

Listening to the Claims of Experience: Psychology and the Question of Transcendence

Mark Freeman

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Abstract The question of transcendence remains a problematic one for psychology, not least because it entails the possible existence of what William James (1902/1982) referred to as “higher energies” outside the perimeter of the self. As such, it also entails the possibility that naturalism may be inadequate as a foundational principle for the discipline. Acknowledging the difficulties posed by seeking to include the idea of transcendence within the province of psychology, compelling evidence may be found within experience itself for holding open the idea at hand. Seen from one angle, holding open the idea of transcendence may be seen as undermining the project of psychological science. Seen from another, however, it may be seen as serving this very project, albeit it in expanded form. Listening to the claims of experience may thus pave the way toward a more inclusive, capacious, and adequate psychology.

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Psychological science and the problem of naturalism

At the core of the discipline of modern psychology, at least in its standard academic form, is a dual premise: The study of human behavior and experience is to be formulated in “scientific” terms, which in turn presumes that such behavior and experience operate “naturalistically”; that is, they must be understood and explained without recourse to any other principles than those operative in the natural world more generally (Nelson and Slife 2012; Slife et al. 2013). This dual premise is a sensible one, for the project of psychological “science,” most would agree, is unthinkable without this very presumption. There is, however, an underside to this dual premise, namely, that any and all phenomena posited as existing beyond the sphere of the natural are essentially considered out of bounds, beyond the purview of science. The result is that the idea of transcendence—which, in its strong form, entails the possible existence of what William James (1902/1982) referred to as

M. Freeman (✉)

College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA 01610, USA
e-mail: mfreeman@holycross.edu

“higher energies” outside the perimeter of the self—has largely been excluded from the province of psychology proper.¹

In the pages to follow, I shall be casting this dual premise into question and, in so doing, issuing a call for a decidedly more *improper* psychology. I shall be doing so in a twofold way: first, by suggesting that naturalism needs to be interrogated for its adequacy as a foundational principle, and second, by suggesting that moving beyond naturalism, rather than undermining the project of psychological science, may in fact be in its service. This, of course, entails a quite different vision of science than is ordinarily maintained. Decoupled from the premise of naturalism, it is a vision that, in true Jamesian fashion, insists first and foremost that we listen to the claims of experience, wherever they may lead. Should they point in the direction of naturalism, fine; we will have learned that much more about this dimension of experience. But should they point beyond it, we should follow their lead. Doing so will serve not only to open ourselves to a more adequate—and, one might add, more authentically scientific—psychology but also to new horizons of being. Insofar as these horizons point outside the perimeter of the natural self, as customarily conceived, it might be argued that an entirely different framework is called for, one that moves beyond the encapsulated ego, beyond “essence,” altogether. So it is that Emmanuel Levinas, for instance, speaks of what is *Otherwise than Being* (1998). For present purposes, I would offer the more modest suggestion that listening to the claims of experience, as they relate to the idea of transcendence, can pave the way toward a more “ex-centric” view of human selfhood, one in which our very nature may in some sense be said to surpass itself (see Freeman 2004, 2012).

Louis Dupré’s *Transcendent Selfhood: The Rediscovery of the Inner Life* (1976) bespeaks the urgency of moving in this direction, particularly in the context of pastoral concerns. In an increasingly secularized society, he suggests, “the religious person has nowhere to turn but inward. There, and for the most part there alone, must he seek support for his religious attitude” (p. 28). As a result, the very *experience* of the transcendent may be diminished. As Dupré quickly goes on to clarify, there surely remain occasions for such experience to be manifested, at least in the lives of believers. “But such hierophanies are definitely not typical of the religious mentality of our age. We seldom encounter the sacred in an objectively given, universally attainable reality, as the miraculous statue or the rustling of leaves in an oak forest were to our ancestors.” Rather, our way leads through private reflection and personal decision, with the result that “almost nothing appears directly sacred to us.” Indeed,

If anything is “sacred” to the modern believer, it is only because he *holds* it to be so by inner conviction and free decision, not because he passively *undergoes* its sacred impact. This mediated “sacred” substantially differs from the traditional meanings of the term: it is no longer a primary category of religion (as it was even in the Judeo-Christian tradition) and it lacks the essential trait of direct experience. (p. 29)

If Dupré is right, the process of secularization, with its attendant naturalization of the transcendent, has led to a kind of spiritual and religious involution, a turning-inward that may all but occlude those outer sources of inspiration that had been more readily available in times past. This may account, in part, for our fascination with religious experience,

¹ It should be noted that portions of *The Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality* (2012) move in a related direction. Lisa J. Miller (2012), editor of the volume, thus speaks of a “postmaterialist” psychology, “a science beyond the limitations of exclusive ontological materialism and mechanism” (p. 1). While the terminology and theoretical perspective employed herein is somewhat different from the postmaterialistic perspective outlined by Miller, there is some important common ground as well. For helpful explorations of the relevant theoretical issues, see especially the *Handbook* chapters by Hood as well as by Nelson and Slife.

especially in its mystical form: modern man feels a strong affinity to the mystics “not because he is more mystical than his ancestors, but because in the absence of outer resources of piety, he has no choice but to start from within, as did those who, however faithful to ritual and practice, favored the inner presence over the more worldly sacred. In this respect at least the modern believer is justified in considering the mystic a kindred spirit” (p. 30).

