

How to Understand James's Absolute Breaches of Thoughts

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Abstract

William James's idea that "the breaches between such thoughts are the most absolute breaches in nature" has aroused various discussions and caused difficulty to understand it. This paper aims to provide a more thoroughgoing account for this idea by deeply explore its connotations. In his theory of The Stream of Thought, he divides the stream of thought into substantive parts and transitive parts. The former, substantive parts, usually contain knowledge principles and vivid sensory experiences, and mostly are expressed by our words. The latter, transitive parts, on the other hand, are the dynamic connections between thoughts, difficult to grasp directly, carrying thought relations, and having unique tendencies and forms. By doing so, James emphasized the personal nature of thoughts, but he never cuts off the possibility of interpersonal understanding. Based on this, this article further divides the content of thoughts into "inside" and "outside" parts to understand James's idea appropriately and points out that we can narrow the breaches between thoughts through imagination and language communication. Imagination helps us empathize with others' inside thoughts, and language, as a communication tool, enables the sharing of outside thoughts. Although James emphasized the complexity of the thought process and the significance of individual subjective activities, making it difficult to fully understand others' thoughts, the similar interests, concerns, communication tools among humans still provide possibilities for mutual understanding.

Keywords: William James, absolute breaches of thoughts, substantive parts, transitive parts, inside parts, outside parts

William James's idea that "the breaches between such thoughts are the most absolute breaches in nature" (James, W., 1981, p. 221) has been discussed for many times, and one associated outcome that complete insulation of person's thoughts remains one of the most contentious issues in the studying of James's philosophy. Many scholars argues that James built a strong wall between people so that we cannot understand each other. In fact, considering the whole works of James, I am certainly sure that James did not deny the possibility that we can understand each other. Thus, in this article, my aim is to present a more thoroughgoing account for James's idea about the thought breach. I will divide my demonstration into three parts. The first section presents the whole point about the breaches of thoughts within the context of the stream of thought. In the second section, I plan to show the detailed analysis of the stream of thought to pave the way to the last section. In the last part, I offer an appropriate way to understand the idea of breaches of thoughts and make James's idea clear.

1. Absolute Breaches of Thoughts Within the Context of the Stream of Thought

In order to figure out the real meaning of an idea, the best strategy is to discuss it in its original context. The first time that James put forward the viewpoint that the breach which between two persons' thoughts is the most absolute one in nature was in the stream of thought in *The principles of psychology volume I*. In that chapter, James proffered five important characteristics of thoughts and the first one is that "every thought tends to be part of a personal consciousness" (James, W., 1981, p. 220). Instead of taking simple sensation as the basic elements of our ideas or concepts, James claimed that the first psychological fact is that "thinking goes on". And as a complement, James said that within each person, thoughts are nothing jointed by small bits, but like a river, it flows. He emphasized that every thought has its owner and we have no experience that there is a thought which

does not belong to any certain person since we have no way to affirm it. “There is no giving or bartering between them” and “absolute insulation, irreducible pluralism, is the law”. (James, W., 1981, p. 221) That means different thoughts are not allowed to encounter each other directly even though they are similar in quality and content of thoughts or simultaneous and proximal in space, because they belong to different minds. Therefore James concluded that every thought is owned, like your’s and I’s.

