INTRODUCTION AND THESIS

Wesley Cooper, a Jamesian scholar, is my resource for the general context in which William James’s ideas will be utilized in this paper. His book on James’s writings elaborates on the unity in all his work; but there are two levels within this unity, both empirical/scientific and metaphysical, in which James studies and comments on reality as we human beings encounter it.¹ Cooper writes, “it is a basic interpretive hypothesis for me that the sensations of James’s early writing are the pure experiences of his metaphysical writing”. In sum, according to Cooper, James, very much a cognitive realist, has produced a philosophical system with empirical and metaphysical levels giving it unity and power to circumscribe our knowledge of life in this world. James rejected any form of reduction of the mental to the physical but did indeed find a correlation between them. However, for James, the really real as pure experience is prior to both our mental and physical worlds; as such it is untouched by the corrupting “human serpent” but from its privileged position of reality, it rather flows into and generates both of these worlds.²

Hence, this paper is both a psychological summation of James’s studies on memory based in our sensory and bodily selves, and a research into memory’s mental and spiritual tasks in the radical empiricism of second level examination of the human non sensory mental world.

²Ibid.
Furthermore, it has been necessary, of course, to limit the materials in James’s prolific writings on these two levels because of the restricted nature of a paper allotted ten to fifteen minutes in a presentation. So I have selected a minimum set of texts in the two levels of James’s psychology—*The Principles of Psychology* and philosophy—*Essays in Radical Empiricism* and *The Pluralistic Universe* as the content to be the sources of my investigation. In the *PP I*, I will look at Chapters XI, “Attention, XV, “The Perception of Time, and XVI, Memory. I have focused on Lecture VI, “Bergson and His Critique of Intellectualism” from *The Pluralistic Universe*. Yet while the material from these essays make up the main source of content for my paper, I do on occasion make use of some of James’s other writings to augment his views on memory and cognition.

Secondly, it should be noted that, in James’s radical empiricism, his philosophy relies on the human experiences of time as well as those of space to investigate and record human knowledge of this world. Of course this is apropos in any research on the topic of memory. But James will introduce new and creatively insightful ways of considering memory based upon his research on the perception of time because, like Bergson, he rejects any construction of thought about memory based upon the predominant space metaphors that both these scholars think have overly influenced the empirical sciences. For James the metaphors the experience of time provides for cognitive activity further open the mind to greater and still to be investigated realms of reality surpassing those of space. “Complete reality” from the insights provided in

---

time perception must be conceived after the analogy of “successive moments in our several histories”. The stream of thought with the phenomena of a process reality that comes in “drops of experience” is also derived from time metaphors.\(^4\) From a time perspective, therefore, the empirical cannot be restricted to knowledge from the five physical senses. While the latter opens our minds to the parameters of space, in memory there is the sensation of time, itself an example and proof of non-sensory experience. This is “because memory is the present experience of the past”. In sum, memory is an experience that must be addressed in a radical empiricism; it will be characterized as direct feeling by James. It is a form of non-sensory perception.

My paper’s thesis vis-a-vis James’s epistemology as grounded in memory will be limited to his ideas on “knowledge by direct acquaintance”. The realm of reality of relations and feelings covered by this form of knowledge is involved with our perception of time rather than space. Specifically my thesis involves a particular epistemological claim made by James in his essay on Bergson,\(^5\) and relates this claim to Voegelin’s writings on anamnesis. In this lecture James makes a distinction between knowledge gained through conception and logic and what he calls “knowledge by acquaintance”. He places severe limitation on what we can really actually know about reality from the former. ‘Concepts negate the inwardness of reality altogether” and chiefly give us some insight into space and matter, he writes. But they fail to even touch the hem of the real world” and cannot enable us to “apprehend reality’s thickness”. In sum


James insists that Bergson is absolutely right in contending that the whole life of activity and change is inwardly impenetrable to conceptual treatment, . . . which opens itself up only to sympathetic apprehension at the hands of immediate feeling”.  

So James’s epistemological claim is that there is knowledge of acquaintance, arising from direct and immediate experiences, that when plumbed in its depth can bring us a consciousness of communion and guidance from the abiding love and truth present within our human inner spiritual parts. He asserts that one can place onself “at the point of view of the thing’s interior doing”, . . . “[G]et at the expanding centre of a human character, the elan vital of a man, as Bergson calls it, by living sympathy”. . .  

In light of this claim, his description of memory becomes very relevant. This is because it is memory, beyond its role in discursive “twice taken construction of thought” also preeminently provides us with the knowledge of acquaintance of the special inward moments of “transcendent feeling” in any person’s biography. This direct and immediate knowledge is far superior to any mediate conceptual knowledge—“knowledge about”. The latter is critically authenticated perceptually, by those who keep a radical openness to all experience, the former only touches the fringes of reality. It both misses its thickness and can become divorced in its logical actions from the really real.  

