

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF WILLIAM JAMES AS A CONTEXT FOR ASTROLOGY

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Originally delivered as a lecture at the Sophia Centre Conference of 2010

Published in: Nicholas Campion and Liz Greene (eds.), *Astrologies: Plurality and Diversity. Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Sophia Centre Conference, 2010* (Ceredigion: Sophia Centre Press, 2011) pp. 63 – 82.

Page numbers from the published version are shown in square brackets.

Grateful thanks to Jenn Zahrt for her editorial work on this paper.

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ABSTRACT: According to William James reality is “if not irrational, then at least non-rational in its constitution”.<sup>1</sup> What he meant can be illustrated by a marginal note he added to a lecture: “All ‘classic’, ‘clean’, cut and dried, ‘noble’, ‘fixed’, ‘eternal’ *Weltanschauungen* [worldviews] seem to me to violate the character with which life concretely comes and the expression which it bears, of being, or at least involving a muddle and a struggle, with an ‘ever not quite’ to all our formulas, and novelty and possibility forever leaking in”.<sup>2</sup> This paper will consider reason, reality, and the disjunction alleged by James to exist between them. Some key elements of James’s thought—such as pluralism, radical empiricism and pragmatism—will be touched on, together with parallels from other thinkers. After noting that astrology is often dismissed as lacking rationality,<sup>3</sup> consideration will be given to James’s non-rational reality as a context for the understanding and practice of astrology.

Astrology is commonly characterised as having been invalidated for all time—as when, for instance, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in defining the noun, notes: ‘By 1700 astrology had lost intellectual credibility in the West, but continued to have popular appeal’.<sup>4</sup> This paper is informed [64] by the idea that reports of astrology’s invalidation rest upon a set of questionable philosophical assumptions. This is a theme that has recently been developed by Willis and Curry, amongst others.<sup>5</sup> Since the theme is too large to develop fully here, this talk will confine itself to surveying some elements of William James’s philosophy which—I will suggest—throw into relief the assumptions generally made by critics of astrology, and sketch an approach that could be more congenial to an understanding of the subject. My hope is that locating the discussion in the work of one philosopher will make it relatively straightforward for subsequent commentators to critique

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<sup>1</sup> William James, ‘Lecture V: The Compounding of Consciousness’ in *A Pluralistic Universe* in William James, *William James: Writings 1902–10: The Varieties of Religious Experience; Pragmatism; A Pluralistic Universe; The Meaning of Truth; Some Problems of Philosophy; Essays*, Ed. Bruce Kuklick, (New York: Library of America, 1988), [Hereafter James, ‘Lecture V’] p. 726.

<sup>2</sup> William James, *Manuscript Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), [Hereafter James, *Manuscript Lectures*], p. 326.

<sup>3</sup> For example in Edward W. James’ essay ‘On Dismissing Astrology and Other Irrationalities’ in Patrick Grim, ed., *Philosophy of Science and the Occult*, 2nd ed., (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), [Hereafter James, ‘On Dismissing Astrology’], pp. 28–36.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Astrology (noun)’ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, rev. ed., Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Roy Willis and Patrick Curry, *Astrology, Science and Culture: Pulling Down the Moon* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

the position developed here. It may be worth emphasising at the start that no attempt is made, in what follows, to resolve or prove anything once and for all. The aim is simply to question what are often taken to be certainties, and to discuss a precedent in the Western philosophical tradition for doing so.

#### RATIONALITY V. ASTROLOGY

As an expedient to introduce the theme that will be developed here, it can be noted that the invalidation of astrology is frequently defined in terms of it lacking rationality, or—which amounts to much the same—being built upon reasoning errors. For example:

It is only when we encounter one piece of bogus reasoning after another, as we do with astrology, that we have a clear case of irrationality.<sup>6</sup>

[Belief in astrology is a] massive rejection of rationality stemming from ignorance of the facts...<sup>7</sup>

[C]ould astrology deliver the necessary goods? For twenty-five years we have tried to find out... we have found nothing that could not be explained by reasoning errors and other artifacts.<sup>8</sup> [65]