Many scholars argued against James’s view for that he built a strong invisible wall between one’s thought and that of another so that it is improbable for us to understand each other, which is totally contradictory with our daily experience since we communicate with others every day. They believe that if we proceed the way of James further, it is our destiny to abolish the possibility of passing our knowledge to others since this process is indeed based on communication which takes place among persons. Then the following consequences are that we hold our thoughts in ourselves and have no idea of what others talking about at all. Actually, I believe that these thinkers pushed James’s idea too far away and they misapprehend the real intention when James said that breaches between thoughts are the most absolute breaches. It is definitely true that James paid more attention to the personal form of every thought and he admitted that the gap between different streams of thought is the greatest gap. However, it is not enough to justify that James denied the possibility of communication among human beings. On the contrary, he held a strong view that we are able to exchange our thoughts with others. From my personal perspective, one of the real reasons why James underlines the gap between thoughts is that he attempted to draw our attention to the continuity of thoughts instead of treating our thoughts as a chain or train which is connected by small bits. In James era, most psychologists tend to regard simple sensation as the elementary fact of mental life and our complicated concepts, ideas and etc., are all composed by these simple sensation. However, James insisted that these thinkers made a huge mistake ignoring the relations of thoughts, and the associated consequence is that they have to find a way to explain the relations among facts, which their attempt did not make us satisfied. Another reason is that James wants to emphasize the personal form of our thoughts. He asserted that the research of psychology is supposed to the study of mental states which belong to individuals. Most of thinkers try to start investigating at simple sensation and describing human beings’ mental life totally objective so that they are able to make psychology more scientific. However, they ignored that our mental states are doomed to be personal and we have no way to investigate them with complete objective as long as we are human beings, unless we had the intellectual intuition only possessed by Omniscience. If we want to make psychology more scientific, we are best to pay much attention to the individual characteristics of thoughts, since our thoughts are personal and situational specific. Therefore, James mere wanted to reminds us to treat mental states as what they really are by overstating the personal from of thoughts. In fact, James did not deny that we are not allowed to communicate with others, what he really rejected is that some psychologists in his era try to describe our mental states without subjective. Only when we realize that diverse thoughts are part of our consciousness and they are owned by our minds, can we develop psychology as a science subject.

2. The Theory of the Stream of Thought

Considering the relation between James’s theory of the stream of thought and the idea of absolute breaches, I believe that a detailed analysis of the stream is helpful for us to make James’s idea on thoughts’ breaches more clear. The theory of the stream of thought is one of the most significant theories of James’s writings. In the principles of psychology, James concludes five characteristics of the stream of thought as follows: (James, W., 1981, p. 220)

- 1) *Every thought tends to be part of a personal consciousness.*
- 2) *Within each personal consciousness thought is always changing.*
- 3) *Within each personal consciousness thought is sensibly continuous.*
- 4) *It always appears to deal with objects independent of itself.*
- 5) *It is interested in some parts of these objects to the exclusion of others, and welcomes or rejects---chooses from among them, in a word—all the while.*

Based on the five important characteristics of the thought, we can tell that when thought is part of the stream of thought, variable all the time and continuous in each person, James used thought as a noun. He believed that a series of thoughts fuse into the stream of thought and there is no crack or division among them. The stream of thought flows all the time and changes forever, so we can never get an identical thought at two times. Each thought has slight duration and is succeeded at once by the next thought, and so on. That is how the stream streams on. The reason why the stream is continuous is the existence of personal selves which underlines the stream and cannot be rejected by any scholars at any rate. Although every thought is unique in the stream, it does

not mean that they can get equal attention, even in our language, not every part of the stream of thought has its name and can be speak utterly. The stream of thought is composed by what James called the substantive parts and transitive parts.

2.1 The Substantive Parts

James used a metaphor of a bird's life to make his theory of stream of thought much easier to understand for us. Like a bird's life, it seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings, the stream of thought is made of the substantive parts and transitive parts. And the substantive parts are similar as "resting places" which are relatively stable, actual, definite in the stream of thought. Here, I shall show a multidimensional interpretation of the substantive part.

Firstly, from the physiology perspective, substantive parts have the same original sources with the transitive parts. According to James, although our thoughts are a kind of knowledge producing by our experiences, "every sensation corresponds to some cerebral action" (James, W., 1981, p. 227). That is to say, our experiences inevitably give rise to changes which take place in the brain, and every brain-modification, no matter how small it is, must accompany with corresponding alternations of the stream of thought, even if such alternations are not able to be observed by us. Given the condition of our brain is changing all the time, strictly speaking, there is no possibility that we can have an identical thought once again, and our thoughts are changing from moment to moment. That means every thought is unique.

Secondly, from the content aspect, substantive parts are the portion of the stream of thought which is inclined to gain our attention and interests. For one thing, it is usually occupied by some kinds of sensorial imaginations and such imaginations allow us to keep before mind for a long time and contemplate without any change. They are the relative stable parts of the stream. Sometimes they tend to be the topics of the conversation and all the conversation is what it is "of" or "about" the topics. Sometimes, they are the aims of our sensorial and perceptual process. Most of the principles of our knowledge and the common sense in our daily life are belong to this part. For another thing, They are correlated of the most immediate and vivid qualities or aspects of sensory experience. (James, W., 1981, p. 444) The present segment or section of that stream always is much clear for us. The peculiarity of this part is that it tend to be more impressive and lively than other segments of the stream. Take a thunder as an instance, a thunder after a long period of silence, rather than a thunder within the background of firecrackers, has more chance to draw our attention by such a sharp contrast. In addition, something fitting or reverse our interests or habits are more possible to be the substantive parts.