James writes, “our senses only give us acquaintance with facts of body, and of the mental states of other persons we only have conceptual knowledge. Of our past states of mind we take cognizance in a peculiar way. They are objects of memory, and appear to us endowed with a sort of warmth and intimacy that makes the perception of them seem more like a process

---

6Ibid., Note # 50, pp. 570-572.

7Ibid., p. 577.
of sensation than like a thought.⁸

Moreover, upon the metaphysical examination, there is a significance to the fact that we experience our own thoughts. First, James notes that this experience of our own thoughts is non-perceptual experience outside of any sense experience. Secondly, the fact that we do experience our thoughts is a matter which is one of objectivity for us, as well as the more familiar subjectivity by which we usually characterize personal thought. So we may think our thoughts but as experienced they stand before us exactly as any perceived object. Thoughts are part of the whole of the reality that we experience in knowledge by acquaintance. We feel them directly and they come to our attention in our stream of consciousness.⁹

My thesis is that James’s cognitive claim for the tremendous possibilities of knowledge of acquaintance plus these simple and obvious observations on human objective experience of their own thoughts by James are relevant to Eric Voegelin’s writings on the important function of anamnesis.¹⁰ The general context in which I will elaborate on this relevance will be Voegelin’s definition of the anthropological principle defined by Plato.¹¹ James’s research as it is carried on in the two levels of sensation/pure experience can augment our understanding of the possibility and the necessity of anamnesis in the ordering of the soul (to use Voegelin’s vocabulary). They point to plausibility of the meditative retrieval by memory of those moments

⁸“Attention”, in PPI, p. 223.


¹¹The term is drawn from Voegelin’s New Science of Politics, but its meaning is very well explained in Anamnesis; i.e., “Philosophy as a Constituent of History”, pp. 124-134.
of transcendental encounter that provoke an excitement over existence and faith and hope in its promises.

A more specific context for my associating James’s work on memory with Voegelin’s on anamnesis is my own research into the meaning of and possibilities for “a common mysticism of humanity”, that is, the mystic potential whose actuation humanizes every human being. James’s research, because it also points to the practical nature of anamnesis, i.e., how and why it actually works to bring us an encounter with the divine at the centre of our being, can lend support to such a theory. First, a disclaimer is in order. James’s anti-intellectualism underscores the error of those who would confuse anamnesis with any kind of fundamentalist dogmatism. This is because James is quite clear that the knowledge achieved, although carried in the primordial experience/symbol bond, is non-discursive and prior to any constructive language recording these experiences. But secondly, James’s research on memory and attention can demonstrate how and why anamnesis purifies the human spirit inspiring faith, a mystic notion.

Anamnesis, as defined by Voegelin, generates the wonder and the seeking in the persons who engage in it, that becomes a directing force in these life bringing faith, hope and love as the interpreting feelings and the normative guidance of these lives. James’s two levels approach, both his scientific and his philosophical ideas, show why and how Voegelin makes sense about anamnesis. The reverse is also true, we’ll see. Voegelin’s theory on anamnesis brings understanding and relevance to James’s research also.

Anamnesis has a long history in philosophy; it is absolutely a much more fully developed human attempt to reach the experience of super realms of reality present to our inward ability to commune with them, than James’s brief explanation of the “knowledge of acquaintance”. My
thesis is interested more in how James’s work on memory gives the modern thinker insight into
the purpose, and practical workings of this ancient practice. Voegelin himself thought that
James’s work could do so. He wrote that James’s study of the question of consciousness was
“one of the most important philosophical documents of the twentieth century”. James’s term
‘pure experience’ was designed to point out human participation in a greater than human reality.
Plato’s metaxy which is not the topic of this paper is a far more sophisticated entrance into the
“something that lies between the subject and object of participation” as this experience itself.
Nonetheless, James’s investigation into sensation/pure experience, that is captured in a twice
taken over process dependent on attention and memory, is a creative accomplishment. It does
make an meaningful contribution to our understanding of the importance of “re-cognizing”; the
recognition enabled by the attention’s excitement and memory is discovered as central for
anamnesis. Thus James’s insights into the inward human/divine encounter coming to our
consciousness in memory’s retrieval of our knowledge of acquaintance is invaluable.

PART ONE: JAMES ON ATTENTION AND MEMORY

I will begin and put great emphasis in working out my thesis in an examination of
James’s ideas from his Principles of Psychology on both attention and memory. However, these
topics are repeatedly alluded to throughout James’s writings. In his essay, “The Stream of
Thought” James emphasizes the choosing activity that directs this stream. It is led by the selective
interest of the person’s mind. “A man’s empirical thought depends on the things he has
experienced, but what these shall be is to a large extent determined by his habits of attention”.

\[12\]

\[PPJ, \text{p. 286.}\]
So while the mind, dependent on memory, works on the data it receives in a primordial chaos of sensations/pure experience, very much in the way a sculptor works on his block of stone, it is the selective attention which drives the emerging thoughts. Yet James recognizes the social context that often influences this attention and he comments that even if “my mind and your mind “ rejected certain portions of the original world stuff, often very similar thoughts emerge and hence, “are to a great extent the same”.  

