

Culture, Embodiment, and the Senses

Thursday, 13 October 2005

Reading

- William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, chs. 9-10, "Conversion," pp. 160-210, chs. 16-17, "Mysticism," pp. 299-336.
 - V.S. Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind*, ch. 9, "God and the Limbic System," pp. 174-198.
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WILLIAM JAMES (1842-1910)

James was trying to understand how the mind works and the nature of experience, especially religious experience at a time when psychology was not as disciplined. He addressed questions of *different cultures, different experiences, how do you classify it?*

His method differed from Freud and Otto (from last time)

- ☞ yes, takes for granted that God is present but does *not* solely locate the nature of religious experience in the body or the brain (like how Freud talked about the body as the center for the mind, how we interpret the uncanny)
- ☞ there's a whole set of people who have had unique religious experiences – **phenomenological** approach – *what is the data of experience and what are the characteristic features? what do these say about the mind and religion and perhaps the deity?*
- ☞ scientific approach to this aspect of experience that had not yet previously been looked at, similar to how Freud said that we look at aesthetics but don't examine the things that horrify

James presents a lot of data from which theory can be derived. His **theory of mind**: there are objects that are perceivable by our consciousness, and even though they're not material, they can have an objective reality that is so real that it elicits a response from us.

In the chapters of today, he examines religious experience.

- ☞ **ideas, aims, systems of ideas, notion of the field** – all have various weight at different points of a person's life
- ☞ **conversion** – a *shift* in the center of a person's ideas
- ☞ **theory of the mind**: some things more central, others more peripheral – can interchange (like Freud, in that both authors have a sense of awareness *outside*, James says the *extramarginal*, the subliminal)
- ☞ **notion of the soul** – core aspect of the self, center from which aims come, some aims have more relevance than the others ("more heat")

People are suffering from some sort of **angst/anxiety** (modern reading could say they are depressed) and then something happens that causes that *shift* – e.g. some were consciously seeking out assistance through religion

- ☞ at James' time period, a lot of psychoanalysis was *not* going on, no "talking cure culture" so religion was the place for healing/transformation about the self
- ☞ note the heavy use of language about *sin* – a very cultural way of thinking about experience

There was a feeling of unworthiness/coldness that elicits the process of conversion – James talks about **conversion** as a very **visceral/sensory** process as well as **moral/intellectual**.

volitional conversion – a gradual change

☞ there can be sudden shifts when something peripheral becomes central, but for a lot of people it is a gradual change, a shift of ideas

psychology and theology approach these experiences differently – Christian thought accepts that an external agent is responsible

☞ James is not categorically denying the reality of the divine but at same time is trying to see what mechanisms are going on in person at both level of body and of mind

why we should read James alongside Ramachandran:

○ *To what extent is a “religious” experience induced?*

○ *Are the physical sensations just a product of culture?*

☞ Ramachandran asks, *what’s happening with the brain at this time?*

☞ consider: *does Ramachandran attribute these religious experiences to science or god?*

☞ examines how physical changes during religious experiences could be similar cross-culturally

other aspects of James’ methodology:

☞ chapter 1 – lays out approach that investigator should **look at extremes**, the extreme examples of a certain phenomenon that would suggest an everyday average – reminiscent of some methods used at social science at his time, e.g. Tyler, Frazer said that primitives represent the vestiges of the past in terms of evolution of particular species, representing an extreme form where humanity *used* to be – here James is still stuck in the the **transitional point** (doesn’t have an evolutionary model of what’s happening in mind)

☞ *How is it that sensory experience is talked about in terms of a mystical experience?* James examines it on **both experiential and investigative levels** (remember, Descartes said don’t trust sensory experience at all)

○ *What is the place of sensory experience in terms of methodology and phenomenon and how has that changed in western tradition over time?*

Mysticism chapter:

☞ the mystical experience is another **mode of knowing** that is just as valid as rational, empirical reasoning or the reason that was put forth in the scientific tradition of the Enlightenment

☞ phenomena as having **evolutionary quality** and emblematic of a development across cultures

Late 19th century – idea that you could take someone who was “civilized” and place him in the context of a “less civilized” environment. He would **degenerate/devolve** in morality and physicality. Lamarck’s argued that your descendants would inherit what you gained, also the idea that you could lose what you gained (degeneration notion).

James offers suggestions on how to **cultivate a mystical state** – it was important for the individual to hold the **visual image** of the deity in mind.

Tom Csordas worked with Catholic charismatics – part of what is going on in the cultivation of this type of religious experience is that people are able to **interact** with the visual image that they have constructed – there is an actual **physiological response** and this process of visualization can have more salience for the individual.

Tanya Luhrmann's book argued that the **process of visualization** has a strong effect on belief and the development of faith – each participation reinforced the belief so that the person came to interpret events differently (what she calls *interpretive drift*)

- *How is it that people talk about questions of belief, faith, and what is happening in the mind?*

V.S. RAMACHANDRAN

Ramachandran approaches religious experience as a *physiological* phenomenon that can be induced without reference to culture.

- *To what extent do we have the capacity to be converted? To what extent must a person first be enculturated/aculturated?*
- *Are certain people predisposed to experiencing phenomenon of this kind?*

James discusses some of the factors that might encourage someone to convert (e.g. suggestion, temperament). There was a study on hysterics – used hypnosis and found that physician had tremendous amount of influence over patient.

- *To what extent are certain people more open to certain kind of phenomena because of suggestion/influence?*
- *To what extent is a matter of will?*

Mind/body exploration is now becoming much more studied and prescribed area of medicine because people don't fully understand the interaction (e.g. effect on prayer on healing)

Ramachandran explores to what extent are we dealing with a **natural/physiological phenomena**

- certain people who have mystical experience have issues with temporal lobes
- To what extent is it cultural? How is the limbic system and the brain related to emotions and behavior?
- **“kindling”** – temporal lobe disruptions can affect one's personality, new neural pathways can have long term effects – notion is similar to James' notions of a shift of something from peripheral to center
- methods to achieve religious sensation:
 - ∞ either god visits
 - ∞ individual experiences emotional disruptions that are interpreted as such
 - ∞ kindling
 - ∞ humans have evolved neural apparatuses to experience these things – **functionalist** approach, but also points into sociobiology – raises question of *why would we have this capacity?*

Ramachandran's conclusion: There are circuits of the brain that are more active with religious experience but we can't say that is the *sole* cause...

He references Alfred Wallace who said that there had to be an agent who designed humans to have these capacities – it's the notion of **intelligent design** that's ever so popular now.

- *How is it that those who are more on the lay theology side of things attempt to approach science? It all has to do with power and knowledge. Always keep in mind – what is at stake for those who are trying to assert anything about body/consciousness/embodiment?*