

# *William James Revisited*

## REREADING *THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE* IN TRANSATLANTIC PERSPECTIVE

by Ann Taves

*Abstract.* William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is one of the world's most popular attempts to meld science and religion. Academic reviews of the book were mixed in Europe and America, however, and prominent contemporaries, unsure whether it was science or theology, struggled to interpret it. James's reliance on an inherently ambiguous understanding of the subconscious as a means of bridging between religion and science accounts for some of the interpretive difficulties, but it does not explain why his overarching question was so obscure, why psychopathology and unusual experiences figured so prominently, or why he gave us so many examples and so little argument. To understand these persistent puzzles we need to do more than acknowledge James's indebtedness to Frederic Myers's conception of the subconscious. We need to read *VRE* in the context of the transatlantic network of experimental psychologists and psychical researchers who provided the primary *intellectual* inspiration for the book. Doing so not only locates and clarifies the underlying question that animated the work but also illuminates the structural and rhetorical similarities between *VRE* and Myers's *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*. In contrast to the individual case studies of hysterics, mediums, and mystics produced by others in this network, both Myers and James adopted a natural-history approach in which they arranged examples of automatisms to produce a rhetorical effect, thus invoking science in order to evoke a religious response. Where Myers organized his examples to make a case for human survival of death, James organized his to make a case for the involvement of higher powers in the transformation of the self. Read in this way, *VRE* marks a dramatic shift from a religious preoccupation with life after death to a religious preoccupation with this-worldly self-transformation.

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William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* ([1902] 1985) (*VRE*) is one of the world's most popular attempts to meld science and religion. It was hugely popular from the start, selling more than ten thousand copies in English within a year of its publication, and has remained so to this day, not only in English but in numerous other translations as well. As an effort to bridge religion and science, James feared it was "too biological for the religious [and] too religious for the biological," but in fact his blend of the biological and the religious only added to its long-term popularity (Perry 1935, 2:326). Academic reviews of the book were mixed, however, and, although the book effectively launched the psychology of religion as an area of study, its influence on religious studies and psychology has been limited, apart perhaps from the study of mysticism. Widely acknowledged as a classic in both religious studies and psychology, it nonetheless remains an interpretive puzzle.

#### THE RECEPTION OF *VRE*

Reviewers had difficulty with the text from the outset. As James commented to a friend, "reviewers, . . . *without a single exception*," described the book as "'unsatisfactory,' [then] having eased their conscience by that term, . . . proceed[ed] to handle me with sympathy and praise" (Perry 1935, 2:236). Reviews of the English, French, and German editions by prominent contemporaries consistently noted and reacted to certain features of the book: James's definition of religion in terms of religious experience apart from institutions and theology, his focus on extreme cases and their link to both psychopathology and mysticism, his explanation of religious experience in terms of the subconscious, and the tension between his ostensibly scientific claims and his own theological "overbeliefs" as outlined in the conclusion. Certain of these features—James's association of religious experience and mysticism, his understanding of the subconscious as potentially extending beyond the self, and his mystical-sounding overbeliefs—introduced ambiguities that made the book particularly susceptible to disparate readings.

In the United States, where liberal Protestantism and metaphysical traditions flourished, many religiously inclined readers appropriated *VRE* as a modern spiritual text. At the same time, academic psychologists, increasingly aligned with the German laboratory tradition, almost universally rejected the underlying psychology of the subconscious. American psychologists of religion were more mixed in their responses. George Coe, a liberal Protestant of a decidedly rationalist bent, criticized the book and derided the popular reading of the text as "psychic theology." Edwin Starbuck, a psychologist of religion who had studied with James, was the

most enthusiastic about the book, although he did think that the theological aspects were too prominent, particularly in the conclusion.<sup>1</sup> With the exception of James Leuba, all of the American psychologists of religion rejected the close association between religious experience and psychopathology evident in *VRE* and worked to distance “higher” forms of religious experience from both psychopathology and popular religion (Taves 1999, 291–305).

In Germany, a psychological approach to religion was advanced primarily by theologians and philosophers influenced by the experientially oriented theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher, rather than by psychologists. At the hands of his German translator, theologian Georg Wobbermin, *VRE* was assimilated to this tradition (Cornell 1990, 30–31; Gooch 2000, 89–90). Wobbermin noted the close relationship between James and Schleiermacher in his introduction to the German edition and praised James for highlighting the irrational aspects of religion. He made it clear, however, that it was James’s emphasis on the mystical and not the pathological that he wanted to applaud. He even inserted the word *pathology* into the subtitle of the book, thus allowing him to distinguish between “the psychology and pathology of the religious life.” Doing so effectively segregated the pathological, excising it from the psychology of the religious life (Wobbermin 1907; Cornell 1990, 30–32). Later works, such as Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy*, silently follow Wobbermin’s lead in this regard, highlighting the role of the irrational in religion while rejecting out of hand any comparisons with phenomena considered psychopathological (Otto [1923] 1958; Eliade [1957] 1987).