Astrology, for instance, is but the largest component of larger phenomenon—the growing receptivity to irrational spiritual doctrines and practices...<sup>9</sup>

William James suggested that reality is ‘if not irrational, then at least non-rational in its constitution’, and it is the vista opened up by this statement which is the focus of this talk, in particular for the perspective it lends to evaluations of astrology.<sup>10</sup> What James meant can be illustrated by a marginal note he added to a lecture:

All ‘classic’, ‘clean’, cut and dried, ‘noble’, ‘fixed’, ‘eternal’ *Weltanschauungen* [worldviews] seem to me to violate the character with which life concretely comes and the expression which it bears, of being, or at least involving a muddle and a struggle, with an ‘ever not quite’ to all our formulas, and novelty and possibility forever leaking in.<sup>11</sup>

James does not discuss astrology, nor show any sympathy towards it—to the best of my knowledge he directly mentions the subject only once, and then dismissively.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the case to be developed here is that certain elements of James’s thought provide an environment congenial to an understanding of astrology as a subject which, whilst it cannot be contained and explained within the framework of ‘scientific rationality’, is not invalidated thereby.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup> James, ‘On Dismissing Astrology’, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Roger B. Culver and Philip A. Ianna, *Astrology: True or False? A Scientific Evaluation* (Buffalo NY: Prometheus Books, 1988), p. 207.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Dean et al., quoted in Garry Phillipson, *Astrology in the Year Zero* (London: Flare, 2000), [Hereafter Phillipson, *Astrology in the Year Zero*], p. 153.

<sup>9</sup> Robert P. Crease, ‘Top Scientists Must Fight Astrology or All of Us Will Face the Consequences’, *The Scientist* 3, no. 5 (1989): p. 9. <http://www.the-scientist.com/article/display/9209/> [Accessed 24 October 2010].

<sup>10</sup> James, ‘Lecture V’, p. 726.

<sup>11</sup> James, *Manuscript Lectures*, p. 326.

<sup>12</sup> ‘...alchemy, magic, astrology, imposed on every one’s belief...’ William James, ‘Philosophy and its Critics’, ch.1 in *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1911), in James, *William James: Writings 1902–10*, p. 993.

<sup>13</sup> For an example of the phrase ‘scientific rationality’, the argument that it distinguishes science from pseudosciences such as astrology, together with reflection on the difficulty of reaching a complete and satisfactory definition of it, see: Alan Sokal, *Beyond the Hoax: Science, Philosophy and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), particularly p. 180.

A thorough examination of James's views on rationality and non-rationality will not be undertaken here. In the first place there is not sufficient time—particularly if we were to [66] consider James's assertion that 'rationality has at least four dimensions, intellectual, aesthetical, moral and practical'.<sup>14</sup> In the second place, it is possible to get a good general idea of what is understood by 'rationality' here from James's statements that 'the subconscious and non-rational... hold primacy in the religious realm'; and that '[i]ntellectually, the world of mechanical materialism is the most rational, for we subject its events to mathematical calculation'.<sup>15</sup> In the third place, a detailed account of James's views on rationality and non-rationality can already be found in an essay by Michel Weber.<sup>16</sup>

The aim of the present talk is, then, relatively modest: to note some of the major elements of James's thought—particularly concerning matters ontological and epistemological—that can be applied to the consideration of astrology. This is undertaken, not with any aspiration to establish or prove any particular view within the compass of the talk, but rather with the hope of introducing a philosophical context which may facilitate future discussion about, and evaluation of, astrology.