Thirdly, from the linguistics aspect, most of substantive parts are able to be expressed by our words and phrases. Although thought is a different sort of existence from material things, most part of them also have their names in our corpus. Like pleasures, pains, and emotions, they are names for feelings, while ideas and concepts, in a form that is symbolic and abstract, are for existent things. Even some logical relations also have their places in our vocabularies, like "and", "but". In a sentence, in general, the substantive parts are more likely to be seen at the spots of the subjects and predicates. They are the cores of the sentence and directly have to do with the meaning of the thoughts, so we are best to pay more attention to them when we read sentences. Moreover, if we go further to interrogate common speech, we can find the feeling of relation expressed in more than thousand different ways. Actually, some outwards relations, like space-relations, relations of contrast, are the foundation of our stream of thought. In other words, without the feeling of such relations, our experiences must be totally chaos; without these words of relations, we even have no way to express our thoughts.

Above all the demonstration, there are two points that are worth an extra illumination. The first one is, in spite of the static and independent interpretation of substantive parts, it does not mean that they are quiescent and invariable. Like a river, water flows without any stop, within different context, substantive parts are allowed to change with our attention, interests or something that really significant in that case. All in all, they are the portions of the stream that earn our notice. The other one is, no matter how important or how much portion the substantive parts takes in the stream of thought, we shall keep in mind that even if we can analysis them in a way which seems like have nothing to do with the other segments of that stream, they are still parts of the stream and never be function smoothly without the transitive parts. In any case, we are supposed to look at the stream of thought as an entirety rather than its substantive parts or transitive parts. Strictly speaking, neither substantive part nor transitive part is an independent element of the stream, there is throughout a dependence.

2.2 The Transitive Parts

James ascribed transitive parts as the "places of flight" in which "are filled with thoughts of relations, static or dynamic, that for the most part obtain between the matters contemplated in the periods of comparative rest", and the "main use of the transitive parts is to lead us from one substantive conclusion to another". (James, W., 1981,

p. 236) Here I will show a detailed interpretation of transitive part to help us to understand it better.

Firstly, it is difficult for us to see what really the transitive part is, whether we deal with it abstractly or concretely. The most significant property of transitive part is that it is, in essence, a sort of transition, which is a movement or process from one substantive part to another. Therefore, only the whole process, rather than any moment of it, is able to on behalf of transitive part. It cannot be held statically before reaching to another substantive part, but after arriving another substantive part, it is not transitive part any more. To attempt to hold them in static would be like trying to see how darkness looks by turning on the lights quickly, while the truth is, once the light is on, it is no darkness in the room any more. In the same way, focusing on one bit of transition to figure out the essence of transitive parts is doomed to be failed and the consequence is that we will never know what is the transitive part. In fact, this kind of attempt is wrong at the outset. The only way we can get a glance of transitive part is to compare the two substantive parts, the former and the latter, and then reflect the differences and changes between them, and then infer what the transition really is. Even by this way, what we got is only what we inferred from our experiences, which might be not so same as the real case. However, it is never and ever wrong for us to keep that the transitive part is the movement from one substantive part to another in mind.