*VRE* provoked a lively a debate in the French-speaking world, where it was better understood and more thoroughly critiqued on its own terms than in Germany. The book’s two most ardent promoters were James’s friend and colleague, Swiss psychologist Théodore Flournoy, who initiated the translation of *VRE* into French, and Emile Boutroux, the professor of philosophy at the Sorbonne who provided the preface to the French edition and became James’s close friend in the last years of James’s life (LeClair 1966, 121; James [1902] 1985, 505ff.; Perry 1935, 2:560–69). The book received immediate attention in Protestant circles in both Switzerland and France, and, in letters to James dated 14 April and 11 November 1903, the French philosopher Paul Sabatier anticipated that it might even have a positive effect on Roman Catholics, especially given the uproar in that church over the writings of French Catholic modernists, such as Albert Loisy (James Papers). French philosophers picked up on James’s pragmatism and, reading *VRE* along with James’s later more philosophical works, entered fully into transatlantic discussions of pragmatism with their Anglo-American counterparts (Perry 1935, 2:599–635; Schultenover 2009).

Although *VRE* was reviewed as a contribution to the psychology of religion in the United States and what we might call pastoral psychology in

Germany, only in France was it seriously engaged as a potential contribution to the emergent scientific study of religion. Noteworthy in this regard were the opposing views of psychologist Henri Delacroix, who embraced *VRE* as a contribution to the science of religion, and Durkheimian sociologist of religion Marcel Mauss, who rejected it as mere theology. Their opposed readings of *VRE* rested on whether or not they thought James viewed religious feelings as distinct and irreducible, that is, *sui generis*. Mauss read James as assuming that there *were* distinct religious feelings. Mauss expressed astonishment at the way in which “theologians or philosophers who, like M. W. James are pervaded by theology . . . talk of religious feelings as of a specific thing. Religious feeling, they say, is religious experience, the experience of god. And this corresponds to a special sense, a sixth sense, that of divine presence” (Mauss 1906, 31).<sup>2</sup> Delacroix, in contrast, acknowledged that while “certain theologians, like [Auguste] Sabatier, whom James relied upon . . . understood religion [as *sui generis*],” James did not. “James’s theory,” he wrote, “is much more profound since, instead of making religious feeling a kind of irreducible reality . . . which entails the truth of its object, it seeks its empirical base in an explanation of the relationship of the conscious self and the subliminal self (*moi subliminal*). He is therefore a psychologist, that is to say a phenomenist and scientist, where the others are only theologians” (Delacroix 1903, 664–65).<sup>3</sup>

In my earlier writings I stressed that James explicitly repudiated a *sui generis* approach to religious feeling and sought to read *VRE* more along the lines suggested by Delacroix. However, we cannot ignore the persistent tendency to read James as a theologian in the fashion of Mauss and Wobbermin. As many scholars have recognized, much of the difficulty lies in James’s reliance on an inherently ambiguous understanding of the subconscious—which may or may not open up to something beyond the self—as a means of bridging between religion and science. This inherent theoretical ambiguity lies at the heart of the problem, but it is not sufficient to account for the difficulties that readers experience in trying to understand the text.

To the ambiguity of the subconscious I would add four further difficulties. First, James’s overarching question is obscure. He does explicitly structure the book around two questions, one of “fact” and one of “value.” The first is a question about the origin of “the religious propensities,” the second about their “philosophical significance.” It is possible to use these questions to tease out the argument of the book, but the reader has to work hard at this and is provided with no rationale for the sharp distinction between “first-hand” and “second-hand” experience and, thus, for the focus on religious geniuses rather than “ordinary religious believers” (see Taves 1999, 273–91). James scholars have argued that James wrote *VRE* to work out issues between himself and his Swedenborgian father (Taylor 2002). That may indeed have been his personal motivation, but it does not explain his intellectual motivation or reveal the central question that informed the book.

Second, it is not clear why he focused on unusual experiences and why psychopathology figured so prominently. Academic reviewers, as we have seen, struggled with his focus on “geniuses in the religious line,” that is, with unusual experiences often construed as pathological, and wished he had focused more on ordinary experience. Only in his concluding lecture is his question of origins framed in terms of what I take to be his deeper question, that is, whether the claims of such exceptional persons could be “literally and objectively true” (Taves 2003, 303–4). If this is his deeper question, what then lies behind it? What did religious geniuses have to offer that others did not?

Third, it is not clear why he gives us so many examples and so little argument. We don’t have a good explanation of the structure of the book. We know that the book was written as a series of lectures and that he wanted to engage his audience. But why are we so inundated with autobiographical snippets at the expense of argument that a prominent historian of the psychology of religion could claim that “James elaborated neither a specific theory nor a particular method, beyond the judicious use of personal documents” (Wulff 1997, 28)?