#### MATERIALISTIC AND SPIRITUALISTIC PHILOSOPHIES

In identifying the overarching worldviews that can be held, James distinguishes between *materialistic* and *spiritualistic* philosophies.<sup>17</sup> The former, he writes, defines the world 'so as to leave man's soul upon it as a sort of outside passenger or alien, while the latter insists that the intimate and human must surround and underlie the brutal.'<sup>18</sup> As James uses the term here, 'spiritualism' is used 'merely as the opposite of materialism'. In other words there is, despite modern usage, no reference to clairvoyance. James then proceeds to [67] distinguish 'two very distinct types or stages in spiritualistic philosophy':<sup>19</sup>

*Dualistic theism*, which depicts 'God and his creation as entities distinct from each other, [and so] still leaves the human subject outside the deepest reality in the universe'.<sup>20</sup> Under this view, '[God's] action can affect us, but he can never be affected by our reaction.'<sup>21</sup>

*Monistic pantheism*, by contrast, is 'the vision of God as the indwelling divine rather than the external creator, and of human life as part and parcel of that deep reality.'<sup>22</sup> This is the position that James favours.

An additional pair of terms that James coined, and which overlap to a considerable extent with dualistic theism/monistic pantheism, are:

- Universalistic (or Refined) Supernaturalism
- Piecemeal (or Crass) Supernaturalism

<sup>14</sup> William James, 'Lecture III: Hegel and His Method', in *Pluralistic Universe*, [Hereafter James, *Pluralistic Universe*], p. 680.

<sup>15</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Penguin, 1985 [1902]), [Hereafter James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*], p. 74; James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 680.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Weber, 'James's non-rationality and its religious extremum in the light of the concept of pure experience', in Jeremy Carrette, ed., *William James and the Varieties of Religious Experience—A Centenary Celebration* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 203–20.

<sup>17</sup> At [for example James](#), *Pluralistic Universe*, p. 640.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 641.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 642.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 644.

As James describes it, for the universalistic supernaturalist, 'the world of the ideal has no efficient causality, and never bursts into the world of phenomena at particular points.'<sup>23</sup> Whereas the piecemeal supernaturalist

admits miracles and providential leadings, and finds no intellectual difficulty in mixing the ideal and the real worlds together by interpolating influences from the ideal region among the forces that causally determine the real world's details.<sup>24</sup>

James numbers himself amongst the ranks of the piecemeal supernaturalists. [68]

#### DIVINATION AND SCIENCE

At this point it may appear that James's 'piecemeal supernaturalism' would naturally map onto a view of astrology as divination; and that his 'universalistic supernaturalism' would ally itself with a view of astrology as science. This is based on the discussion of these matters found in works such as those of Geoffrey Cornelius, who writes that 'the main body of astrology's practice... is properly to be understood as a form of divination. It is divination despite all appearances of objectivity and natural law.'<sup>25</sup>

To say of astrology that it is divination, or any particular type of thing *sub specie aeternitatis* is, however, just what Liz Greene has recently argued against:

Astrology cannot be explained by any single theoretical framework, but must be viewed within a specific religious, philosophical, social and political background and, equally importantly, from the perspective of individual practitioners working within a particular milieu.<sup>26</sup>

It will be argued in what follows that elements of James's philosophy provide a way of thinking within which the epistemological and ontological dilemmas posed by astrology can be accommodated and—up to a point—made sense of, and that part of this process involves an explication of how it is that the subject can take a plurality of forms.

#### PRAGMATISM

For James, experience rather than concepts should be the arbiter of truth. This is the essence of his pragmatic approach:

There can *be* no difference anywhere that doesn't *make* a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in [69] conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere and somewhen.<sup>27</sup>

The need for the pragmatic approach follows, for James, from the relativism he illustrated on more than one occasion with analogies concerning household pets. James wrote:

I firmly disbelieve, myself, that our human experience is the highest form of experience extant in the universe. I believe rather that we stand in much the same relation to the whole

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<sup>23</sup> James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 521.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 520–21. For an extended discussion, see: T. L. S. Sprigge, 'Refined and Crass Supernaturalism', in Michael McGhee, ed., *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1992), pp. 105–25.

<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology*, 2nd ed., (Bournemouth: Wessex Astrologer, 2003), p. xxii.