Secondly, unlike their counterparts, transitive parts are occupied with the various relations of thoughts, static or dynamic, and escape our notice. Because it is difficult to perceive the detailed feelings of innumerable relations and various connection among the facts of the world and there are not so much vocabularies in our language to describe or name these kind of relation and connection, most of sensationalists denies the existence of feeling of relations, and many of them who proceeds too far even deny the reality of relations actually and abstractly. While a great number of intellectualists, on the other hand, based on the same reason, approach to opposite conclusion that relations are nothing which can be felt by us but something beyond material matters which are only able to attain by an *actus purus* of thought. (James, W., 1981, p. 238) However, for James, it is not fair to deny the feelings and existence of relations just because of their properties of difficult perceiving. One reason why we are inclined to overlook these parts of thought is that our inveterate habit of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone which is formed by a long period of evolution and an efficient way to distribute our attention. And another fact that can account for this is our structure of language. We have a great amount of words for substantive parts of the stream of thought while we do not have many words for relations. Although there are some adverbial phrase, syntactic form, or inflection of voice to express some shading or other of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thought, we cannot deny that these words are far from enough and most part of the feelings of relation, even have been notice by us, still have no spot in our language. And all what we use to describe them, in general, is the phrase of “about” or “of”, a stolid word which engulfs all their delicate idiosyncrasies in its monotonous sound. Then, with the repeatedly using of language, the substantive parts are getting more solid and independent while the transitive parts are more ignored and escaping out of our attention.

Thirdly, transitive parts have their special shapes. Here I do not mean that transitive part have shapes like triangle or square in geometry, but I really mean that every transitive part welcomes or rejects some certain substantive parts. We know that the main purpose of transitive part is to lead us from present substantive part to the future one. However, this process is not random. According to James, every our present transitive part is the result of the pre-substantive parts and the whole surroundings, which means the present transitive part is shaped by its environment including where, when, subjects, objects and all the factors in that situation. That is to say, every present transitive part is unique and specific. That means that the coming substantive part have to carry some characters which can be shared with the present transitive part in order to be welcomed. To be clear, the present transitive part is the result of its whole history and environment and the precondition of the coming substantive part, so it defines the substantive part to some degree. And the same peculiar warmth and intimacy among different thoughts is the mark of being accepted. Besides, James uses the halo or penumbra or fringes to grasp the character of transitive part. In order to make his opinion clearer to us, James provides us three examples. The first one is that what our mental states are when we heard “Wait”, “Hark”, and “Look”. All of us would admit that when we heard these three words we have different mental states. Although we all expect something which is absent after hearing them, it is obvious that these words stir different anticipation in our minds. The second one is what we feel when we try to recall a name of a person or a song which we have met or listened ago. We can feel that there is a gap between our thought, but it is not mere a gap. It is a gap that so active and powerful that forcing us to fill it with right names. Even if we cannot recall the name for now, but as long as someone else provides a wrong name, we can find that it does not fit into the gap. The third one is of a speaker’s intention “to say so-and-so” before say it. When we read some sentences within logical relations, we

have some kind of strong feeling to look forward “nor” when we read “neither”, even we have no idea about the meaning of the whole sentence. The similar situation happens when listening to a lecture. It is more likely for us to ignore the meaning of the speaker when we are sleepy or tired, but it is easy for us to notice if some grammar mistakes occur. In these three examples, although the specific contents which we are looking for are not absent, we do have strong inclination to identify them to some extent, which James calls the feelings of tendency. This kind of feeling, even faint, is the most important character of the transitive part and it is the reason why transitive parts have shapes.

Above all the analysis of transitive part, one thing that I need to underline again is that transitive part is the important portion of the stream of thought, but not independent from the substantive part. The substantive part, like the core of the thought, is surrounded by the transitive part, like the fringes or halos of the thought. In the stream of thought, substantive part and transitive part are making and overlapping. They are the different manifestations of one and same thought.

3. An Appropriate Way to Understand the Breaches Between Person's Thought

After a big volume of the demonstration of the stream of thought, it is time for us to concentrate on the important problem which I have put forward at the very start. To be sure, James's division of substantive and transitive part genuinely reflects the property of the stream of thought and expresses his intention perfectly. He drew a vivid and colorful picture about our thoughts, and showed us every line and point of the picture of thoughts. But it is true that James never given a clear description for the question that how should we overcome the breaches among persons' thoughts, and how can we communicate with others, even though there are some tracks which scattered throughout the whole theory of the stream of thought. Thus what I want to do in this part is to dig out these clues and divide the theory of the stream of thought with a special angle into inside which is happens in our bodies and outside part which we can communicate with others based on the division of James and explain how can we overcome the gaps between our thoughts.

3.1 The Inside Parts

When I spoke of “inside part”, I am referring more narrowly to the part of the thought which is happen in our bodies and which is unique for myself and never occurs again in a strict sense. And it is exactly that this kind of speciality and non-replicability becomes the real reason of the breaches among persons.

