or alive. James admits that the “transitive parts” of thought are “very difficult” to see: “stopping them to look at them before the conclusion is reached is really annihilating them” (James, 1950: 243). Subsidiary Jamesian metaphors attest to his sense of the depth of this difficulty: We might as well catch and try to examine the structure of a snowflake in a warm hand, seize a spinning top to study its motion, or try to “turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks” (James, 1950: 244).

Still, James tries to locate this slippery stream of thought at the core of the personal self. He distinguishes various constituents of the self: the *material* self, of which the body is the innermost part, then clothing, family, home, and possessions; the *social* self, which is recognition by others, the sense of a person carried by acquaintances, lovers, friends, and family, an individual’s fame or notoriety, honor or disgrace; and the *spiritual* self, the inner or subjective being, discovered when thought becomes reflective, when we “*think ourselves as thinkers*” (James, 1950: 286). In focusing on the stream of thought, we approach, James suggests, a kind of core self. The stream of thought itself is felt to be more the *true* self than any outward thing, and, within the stream, a “*certain portion ... abstracted from the rest ... is felt by all ... as a sort of innermost centre within the circle, of sanctuary within the citadel, ... [the] self of all the other selves*” (James, 1950: 297). James thinks we might call this the *active* element in consciousness, that which welcomes or rejects the other contents, the “home of interest,” “the source of effort and attention,” the functional point at which sensation terminates and movement may begin (James, 1950: 298).

He says that though metaphysicians will give different accounts of the nature of this central self, all will agree that we are directly acquainted with it, that it is *felt*. James relies, as always, on introspection to describe what is felt, and he proceeds, like Descartes, in the grammatical first person, to state what *he* finds when he turns inward, what seems to him “indubitable and distinct”: “Whenever my introspective glance succeeds in turning round quickly enough to catch one of these manifestations of spontaneity in the act, all it can ever feel distinctly is some bodily process, for the most part taking place within the head.” (James, 1950: 300)

He notices his eyeballs rolling upward and outward as he tries to remember or reflect, his jaw and brow muscles contracting as he makes an effort, his glottis opening and closing as he accepts or rejects an experience or idea. This is the discussion that the later Wittgenstein seems to mock when, in the *Philosophical Investigations*’ examination of the idea of inner experience, and the feeling of “an unbridgeable gulf between consciousness and brain-processes,” Wittgenstein says

Here we have a case of introspection, not unlike that from which William James got the idea that the ‘self’ consisted mainly of ‘peculiar motions in the head and between

the head and throat'. And James' introspection shewed, not the meaning of the word "self" (so far as it means something like "person", "human being", "he himself", "I myself"), nor any analysis of such a thing, but the state of a philosopher's attention when he says the word "self" to himself and tries to analyse its meaning. (And a good deal could be learned from this.) (Wittgenstein, 1953: sec. 413)

Wittgenstein questions what it can *mean* "to speak of 'turning my attention on to my own consciousness,'" and he says that the feeling it can produce is what occurs "when we are performing some logical sleight-of-hand" (Wittgenstein, 1953: sec 412). But the parenthetical remark at the end of section 413 may suggest Wittgenstein's ambivalence about James's enterprise, as would the frequency of his allusions to the *Principles'* chapters on the stream of thought and the consciousness of self. Wittgenstein must know that James is not trying here to show the meaning of the word "self," must know that even when James says that, for himself, the innermost self consists mainly of these peculiar motions, that he hastens to add, "I do not for a moment say that this is *all* it consists of" (James, 1950: 301). When Wittgenstein takes up James's treatment of the experience of trying to remember a name, of feeling that the word is "on the tip of one's tongue," he says, as if against James, "But this is not an experience at all. *Interpreted* as experience it does indeed look odd": We use the words "It's on the tip of my tongue" in *certain situations*, and they are surrounded by behavior of a special kind, and also by some characteristic experiences. In particular they are frequently followed by *finding* the word. (Wittgenstein, 1953: 219)

But James is himself trying to connect what he thinks are "some characteristic experiences" with behavior, and he is trying to cash out even introspection into behavioral, bodily terms. He says "warmth and intimacy" suffuse present thought and past thoughts that belong to the same stream, that it is "warmth and intimacy" that mark the personal privacy of one's subjective experience; but these feelings of warmth and intimacy are, he thinks, derived from the continuity of one's sense of one's own body, an awareness of which accompanies all thinking, feeling, and knowing, whatever else we think, feel, or know. In *Essays in Radical Empiricism*,⁴ James says that what feels like the stream of thought is primarily the stream of one's own breathing, that the "I think" that advocates of the pure ego of apperception say must be able to accompany all objects of thought is really the "I breathe" that *does* accompany them.