The mystic, however, is not to be seen as localizing the sacred wholly within the confines of the natural self, at least as customarily conceived. On the contrary, “The ultimate message of the mystic about the nature of selfhood,” Dupré (1976) writes,

is that the self is *essentially* more than a mere self, that transcendence belongs to its nature as much as the act through which it is immanent to itself, and that a total failure on the mind’s part to realize this transcendence reduces the self to *less* than itself. The general trend of our civilization during the last centuries has not been favorable to this message. Its tendency has been to reduce the self to its most immediate and lowest common experiences. But for this restriction we pay the price of an all-pervading feeling of unfulfillment and, indeed, dehumanization. Deprived of its transcendent dimension selfhood lacks the very space it needs for full self-realization. With its scope thus limited freedom itself becomes jeopardized. Within such a restricted vision any possibility of meaning beyond the directly experienced is excluded. (p. 104)

Dupré’s comments present us with an intriguing, and potentially valuable, tension. Seen from one angle, his ideas may be seen as a critique of naturalism, and insofar as naturalism is understood in the essentially closed, positivistic way it generally is (see Nelson and Slife 2012), the critique stands. Seen from another angle, however, his ideas open up a quite different possibility—namely, the possibility of rethinking the very conception of *nature* upon which the idea of naturalism relies. Note his wording in the first sentence of the above-quoted passage: transcendence *belongs* to the nature of selfhood; it is part and parcel of our very being. In failing to recognize this, we thus diminish an *essential* aspect of who and what we are.

Along the lines being drawn, the problem at hand may be less with naturalism per se than with the exclusionary form of it that continues to occupy a privileged place in the discipline of psychology and the social sciences more generally. In emphasizing the importance of moving beyond naturalism, therefore, I am referring to that form of it that cuts off a portion of the very nature it seeks to understand. This problem is more than a merely conceptual restriction-of-view; it is also existential and spiritual and can serve to delimit our very freedom and growth; “Deprived of its transcendent dimension,” Dupré told us, “selfhood lacks the very space it needs for full self-realization.” Moving beyond naturalism, as customarily conceived, may serve to clear a space for more fully acknowledging and respecting the transcendent dimension of selfhood. It may also foster a more welcoming stance to those persons, in therapy and elsewhere, for whom the transcendent—whether in its presence or its absence—is understood to be the primary source of spiritual and religious life.

The idea of transcendence

Before moving any further in this direction, it is imperative to ask: What is “transcendence”? On the face of it, the answer would seem to depend on whether we are believers, people of faith. For again, insofar as the idea of transcendence brings to mind the existence

(or possible existence) of the aforementioned “higher energies” outside the perimeter of the self, it leads us in the direction of territories that are customarily thought to be beyond the province of psychology. This doesn’t necessarily mean that such phenomena are unreal. Rather, the idea—which still appears to be operative among most psychologists of religion—is that the question of transcendence cannot, and should not, be broached in psychology. Flournoy’s (1903) “Principle of the Exclusion of Transcendence” says as much: insofar as psychology is understood in essentially naturalistic terms, it can only address these phenomena anthropologically, in reference to the “purely human” (see also Belzen 1997; Wulff 1997). It should be emphasized that Flournoy did not set forth this principle out of an a priori commitment to naturalism. Following Vergote (1996), the notion of exclusion is, perhaps, better formulated as “bracketing” the question of transcendence. As Vergote puts it, “Psychology neither denies nor confirms for itself the reality of the divine, but abstains from the analysis of those relational intentionalities that are either carried out or discarded by the subject under consideration.” Along these lines, “Psychology is authorized neither to disprove nor discount specific religious propositions” (p. 27).

Again, however, the question that needs to be posed is whether psychology must be understood in this way. In one sense, the Principle of the Exclusion of Transcendence is innocuous, amounting essentially to a kind of agnosticism vis-à-vis the idea. Moreover, there is, arguably, a potential danger in *not* following it; more than likely, there will be those who will wish to smuggle the divine in through the back door, as it were, justifying their own faith commitments along the way (see Proudfoot 1986). For the time being, then, let us proceed on a more straightforwardly phenomenological plane by suggesting that “transcendent” experience (I shall put “transcendent” in scare quotes for now) entails the magnetic presence of some forceful object, some *Other*, that in some way “takes hold” of the self, capturing not only its attention but its very being. Taking this set of ideas one step further, I also want to suggest that transcendent experience entails what I have come to call the *priority* of the Other—in this context, a sense that this Other is larger than me and that it embodies a dimension of reality that is *prior* to the more mundane sphere ordinarily inhabited (see Freeman 2004, *in press*).