Of course, this “original world stuff” on the metaphysical level is James’s pure experience. This is the name James uses to delineate the “immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories”. This immediate flux of life is also the immediate present instant itself and according to James, this cannot be known about until it is dead and gone. It is the darkest place in the flow of pure experience, a mere “that-ness” before being characterized as a “what-ness”. We will delve further into this point further on this paper in the discussion of the perception of time. But this statement first of all deals with the importance of attention. For James, the specific encounter with a “drop” of pure experience is caused by the person’s attention. In fact, James defines the word experience in terms of attention. “My experience”, he writes, “is what I agree to attend to”. “Millions of items of the outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience. Why? Because they have no interest for me”. He adds, “[i]nterest alone gives accent and emphasis, light and shade, . . . intelligible perspective, in a word. . . . clay will be

---

13 Ibid., p. 289.

14 ERE/PU, p. 93.

15 James, “Attention”, in pp1, p.402.
impressed most deeply where the drops fall thickest, and so the final shape of the mind is moulded”. In sum, experience, as a transaction in a personal consciousness, is caused by personal attention.\(^\text{16}\)

James’s definition of memory breaks with classic and static definitions of it as a human faculty. This dated explanation posits memory as an “inalienable function” of the substance which is the soul. One can at any moment engage in recollection and have a cognition of the past. Memory is simply a term to designate the principle of our general power to recall. The classic definition is empty psychology to James as it is a categorization which has no scientific value.\(^\text{17}\) James defines memory in tandem with his elucidation of the stream of thought and the dynamic process nature of reality. He writes that human beings are “essentially associating machines” and when a cue is presented memory takes off. Because the cue is contiguously associated with the thing recalled, it determines a vast set of potentials toward a particular point. Whatever is in the mind, James insists, is introduced; when it is introduced it is associated with something already there. The psychological explanation of our memory is tied into our associationist constitution.\(^\text{18}\)

James writes that our minds depend upon an organized system of associations. So if one fact more than another is associated with the mind, the better will our memory get possession of it. One could envision a mesh of facts. “Each of its associates becomes a hook to which it

\(^{16}\)Ibid., pp. 402-3.

\(^{17}\)William James, \textit{Talks to Teachers and Students} (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1900), p. 117.

\(^{18}\)Ibid., 118-19. It should be noted that James is not using a definition of associationist psychology that is derived from Locke or Hume. He designates that as “associationist theory”, \textit{PPI}, pp. 350-360.
hangs, a means to fish it up by when sunk beneath the surface”. The ability to remember will depend upon the persistency of the associations as well as on the number of them. Moreover, associations explain the memory’s function in general retention as well as in special recall. These associations themselves can further work as cues and enlarge the vast potentials of memory. Thus James promotes the development of special systems of associated things as a way to improve memory—simply through the expansion of our systems of association.

We known in our own common sense experiences of memory that there is both great vitality and light to it on one occasion, and upon another, it may be shaded with a faintness, cloudiness, or even over time fade away. Even so, James wrote there is “a warmth and intimacy” to which no mere concept in the discursive thinking process ever attains. Moreover, remembered things in thought may come to us with greater vividness than what we have through sensible presences. “A memory of an insult may make us angrier than the insult did when we received it”. In fact, through memory, (that owes its own ability as an essential mental function to the fact of time) reality can change, grow, and become more vividly real. So there is a reciprocation marked on by James. Memory may be triggered by interest but in turn it can build new and stronger interests. An object not interesting in itself may become so with the associations memory provokes, and the two associated objects may increase one’s interest

---

19 James, “Memeory”, in PP1, p. 662.

20 TT&S, pp. 120-24.

21 PP1, p. 239.

The more sophisticated distinctions that James applies to his explanation to memory will be taken up at this point. James identifies both the human primary memory in conjunction to his sensation/pure experience explanation of the primordial human cognitive encounter with the real, and reproductive memory, used in actual discursive thinking. Together, human thought can make order our of the flux of pure experience—both in the positive and useful operations of reason as well as for re-gaining the more vague and elusive experiences of the conjunctive relations and feeling in the thicker reality we might miss. In sum, primary and reproductive memory both have an important function in the “stream of thought”.

The discussion of primary memory will be addressed first. James sometimes refers to this memory as, “elementary memory”. It is our immediate sensation of time. James compares and relates it our other five physical senses of space. Primary memory is our first experience of time just as these five senses occasion our first experience of space. Furthermore, this initial perception of time will always have duration, volume or extensity, James writes. In other words, we do not sense the present moment but rather the “specious present”: the only fact of our immediate experience of time is the specious present.