The dualism of the *Principles* is supposed to be methodological, not metaphysical, but James's assertion that introspective observation provides the fundamental data for psychology is buttressed by a deliberately Cartesian allusion. Introspection is looking into our own minds, he says, and he claims that we all agree that what we find there are states of consciousness: "That we have *cogitations* of some sort is the *inconcussum* in a world most of whose other facts have at some time tottered in the breath of philosophic doubt" (James, 1950: 185). What James eventually finds, though, in turning consciousness on consciousness, in trying to

focus on thinking and feeling, itself – as opposed to or in abstraction from the objects, the “outer reality” on which consciousness may be directed – are sensations of concentration, the muscle tension of an attentive human organism. He finds, in short, the body:

The world experienced... 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’....

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. 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.... I see no inconsistency whatever in defending, on the one hand, ‘my’ activities as unique and opposed to those of outer nature, and, on the other hand, in affirming, after introspection, that they consist in movements in the head. (James, 1967:170)

There may be no inconsistency, but this is, for many readers of James, a disappointing juncture in the quest for an adequate account of privacy and the self. The deepest problem may not be James’s attention to cephalic movements, but rather his inattention to the conditions of ownership of those movements. It turns out that the gaps between personal minds – the gaps denied by Peirce and asserted as unbridgeable by James – are, for James, simply a direct function of our separate bodies. If Peirce’s neglect of our physical separateness is a problem for the accuracy and adequacy of his account, James’s assumption that physical distinctness immediately entails reflective privacy is also a problem. The non-introspective, or, rather, less individualistic, psychology associated with George Herbert Mead and John Dewey, social behaviorism, does not make this assumption.

Mead and Dewey agree that introspection has a place in psychology, and that there are phenomena to which only the individual has experiential access. They claim, however, that even these phenomena, an individual’s “inner experience,” can be studied from the point of view of a behaviorist. These phenomena are within the organism, not in another world, and they find expression – as attitudes, responses, and so on – within a larger field of behavior. This is close to a claim James might already seem to have made. His feeling of effort, e.g., may begin as the sensation of tightened brow muscles, but it can grow into contractions of the biceps and the visible tugging of a heavy object, an activity open to the gaze of all. Mead and Dewey would have no need to remind James that an individual’s inner life is often expressed, or connected with public behavior.

Their insistence that we also need an account of how the individual’s inner life is experienced as “inner,” however, might seem foreign to James. He suggests a transparency to introspection, even though he denies introspective infallibility, and he asserts that a reflective condition of mind – a mind that is conscious of its own

consciousness – “is, more or less explicitly, our habitual adult state of mind” (James, 1950: 273). Thus Mead, in the essay, “The Self and the Process of Reflection,” might be speaking to directly to James:

It may be necessary again to utter a warning against the easy assumption that experiences originating under the skin provide an inner world within which in some obscure manner reflection may arise, and against the assumption that the body of the individual as a perceptual object provides a center to which experiences may be attached, thus creating a private and psychical field that has in it the germ of representation and so of reflection. Neither a colic nor a stubbed toe can give birth to reflection, nor do pleasures or pains, emotions, or moods, constitute inner psychical contents, inevitably referred to a self...(Mead, 1962: 357)

James claims that each of us splits the universe in half, each of us in a different place, and for each of us almost all interest is focused on only one of the halves. The halves are the “me” and “not-me”. This “may be a moral riddle,” according to James, “but it is a fundamental psychological fact”:

Even the trodden worm... contrasts his own suffering self with the whole remaining universe, though he have no clear conception either of himself or of what the universe may be. He is for me a mere part of the world; for him it is I who am the mere part. Each of us dichotomizes the Kosmos in a different place. (James, 1950: 290)

For Mead and Dewey, the worm, with no clear conception of himself, cannot contrast his own suffering with the whole remaining universe. He cannot reflect on his suffering at all. The capacity to reflect depends upon the possession of a self, and a self is not something that every conscious creature just *has*. Even among human beings, according to Mead and Dewey, the self – and its essential characteristic, viz., reflexivity – is not present at birth but must develop in and through the life of the physical organism. The mechanism for this development is found, they say, in social activity. This may seem an echo of Peirce, but Mead and Dewey are less dismissive of biology, and Mead begins within an explicitly Darwinian framework.⁵

Mead in fact gives both a phylogenetic and an ontogenetic account of the development of the human self. In both these accounts, his notion of the “vocal gesture” is pivotal. In the phylogenetic reconstruction, he notes that animals at a certain level of complexity have physiological impulses – those related to nutrition and reproduction, for example – whose expression or satisfaction is social. Sexual behavior; the interactions between parent and offspring; the establishment of patterns of dominance; the phenomena of herding, of group attack and defense – any of these can provide the occasion for what Mead calls “the conversation of gestures.” Making use of Wilhelm Wundt’s delineation of the concept of the gesture, defining the gesture as “that part of the social act which serves as a stimulus to other [animals] involved in the same social act” (Mead, 1962: 42), Mead points out that such stimulation and responsive adjustment may proceed reciprocally, the beginning of the response to a gesture becoming in turn a stimulus, a gesture. One grazing animal becomes agitated and begins to trot; its movement may stimulate those near it to flee from

their foraging; their flight may then stimulate the first animal, and others, to a gallop; and soon the herd is in full stampede. Mead's favorite example is the dogfight: one dog sees another in its territory and growls; the other dog hears the growl, turns and bares its teeth; the first dog in response flattens its ears and lunges.