As James (1902/1982) suggests in his lectures on mysticism, it is precisely in view of such experience that we may gather the conviction that “our normal waking consciousness . . . is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different.” Bearing this in mind, “No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question.” Here, as elsewhere in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James flirts with the metaphysical implications of the phenomenological realities being considered. Indeed, he avows, “Looking back on my own experiences, they all converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. The keynote of it,” he explains,

is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity. Not only do they, as contrasted species, belong to one and the same genus, but *one of the species*, the nobler and better one, *is itself the genus*, and so soaks up and absorbs its opposite into itself. (p. 388)

James goes on to frame this experience as a “monistic insight, in which the *other* in its various forms appears absorbed into the One” (p. 389).

As suggested above, I would frame the matter somewhat differently. For even amid this process of being “absorbed into the One,” there remains an “immediate and primary

reference to an object outside the self” (Otto 1923/1958, p. 10). Indeed, it is precisely this reference that is constitutive of the *religious* as such. The implication is a troubling one. In a very real sense, it can plausibly be said that insofar as the psychology of religion remains ensconced within a purely naturalistic framework, it effectively excludes not only the idea of the transcendent but the idea of the religious itself.

Religion and revelation

As Dupré has argued in a later book, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection* (1998), “All living religion centers around a nucleus that its believers consider to be transcendently *given*. To exclude that nucleus from phenomenological reflection means to abandon what determines the religious attitude” (p. 6). Not unlike James, Dupré realizes that there is no way of knowing for certain whether what believers *consider* to be transcendently given really *is* so given. This is a matter of *faith*. “But, whatever the final conclusion may be, the religious act certainly displays a distinct quality in the passive attitude that the subject of this act adopts with respect to its object. That object,” Dupré tells us, “appears as providing its own meaning rather than receiving it from the meaning-giving subject” and thus “resists all attempts to define its meaning exclusively as actively projected” (p. 7). Religious experience, therefore, is by its very nature bound up with the positing of the transcendent, and this positing of the transcendent precludes the notion that meaning is merely projected onto the world.

As Dupré adds, “religious knowledge ultimately”—and, it would seem, *necessarily*—“rests on a ‘revelation.’ . . . It depends on insight in the overall structure of the real *received* from a transcendent source rather than being entirely constituted by the transcendental ego in its encounter with the world.” Moreover, “A givenness experienced as ‘revealed’ *appears* different from a self-induced givenness” (pp. 17–18; see also Marion 2002, 2008). Dupré also speaks of “disclosure” in this context:

Religious insight enriches all facets of the real with a new ontological density, with what Gadamer (referring to the nature of symbols) has described as *ein Seinzuwachs*, an increment of Being. This insight appears as given gratuitously, an unearned disclosure of truth. However much the religious mind is aware of its own creative part in concretizing this all-comprehensive vision in rituals, myths, and institutions to express its new symbolic richness, the Source is experienced as surpassing the mind. They serve as privileged symbols allowing the transcendent meaning to penetrate all of reality. (p. 18)

The situation at hand is complicated, indeed. James, Otto, and Dupré each insist, albeit in different ways, on retaining a phenomenological focus in their respective inquiries. But what these same inquiries have revealed points in the direction of some “object,” some Source, some *Other* beyond the perimeter of the self. Marion’s (2008) discussion of the “saturated” phenomenon may be helpful here. For Kant, among others, Marion notes, “The formal conditions of knowledge are . . . joined directly to the power of knowing. This means that intuition and the concept determine in advance the possibility for any phenomenon to appear” (p. 20). However, there also exist phenomena that would appear to *defy* these conditions; as such, “one must attempt to describe the traits of a phenomenon that would be characterized by an excess of intuition, and thus of givenness, over the intention, the concept, and the aim. Such a phenomenon will doubtless no longer allow the constitution of an object, at least in the Kantian sense” (p. 33). This sort of phenomenon—the saturated

phenomenon—thus “exceeds the categories and the principles of understanding” (p. 34). It also exceeds the very *I* who encounters it. This situation is nothing short of paradoxical:

The paradox not only suspends the phenomenon’s relation of subjection to the *I*, it actually inverts that relation. Far from being able to constitute this phenomenon, the *I* experiences itself as constituted by it. It is constituted and no longer constituting because it no longer has at its disposal any dominant point of view over the intuition that overwhelms it. . . . The *I* loses its anteriority and finds itself, so to speak, deprived of the duties of constitution, and is thus itself constituted: it becomes a *me* rather than an *I*. (p. 44)

Has Marion drifted into theology in uttering these words? His answer:

There is no drift or turn here, not even a ‘theological’ one, but, on the contrary, an accounting for the fact that in certain cases of givenness the excess of intuition could no longer satisfy the conditions of ordinary experience and that the pure event that occurs cannot be constituted as an object and leaves the durable trace of its opening only in the *I/me* that finds itself, almost in spite of itself, constituted by what it receives. The constituting subject is succeeded by the constituted witness. As a constituted witness the subject remains the worker of truth, but is no longer its producer. (p. 44)

Not unlike Dupré, Marion goes on to speak of “revelation,” insisting once more that he is remaining within phenomenology. “The saturated phenomenon must not be understood as a limit case, an exceptional, vaguely irrational, in short, a ‘mystical’ case of phenomenality”—with “mystical” implying something utterly discontinuous with more ordinary phenomena. “On the contrary, it indicates the coherent and conceptual fulfillment of the most operative definition of the phenomenon: it alone truly appears as itself, of itself, and starting from itself, since it alone appears without the limits of an horizon and without reduction to an *I*.” Marion continues, “I will therefore call this appearance that is purely of itself and starting from itself, this phenomenon that does not subject its possibility to any preliminary determination, a ‘revelation.’ And I insist that here it is purely and simply a matter of the phenomenon taken in its fullest meaning” (pp. 45–46).

Following Dupré and Marion in broad outline, in referring to “transcendence” I am thus referring not only to a feeling but to an experience of that which is assumed to exist *outside* ourselves—or at least outside our existence as meaning-giving, constituting subjects—in a realm *beyond* the more ordinary one that houses most of everyday life. This may not be quite right. As Marion has just told us, we ought not to set wholly apart such revelatory encounters from the movement of ordinary experience (see also Richardson *in press*). Despite his reference to the term “mystical,” James says much the same thing. “The simplest rudiment of mystical experience,” he writes, “would seem to be that deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or formula which occasionally sweeps over one”—anyone, we can presume. “I’ve heard that said all my life,” we exclaim, “but I never realized its full meaning until now” (p. 382). “As a rule,” in fact, James notes later on, “mystical states merely add a supersensuous meaning to the ordinary outward data of consciousness. They are excitements like the emotions of love or ambition, gifts to our spirit by means of which facts already objectively before us fall into a new expressiveness and make a new connection with our active life” (p. 427).

In speaking of “full” and “supersensuous” meaning, James, like Marion, is essentially speaking about *revelation*, and in so doing calls attention to the profound continuity between that which has no special religious significance and that which has. The paradoxical nature

of the situation we have been exploring has therefore intensified. In addition to the aforementioned tension between that which arises *within* ourselves and that which is posited as existing *outside* ourselves, we have just observed a tension between the *ordinary* and the *extra-ordinary*, the ostensibly transcendent “beyond” being, at one and the same time, continuous with the immanent realities of everyday life.

“True” transcendence

But what can this possibly mean? And, as Iris Murdoch (1970) asks: “Are you speaking of a transcendent authority or a psychological device?” The question is an important one. “As with so many of these large elusive ideas,” she notes, “it readily takes on forms which are false ones,” and people latch onto these false forms with alarming frequency, seeking just that sort of comfort and consolation that illusions so readily provide. It is precisely here, at this juncture, that she also asks: “Is there . . . any true transcendence, or is this idea always a consoling dream projected by human need onto an empty sky?” (p. 57).

Needless to say, it all depends on what one means by “true.” Consider Martha Nussbaum’s (1990) reflections on “internal” versus “external” transcendence. If we look, for instance, at Homer or Sophocles, “with their keen interest in a specifically human heroism and its natural conditions,” we see that many of the attributes and activities we have come to prize in people “will not figure in a divine life” (p. 372). The social life of the Olympian gods, Nussbaum notes, is often portrayed as “free-floating, amorphous, uninspired by need”—characterized by “lightnesses,” as she calls them. Their love life is similar: “There is a kind of playfulness and lack of depth about the love of the gods” (p. 376), the implication being that striving to be godly, to transcend the everyday world, is precisely to move *away* from, even to relinquish, one’s humanity, in all of its earthly messiness. As Nussbaum hastens to point out, there is still plenty of room in the perspective she is offering for a certain kind of desire and ability to transcend our ordinary humanity, for it is clear that “most people are much of the time lazy, inattentive, unreflective, shallow in feeling” (p. 378). In other words, the very fact that we are as flawed as we are and that attaining virtue is as difficult as it is means that there remains ample opportunity, within the confines of *this* life, to transcend ourselves. If we wish to speak of transcendence at all, therefore, we would do best, she believes, to speak of it in internal rather than external terms.