<sup>26</sup> Liz Greene, 'Is Astrology a Divinatory System?', *Culture and Cosmos* 12, no.1 (Spring/Summer 2008): p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> William James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, ed. Giles Gunn, (London: Penguin, 2000), [Hereafter James, *Pragmatism*], p. 27. Emphasis in the original.

of the universe as our canine and feline pets do to the whole of human life. They inhabit our drawing-rooms and libraries. They take part in scenes of whose significance they have no inkling. They are merely tangent to curves of history the beginnings and ends and forms of which pass wholly beyond their ken. So we are tangent to the wider life of things.<sup>28</sup>

In another work he put it this way:

That the world of physics is probably not absolute, all the converging multitude of arguments that make in favour of idealism tend to prove; and that our whole physical life may lie soaking in a spiritual atmosphere, a dimension of being that we at present have no organ of apprehending, is vividly suggested to us by the analogy of the life of our domestic animals. Our dogs, for example, are in our human life but not of it. They witness hourly the outward body of events whose inner meanings cannot, by any possible operation, be revealed to their intelligence, — events in which they themselves often play the cardinal part.<sup>29</sup>

The suggestion in these passages is that it may not in fact be rational to believe the human mind central, privy to everything there is to know about the world. As to what *is* rational, James argued that rationality is to some extent a *feeling*, and therefore intrinsically perspectival.<sup>30</sup> In consequence, therefore, ‘the ultimate philosophy... must not be too strait-laced in form, must not in all its parts divide heresy from orthodoxy by too sharp a line’.<sup>31</sup> [70]

This reintroduces a theme referred to, with a quotation from James, at the beginning of this talk. In a fuller version of that quotation, James states that:

For my own part, I have finally found myself compelled to give up the logic, fairly, squarely, and irrevocably. [...] Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it... I prefer bluntly to call reality if not irrational then at least non-rational in its constitution, — and by reality here I mean reality where things *happen*, all temporal reality without exception.<sup>32</sup>

As part of his critique of the rational, conceptual, mind, James denied the ultimate reality of familiar mind-created dualities such as ‘thoughts and things’, ‘spirit and matter’, ‘soul and body’ and advocated an understanding in terms of what he called ‘pure experience’. He wrote that:

My thesis is that if we start with the supposition that there is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff ‘pure experience’, then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the most cogent way to encapsulate the significance of James’s ‘pure experience’ is to say that it is opposed to Cartesian dualism. This is significant for astrology because an absolute split between mind and matter poses the problem of how there could be any sort of meaningful relationship between the inner life of an individual and the planets. Under a dualistic view, some sort of ‘influence’ would be needed — as when the philosopher Kanitscheider suggested that astrology could only be credible if there was evidence of ‘F-Rays’ to mediate astrological influence:

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<sup>28</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, p. 131.

<sup>29</sup> William James, *The Will to Believe* (in James, *Pragmatism*), p. 237.

<sup>30</sup> See, in particular, ‘The Sentiment of Rationality’ in *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 539.

<sup>32</sup> James, *Pluralistic Universe*, p. 725–26.

<sup>33</sup> William James, ‘Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?’, in James, *William James: Writings 1902–10*, pp. 1141–42.

For the sake of brevity, let us introduce the term 'F-ray' for a supposed type of stellar influence (F for fate determinant) of unknown ontological status, whether physical or spiritual. [...] [71]

If F-rays are somehow phenomena that exist in space-time, then distance must somehow be pertinent in the judging the influence of individual stellar bodies. Every known macroscopic force varies with the inverse square of distance, and in the case of F-rays the emitter and receiver are spatiotemporal objects; it is therefore all the more plausible that such interactions should obey the laws of space-time.<sup>34</sup>

Despite some attempts to identify a causal mechanism for astrology—found, for instance, in some works of the astronomer Percy Seymour—astrology has generally failed to produce convincing candidates for the role of 'F-rays'.<sup>35</sup> Rather than attempting to find a viable explanation within Newtonian physics, it seems natural to see James's 'pure experience' as having more affinity with views found in quantum physics. This is not the place for a long discussion of the relevance of developments in modern physics to astrology.<sup>36</sup> For the purpose presently in hand, it will suffice to note the response of the physicist Max Planck (1858–1947) who, on being asked if he thought consciousness could be explained in terms of matter and its laws, replied, 'Consciousness I regard as fundamental. I regard matter as derivative from consciousness. We cannot get behind consciousness. Everything that we talk about, everything that we regard as existing postulates consciousness.'<sup>37</sup>

