

THE SELF

William James

from *The Principles of Psychology* (Chapter 3)

"Whatever I may be thinking of, I am always at the same time more or less aware of myself, of my personal existence. At the same time it is I who am aware; so that the total self of me, being as it were duplex, partly known and partly knower, partly object and partly subject, must have two aspects discriminated in it, of which for shortness we may call one the *Me* and the other the *I*. I call these 'discriminated aspects.' and not separate things, because the identity of *I* with *me*, even in the very act of their discrimination, is perhaps the most ineradicable dictum of common-sense, and must not be undermined by our terminology here at the outset, whatever we may come to think of its validity at our inquiry's end."



THE SELF AS KNOWN (*ME*)

The Empirical Self or *Me*

"Between what a man calls *me* and what he simply calls *mine* the line is difficult to draw."

How do you feel when you have been robbed, or cheated? What words come to mind that describe this feeling?

"In its widest possible sense, a man's *Me* is the sum total of all that he CAN call his."

Constituents of the *Me*

The Material *Me*

Do you agree that the material *me* is composed of everything that an individual can call mine?

- a. your body (is our body "ours" or is it "us"?)
- b. your clothes
- c. your family (when a family member dies, is part of our very "self" gone?)
- d. your home
- e. your property (does an instinctual impulse drive us to collect property?)

The Social *Me*

Do you require *recognition* from others, particularly from others of your "kind"?
Do you show a different side of yourself to different people and different groups?
Do you "*prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet*"? (T. S. Elliot)

The Spiritual *Me*

The entire collection of our states of consciousness, our psychic faculties and dispositions.
Note that James means the word "spirit" in a "psychological" sense.

Feelings and Emotions of Self

Self-appreciation (self-satisfaction)

"A man with powers that have uniformly brought him success ... is not likely to be visited by the morbid diffidences and doubts about himself which he had when he was a boy. Whereas he who has made one blunder after another, and still lies in middle life among the failures at the foot of the hill, is liable to grow all sicklied o'er with self-distrust, and to shrink from trials with which his powers can really cope."

"... the barometer of our self-esteem and confidence rises and falls from one day to another through causes that seem to be visceral and organic rather than rational, and which certainly answer to no corresponding variations in the esteem in which we are held by our friends."

Does your self-appreciation rise and fall from one day to another?
Is our sense fo "Self" stable? To what degree? How?

Self-seeking and Self-preservation (fundamental *instinctive* impulses)

Bodily Self-seeking

Similar to Maslow's physiological and safety needs. James identifies "alimentation" and "defense."

Social Self-seeking

Similar to Maslow's love/belonging and esteem needs.

- desire to be recognized
- every impulse toward psychic progress
- self-esteem



Rivalry and Conflict of the Different *Mes*

"I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical selves and relinquishing the rest."

"With no attempt there can be no failure; with no failure, no humiliation. So our self-feeling in this world depends entirely on what we **back** ourselves to be and do."

$$\text{Self-esteem} = \frac{\text{Success}}{\text{Pretensions}}$$

Do you agree with James's formula for self-esteem?



"Everything added to the Self is a burden as well as a pride."

So what should we do?

"Our self-feeling is in our power." Do you agree? Is James overstating our own mental powers?

James observes that "it is only with **renunciation** that life, properly speaking, can be said to begin." Here are the first three "Noble Truths" of Buddhism:

1. Suffering exists.
2. Suffering arises from attachment to desires.
3. Suffering ceases when attachment to desire ceases



"How pleasant is the day when we give up striving to be young, —or slender!"

"Neither threats nor pleading can move a man unless they touch some one of his potential or actual selves. Only thus can we, as a rule, get a 'purchase' on another's will."

"The seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully, and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation."

The Hierarchy of the Mes

"We learn to subordinate our lower selves to our higher." Do you agree that our bodily self is at the bottom of the hierarchy and the spiritual self at the top?

"It is one of the strangest laws of our nature that many things which we are well satisfied with in ourselves disgust us when seen in others."

"In each kind of Me, material, social, and spiritual, men distinguish between the immediate and actual, and the remote and potential, between the narrower and the wider view, to the detriment of the former and the advantage of the latter." This is the foundation for the idea of "delayed gratification." How successful are you at doing this?

James here introduces the concept of "potential selves" and argues that an individual pursues "an ideal social self." Educational psychologists have conducted much research into what they call "possible selves" (e.g., Hazel Markus at Stanford). These possible selves include

- desired possible selves — the type of person we want to be (Freud's SuperEgo)
- feared possible selves — the type of person we strongly wish not to become



What potential "selves" do you wish to become?