Nussbaum’s own heroes in regard to the present issues are people like Henry James and Marcel Proust, both of whom claim that “the artist’s fine-tuned attention and responsiveness to human life is paradigmatic of a kind of precision of feeling and thought that a human being can cultivate, though most do not.” Neither of them, she maintains, have “the slightest interest in religious or other-worldly or even contemplative transcendence,” yet “both aim at transcendence nonetheless and exemplify it in their writing.” Nussbaum has in mind works “like angels that soar above the dullness and obtuseness of the everyday, offering their readers a glimpse of a more compassionate, subtler, more responsive, more richly human world” (p. 379). The bottom line, then, is that there is so much to be done in our day-to-day lives, as messy and risky and incomplete as they are, that if we really concentrate on them and how they can be improved rather than on what might exist *beyond* them we will be a whole lot better off.

Nussbaum goes on to acknowledge that the line between internal and external transcendence can never be a sharp one. She thus asks: “When does the aspiration to internal transcendence become the aspiration to depart from human life altogether?” (p. 380). Let me pose a parallel question here: When can we say, when *should* we say—if ever—that this

experience in which I am immersed has indeed moved beyond the purely internal? On one level, one might simply say, “Who cares?! Call it what it you want; the main thing is that it’s deep and good!” When it starts to matter, however, is when we try to conceptualize human nature and human experience—whether we do so in purely naturalistic terms or whether instead we allow for the possibility that there are other dimensions at work. Let us therefore return to Murdoch and see whether there is any compelling reason for moving in the more external direction Nussbaum identified.

For Murdoch, the idea of transcendence may be related to two other ideas, “certainty” and “perfection.” “Are we not certain,” she asks, “that there is a ‘true direction’ toward better conduct, that goodness ‘really matters,’ and does not that certainty about a standard suggest an idea of permanence which cannot be reduced to psychological or any other set of empirical terms?” (p. 59). What Murdoch is talking about, basically, is the stubborn sense that, through it all, meaningful distinctions can in fact be made, at times, between “worse” and “better,” evil and good, less and more. “It is true,” of course, she recognizes, “that there is a psychological power which derives from the mere idea of a transcendent object, and one might say further from a transcendent object which is to some extent mysterious. But a reductive analysis in, for instance, Freudian terms, or Marxian terms, seems properly to apply here only to a degenerate form of a conception about which one remains certain that a higher and invulnerable form must exist” (p. 59). Recognizing the psychological power that can issue from the “mere idea of a transcendent object,” in other words, need not lead us to presume that this power is nothing but a function of the idea; to do so is to succumb to a “degenerate” and debased form of the very conception she wishes to advance. For Murdoch, therefore, the idea of certainty—the *felt* certainty that so often emerges in our everyday engagement with the world—remains a key component of her defense of the idea of transcendence.

As for how the idea of perfection enters the picture, Murdoch goes on to note that a “deep understanding of any field of human activity (painting, for instance) involves an increasing revelation of degrees of excellence and often a revelation of there being in fact little that is very good and nothing that is perfect. Increasing understanding of human conduct operates in a similar way. We come to perceive scales, distances, standards, and may incline to see as less than excellent what previously we were prepared to ‘let by’” (p. 61). Murdoch casts a critical eye toward this set of ideas as well. “The idea of perfection works thus within a field of study, producing an increasing sense of direction. To say this,” she admits, “is not perhaps to say anything very startling; and a reductionist might argue that an increasingly refined ability to compare need not imply anything beyond itself.” And so, “The idea of perfection might be, as it were, empty” (p. 60).

But it also may not be. According to Murdoch,

The idea of perfection is also a natural producer of order. In its *light* we come to see that A, which superficially resembles B, is really better than B. And this can occur, indeed this must occur, without our having the sovereign idea in any sense “taped.” In fact it is in its nature that we cannot get it taped. This is the true sense of the “indefinability” of the good. . . . It always lies beyond, and it is from this beyond that it exercises its *authority*. (pp. 60–61)

Murdoch’s point here, as I understand it at any rate, is not unrelated to Marion’s idea of the saturated phenomenon, the “indefinability” she is speaking of being a close relative to that which “exceeds the categories and principles of understanding” (Marion 2008, p. 34).

None of what has been said thus far constitutes definitive evidence on behalf of the idea of transcendence. As Murdoch realizes, there can *be* no such evidence—not, at least, of the definitive sort that many seek. Where, then, does this leave her? *Is* it a meaningful idea or not? Murdoch herself knows it is a serious stretch, and as someone who was generally considered a non-believer, she would be the last to smuggle some secret faith commitment in through the back door. How, then, does she advance her perspective? Interestingly enough, she does so not through religion but through art, great art. This might seem like a curious path. As she herself acknowledges, “Art presents the most comprehensible examples of the almost irresistible human tendency to seek consolation in fantasy and also of the effort to resist this and the vision of reality which comes with success. Success is in fact rare. Almost all art is a form of fantasy-consolation and few artists achieve the vision of the real” (pp. 62–63). The same holds for the appreciation of art. And yet,