This is a conversation of gestures – alert but unreflective responses and adjustments, proceeding reciprocally – below the level of language, but it is a process out of which language – and so, Mead says, minds and selves – can develop. The vocal gesture is said to be the primary vehicle for this development, because it is heard by its maker just as it is heard by others. This allows for self-stimulation, for the individual to respond to himself or herself as he or she would to another. One can thus become an object to oneself.

Mead thinks human ontogeny structurally recapitulates this phylogeny: The infant reproduces the tone of voice and, later, some of the articulate sounds produced by the parents in response to the infant's own cries and gurgles. The baby's dependence upon the responses of others makes him or her peculiarly sensitive to these vital relations between stimuli and responses. "Having in his own nature the beginning of the parental response, [the baby] calls it our by his own appeals" (Mead, 1964: 285). The adoption of roles in play is interpreted similarly: the child is calling out in himself or herself the responses which might be called out in another – in mother, father, in a pirate or policeman. The child addresses and responds to her doll as her mother address and responds to her. It is a simple form of being another to oneself, both exhibiting and developing the capacity to be an object in one's own experience. This is or requires the reflexivity which is at the core of self-consciousness, and it is effected, again, by the vocal gesture. But Mead says the child must progress to another stage before he or she can be said to have fully developed a self.

The child must not only take the roles of others, respond as others; he or she must also use those responses to organize those various roles into a structured whole. This is what the child does in rule-governed games. In play the child may shift randomly from one role to another; in the game he assumes, supposes, the roles of the other participants, but doesn't usurp or haphazardly take up those roles:

If he plays first base, it is as the one to whom the ball will be thrown from the field or from the catcher. Their organized reactions to him he has embedded in his own playing of the different positions, and this organized reaction becomes... the 'generalized other' that accompanies and controls his conduct. And it is this generalized other in his experience which provides him with a self. (Mead, 1964: 285)

The organization of the generalized other provides the unity requisite for a self. While in play the child may, with a whim, slip from one role to another, in the game he or she must be, e.g., the first baseman, or say, the goalkeeper, the forward, etc. The organization in terms of which the child's own position is established and defined constitutes an "other," but it is not a particular other – not a parent, teacher, real or fictitious acquaintance, and not one or more of the other individuals taking part in the game. It is an abstraction from the social process from which it originates.

The child may thus take on a number of defined identities, as he or she plays a variety of games, but, of course, he or she is always implicated in much larger social processes as well. To develop a coherent self, a child must share, organize, and generalize the attitudes and responses of many more individuals than just his or her team or playmates. But as the individual interacts with a wider community, in a variety of contexts, he or she can organize a more comprehensive generalized other – a more comprehensive set of roles and reactions in terms of which his or her own identity can be understood, a broader perspective from which coherent reflection on the self may proceed.

This account of the origin and development of the self is guided by the realization that reflexivity, the capacity to be an object to oneself, *is* a puzzle. Mead tries to solve the puzzle by locating a point – a social construction, the generalized other – from which reflection can be achieved. The self that is realized through the adoption of this reflexive vantage point is likewise, then, a social construction. But how are its parts put together? Mead suggests that sharing others' responses is the first glue of the social self, but how does this sharing illuminate the self's essential reflexivity? If one responds as an other to one's own vocal gesture, one may be an object to oneself, but one is a foreign object: if I actually respond to my own utterance as another would, or as to another, I do not seem to grasp that is *my* utterance. Mead is right that problem of reflexivity wants an account, but the story of the vocal gesture is patently inadequate. Nonetheless, the supposition remains attractive that the emergence of the self is somehow tied, in the species and in the individual, to the emergence of language. Speech and writing expand our possibilities for interactions with others and, it seems, can generate refinements in our cognitive and affective capacities, our powers of knowing ourselves and others.