In short, the practically cognized present is no knife-edge, but a saddle back, with a certain breadth of its own in which we sit perched, and from which we look in two directions. The unit of composition of our perception of time is a duration, with a bow and a stern, as it were—a rearward and forward-looking end.

---

23 TT&S, p. 94.

24 PP1, p. 618.

25 Ibid., p. 609.

26 Ibid.
It is primary memory that enables us to deal with the perception of time, of duration, and the specious present. “The number of direct experiences which the specious present and immediately-intuited past may embrace measures the extent of our ‘primary memory’... or elementary memory”.

It should be noted that all consciousness is in the form of time and hence tied to this primary memory. James writes, “[t]he knowledge of some other part of the stream, past or future, near or remote, is always mixed with our knowledge of the present thing”.

Hence the simple sensation is a distraction. All our concrete states of mind are representations of objects with some amount of complexity. They happen as a part of a duration block in the succession to time. The sense of duration, in turn, is a real sensation of time; “in neural terms, there is at every moment a cumulation of brain processes overlapping each other... The AMOUNT OF OVERLAPPING determines the feeling of the duration occupied.”

James remarks that studies of human perception of space have an analogous description of a feel of volume or extensity. Date in time corresponds to positions in space. We will imagine larger realms in each, but the original experience of both space and time is given as a unit, inside of which attention afterwards discriminates parts in relations to wholes.

So James writes, “[t]he earliest form of distinct space-perception is undoubtedly that of a movement over some one of our sensitive surfaces, and this movement is originally given as a simple whole...”

---

27 Ibid., p. 638.
28 Ibid., p. 606.
29 Ibid., p. 635.
of feeling”.  

Also, even if we empty our minds, some form of changing process still remains for us to feel; we cannot rid ourselves of this experience.  So with this sense of process and in its rhythm we have a sense of the length of time as it lasts.  And for James, awareness of change is a condition on which our perception of time’s flow depends.  But even further, our intuitions of the reality of time arise with our consciousness of duration as a specific kind of object.  James calls this the sensation of the specious present.  As mentioned above brain studies show that there is at every moment a cumulation in the brain of processes overlapping each other.  The fainter ones, that are in the dying phase, were shortly before active to a maximum degree.  So we are consciously conscious of this specious present, a certain duration varying length from a few seconds to probably never more than a minute.  And in this duration there is a content.  It has one part from earlier time and the other part from later time with the former leaving as were by the rear door.

What is significant about these psychological discoveries vis-a-vis the original intuition of duration for James’s cognitional theory?  First, there would be no memory of sensation/pure experience or any possibility of cognitive reflection without it.  James writes that it is immaterial whether our feeling or the immediate intuited past event is of long or short content.  What is important is that this content is part of processes left behind that are present.  Because every act

---

31 Ibid., p. 621.
32 Ibid., p. 620.
33 Ibid., pp. 630, 637.
34 Ibid., p. 642.
of sensational stimuli takes up moments of time, which can be identified as simultaneity, continuous transition and discontinuous transition, the “law of discontinuous succession in time, of percepts to which we cannot easily attend to at once” requires the feeling of time duration. The transition is the lost dark moment, but the sensation/pure experience in the specious moment remains one of transition despite the loss of it in the total sensation.\textsuperscript{35}

When we turn to conceptual processes and engage in discursive thinking of past events outside the specious present, the successive acts of conceiving dated events—the reproduction and thinking of them, still must transverse the intuited specious present. “The immediate content of the latter is thus all my \textit{direct experiences} whether subjective or objective”.\textsuperscript{36} In sum, the states of mind we need for empirical data of our thinking will be only available to us through further uses of memory (which we will take up shortly) if they have endured for a certain length of time in the specious present.

James provides an explanation in these comments on the empirical level for the claim made in his philosophy that we experience our thoughts objectively as well as subjectively. Furthermore, he concludes, “all the intellectual value for us of a state of mind depends upon our after memory of it. It is only then it can be combined in a system, and knowingly used to achieve useful results”.\textsuperscript{37} Even when long past events are taken up by reproductive memory, conceived with their dates, that operation too depends upon the primary memory’s sensation of the specious present which they also must transverse. Thus this memory serves not only perception in

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., p. 636.

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid., p. 638.

\textsuperscript{37}Ibid., pp. 643-44.
sensation/pure experience, but also conception and the secondary perception involved in the
direct experience of our thoughts. 38

Secondly, we can make some inferences from James’ work on primary memory. For one, the number of direct experiences of the specious present and immediately intuited past in its “front door” may embrace measures primary memory, and is itself direct non sensory experience. This means that the primary memory has been defined as the non-space ‘sense’ we use to access all the data of radical empiricism beyond the data gained through space sensory knowledge. In James’s radical empiricism both non-sensory and sensory experiences must be used in cognition giving a plurality of facts. But nothing else, i.e., nothing not experienced, that is nothing that has not crossed in the duration of the specious present, is relevant content to reasoning.