The appreciation of beauty in art or nature is not only (for all its difficulties) the easiest available spiritual exercise; it is also a completely adequate entry into (and not just analogy of) the good life, since it *is* the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real. Of course great artists are “personalities” and have special styles. . . . But the greatest art is “impersonal” because it shows us the world, our world and not another one, with a clarity which startles and delights us simply because we are not used to looking at the real world at all. (p. 63)

Ultimately, Murdoch goes on to suggest, these facts point toward Plato’s idea of the *Good*, understood metaphorically “as the source of light which reveals to us all things as they really are” (p. 68). Can Murdoch’s own perspective be trusted? Or has she herself succumbed to some form of wishful consolation? “At this point,” therefore, “someone might say, all this is very well, the only difficulty is that none of it is true. Perhaps indeed all is vanity, *all* is vanity, and there is no respectable intellectual way of protecting people from despair. The world just is hopelessly evil and should you, who speak of realism, not go all the way towards being realistic about this?” This is one problem, but not the only one. “To speak of Good in this portentous manner,” this same critic might add, “is simply to speak of the old concept of God in a thin disguise. But at least ‘God’ could play a real consoling and encouraging role. . . . ‘Good,’ even as a fiction, is not likely to inspire, or even be comprehensible to, more than a small number of mystically minded people who, being reluctant to surrender ‘God,’ fake up ‘Good’ in his image to preserve some kind of hope” (p. 70).

Murdoch hasn’t simply invented this skeptical interlocutor. As she admits, “I am often more than half persuaded to think in these terms myself” (p. 70). There is much, then, to recommend the skeptical view Murdoch has put forth. “There is, however, something in the serious attempt to look compassionately at human things,” she writes, “which automatically suggests that ‘there is more than this.’ The ‘there is more than this,’ if it is not to be corrupted by some sort of quasi-theological finality, must remain a very tiny spark of insight, something with, as it were, a metaphysical position but no metaphysical form. But it seems to me that the spark is real” (p. 73).

At the center of Murdoch’s way of framing this “tiny spark of insight” is the notion of *Eros*. “‘Eros,’” she writes, following Plato once more, “is the continuous operation of spiritual *energy*, desire, intellect, love, as it moves among and responds to particular objects of attention, the force of magnetism and attraction which joins us to the world, making it a better or worse world: good and bad desires with good and bad objects.” The idea of *Eros* also “gives sense to the idea of loving good, something absolute and unique, a magnetic

focus, made evident in our experience through innumerable movements of cognition.” As Murdoch goes on to note,

This is not just a picturesque metaphysical notion. People speak of loving all sorts of things, their work, a book, a potted plant, a formation of clouds. Desire for what is corrupt and worthless, the degradation of love, its metamorphosis into ambition, vanity, cruelty, greed, jealousy, hatred, or the parched demoralizing deserts of its absence, are phenomena often experienced and readily recognized. . . . People know about the difference between good and evil, it takes quite a lot of theorizing to persuade them to say or imagine that they do not. . . . Reflecting in these ways we see “salvation” or “good” as connected with, or incarnate in, all sorts of particulars, and not just as “an abstract idea.” “Saving the phenomena” is happening all the time. We do not lose the particular, it teaches us love, we understand it, we *see* it. (1993, pp. 496–497)

There is much in these words to reflect upon. It is early morning, still dark, and I am upstairs at work, trying to find words, others’ as well as my own, that will somehow bring me closer to what needs to be said. My wife is downstairs, asleep, and at some point I will be seeing her again, feeling her world. It’s a good day so far; I look forward to what it will bring. It’s not always this way. Sometimes there is real tedium in the work, or a sense of its redundancy or superficiality or inauthenticity. And sometimes my wife and I remain distant, projecting this or that ugly emotion onto one another and of course disavowing it all the while. Later we will no doubt see the error of our ways, bear witness to the degradation that so often finds its way into experience. This testifies to the idea of transcendence, too, albeit in its negative form. All of it is as plain as can be, and this despite the fact that much of it remains utterly undefinable. It is a matter of seeing, and listening.

Naturalism revisited

It is often thought that we ourselves “construct” reality and that our own freedom, our own *will*, is central to the process. Perhaps there is some truth to this idea. If Murdoch is right, however, “There is no unattached will as a prime source of value. There is only the working of the human spirit in the morass of existence in which it always at every moment finds itself immersed.” The process can be painful and difficult. Throughout the course of the “iconoclastic pilgrimage” that is our life, “through the progressive destruction of false images, we experience the *distance* which separates us from perfection and are led to place our idea of it in a figurative sense outside the turmoil of existent being. The concept is thus ‘forced upon us.’ The transcendental proof of it is from all the world, all of our *extremely various* experience” (p. 507). These last words of Murdoch’s are of course reminiscent of James, who also seeks “transcendental proof,” of a sort, through our “extremely various experience.” Let us therefore return to the *Varieties* and see whether we can make our way forward.