Fourth, why is *VRE* so hard to pin down? Why is it such an elusive and at the same time alluring text? Why does it consistently seem to elude our grasp as either science or religion or even as science *and* religion, and why does it have such enduring appeal? Scholars, myself included, have tended to read it one way or another—as science, as religion, as philosophy, depending on our interests (compare Barnard 1997; Lamberth 1999; Taves 2003). Why is it so difficult to grasp as a whole?

To understand these puzzles, it is not enough simply to recognize that James borrowed the idea of the subconscious from psychical researcher Frederic Myers. Instead, we need to read *VRE* as a whole within the context of the work of the transatlantic network of experimental psychologists and psychical researchers who, I will argue, provided the primary *intellectual* inspiration for the book. Most readers, whether American or European, have read it with little or no awareness of this larger context. The one reviewer who did read it with this larger context in mind, American psychologist of religion James Leuba, came closest in my view to capturing and explaining the ambiguities in the text.

Leuba, who was among the Americans who participated with James in this transatlantic network and the only reviewer to mention the work of the Society for Psychical Research (S.P.R.), argued that James did not want to write a purely scientific work. “His purpose was not so much to contribute to the science of religions, as defined by him, as to take a further step in the preparation of a startling system of Pluralistic Idealism [*sic*] . . . in which his passionately individualistic soul, enamored of the fullness and picturesque of life, could find affective as well as logical satisfaction” (Leuba 1904, 324).<sup>4</sup> “In the phenomena studied by the Society for Psychic [*sic*]

Research,” Leuba noted, James “had already seen intimations, if not proofs, of the interference in human life of spiritual agents” (p. 324).

James’s governing question, according to Leuba, extended the research of the Society into the realm of the religious life, asking whether there was any “indication [of the interference in human life of spiritual agents] in religious experiences. . . . ‘The Varieties of Religious Experience’ was prepared primarily as an answer to this query, for it is a survey, *not of religious life as a whole*, but of that portion of it which seems to promise a favorable answer to that question.” If this is “admitted to be the animating spirit of the work, one understands the omission from it of a type of religiosity not so striking and, philosophically, less interesting than the mystical, but much more common and probably as influential over human life,” that is, the ordinary believer’s belief in a transcendent God (pp. 324–25; emphasis added). In Leuba’s reading, James’s Gifford Lectures were, thus, “not so much an exposition of those [human] needs [for religion] as an attempt to make it appear that a particular belief [in spiritual agents], which would satisfy [those needs], is empirically justifiable” (p. 337).

Leuba faulted James for obscuring the question that animated the work and, as a result, making a case for belief in spiritual agents through indirection. The net effect, according to Leuba, was that, *even when James spoke as a scientist*, “the mysterious, imaginary shadows of spirit-agents . . . spread throughout the book,” suggesting something more. Thus, he wrote, “a work providing no empirical basis whatsoever for spirit-intervention is, nevertheless, made—I do not say intentionally—to cast the great weight of a mass of impressive facts in favor of that hypothesis.” In short, Leuba argued that James’s manner of constructing his case “bewitched” his readers. “The perfect candor of the author, so evident when he makes definite statements as to his [scientific] attitude, does not much mend matters. The bewitched reader is not in a position to give them their full value” (p. 337).

In a letter to Leuba dated 17 April 1904, James accepted the bulk of Leuba’s critique, praising Leuba for the way in which he “went to the heart” of his contentions, “straight and without floundering.” His only complaint was with Leuba’s “characterization of [his] thesis as that of ‘spirit-intervention.’” Referring to the passage just cited, James wrote, “No reader could possibly guess that the only spirit I contend for is ‘God.’ Unless he knows my book he will suppose that I am a ‘spiritist’ out and out, which I am not” (Perry 1935, 2:348–49). This suggests that, rephrased in terms of mysticism rather than spirit-intervention, James would have acknowledged Leuba’s contention that *VRE* cast a mass of impressive facts in favor of a hypothesis for which he (James) “provided no empirical evidence.”

James’s response also suggests that he accepted Leuba’s contention that *VRE* can be read as an extension of the work of the Society for Psychical Research. Reading it in that way reveals the underlying question that animated the work and accounts for *VRE*’s peculiar mix of science and reli-

gion. Locating *VRE* not only in relation to the S.P.R. but also to the French experimental psychology with which it was closely allied allows us to understand James's emphasis on extreme experiences both pathological and religious. It also allows us to position it in relation to a kindred work, Myers's *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* ([1903] 1954). A comparison of the two works reveals similarities in structure and differences in content and, thus, illuminates the way in which *VRE* stripped Myers's central concerns of their occult overtones and reframed them within the realm of religion.