Have been deeply influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution, James was convinced that every change in thoughts must leads to some alternation in brains even we are not able to observe. And the reason of what is happening now is the whole behind universe, even he prefers to find the direct reason. So it is no surprise that he proffered that our thoughts are the results of the entirety of the environment and the particular, including the time, the temperature and the place, and all the factors ought to be take consideration. Given the facts that our bodies which are the place of our thoughts and they are changing all the time, such like blood pressure, heart-beating rate, and even the history of the particular never can be duplicated again, so the thought which we perceive at present is so unique and special.

In addition, most of transitive parts, especially the fringes of thought, belong to inside parts, however, there are also some parts of transitive part do not belong to this. Given the peculiar physiological states, there are good grounds for believing that the portion of thought which happens in our body and stir our feelings and motions are this part. The pain that a stone hits my feet and the joy that i received an offer, this sort of feeling is the thing that can only be felt by myself, no matter how close someone near me, no matter how i describe it in details to others, there are always something that only belongs to me. In a word, there is no way for us to expel the bodily dimension from our thoughts. After all, our bodies are the base which underlines our thoughts over the time. Besides, most of the portion of the thought which we have no word to describe them can also be classify into this part. Due to the structure and the limitation of our language, it is safe for us to say that considering portion of our thoughts hides behind our languages. In general, when we use the word “of” or “about” or “like” to depict the contents which are no corresponding vocabularies in our present language, it has indicated that we are allowed to have our imagination to fill the vague contents. Thus, these vague and dim parts of thoughts also belong to ourselves only. In addition, the factors in specific circumstance which fit someone's interest and only notice by oneself can also be ascribed to inside parts. Here what I endeavor to point out is that some elements in a situation which are selected by someone while overlook by others are also have to do with the speciality of our thoughts.

3.2 The Outside Part

After teasing out the inside parts form the stream of thought, it is easy for us to provide a description of the outside parts of thoughts. To be clear, I use the outside part to classify the content of our thoughts which occurs

outside of our bodies and we can share with others. So almost all the substantive parts belong to this part, since the substantive part are full of relative stable, actual, definite images that we can hold for a long period. And the conclusions which we arrived through transitive parts are definitely the outside part either. They are usually the purposes of our action and can be observed by people around of us. And apparently, almost all the contents that we can express by our language are this part too. Our language, as a way of expressing ourselves, is the most significant way to pass our thoughts to others. After a very long period of repeatedly use, to some extent, our language system is designed to express our thoughts. Nouns are names for the things that we repeatedly talk about, not only in terms of real things, but in terms of abstract and construct things, like the concept that we generalized for the actual things. They are usually the topic of a conversation or a theme of a sentence. We are inclined to treat them as the cores of the thought and they are relative stable and understandable for other for a long time. While the verbs are used to describe the action and behaviors which can be observed and admitted by others, and adjectives are always used to depict the quality and quantity of characteristics and feelings of things that we name them by nouns, in detailed or abstracted way. Further more, some logical operations have their places in our language system. Besides, i think the behaviors that we react for a specific situation belongs to this part too. In a word, all the contents that we have word for them and that the people in our society have general understanding of them and even some feelings and emotions are belong outside part. Because that is what we can share with others.

To sum up, what I endeavor to make it clear and emphasize is that the inside part of the thought is the portion which can only felt and noticed by ourselves, the every details of them just be complete known by myself, while the outside part is the portion which we can shared with others. Due to the fact that our bodies are always the spot of our thoughts, i believe that my division makes sense to some extent. As James claimed, every one of us separates the world into mine and non-mine. However, even we can classify the content of our thoughts in that way, it does not justify that the inside and outside part are independent form each other, it is also not enough for us to regard them as invariable. To find a clear-cut line between these two parts just as difficult as to find the boundary between substantive and transitive parts. It is impossible and unnecessary to do that. Because they are overlapping and melt together, and changing among persons and environments. What we need to keep in mind is that they are the parts of our whole thoughts, and just for the sake of convenience of our language and the purpose of mine, we treat them like separate.

3.3 A Way to Narrow the Breaches

In the light of above division, we ought to say that there is possibility that we are capable of understanding the thoughts of others.