This view—which is, or at least is close to, panpsychism—would have sat well with James, whose panpsychist leanings can be seen in his warm and sympathetic appraisal of the works of the [72] psychologist and animist mystic Gustav Fechner (1801–1887):<sup>38</sup>

The vaster orders of mind go with the vaster orders of body. The entire earth on which we live must have, according to Fechner, its own collective consciousness. So must each sun, moon, and planet; so must the whole solar system have its own wider consciousness, in which the consciousness of our earth plays one part. So has the entire starry system as such its consciousness; and if that starry system be not the sum of all that is, materially considered, then that whole system, along with whatever else may be, is the body of that absolutely totalized consciousness of the universe to which men give the name of God.<sup>39</sup>

These remarks will have reached many twentieth century students of the occult via the lengthy citation of them in the international best-seller *Tertium Organum* by P. D. Ouspensky (1878–1947).<sup>40</sup>

If it is true, however, that consciousness informs everything—and particularly if this consciousness is somehow synonymous with what is often thought of as 'God'—this raises as many questions as it answers. For astrology, an obvious question is: If there is already a connection between the astrologer's mind and the entire world, why would they need to refer to astrological charts at all? In fact the question of how astrology could allow anyone to know

<sup>34</sup> Bernulf Kanitscheider, 'A Philosopher Looks at Astrology', *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 16, no. 3 (1991): pp. 261–62. For an argument from an astrologer to the effect that astrology works "within the accepted laws of space/time physics" (and not through synchronicity), see Mike Harding, *Hymns to the Ancient Gods* (London: Arkana, 1992), p. 35.

<sup>35</sup> In particular, Percy Seymour, *The Scientific Basis of Astrology* (London: Quantum, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> More on the subject can be found in: Garry Phillipson, 'Modern Science, Epistemology and Astrology', in *Correlation (Astrological Association Journal of Research in Astrology)* 23, no. 2 (2006): pp. 4–23.

<sup>37</sup> J. W. N. Sullivan, 'Interview with Max Planck', *Observer*, 25 January 1931. Cited in C. E. M. Joad, *Philosophical Aspects of Modern Science* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1932), p. 16.

<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of James's panpsychism, see: David Skrbina, *Panpsychism in the West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 145–49 and David C. Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), [Hereafter Lamberth, *James and the Metaphysics of Experience*], pp. 185–96.

<sup>39</sup> James, *Pluralistic Universe*, p. 699.

<sup>40</sup> P. D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970 [1922]), pp. 188–91. In describing the book as an 'international best-seller' I follow: Jacob Needleman, 'Ouspensky' in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 912.

anything may seem to have been exchanged for the question of why the astrologer (or anyone whatsoever) does not know everything in the normal course of things, without recourse to the technical apparatus of horoscopic charts and so forth. This issue may be illumined somewhat by reference to James's studies of clairvoyant phenomena. [73]

#### A 'PSYCHICAL RESEARCHER'

William James was interested in clairvoyant phenomena and psychical research for much of his life. This interest can be dated back at least as far as 1869, when he reviewed a book on the subject—albeit without great enthusiasm.<sup>41</sup> In 1885 he began visiting a clairvoyant by the name of Mrs Piper, who he at length concluded had 'supernormal powers'.<sup>42</sup> And he was involved from the start in the *American Society for Psychical Research*, founded in 1885.<sup>43</sup> The measured interest that James brought to the subject is illustrated by an episode that occurred in 1906, when his wife conveyed a clairvoyantly received message to Henry James (the novelist and William's brother, 1843–1916). The message purported to be from their mother, who at that point had been dead for 24 years. Henry wrote that it contained

an allusion to a matter known (so personal is it to myself) to no other individual in the world but *me*—not *possibly* either to the medium or to my sister-in-law, and an allusion so pertinent and *initiated* and tender and helpful, and yet so unhelped by any actual earthly knowledge on any one's part, that it quite astounds as well as deeply touches me.<sup>44</sup>