Dewey, like Mead, suggests that our knowledge of ourselves is always mediated by our knowledge of others. He speaks of the "the social constitution of personal, even of private experience" (Dewey, MW: 7.78), and complains that the idea that we understand other minds only "by reasoning from analogy" on the basis of our own "exclusively private states of consciousness (supposed to be experienced from the start in their privacy) is in curious contradiction with a whole body of facts which in another context we unhesitatingly accept" (Dewey, MW: 7.39). We find it easy, he says, to attribute states of mind to others: we are certain, e.g., that another person is angry, but we often need others, or the reflection mediated by a realization of how we appear to others, to see our own anger. Mead and Dewey both underscore the difference between being a conscious creature – say, James's suffering, trodden worm – and being a creature that knows its own consciousness: Of course your *having* a toothache is quite different event from *my* having it, Dewey says; but it "does not follow that you know that *what* you have is a toothache any differently from the way in which any one else knows it" (Dewey, LW: 15.30).

Dewey in particular seems interested in eroding both the metaphysical and the epistemological claims of privacy. He says that while there may be "such things as enjoyments and sufferings which are 'private' in occurrence," the insistence

that they are *known* in any way different from the way in which we know sounds, colors, etc., seems to be a dictum resting... not upon any evidence.... Moreover, the privacy of enjoyments and sufferings in their occurrence seems to describe a *social* fact – as much so as in the case of a miser who has and gloats over a “private” store of gold.

...The currency of the doctrine which mistakenly converts the event of having into a unique mode of knowing can be said to be a confused product of an “individualistic” *social* movement in politics and economics. (Dewey, LW: 15.30-31)

...Personally, I doubt whether one could even be acquainted with the things he enjoys and undergoes, any more than with milk, oak trees, or neighbors, unless he got beyond what he *has* by means of operations of comparison and discrimination, which result in giving the things in question a general or public status. (Dewey, LW: 15.31)

We might agree with Dewey’s claim that the privacy of enjoyments and sufferings is a social fact, if all this means is that our *notion* of privacy is shared, that the word “privacy” is part of a common language, a language with a semantics exhibiting its own natural history. But can we conclude, as Dewey suggests, that if acquaintance with enjoyments and sufferings requires comparisons and discrimination, these cognitive operations give enjoyments and sufferings themselves a “general or public status”? His remarks may remind us that *representations* of enjoyments and sufferings have a public status, but do they illuminate the way in which my sufferings are enjoyments *are* mine? Is there really no metaphysical category distinction between pain and pleasure, on the one hand, and milk, oak trees, and neighbors on the other? Dewey, with an interest here in rebutting a particular theory of knowledge, may be less interested in pursuing this question.

In fact, each of these philosophers – Peirce, James, Mead, and Dewey – through selective attention to the issues he feels most pressing, overlooks some problems and puzzles tied to our sense of privacy or distorts some aspect of the phenomena of our private experience. In Peirce, there is the claim of, or the hope for, metaphysical continuity, which works to minimize the import of our physical and moral separateness. In James, there is a sharp feel for the isolated individual, but a weakened attentiveness to the social conditions necessary for self-reflection. In Mead and Dewey, an interest in social explanations prevails, but there is little patience with metaphysical questions that may persist beyond the workings of a social epistemology.

The problems and deficiencies in Peirce’s, James’s, Mead’s and Dewey’s accounts are not, however, consequences of the pragmatic views they share – commitments to consider consequences, e.g., fallibilism, a broad instrumentalism, an evolutionary outlook. The deficiencies in, and the differences between, these pragmatists’ views seem rather to be born, at least in part, from their individual circumstances – the time and place of their remarks, the history of philosophy to that point, the texts through which they situate themselves, the conversations in which they are engaged, their own temperaments and perspectives. This last suggestion – that temperament and personal perspective, the private side of the philosopher – may play a crucial

role in the substance of philosophy is an idea in need of more direct examination and defense. But that's another story about privacy – one that must be left for another occasion.

NOTES

1. Some of this account of Peirce's views is also to be found in my "American Philosophy Continued: Peirce's Puzzles about the Self." *Pursuits of Reason*. Ed. T. Cohen; P. Guyer; H. Putnam. Lubbock: Texas Tech UP, 1993.
2. Some religious texts central to Western culture may seem indeed to insist that the world depends on the tongue – "in the beginning was the Word..." (John 1.1), "... and God said, Let there be light: and there was light.." (Genesis 1.3). Are these crucial testaments to the tongue's agility?
3. His own life experience surely belied this ease (– and so he said, "Man is essentially a social animal; but to be social is one thing, to be gregarious is another.." [CP 1.11]).
4. *Essays in Radical Empiricism* was published posthumously, in 1912, but the essays first appeared in 1905-07, and they had been collected and put under their covering title by James himself in 1907. In the first essay, "Does Consciousness Exist?," James noted that he had doubted the existence of consciousness as an entity for twenty years – at least as long ago, in other words, as the appearance of the *Principles of Psychology*, in 1890.
5. For a fuller discussion of Mead's philosophy of the self, and discussion of some other pragmatic alternatives, see my *The Self Imagined: Philosophical Reflections on the Social Character of Psyche*. London: Routledge/Kegan Paul, 1986.

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