Thirdly, then primary memory, along with reproductive memory which we now take up—that is both together—serve in accessing what James includes in radical empiricism: the substantive and transitive aspects of reality present in the stream of consciousness. 39

Substantive and conjunctive states of mind are not remembered as independent facts but in their former “perchings” in the specious present. There would be no experience of these perchings or of the more elusive “flights” without the supporting role it plays. In James’s epistemology, the “perching” that is the specious present is the founding substantive experience behind the experience in the rhythm of language that every thought is expressed in sentences and closes with a period. But the law of discontinuous succession that we quoted above in tandem with the intuited duration of the specious moment also founds our ability to capture the flights and the

38Ibid., p. 638

more elusive transitive aspects of experience.

It is not possible to over emphasize the importance of primary memory—there is nothing in our minds that it does not preserve. This memory founds our ability to access in a comprehensive way the contents of the stream of experience, whether from space or time. It holds the “out there” experienced as well as those of strictly mental reality. When joined to reproductive memory, “the universe that is a large extent chaos” is a potential content to be ordered by our minds. It will be the reproductive memory that will discern what really are the concepts that are worthy of investigation and which have value as content for discursive thinking.

The actual term, reproductive memory, intimates the creative possibilities of human cognition for James. The reproduction of an event, after it has once completely dropped out of the rear of the specious present, is an entirely different psychic fact for than that of the direct perception of reality, sensory or in the direct acquaintance of feeling. As mentioned above, James has written that “that a succession of feelings is not a feeling of succession”. The first is added on to the second. So it is an additional fact requiring its own special elucidation. In other words, the past known as past must be known with what is present and during the present extensity ot time. This is exactly the job of the reproductive memory.  

It is in and through the reproductive memory that the relationship of knowledge to its object outside of the simple act of primary memory occurs. This happens in a subsequent reflection by the memory in the new present moments of the stream of thought. Thus the reproductive memory is at work to carve out a “what-ness” from the “that-ness” of the drops of experience. The open possibilities of this what-ness were discussed in the introduction to this

\[40\] Ibid., pp. 628-629.
paper using the metaphor of a sculptor and un-carved piece of clay. A quick summary of how this works is that the causes of memory lie first in the human retentive ability of facts captured by primary memory so there is a potential for recall. Secondly, the processes of reminiscence, recollection, reproduction and recall are available as cognitive tools. Both of these causes require the law of habit in the nervous system, working as observed in the association of ideas—this was discussed under the topic of attention.\footnote{James devotes a chapter to habit in his \textit{PP1} and we can only reference it in this limited paper. For James, habits form our (second) nature and habits of thought and moral habits set the direction of our lives. See \textit{PP1}, pp. 104-127.}

In sum, the lines of order soon get traced our of the first “unqualified actuality” of sensation/pure experience, any part of which may be retrieved and connected with distant groups of associates. Reproductive memory makes possible the combinations of parts into wholes through its use of signs and symbols.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 622, 631.} In the real spatio/temporal world the first things known are these combinations that are the wholes encountered in twice taken reflection.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 629.}

\textbf{Part Three: Memory and Anamnesis}

In James’s epistemology, reason has endless possibilities because it is open to cumulative and progressive insights. This is because when past experience is taken up in the specious present, new associations can bring about additional creative realms of possible cognition. This is a notion of truth that posits a widening and growth upon the expanding possibilities of empirical data—in the sense of the conceptual and from the thickness of feeling and relationship—on which the mind can work through reproductive memory. This core belief of
James in our cognitive possibilities can be applied to our knowledge of our very selves. This is important to note because, as we will define it, anamnesis is a project of self-knowledge to find the transcendent, super realm encountered in our out of the ordinary moments experienced through acquaintance with them. It discovers the unlimited in the limited, the infinite in the finite, and the endless in the circumscribed—all as we ourselves inwardly experience it. But anamnesis itself is a cumulative knowing exercise. James’s comprehensive explanation of memory that takes in habit and attention, as well as primary memory in the experience of the duration of the specious present, and the work of reproductive memory, is all pertinent to the ever deepening self knowledge of the interior divine grounding of the human psyche.

Hence, in the definition of anamnesis we can pin point an anamnetic exercise that purifies and brings us to a halting, beginning but real faith, as well as the more sophisticated and mature meditations of remembrance of a full faith, such as exemplified in St. Augustine’s Confessions. The latter are a search for the true self, and hence the ‘divine’ ground that internally participates in a relation of love and truth with us in forming each self’s identity. The best model for this mature form of anamnesis is the “medieval ascent”. The meditation seeks out the mystery that lies at the source of our very selves, and the mystery of the self and its psyche and the mystery of God are found to intermingle.