William's thoughts on the matter can be found in his response to Henry:

The episode of the message so exactly hitting your mental condition is very queer. There is something back there that shows that minds communicate, even those of the dead with those of the living, but the costume, so to speak, and accessories of fact, are all symbolic and due to the medium's stock of automatisms—what it all means I don't know but it means at any rate that the world that our 'normal' consciousness makes use of is only a fraction of the whole world in which we have our being.<sup>45</sup> [74]

Three years later—in 1909, the year before his death—James characterised himself as 'neither a convinced believer in parasitic demons, nor a spiritist, nor a scientist, but still... a psychical researcher waiting for more facts before concluding.'<sup>46</sup> He noted that, 'at times I have been tempted to believe that the Creator has eternally intended this department of nature to remain *baffling*, to prompt our curiosities and hopes and suspicions all in equal measure'.<sup>47</sup> It may be as well, at this point, to be clear that it is not my intention to conflate astrology and 'psychical' phenomena, but only to suggest that James's thought about the latter may shed light on the former as regards two particulars:

- That the interaction typically involves a mediating figure who plays midwife to the communication whilst inevitably colouring and shaping it thereby

<sup>41</sup> See: Robert D. Richardson, *William James in the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (New York: Mariner, 2007), [Hereafter Richardson, *William James in the Maelstrom*], pp. 99–100.

<sup>42</sup> William James, *Essays in Psychical Research* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 80–81.

<sup>43</sup> See Richardson, *William James in the Maelstrom*, p. 259.

<sup>44</sup> *Henry James Letters Vol. 4 1895–1916*, ed. Leon Edel, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 396–97.

<sup>45</sup> *The Correspondence of William James Vol. 3*, Elizabeth Berkeley, John J. McDermott, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, eds., (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1994), p. 310. For discussion of this episode, see Richardson, *William James in the Maelstrom*, pp. 475–76.

<sup>46</sup> William James, 'The Confidences of a "Psychical Researcher"', in *William James: Writings 1902–10*, [Hereafter James, 'Psychical Researcher'], p. 1263.

<sup>47</sup> James, 'Psychical Researcher', p. 1250.

- The suggestion that the phenomena may be seen as elusive, or chimerical, and that this may in some sense be a 'design feature'.

Perhaps the issue here was pointed toward by Max Planck, when he remarked that '[s]cience cannot solve the ultimate mystery in nature. And it is because in the last analysis we ourselves are part of the mystery we try to solve.'<sup>48</sup> This certainly seems to be a good fit with James's views, as when for instance he wrote:

Out of my experience, such as it is (and it is limited enough) one fixed conclusion dogmatically emerges, and that is this, that we with our lives are like islands in the sea, or like trees in the forest. The maple and the pine may whisper to each other with their leaves, and Conanicut and Newport hear each other's fog-horns. But the trees also commingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the islands also hang together through the ocean's bottom. Just so there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our [75] individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother-sea or reservoir. Our 'normal' consciousness is circumscribed for adaptation to our external earthly environment, but the fence is weak in spots, and fitful influences from beyond leak in, showing the otherwise unverifiable common connection.<sup>49</sup>

This passage is quoted approvingly by the PSI researcher Dean Radin, who remarks that 'James's cosmic consciousness metaphor has reverberated throughout the ages, ranging from ancient concepts like the Akashic record of Hindu mysticism, to psychiatrist Carl Jung's collective unconscious, to biologist Rupert Sheldrake's morphogenetic fields.'<sup>50</sup> Such views—wherein the detail of individual lives forms part of a bigger picture—have often been invoked as a context for astrology, as when Howard Sasportas cited a statement attributed to Einstein:

A human being is part of the whole, called by us 'Universe', a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us...<sup>51</sup>

As Sasportas went on to say, the significant thing here is that 'we... have to put the ego in its proper relation to the Higher Self'.<sup>52</sup>

The search and struggle to put his ego into a proper relation to a 'Higher Self' is, it is probably fair to say, *the* [76] central theme of James's life. He spoke of the difference that could be made by what he called a 'religious' attitude, writing that '[t]he universe is no longer a mere *It* to us, but a *Thou*... and any relation that may be possible from person to person might be possible here.'<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Max Planck, *Where is Science Going?*, trans. James Murphy, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1932), p. 217.