Firstly, we have imagination so that we can image that the inside part of others' thoughts. As we previously discussed, we cannot expel the bodily dimension of our thoughts and describe them totally objective since they are always personal and situational specific. Similarly, there is no way that I can be in the position of someone else, thus I cannot feel the feeling which is ongoing in someone else body indeed, I also cannot experience the process which happens to someone else. But it merely means that we are not allowed to understand others' thoughts with one hundred percent, we are still capable of understanding others' real meaning or intention by using our imagination. As the number of human beings, we all have basic understanding of our nature, structure, and ability, and so on. We all must admit that we can know what someone's meaning is when he or she uses the word "pain". Even though we have no idea the reason why he feels pain, we even do not need to know whether his teeth or his feet make he feel pain. We are still able to know what he try to express by imaging that how we feel and what happened we use the word. Furthermore, if we are in same situation and we are close enough, we can understand others' thoughts better because the identical environment can help us image the circumstance much resemblance to the original one. In the same way, if we had the similar experience and we are familiar with each other, we are more likely to image someone else feeling and give the right reaction. Therefore, our imagination make it easier for us to understand the inside part of others' thoughts.

Secondly, we have language so that we can communicate with others and share the outside part of our thoughts. James claimed that a host of mental phenomena are not depicted by our language. However, he still admitted that "Language is the sole channel through which we communicate our knowledge and discoveries to others, and through which the knowledge and discoveries of others are communicated to us". (James, W., 1981, p. 252) Even Wittgenstein asserted that what can be expressed by our words must be expressed clearly. It is true that our language have its limitation, but after using it day by day, most of words have relative fixed and specific meaning which we all acknowledged, so we can share our thoughts with others who do not experience it. On the other hand, we also have been deeply influenced by our language. Although our language is the result of our needs to expression, but it also in turn shapes our cognition and attention. It is very obvious when we observe

our language closely. Most of substances which keep drawing our attention and are noticed by us always have corresponding vocabularies in our language. At the same time, our language also makes us pay more attention to the things which have vocabularies for them. In other words, our language not only expresses what we want to express to some extent, but also provides us the structure to display our thoughts. Also James emphasize that what really matter is that the meaning of the sentence, even we perceive the meaning in different way, just like we go to the same destination in different roads. All in all, by virtue of communication, most of parts of the stream of thought are able to share with persons.

Thirdly, as a complementary description, we have imagination and language, however, we are so complicated species and we still cannot overcome the breaches among persons. According to James, our thoughts are making and generating in their process and every attempt which try to depict our thoughts by language is doomed to lose something. It is the feeling that brings the segments of thoughts together and that really is the absolute gap between different thoughts. James regarded our thoughts in an ongoing process and he tried to make us to notice the totality of the thoughts and its environment and all the factors by overstating the breaches among persons. At the same time, James also claimed that our subjective activities play a magnificent role in the stream of thought and everyone's interests and attention is unique. A certain portion of stream abstracted from the rest is that it fits someone's interests, which means we are not capable of understand other thought completely. As James said, the universe is complex in essence, any attempt that wish to make this complex simple by categories and concepts are wrong. (Note 1) However, as a human being, we are inclined to have the similar interests, even not same, in many thing which have huge influence on our human beings' welfare. It is also helpful for us to understand others' thought.

To sum up, the real purpose of this paper is finding a thoroughgoing interpretation of the idea on the breaches among persons' thought. On the one hand, the promise is to know that James' real intention is to show us what our thoughts really are. Our thought is personal, variable, continuous, object-oriented and selective, likes a river flowing all the time. The feeling is the thing that brings our thought together, and the identical self which underlies behind the stream of thought is the reason for the subjectivity of our thoughts. In a word, our thought is always individual. On the other hand, we have imagination and language which enable us to share our thoughts with others. By virtue of imagination, we are able to feel the inside part of thought, while by using the language our thoughts can be transferred in the structure of the language which reflects the structure of our recognition. That is to say, our thoughts are born to fit our language and our cognition and that is exactly why we can share our thoughts with other in language, vice versa. Even if we lost some inside part, we still can transfer the core of thoughts which really matter to others.

References

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Note

Note 1. This viewpoint has been repeatedly demonstrated in Pragmatism Lecture IV The One and the Many and in A Pluralistic Universe, Lecture II Monistic Idealism.

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