#### THE TRANSATLANTIC NETWORK OF PSYCHOLOGISTS AND PSYCHICAL RESEARCHERS

The new scientific psychology that emerged as a distinct discipline at the turn of the last century built on two traditions of research: the German experimental tradition based in the laboratory and the French clinical tradition based in the wards of hospitals, such as the Salpêtrière in Paris. Historians typically associate the German laboratory tradition with the rise of academic psychology in the universities and the French clinical tradition with the rise of psychoanalysis. But the clinical tradition gave rise to French psychology in the universities as well as to psychoanalysis and to a clinically based understanding of experimentation based on the comparison of normal and pathological cases that differed markedly from that of the Germans (Ellenberger 1970; Nicolas 2002; Carroy, Ohayon, and Plas 2006).

Viewed superficially, the French clinicians and the psychical researchers were interested in very different kinds of subjects. The former used hypnosis and other techniques to investigate cases of hysteria and multiple personality. The latter were interested in unusual claims that surfaced intermittently in the general population having to do with telepathy, crisis apparitions, and communications with the spirits of the dead through automatic writing and in trance. Despite the obvious differences, hysterics, multiples, and spirit mediums provided examples of different ways in which the self or ego's ordinary sense of controlling the body could be displaced. The researchers recognized this phenomenological similarity, compared their cases, and exchanged theories and methods. Psychical researchers borrowed hypnotic methods from clinicians, and clinical researchers borrowed the spiritualist practice of automatic writing from psychical researchers. Although the clinical researchers were interested in curing illness and the psychical researchers were interested in empirically investigating alleged supernormal abilities, they shared a common interest in the workings of the human mind. Myers's theory of the subconscious emerged from his reflections on early experiments that used automatic writing to tap into secondary streams of consciousness conducted on clinical subjects by the French psychologists Pierre Janet and Alfred Binet and research on normal,



albeit “sensitive,” subjects conducted by psychical researcher Edmund Gurney (Taves 2003, 306–10).

Although case studies are most often associated with clinical research, researchers interested in the study of normal populations and/or the larger metaphysical questions associated with psychical research extended the case-study method to spiritualist mediums. Their research gave rise to a series of well-known case studies, including Janet’s study of the hysteric (and devout Catholic) Madeleine LeBouc, Flournoy’s case study of the medium Helene Smith, American neurologist Morton Prince’s study of the multiple Christine Beauchamp, and the S.P.R.’s collective study of the medium Leonore Piper (Wulff 1997, 37–43; Kenny 1981).

The early International Congresses of Psychology, in which both French psychologists and psychical researchers played leading roles, devoted much of their program to reports on case studies of this sort. At the first Congress, held in Paris in 1889, laboratory-based experimental psychology as promoted by German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt and his followers did not figure prominently. Indeed, Serge Nicolas (2002, 148–49) notes that in the French context other branches of psychology, particularly psychiatry, hypnotism, and psychical research, were much more powerful and well-organized than experimental psychology of the sort promoted by Wundt. In his report of the proceedings, James commented: “The most striking feature of the discussions was, perhaps, their tendency to slope off to some one or other of those shady horizons with which the name of ‘psychic research’ is now associated” (1983, 244).

Henry Sidgwick, who was at the time president of the S.P.R., presided over the second Congress, held in London in 1892. Myers was appointed one of two secretaries for the Congress, and correspondence suggests that Myers, Sidgwick, and Charles Richet, the French physiologist and psychical researcher who had been heavily involved in planning the first Congress, were largely responsible for planning the second. In their letters they discussed the need to downplay the French research on hypnosis and the work of the S.P.R. in order to attract more mainstream British psychologists. In a letter dated 26 April 1891, Myers wrote to Richet that out of the five afternoons devoted to “general disciplines” in psychology they “should try to leave say three afternoons for the discussion of subjects neither connected with *hypnotism* nor with *S.P.R.* work” (Myers Papers).

As the Congresses expanded and became more diverse, French experimental psychology with its connections to psychical research came under attack for blurring the boundaries between science and the occult. When a number of leading French spiritualists and occultists presented papers at the fourth Congress in Paris in 1900, tensions that had been simmering below the surface erupted into outright conflict. Psychologists, wanting to free psychology of occult overtones, sharply differentiated the study of psychology not only from the occult but also from the psychological study of



the occult, thus leaving little room for psychical research and the psychological study of mediumship. With the death of Myers and Sidgwick the following year, the golden era of psychical research came to an end (Parot 1994; Monroe 2008).

#### EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

What, you may ask, does this exchange between French psychologists and psychical researchers have to do with the psychology of religion? Superficially, psychologists of religion, like psychical researchers and clinically oriented psychologists, can be understood as having their own object of study: religion or religious subjects. If we probe a bit more deeply, it turns out that all the major “cases” had a religious dimension. Moreover, some of the leading figures associated with the psychology of religion were thoroughly familiar with both the clinical research and the work of the S.P.R. If we don’t read postwar parochialism—both national and disciplinary—into the prewar period, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the international network of experimental psychologists and psychical researchers played an important role in the rise of the psychology of religion. Indeed, viewed from a transatlantic perspective there is perhaps no better window on the rise of the psychology of religion than the intertwined development of James and his close academic colleague and friend Flournoy.

Scholars have been puzzled by the careers of both James and Flournoy. Historians of psychology recognize Flournoy as “a respected experimental psychologist at the beginning of his university career,” indeed, a “pioneer in this discipline,” but have had difficulty comprehending his turn to questions related to supernormal phenomena, spirits, and mediums (Nicolas and Charvillat 1998). So, too, James scholars have struggled to understand James’s transformation from psychologist to philosopher and argued over how *VRE* ought to be situated in relation to that trajectory. Not only did James and Flournoy’s interests follow a similar intellectual trajectory during the nineties, they actually developed in tandem. Of James’s many friends, Flournoy was one of his closest, and the intertwined development of their interests can be traced in their correspondence, which extends from shortly after their first meeting at the first International Congress in 1889 until James’s death in 1910 (LeClair 1966, xiii, xviii). Both were viewed as experimental psychologists in the early 1890s, both were involved in laboratory research, and both abandoned the laboratory—Flournoy with James’s encouragement—to pursue their interests in abnormal psychology, psychical research, and, at the turn of the century, the psychology of religion (Shamdasani 1994, xiii–xv). James moved on from the psychology of religion to devote most of his attention to philosophy; Flournoy remained centrally interested in the psychology of religion through the end of his career. The intertwined development of their interests during the 1890s

provides a concrete link between French experimental psychology, psychical research, and the emergence of the psychology of religion.

#### THE UNDERLYING CONNECTION: AUTOMATISMS

Although it is clear that James's and Flournoy's interests moved in tandem from abnormal psychology and psychical research to the psychology of religion, the connection between *VRE* and this earlier research is not immediately evident. This, however, is the direct result of the oblique way in which James posed his central question. It is only when we reach his concluding lecture, where he addressed the deeper question that in his view informed the question of origins—the question of whether the claims of such exceptional persons could be “literally and objectively true”—that the parallels become obvious (James [1902] 1985, 405; Taves 2003, 303; Putnam 2005, 172–82; Lamberth 2005, 221–34). It becomes evident that James's central question can be pieced together as: Were geniuses in the religious line literally and objectively “moved by an external power”—in the context of prayer, prophecy, inspiration, or visionary experience—or were they not? (James [1902] 1985, 405). His underlying question, in other words, focused on experiences that subjectively felt involuntary, or automatic, and asked whether this subjective sense was literally and objectively true.

Automatisms, the primary means of communication between the subliminal and supraliminal levels of consciousness in Myers's fully developed theory of the self, were the central focus of research on mediums and the religious geniuses who interested James. He devoted one of his 1896 Lowell Lectures on Abnormal Psychology to “Automatism[s],” which he defined as “‘sensory and motor messages’ from the subliminal” (Taylor 1984, 49). In the preface to *From India to the Planet Mars*, Flournoy's study of the medium Smith, Flournoy explained that “English and American psychologists, being practical, [had] liberally substitute[d] for the word *medium* that of *automatist*,” as a more neutral term that avoided the “disputable doctrinal affirmation [of spirits]” implicit in the word “medium.” Referring to a person as an “automatist,” he said, “does not prejudge anything and simply designates individuals presenting the phenomena of automatism—that is to say [phenomena] which are involuntary and often unknown to the subject, though marked by intelligence.” He indicated that he would have followed the English and American usage and referred to Smith as an “automatist” rather than a medium if the term had been more widely accepted in French (Flournoy 1994, 7).

The accounts of first-hand experiences of “geniuses’ in the religious line” that interested James shared this subjective sense of involuntariness or automaticity. In his penultimate lecture, he claimed that one can “hardly find a religious leader of any kind in whose life there is no record of automatisms.” 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’” (James [1902] 1985, 376–77). In introducing the idea of the religious genius in his opening lecture, James took George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, or Quakers, as his exemplary case (1985, 15–16). It was, thus, the underlying question of “who acts” in the context of involuntary or “automatic” phenomena “marked by intelligence” that necessitated a focus on “‘geniuses’ in the religious line” and determined the particular focus of the book.