<sup>49</sup> James, 'Psychical Researcher', pp. 1263–64.

<sup>50</sup> Dean Radin, *Entangled Minds: Extrasensory Experiences in a Quantum Reality* (New York: Pocket/Simon & Schuster, 2006), p. 234.

<sup>51</sup> Albert Einstein quoted in: Howard Sasportas, 'The Quest for the Sublime', in Liz Greene and Howard Sasportas, *Dynamics of the Unconscious – Seminars in Psychological Astrology* (London: Arkana, 1988), [Hereafter Sasportas, 'The Quest for the Sublime'], p. 171. As his source, Sasportas cites: Peter Russell, *The Awakening Earth* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 129. The exact provenance of the quotation is disputed. It was quoted as presented here in the *New York Times* of 29 March 1972, where it was attributed to a letter sent by Einstein on 4 March 1950; however *The New Quotable Einstein* by Alice Calaprice (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 206 reproduces a different version of the letter, dated to 12 February 1950. The substance of the quotation as it appears here remains, however, unaltered.

<sup>52</sup> Sasportas, 'The Quest for the Sublime', p. 175.

<sup>53</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, p. 216.

## GOD, SIGNS AND GAMES

It may seem somewhat incongruous, given James's avowed pantheism and the apophatic orientation of much of his work, to find him writing of a finite God, a *thou*.<sup>54</sup> I believe the point for James, here, is not however to attempt to define God—his own philosophy bars him from the attempt—but to submit what he sees as the most pragmatically useful way of thinking about God. And the payload of the finite God is that

my powers, such as they are, are not irrelevant to [the universal essence], but pertinent, that it speaks to them and will in some way recognise their reply, that I can be a match for it if I will, and not a footless waif...<sup>55</sup>

This can be seen as one implication of James's analogy of islands that meet under the sea, and indeed as 'pure experience'. Although the 'universal essence' is beyond our conception, the apparent individual is not ultimately separate from it, and therefore interaction is possible. There are a number of parallels that could be pursued here. For instance, the idea is found in the Upanishads that Brahman has two aspects: saguna Brahman (Brahman with qualities), and nirguna Brahman (Brahman without qualities). Hence, the *Ramatapinya Upanishad* states: 'Brahman is pure consciousness, without parts, without form. In order to help the seeker in his efforts to surrender, symbols and qualities are added to Brahman.'<sup>56</sup> This is a view which can be seen [77] when, for instance, the Indian sage Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), said, 'God assumes any form imagined by the devotee through repeated thinking in prolonged meditation.'<sup>57</sup>

This need to play an active part in characterising the transcendental can also be found in Plato, when Socrates remarks that:

The first and finest line of investigation, which as intelligent people we must acknowledge, is this, that we admit that we know nothing about the gods themselves or about the names they call themselves... [and] we hope the gods are pleased by the names we give them, since we know no others.<sup>58</sup>

In somewhat similar vein, James approvingly quotes his friend Myers's view of prayer:

If we then ask to *whom* we pray, the answer (strangely enough) must be that *that* does not much matter. The prayer is not indeed a purely subjective thing... but we do not know enough of what takes place in the spiritual world to know how the prayer operates;— who is cognizant of it, or through what channel the grace is given.<sup>59</sup>

It would surely not be helpful, in this paper, to conflate astrology with prayer, any more than with psychic phenomena. What I suggest here is that there may be *something* in common between

<sup>54</sup> For more on James's thought concerning a finite God, see: Lamberth, *James and the Metaphysics of Experience*, pp. 196–202.

<sup>55</sup> William James, *The Psychology of Belief* in William James, *William James: Writings 1878–1899* (New York: Library of America, 1992), pp. 1053.