I alluded to this claim shared by James and Voegelin in the introduction when I quoted James’s admiration of Bergson’s mysticism: We can get at the expanding centre of human character, the elan vital of a man, as Bergson calls it, by living sympathy... There is an elusive relationship of loving and knowing of the self and its Ground at the core of the human making its

\[44\] See note# 6, p. 4 in this paper
unique being-ness. Voegelin has summarized the perfected and mature meditative search for self knowledge that ends with the insight into the divine participation integral to human identity in writing about St. Augustine’s Chapter 10 in the Confessions. But, as the context for this research is the common mysticism of humanity, it will be the first form of anamnesis that is discussed in this paper.

There are two clarifying points can be provided before we take up Voegelin’s definition of this elementary anamnesis and the truth it brings us about ourselves and existence. First, the two-levels of James’s psychology/philosophy are involved in his treatment of memory and cognition. Hence, beyond James’s comments on the intimacy and warmth in which we know ourselves, and the deepening possibilities of this knowledge of acquaintance in his philosophy, James has a very thorough investigation of “The Consciousness of Self” in his empirical psychology. Already on the empirical level there is a naming of the self that depends upon memory and recollection. First James writes, “the central part of the Self is felt”. And beyond the material and social self we do come to the self of all selves, that welcomes and rejects sensations, is the home of interests and the source of effort and attention. This self is found in


47William James, “The Consciousness of Self”, PPI, p. 298.
the stream of consciousness as a palpitating inward life. The empirical evidence of this self is the indecomposable unity of every pulse of thought and the fact that the perishing thought at the back door of the specious present can recollect and know. Hence there are two elements in personal identity: a passing subjective Thought that knows oneself, and our recognition of it as continuing in time.

Secondly, there is a distinction made by Richard Gale concerning James’s work on memory that is relevant. It is one between thoughts remembered in logical or propositional action and image memory. Propositional memory is the remembering of ‘p’ when ‘p’ is a rigorous ascertaining of truth and this would be important for James. But since James held that any and all truth is always constructed in the twice taken mental actions, image memory is also actively important in the processes of reproductive memory. The latter is the “representation of a former experience of one’s own through an affective or phenomenal re-enactment”. Hence there can be a twice taken construction of feeling as well of concept. In this case the warmth and intimacy would be paramount and could serve to foster interest based selectivity of consciousness. A past feeling of the self is ascribed by a present one and taken to be co-personal with it when it is captured in memory, and possesses the same warmth and intimacy. Moreover, as in the case of the remembered insult, the present excitement and interest may not only match the past but could surpass it. The image would be more vivid, stronger, of greater influence. Gale’s distinction is relevant because the type of experiences addressed by

48 Ibid., pp. 296-299.

49 Ibid., p. 371.

anamnesis are carried in imagery. Conceptual language is simply not adequate to the mysterious depth and fulness of these experiences.

These observations and the explanation of memory in Part II of this paper can help explain just how anamnesis “works” and also hint at its purposes. A definition of anamnesis is an appropriate starting place to show why this is a reasonable assertion. Voegelin begins with a claim supported by any truly radical empiricism: “that experiences of the transcendence of consciousness into the body, the external world, the community, history, and the ground of being are givens in the biography of consciousness and thus antecede the systematic reflection of consciousness”\textsuperscript{51}

What kind of experiences are we talking about in regard to anamnesis. They are experiences that have excited consciousness with an ‘awe” of existence and as such, they already grab the attention and “impel towards reflection”.\textsuperscript{52} Childhood is a fertile period of life for such experiences. James has remarked on this but anyone who has ever had to respond to dozens of “why” questions from a four year old knows this is the case. The mystery that is life becomes part of the biography of consciousness at an early age. This mysteriousness already felt when brought into the specious present, and perhaps joined to new “rumors of transcendence” erupting now and then in everyday existence, will be able to magnify the selected interest of the impelled reflection.

These are a special kind of experience. They are definitely felt. They belong to the category of aesthetic experiences more than anything else. They have been recognized by many

\textsuperscript{51}Anamnesis, p.. 36.

\textsuperscript{52}Ibid.
writers. For example Kant deals with such experiences under the headings of the beautiful and especially, the sublime. They arise in the general realm of Kant’s “ideas of reason”, and thus are provocative experiences of the cosmos, the psyche, and of the divine, indications of a broader and larger reality beyond the one immediately apparent to our senses. Their common theme is wonderful mysteriousness of life, and that there is more to reality than one can perceive or understand. They fill one with wonder and amazement, provoke a questioning search about life in this world. One is the subject of *eros*.