James explained experiences of this sort as “incursions” from outside the field of the primary consciousness. His explanation rested, he said, on “the discovery, first made in 1886, 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.” This discovery, which he said “revealed to us an entirely unsuspected peculiarity in the constitution of human nature, . . . casts light on many phenomena of religious biography” ([1902] 1985, 190). Specifically,

The most important consequence of having a strongly developed ultra-marginal life of this sort is that one’s ordinary fields of consciousness are liable to incursions from it of which the subject does not guess the source, and which, therefore, take for him the form of unaccountable impulses to act, or inhibitions of action, of obsessive ideas, or even of hallucinations of sight or hearing. The impulses may take the direction of automatic speech or writing, the meaning of which the subject himself may not understand even while he utters it. . . . Mr. Myers has given the name of *automatism*, sensory or motor, emotional or intellectual, to this whole sphere of effects, due to “uprushes” into the ordinary consciousness of energies originating in the subliminal parts of the mind. (p. 191)

Although James forthrightly acknowledged his reliance on Myers’s theory of subliminal consciousness, he obscured the extent to which his and Myers’s theoretical explanation relied on the experimental work of Janet. He described the discovery of 1886 as “the most important step forward in psychology since [he had] been a student of that science,” but this discovery remained unattributed. Scholars have mistakenly concluded, with no compelling evidence, that James was attributing this discovery to Myers (Perry 1935, 2:121; James [1902] 1985, 452; Levinson 1981, 116; Powell 1979, 156; Taylor 1996, 87; Barnard 1997, 173; Crabtree 2007, 301).<sup>5</sup> As I argue elsewhere, scholars have confused James’s appropriation of Myers’s particular understanding of the subconscious with the discovery of co-conscious “secondary selves” that informed Myers’s theory and thus obscured the basic theoretical continuity between *VRE* and French psychology. Moreover, in James’s attribution of the discovery in other contexts to the triumvirate of Janet, Gurney, and Binet, we see the explicit links between the French psychologists and the research of the S.P.R. (Taves 2003, 303–26).

REREADING *VRE* AS A "NATURAL HISTORY" OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Although James, Flournoy, and Myers were all interested in explaining "automatisms," they attempted to answer the question in different ways. Flournoy adapted the clinical case study to the study of an individual medium. Myers's and James's approach was based not on an in-depth case study of the sort produced by Flournoy, Janet, or Prince but on the collection and arrangement of the cases/accounts produced by others. As Michael Murphy (1992, 9) and Diane Jonte-Pace (2002) have noted, Myers's *Human Personality* and James's *VRE* can both be interpreted as appropriating a natural-history model. Just as naturalists extract living specimens from their native habitat and display the preserved specimens in a new configuration in order to make a scientific point, James followed Myers in extracting "specimens" of unusual experience from the contexts in which they were embedded, preserving them textually and arranging them to make a comparative point. There is some overlap between the "specimens" included in their respective "collections," but each collection was arranged differently. As is the case with natural-history museums, each can be "read" in order to ascertain the larger point that the collection is intended to make.

In creating and arranging their collections, Myers and James quasi-consciously adapted the methods of natural history to a new sort of "specimen." In contrast to traditional specimens, which were generally speaking physical things—parts or individuals that exemplified a whole—the specimens collected by Myers and James were phenomena, that is, occurrences in which something allegedly out of the ordinary had taken place. Neither material nor metaphoric specimens exist as such independent of a research agenda or collection plan. The idea of a specimen, in other words, presupposes that things have been *extracted* from various places according to an agenda set by a researcher or collector (Taves 2005). As Stephen Asma notes, "The significance of the specimen does not inhere in the specimen itself, but is socially and theoretically constructed" (2001, xiii).

Myers and James were entirely open with regard to the comparative agenda that guided their selection of "specimens." Myers argued,

If we are to understand *supernormal* phenomena—phenomena transcending, apparently, the stage of evolution at which we have admittedly arrived,—we must first compare them, as fully as possible, both with *normal* and with *abnormal* phenomena;—meaning by abnormal phenomena those which, while diverging from the ordinary standard, fall below or, at least, do not transcend it. (1886, 213)

James incorporated these methodological presuppositions into *VRE*, arguing in his opening chapter that religious experiences "are each and all of them special cases of kinds of human experience of much wider scope" and that their distinctive significance could best be determined by comparing them to nonreligious experiences of a similar sort:

... who does not see that we are likely to ascertain the distinctive significance of religious melancholy and happiness, or of religious trances, far better by comparing them as conscientiously as we can with other varieties of melancholy, happiness, and trance, than by refusing to consider their place in any more general series, and treating them as if they were outside of nature's order altogether? (James [1902] 1985, 28; Wulff 2005, 51)

These wide-ranging comparisons were, according to James, the distinguishing feature of his lectures. Indeed, he wrote, "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, with which the various religious phenomena must be compared in order to understand them better" (James [1902] 1985, 29).