<sup>56</sup> *Ramatapinya Upanishad*, quoted in 'Saguna Brahman', in Ingrid Fischer-Schreiber, Franz-Karl Ehrhard, Kurt Friedrichs & Michael S. Diener, *Rider Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion*, trans. Michael H Kohn, Karen Ready, and Werner Wunsche, (London: Rider, 1989), p. 294.

<sup>57</sup> David Godman, *Be As you Are: The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi* (London: Arkana, 1985), p. 205.

<sup>58</sup> Plato, *Cratylus* 400d: this translation by C. D. C. Reeve in John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), p. 119.

<sup>59</sup> James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 467. And see the discussion of this passage at: G. William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press: 1997), p. 326f.

prayer (as it appears in Myers's account) and astrological work. The commonality seems to exist in the need for an element of creative engagement – as, for instance, when Nick Campion wrote that:

Astrology is like a game of chess with an invisible partner. We set out the board and the rules, make a move, and then [78] find that the pieces are moving themselves, as if by an invisible hand.<sup>60</sup>

It can be noted that, in order to locate Campion's analogy entirely with the present discussion, it would be necessary to further specify that the rules of the game are themselves devised, to some extent at least, as part of the game. From this perspective, the involvement of the individual in characterising the gods, or forces, of astrology makes it inevitable that astrology should take a broad plurality of forms.

#### THE RIGHT TO BELIEVE

It was a major concern of James's to exhort his readers, and indeed himself, to engage with life. He argued that we have – as he put it – a 'right to believe' and insisted that 'evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we [meet] the hypothesis half-way.'<sup>61</sup> He encapsulated his argument by saying, '[i]f I refuse to bale out a boat because I am in doubt whether my efforts will keep her afloat, I am really helping to sink her.'<sup>62</sup>

If this is applied to engagement with astrology, I think it will be clear that it tends in the opposite direction to that advocated by critics of astrology such as Dean et al when they say that we should '[b]e careful because pitfalls are everywhere' and that the possibility of seeing correspondences where none exist explains 'why researchers have to be so careful. They cannot afford to be misled.'<sup>63</sup> Or, indeed, Richard Dawkins when he writes that belief in 'astrology, paranormalism and alien visitations' stems from 'a normal and, from many points of view, desirable credulity in children which, unless we are careful, can spill over into adulthood, with unfortunate results.'<sup>64</sup>

In words which could have been written specifically about the popular work of Dawkins, James says that he is [79] worried for the 'thousands of innocent magazine readers [who] lie paralyzed and terrified in the network of shallow negations which the leaders of opinion have thrown over their souls.'<sup>65</sup>

James's conclusion on the matter is this:

I... cannot see my way to accepting the agnostic rules for truth-seeking, or wilfully agree to keep my willing nature out of the game. I cannot do so for this plain reason, that *a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.*<sup>66</sup>

In conclusion, it has been argued that James challenges many of the assumptions most inimical to astrology, and that he articulates a worldview which can help make sense of astrologers' work and experience, as situated on a shoreline where distinctions between individual and universe blur. As already stated, none of the discussion here *proves* astrology, nor has it aimed to. What such reflections may eventually serve to establish, however, is the viability of a different worldview to the rational-scientific one that is generally assumed by astrology's critics. In this view, the

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<sup>60</sup> Nicholas Campion, 'Mythical Moments in the Rectification of History', in Noel Tyl, ed., *Astrology Looks at History* (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1995), p. 47.

<sup>61</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, p. 216.

<sup>62</sup> James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 538.

<sup>63</sup> Dean et al., quoted in Phillipson, *Astrology in the Year Zero*, p. 135.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 138.

<sup>65</sup> James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 538.

<sup>66</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, p. 216. Original emphasis.

uncertainty, doubts and lack of overwhelming proof of astrology within a scientific framework need not point to the subject's invalidity. Rather, these qualities may be entirely fitting for a subject that aspires to hold a mirror up to life. For, as James put it:

If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it *feels* like a real fight—as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem; and first of all to redeem our own hearts from atheisms and fears. For such a wild, half-saved universe our nature is adapted.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 502.

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