Not unlike Murdoch, James too is oriented toward the idea of goodness in considering the question of “true” transcendence. Speaking of “the general traits of the mystic range of consciousness,” he writes, “*It is on the whole pantheistic and optimistic, or at least the opposite of pessimistic. It is anti-naturalistic, and harmonizes best with twice-bornness and so-called otherworldly states of mind.*” His perspective remains phenomenological at this point. The next task is to ask: “Does it furnish any *warrant for the truth* of the

twice-bornness and supernaturalism and pantheism which it favors?” (1902/1982, p. 422). James does respond to his own question, with his classic three-part answer. “Mystical states, when well developed, usually are and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.” At the same time, “No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically” (p. 422). This qualification notwithstanding, these states “break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness . . . and show it to be only one kind of consciousness.” As such, “They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith” (p. 423). This response, while significant, isn’t entirely satisfactory, even to James himself, for all we have, still, is a “possibility.” He thus asks a variant of the above question in the next lecture: “Can philosophy stamp a warrant of veracity upon the religious man’s sense of the divine?” (p. 431). Unfortunately, no: “In all sad sincerity I think we must conclude that the attempt to demonstrate by purely intellectual processes the truth of the deliverances of direct religious experience is absolutely hopeless” (p. 455).

Let us therefore turn to the “Conclusions” to see where exactly James lands on these difficult issues. Early on in the lecture, he turns to the question of the degree to which religious experiences are shared among those from disparate walks of religious life: “Ought it to be assumed that in all men the mixture of religion with other elements should be identical? Ought it, indeed, to be assumed that the lives of all men should show identical religious elements? In other words, is the existence of so many religious types and sects and creeds regrettable?” We can add another question as well: Does the existence of all these different types and sects and creeds imply that, finally, religious experience is to be regarded as an artifact or epiphenomenon of one’s particular religious background and environment (e.g., Katz 1978; see also Hollenback 1996)? “To these questions”—including this last one, I would venture—“I answer ‘No’ emphatically. . . . The divine can mean no single quality, it must mean a group of qualities, by being champions of which in alternation, different men may all find worthy missions. Each attitude being a syllable in human nature’s total message, it takes the whole of us to spell the meaning out completely.” And so, “We must frankly recognize the fact that we live in partial systems, and that parts are not interchangeable in the spiritual life” (p. 487).

But the question of truth remains. “First,” then, “is there, under all the discrepancies of the creeds, a common nucleus to which they bear their testimony unanimously? And second, ought we to consider the testimony true?” The first question surely warrants an affirmative answer, for “there is a certain uniform deliverance in which religions all appear to meet”; there is a sense of “uneasiness,” the “sense that there is *something wrong about us* as we naturally stand,” as well as the “sense that *we are saved from the wrongness* by making proper connection with the higher powers.” As James goes on to explain, “The individual, so far as he suffers from his wrongness and criticises it, is to that extent consciously beyond it, and in at least possible touch with something higher, if anything higher exist” (p. 508). This process in itself serves to signify a kind of transcendence, in the most basic sense of a going-beyond a previous, less desirable, mode of being. But this process sometimes bespeaks a deeper level of transcendence as well. Returning to the “certain uniform deliverance in which religions all appear to meet,” James goes on to address the kind of experience in which the individual gathers the conviction that the “higher part” of his (or her) being is “*conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get*

on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck” (p. 508). As he goes on to state:

The part of the content concerning which the question of truth most pertinently arises is that “MORE of the same quality” with which our own higher self appears in the experience to come into harmonious working relation. Is such a “more” merely our own notion, or does it really exist? Does it act, as well as exist? And in what form should we conceive of that “union” with it of which religious geniuses are so convinced? (pp. 509–510)

From the standpoint of the various religions, there is generally agreement that this “more” really exists, “though some of them hold it to exist in the shape of a personal god or gods, while others are satisfied to conceive it as a stream of ideal tendency embedded in the eternal structure of the world” (p. 510). Neither James nor we, however, can rest content with this point of view. For what it amounts to is little more than a restatement of the idea that this religious attitude is ultimately based on *faith*.

The challenge is to gain some additional traction in addressing the issues at hand. Toward the end of the *Varieties*, James returns for a brief while to being the naturalistic psychologist. In considering the aforementioned idea of the “more,” the idea of the “subconscious self”—“nowadays a well-accredited psychological entity”—reenters the picture. Could it be that this is all that’s needed? Perhaps: “Apart from all religious considerations, there is actually and literally more life in our total soul than we are at any time aware of” (p. 511). Much of what is there, James notes, is trivial. “But in it, many of the performances of genius seem also to have their origin; and in our study of conversion, of mystical experiences, and of prayer, we have seen how striking a part invasions from this region play in the religious life” (p. 512). *There*, James seems to say, we have an answer:

Let me then propose, as a hypothesis, that whatever it may be on the *farther* side, the “more” with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life. Starting thus with a recognized psychological fact as our basis, we seem to preserve a contact with “science” which the ordinary theologian lacks. At the same time the theologian’s contention that the religious man is moved by an external power is vindicated, for it is one of the peculiarities of invasions from the subconscious region to take on objective appearances, and to suggest to the Subject an external control. In the religious life the control is felt as “higher”; but since on our hypothesis it is primarily the higher faculties of our own hidden mind which are controlling, the sense of union with the power beyond us is a sense of something, not merely apparently, but literally true. (pp. 512–513)

But this hypothesis—we might call it “transcendence from below”—cannot possibly be enough; for once again, what is being posited here is a kind of *faux* Other and a *faux* priority, dressed up in the captivating garb of the *real* priority of the *real* Other.