As with the natural historian, comparison was a prelude to some sort of organization and display intended to make a larger point (Asma 2001, 128–29). During the 1890s, Myers and James corresponded regarding the best way to arrange Myers's magnum opus on "The Subliminal Self," as he originally titled it, to make his larger point about human survival of bodily death. In a letter dated 31 August 1894 Myers sent James a list of the proposed chapters and asked whether James thought it would be better to publish the whole as "one book in 2 vols—or as two books—each in a fat vol." (Myers Papers). Responding rather belatedly, on 19 January 1897, James encouraged him to "publish the volumes separately, tone down your transmundane enthusiasm in the first one, and reserve all lyrical outbursts for the last pages of the second, where they will crash in with full effect, the reader having been unsuspectingly led up from one step to another until at last the full view bursts upon his vision, and he finds that he must take it in" (James 1992–2004, 8:221–22).

James seems to have adopted something of the same strategy with *VRE*. Initially he intended to give two sets of Gifford Lectures and publish a two-volume work. As he wrote Frances Morse on 23 December 1899, "I can see my way to a perfectly bully pair of volumes, the first an Objective Study of 'the Varieties of Religious Experience', the second, my own last will and testament, setting forth the philosophy best adapted to normal Religious needs" (1992–2004, 9:105). In the end, he gave only one set of lectures and never produced the projected second volume, although the first, as scholars recognize, can be read both philosophically and religiously (Lamberth 1999; Carrette 2005, 1–7). Even without the projected second volume, James's advice to Myers (which Myers more or less followed) goes a long way toward explaining the overarching structure of the volume we have. In *VRE* James deliberately "toned down" his "transmundane enthusiasm," maintaining a scientific stance through the bulk of the work. He likewise saved his "lyrical outbursts" regarding his own overbeliefs until the final pages, where he undoubtedly hoped they would "crash in with full effect." This strategy provides a candid description of the way in which James and Myers both sought to "bewitch" their readers, as Leuba so aptly put it.

James's transmundane enthusiasms were not identical to Myers's, however. As James protested to Leuba, he was not arguing, as Myers was, for "spirit intervention," and human survival of death was not his primary concern, as it was Myers's. The problem he set himself in his Gifford Lectures was twofold, as he confessed to Morse in an oft-quoted letter dated 12 April 1900:

1st to defend (against all the prejudices of my "class") "experience" against "philosophy" as being the real backbone of the world's religious life—I mean prayer, guidance, and all that sort of thing immediately and privately felt, as against high and noble general views of our destiny and the world's meaning; and second, to make the hearer or reader believe, what I myself invincibly do believe, that, altho all the special manifestations of religion may have been absurd (I mean its creeds and theories) yet the life of it as a whole is mankind's most important function. A task well nigh impossible, I fear, and in which I shall fail; but to attempt it is *my* religious act. (James 1992–2004, 9:185–86; see Lamberth 1999, 203–5)

James defended experience against philosophy and the life of religion "as a whole" because he was invested in the idea that engagement with something (that seemed to be) beyond the self could be transformative. His transmundane enthusiasms were not spirit intervention and life after death but the more general "feeling of unseen presence" (the experience of the More) that he associated with transformative religious experience (Shamdasani 2005, 33). To defend experience "immediately and privately felt" against philosophy, James began, in his second lecture, by defining religion in terms of religious experience, that is, in terms of "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual[s] . . . so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine" (James [1902] 1985, 34). He opened his third lecture by characterizing "the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms . . . [as consisting] of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" (p. 51). The process of adjustment, he went on to explain, involved a subjective engagement with an "object" present to consciousness as "*a sense of [an unseen] reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call 'something there,'* more deep and more general than any of the special and particular 'senses' by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed" (p. 55). For James, the life of religion involved a process of adjustment, what we might call transformation, relative to an unseen reality subjectively experienced as an unseen presence. James emphasized his transformative understanding of religion in his conclusion, where he famously described the common feature of all religions as consisting in "an uneasiness" and "its solution," such that "we are saved from the wrongness by making proper connexion with the higher powers" (p. 400).

Where Myers organized his examples of automatisms so as to display the capacities of the self and through a comparison of these phenomena made a case for human survival of death, James organized his examples of

automatisms to display various types of religious transformation—conversion, saintliness, and mysticism—in order to make a case for the involvement of higher powers in the transformation of the self (Shamdasani 2005, 33). Within his chapters, James arranged his “specimens” of each type—religious and nonreligious—in order to reveal that which was distinctive about the religious ones, and he progressed from types of religious experience (the gradual transformations of the once born and the sudden transformations of the twice born) to the conversion experiences of the twice born, then the saints, and finally mysticism, the “root and centre” of religious experience. The effect of so many examples, as James readily admitted, was to “make the hearer or reader believe” that the religious life is “mankind’s most important function” (James 1992–2004, 9:185–86). He did not provide empirical evidence to make his case, as Leuba pointed out, but rather attempted to lead his unsuspecting readers to accept his views through the accumulated weight of his examples. The writing of *VRE* was a religious act, as he conceded, and his method of argumentation was designed to persuade rather than provide experimental evidence.