James writes about such experiences at length in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, but he quite definitely brings the fact and data of such experiences into his strictly philosophical work. “He contends that each conscious self is surrounded by an unconscious ‘more’ which in turn forms the margin of a superhuman intelligence with whom the individual self may be coconscious if the threshold of consciousness is sufficiently lowered”.53 So to the degree we plunge into depths of inward being-ness, we do indeed experience another dimension of existence from the sensible, conceivable, or even imaginable. The natural appellation for this mystical region of the psyche is God for those involved in the biblical religions.54

Voegelin gives twenty examples of his own experiences of the mystical grounding of being to give some insight into the data that is awaiting us in our own biographies of consciousness. He writes that their content dealt with excitements arising from “experiences of transcendence in space, time, matter, history, wishful dreams and wishful time”.55 They impose

---

53 Marcus Ford, p. 96.

54 *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96

a sense of a greater meaning to life but do not convey it, only imply it—thus the urgency to search into this meaning. In his *Autobiographical Reflections* Voegelin returns to the example of the tale of the Monk of Heisterbach, and how the impressions of that experience had vividly remained in his consciousness. The monk, deep in thought went away for a hundred years, but it seemed to him like an afternoon. This story led Voegelin to puzzle over time, and muse about making time stand still. Recently a granddaughter of mine was relating an experience of the relativity of time—it takes a long time to get to the vacation site, but a very short time to get home. Why was that? she wondered. Childhood is littered with these type of questions and the feelings which provoke them, because for children life is often quite amazing and unfathomable.

Thus, one can recognize these experiences because everyone has them. But it is also true that one can miss them all together if the compelling need to reflect upon them is ignored. James has made this very clear. As we wrote above, experience itself is defined in terms of personal attention and selected interest. It is ‘what I agree to attend to’. Only those items which I notice shape my mind. So there is also the phenomenon of inattention. James quotes Helmholtz’s law of inattention: “we leave all impressions un-noticed which are valueless to us as signs by which to discriminate things?”.\(^{56}\) These impressions can be shunted off from all relation to the rest of consciousness. In other words there is the fact of acquired inattention. The unfelt stimulus may itself be felt—James gives the example of the sleeper in church who wakes when the sermon ends. In acquired inattention the stimulus at first is disturbing, and the brain had to be strongly excited with something else to ignore it, but eventually it is possible to

---

\(^{56}\) *PP1*, p. 456.
automatically shut off from consciousness certain undesired stimuli\textsuperscript{57}.

In my thesis statement, I made the claim that anamnesis should be looked upon as a necessary and a deliberate exercise, if one is to become aware of, and then systematically explore the meanings of the real experiences of transcendence that impose themselves at will in everyone’s life, especially during the childhood years. The proof of this lies in the phenomenon of acquired inattention. The latter can actually train the brain to avoid certain stimuli. Hence, these experiences of the mystic realm can also be missed, ignored and dropped permanently from consciousness. Anamnesis is a deliberate act of attention; it is a sustained effort to get at larger meanings. The questioning and seeking these particular attended to experiences impel will repeatedly be available for our mental operations. The anamnetic processes don’t stop, rather they bestow the strange combination of both further insight and more mystery to be explored. We become openly attuned to their reality. The choice then, even if it one is only dimly aware of it, is between the attunement that accompanies the radical beginning of philosophizing which are these experiences, or the unconsciousness of them from acquired inattention. The common mysticism of humanity is a potential that can be developed or rejected.

Voegelin writes “a philosopher, it appeared, had to engage in an anamnetic exploration of his own consciousness in order to discover its constitution by his own experiences of reality, if he really wanted to be critically aware of what he was doing”\textsuperscript{58}. James’s work on apperception is appropriately applied to Voegelin’s point in this statement. From the time of childhood until the present, attended-to, thus experienced, reality enters our minds in the mesh that is memory.

\textsuperscript{57}Ibid., p. 457.

\textsuperscript{58}Anamnesis, p. 13.
But later in life our attention becomes apperceptive: there is a reinforcement of ideas and impressions by the pre-existing intent of the mind and a double action ensues. We attend to “words heard”—new cognitions then—shaped by the “premonitory processes irradiating from previous words heard”.

Apperception creates our universe; it is behind the particular focus of our attending excitement, an “ideational preparation” that selects which object will be attended to and then fully perceived. The fact of apperception, as Voegelin has written, is that these experiences, once the subject of systematic reflection, become a further event in consciousness that may lead to ever clearer clarification about the questions they provoke.

This comment introduces the second point in my thesis, and that is concerning the possibility and plausibility of anamnesis as a successful attempt to reach deeper meanings and truth. More than this, James’s work actually demonstrates the practical workings of these exercises. In the continued biography of consciousness the experience of anamnesis itself as deliberate attention in systematic remembrance of past experience is at work in our basic mental operations. It assists us to perceive, conceive, distinguish and remember. James would of course add that the truth and meanings discovered will always be available to us with warmth and intimacy because the experiences are our own. So James has succeeded in demonstrating just how anamnesis can work in philosophizing which is of course Voegelin’s emphasis. However, the same principles would hold for the anamnesis that is integral to simple acts of prayer and mediation in religious probing of life’s mysteries. In both cases the experiential data

59 PP1, p. 450.
60 Ibid., p. 438.
61 Ibid., p. 424.
of past experiences can become new exciting data for reflection.

This is important, because although the experiences of awe and excitement at life itself could not be fully explored cognitively by the child with its incomplete brain development, yet they can be vividly retrieved and hence provoke a comparable excitement in the matured individual. The warmth and intimacy of our personal acquaintance with our own thoughts is both bodily and mental in our present thinking of them—even though we may be doing the work of reflective cognition. But remembrance, i.e., anamnesis, is also involved with the idea of myself having the same idea formerly, connected to my sense of myself in the present, in such a way as to give the warmth and intimacy. This active relationship to ourselves that doesn’t close, gives the object of our thought its characteristic quality of reality. It is the peculiar trait behind the impressiveness of the experiences of memory.