It is at this point that James all but abandons the role of naturalistic psychologist and explicitly states that his “hypothesis” to follow must be regarded as an “over-belief”—that is, a belief that falls short of full-blown religious faith but that cannot help but go beyond the data at hand. As for the content of this over-belief, it is as follows:

The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether different dimension of existence from the sensible and merely “understandable” world. Name it the mystical region, or the supernatural region, whichever you choose. So far as our ideal impulses originate in this world (and most of them do originate in it, for we find

them possessing us in a way for which we cannot articulately account), we belong to it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world, for we belong in the most intimate sense wherever our ideals belong. (p. 516)

On my reading, James backpedals a bit after this dramatic proclamation. This unseen region, he continues, isn't merely ideal, "for it produces effects in the world." And "that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we had no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal" (p. 516). At this point, James's perspective sounds less like an over-belief, tied to what experience itself seems to say, than a somewhat sophistic bit of philosophic maneuvering. He therefore seems to have backed down just as he was rising to the occasion. Is there anything to say beyond this pragmatic point of view?

Strictly speaking, the answer is "no." As James avows, "What the more characteristically divine facts are . . . I know not. But," he quickly adds,

the over-belief on which I am ready to make my personal venture is that they exist. The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in. (p. 519)

There still remains a pragmatic edge to this perspective: "By being faithful in my poor measure to this over-belief, I seem to myself to keep more sane and true" (p. 519). Finally, however, the reason James subscribes to it is not only because the divinely Other generates real effects and keeps him sane. It is also because experience, his own and others', tells him that the "something there" so frequently reported feels so palpably real that he is willing to suspend his own rationalistic and naturalistic skepticism.

I *can*, of course, put myself in the sectarian scientist's attitude, and imagine vividly that the world of sensations and of scientific laws and objects may be all. But whenever I do this, I hear that inward monitor of which W. K. Clifford once wrote, whispering the word "bosh!" Humbug is humbug, even though it bear the scientific name, and the total expression of human experience, as I view it objectively, invincibly urges me beyond the narrow "scientific" bounds. (p. 519)

James has not "proved" anything in his book, certainly not the truth of transcendence. In fact, it could be argued that, ultimately, he has done nothing more than offer his over-belief—which, even if short of full-blown religious faith, is surely closer to that than it is to "science," as ordinarily conceived. Where does this leave us? More specifically, how might it be possible to affirm the (possible) existence of these allegedly higher energies without resorting explicitly to theological principles? *Is* it possible?

It should be clear that this cannot be done within the confines of a purely naturalistic psychology, as customarily conceived, a psychology in which there exist firm boundaries between the human and the other-than-human. At the same time—and paradoxical though the idea may appear—if such a psychology is to avoid resorting to theological principles, it must nevertheless carry out its work in the name of *science*, that is, a mode of critical and open inquiry that (as I put it earlier) "insists first and foremost that we listen to the claims of experience—wherever they may lead." Now, one might again argue that moving in the direction of a (partially) non-naturalistic psychology obviates the very possibility of science. But this argument actually runs counter to the idea and ideal of

listening to the claims of experience. Moreover, it forecloses on the challenge of imagining other-than-naturalistic ways of conceiving of who and what we are. Let us not forget, however, that the subtitle of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is *A Study in Human Nature*. This simple fact leads us still further into the paradoxical nature of the situation at hand. For what James has essentially told us is that it may very well be the case that the nature of *human* nature points *beyond* nature—as customarily conceived. That is, it points to the possibility that human nature, insofar as it is in contact with “higher energies,” transcends the boundaries of the natural world, opening into “other worlds” entirely. Dupré, in speaking of the transcendent dimension of selfhood, had said much the same thing.

To exclude this possibility a priori is not only unscientific; as I noted toward the outset of this article, this perspective, in its very ego-centricity, effectively excludes the idea of the religious itself. By conceptualizing human experience in more “*ex-centric*” terms, as I put it earlier, other perspectives, indeed other kinds of perspectives, may be opened up. So too may the idea of naturalism: rather than remaining within the closed circuits of purely immanent being, naturalism might become more inclusive and better able to accommodate the lived reality of transcendence within it. This may be valuable both for psychology and for the human beings psychology seeks to understand and heal.

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