Although James’s *VRE* and Myers’s *Human Personality* shared a common interest in potentially supernormal aspects of automatic or involuntary phenomena and used a common format to argue their respective cases, *VRE* marked a shift from the psychology of multiples and mediums to a psychology of religious experience. James accomplished this by shifting (1) his *subject matter* from multiples and mediums to converts, saints, and mystics, (2) his *object of study* from spirits to the more general “feeling of unseen presence” that he associated with religious experience, and (3) his *focus* from life after death to religious transformation. This set of changes effectively stripped Myers’s interest in potentially supernormal aspects of automatic or involuntary phenomena of their occult overtones and reframed them within the realm of religion. Moreover, by focusing on processes of transformation, he made mysticism central to the religious life.

## CONCLUSION

James’s underlying question can be paraphrased as: Is there something More, something beyond or seemingly beyond the self, that actually aids in the process of self-transformation and that can be expressed in terms acceptable to religion and science?

James turned to unusual experiences to answer this question for two reasons. First, the question itself emerged out of a transatlantic interest in involuntary experiences in which subjects—including mediums, religious virtuosos, and those suffering from hysteria and multiple personality—claimed that they were moved by forces that they did not intend or will. Second, James, like Myers and others interested in apparently supernormal phenomena, was committed to comparing them to the entire range of



normal and abnormal phenomena with similar—in this case involuntary or automatic—features.

The book was structured to maximize its rhetorical effect. Writing it was a religious act for James, and it was designed to make a case for the involvement of higher powers in the transformation of the self through the logical progression and accumulated weight of his examples. It bewitched its readers by *invoking* science while aiming to *evoke* a religious response through an effect that was achieved rhetorically rather than evidentially.

Read alongside Myers's *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, we see striking rhetorical parallels. In light of the fact that James suggested this rhetorical strategy to Myers, the similarities are hardly accidental. The differences, however, are equally striking and mark a dramatic shift from a religious preoccupation with life after death to a religious preoccupation with this-worldly self-transformation.

Attempting to read *VRE* whole leaves me with the sense that those of us in the academy who have attempted to read it for our own purposes—philosophical, mystical, or scientific—have mostly missed the point. The bigger story, and one that many of his nonacademic readers have grasped, is this shift from the other world to this world, from life after death to self-transformation aided by higher powers. *VRE* marks what sociologists Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005, 6) refer to as the “massive subjective turn” in the modern religious life characterized by what they call “spiritualities of life” or “subjective-life spiritualities.” If I am correct in this reading, Bill Wilson, founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, and the Twelve-Step Movements that have claimed James as a spiritual father and *VRE* as their classic text, have captured the main message of *VRE* more accurately than most academics.

## NOTES

1. In a letter to James dated 23 August 1902, Starbuck wrote: “Well, the thing is assured that I had hoped for, and my satisfaction is great, —I mean the placing of the study of religion on a dignified respected footing. I had feared that the sensational pseudo-scientists would turn in to effervescing and make a nasty mess that would have to be outgrown and forgotten before respectable people would have much to do with it. . . . And what it will mean for the broadening of life on the religious side and for fair mindedness in general! A multitude of superstitions and crudities are doomed to fold their tents” (James Papers).

2. “Pour ce qui est des théologiens ou de philosophes imprègnés de théologie comme M. W. James, nous ne nous étonnons pas qu'ils nous parlent des sentiments religieux comme d'une chose spécifique. Le sentiment religieux, disent-ils, c'est l'expérience religieuse, l'expérience de dieu. Et celle-ci correspond à un sens spécial, un sixième sens, celui de la présence divine.”

3. “C'est bien ainsi que certain théologiens, comme Sabatier, dont James s'est beaucoup servi, ou Theile ont compris la religion. La théorie de James est beaucoup plus profonde puisque, au lieu de faire du sentiment religieux une sorte de réalité irréductible et qui entraîne la vérité de son objet, il en cherche la base empirique dans une explication des rapports du moi conscient et du moi subliminal. Il est donc psychologue, c'est-à-dire phénoméniste et scientifique, la où d'autres ne sont que théologiens.”

4. Leuba cites James's “Will to Believe” and his “Ingersoll Lecture on Immortality” as evidence of James's broader philosophical aim. Leuba's reading was definitely borne out by James's

later writings and, as David Lamberth has argued (1999), by James's own original plan for the Gifford Lectures, which included a second set of philosophically oriented lectures following on those he actually gave.

5. Although these scholars all agree that James was referring to Myers, they do not agree on the particular publication that marks this discovery (see Taves 2003, 306).

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