What potential "selves" frightens you? That is, what are you afraid of becoming?

Teleological Uses of Self-interest

"Its own body, first of all, its friends next, and finally its spiritual dispositions, **MUST** be the supremely interesting objects for each human mind. Each mind must have a certain minimum of selfishness in the shape of instincts of bodily self-seeking in order to exist." Why do you think, then, that so many people abuse their bodies or fail to protect themselves against disease? Why is it that so many people seem to ignore their body's needs? What does James say about sexuality that refers to this? about alcoholism?

"The sympathetic instincts and the egoistic ones are thus coordinate."

THE SELF AS KNOWER (*I*)

"The *I*, or 'pure ego,' is a very much more difficult subject of inquiry than the *Me*. It is that which at any given moment **is** conscious, whereas the *Me* is only one of the things which it is conscious **of**. In other words, it is the Thinker ..."



If "I" talk to "myself," who (or what) talks, and who (or what) listens?

"... behind the passing state of consciousness [there is] a permanent Substance or **Agent** whose modification or act it is."

The Unity of the Passing Thought

"The simplest thing, if we are to assume the existence of a stream of consciousness at all, would be to suppose that **things that are known together are known in single pulses of that stream**. The things may be many, and may occasion many currents in the brain. But the psychic phenomenon correlative to these many currents is one integral '**state**,' transitive or substantive, to which the many things appear."



Is James arguing that the Self is "unified" just as thought is unified? That, although composed of various parts (selves), the Self itself is One thing?

The Soul as a Combining Medium

"... things which are known together are known by one **something**, but that something is no mere passing thought, but a simple and permanent spiritual being on which many ideas combine their effects. It makes no difference in this connection whether this being be called Soul, Ego, or Spirit, in either case its chief function is that of a combining medium."

When you *think*, what combines your single thoughts into complex ideas?

What in an individual combines the various parts (selves)?

Can you see the case that James is making for the *I*—the "Self as knower"—as a "combiner" inside your head?

Sameness in the Self as Known

The *Me* is identical in *essential* ways from one day to the next. In other words, this feature of the Self is "stable" and harmonious. The *Me* is also "continuous," in the sense that all change is gradual. Thus, **personal identity** is similarly stable and continuous.

Nonetheless, "*past and present selves compared are the same just so far as they **are** the same, and no further. They are the same in **kind**. But this generic sameness coexists with generic differences just as real; and if from the one point of view I am one self, from another I am quite as truly many.*"

Sameness in the Self as Knower

"The states of consciousness are all that psychology needs to do her work with. Metaphysics or theology may prove the Soul to exist; but for psychology the hypothesis of such a substantial principle of unity is superfluous."

So the *Me* is stable and continuous. But is the *I* stable and continuous? And what matters to psychology?

How the I appropriates the Me

With warmth and intimacy. And with authority.



Mutations and Multiplications of the Self

"The Me, like every other aggregate, changes as it grows." These "mutations" are of two kinds:

1. Alterations of memory



- a. loss of memory—"a person's *me* shrinks *pari passu* (in equal proportion) with the facts that disappear." What does this say about those suffering from Alzheimer's?
- b. false memories, including our inventions and reinventions of past events—"the memory follows the story."

2. Alterations in the present bodily and spiritual selves

- a. insane delusions—enough said.
- b. alternating selves—typically due to lapses of memory ("any man becomes inconsistent with himself if he forgets his engagements, pledges, knowledges, and habits.")
- c. mediumships or possessions—let's not go there.



Can you see James's point in including this section? Although he has argued with conviction that the self has unity, stability, harmony, and continuity, he must account for the circumstances that cause a Self to "mutate."

Review and Psychological Conclusion

"The consciousness of Self involves a stream of thought, each part of which as 'I' can remember those which went before, know the things they knew, and care paramently for certain ones among them as 'Me,' and **appropriate to these** the rest. This **Me** is an empirical aggregate of things objectively known. The **I** which knows them cannot itself be an aggregate; neither for psychological purposes need it be an unchanging metaphysical entity like the Soul, or a principle like the transcendental Ego, viewed as 'out of time.' It is a **thought**, at each moment different from the last moment, but appropriative of the latter, together with all that the latter called its own."

There you go. The whole chapter in a nutshell.