Furthermore, while James has written that the laws of stimulation and of association may be important to developing our attention to a matter, he also stresses the fact that the effort to attend is important. This is an additional insight into how the results of anamnesis are practically attained. As a deliberate attempt at attuned remembrance it can help “deepen and prolong the stay in consciousness of innumerable ideas which else would fade more quickly away.”

Moreover, the delay of losing a thought might be critical, because there may be an association in the mesh that is memory that will more fruitfully carry a thought further. The whole drama of voluntary life, he adds, hinges on the amount of attention, slightly more or less, which motor ideas receive. This is certainly true of memories retained from childhood. In sum, the will to pay attention to them will create the selective interest that gives the intelligible perspective to the

---

The final point to be made is my thesis statement that practice of anamnesis purifies. By this I mean that it creates the love and desire to know and participate in a reality that exists beyond our apparent sense impressions of it. In his book *Anamnesis*, Voegelin demonstrates this purification, a equivalent experience of the “turning around” of metonia in Christian practices of initiation into its faith, in terms of “systematic reflection”. However, in other parts of his writings he does also point to a similar role played by the “philosopher’s myth”. In both cases, the systematization or the myth which conveys the meaning of transcendent experience in a symbolic language, the statement of the purifying effect of such work is of the same definition. Love, erotic seeking for the marvels glimpsed of greater reality is initiated. This love takes the form of anamnestic searching. As one writer puts it, “the philosopher [as conceived by Plato] is an ardent Lover . . . all forgetfulness is overcome . . . , and the Soul is made perfectly pure, and is redeemed from the flesh for ever”. This happens because the whole person becomes completely involved in the concentrated effort of the search for the wisdom and beauty intimated in the excitement from the experience.

In the philosophical rumination that is the systematic reflection on these experiences, a further event in consciousness occurs, which with anamnestic attention grows in its warmth and intimacy for a thinker. Two points made be made in regard to this further event in

63 For example, in his Aquinas lectures on “The Beginning and the Beyond”.

64 J.A. Stewart, *The Myths of Plato*, p. 303. The notion of the philosopher’s myth also introduces the topic of the role of the classic: all the symbolic and language records in history that record previous anamnestic exercises with the paradigmatic insights into the reality of God and psyche they contain. The classic provides plenitude of association cues for the meditation. In addition there is the role of religious ritual which also serves the project of anamnesis. This is another topic that cannot be addressed in this paper.
consciousness. First, as we wrote in Part two, the thoughts in this reflection are both subjective and objective, i.e. our own thoughts thus so forcefully impressive for us, and also in our experience of them both objective and data for further reflection. Because they are brought into the specious present and thus available for more associative contexts and creative new cognitive experiences, deeper insights into “our inner doings” are open to us even as the original experiences become more transparent for the reality they symbolize. All of this is present in our thoughts and hence, one can look at anamnesis as purifying in the sense it is an “un-peeling” of the accretions in the reason’s own thoughts searching for its ground dependent on the primordial “Word” that began this revealing process in us.

Secondly, there is a realization for that person that the inward depths, call it the soul, is revealed as a place of tension between temporal being in an encounter with the being beyond all temporality. This too can be looked upon as purifying. Voegelin writes that in this further experience coming upon reflection there is also an experience of a loving and hopeful urge toward the divine eternity “understood” as a call, a grace, a well springing forth faith. So Voegelin describes the experienced anamnetic process as “an ordering of self or the soul permitting itself to be ordered by its loving opening to the irruption of eternal being”

But as James has written in regard to acquired inattention, Voegelin also adds, the enduring order supported by the faith born of this purification/turning around brought on by anamnesis, is not a possession, but an enduring flow of tension itself. Anytime, he writes, it “can collapse through sloth or the self-closing of the soul”. And just to reiterate a point

---

65 Anamnesis, p. 126.

66 Ibid.
made previously, the process is at its core an exercise in self-knowledge. Human nature is experienced as the “openness of the questioning knowledge and the knowing question about the ground. Through this openness, beyond all contents, images, and models, order flows from the ground of being into [our] being”\textsuperscript{67}. This is to define it as one ever being formed dynamically in a faith that is continuously growing in hope and love built upon the foundation of remembrance. Anamnesis is always a beginning.

\textsuperscript{67}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 86.