THE SARTORIAL SELF:
William James’s Philosophy of Dress

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William James placed great importance on clothing, and this emphasis on apparel is reflected in his writings on psychology, in his letters, and in his own style of dress. His perspective on dress was influenced by a passage on the “philosophy of clothing” in Hermann Lotze’s *Microcosmus*. James believed clothing to be an essential part of the material self; in this article it is argued that it is important to the spiritual and social selves as well. James’s interest in the self-expressive aspects of clothing was reflected in his attire, his descriptions of colleagues’ clothing, his account book, and his chairmanship of Harvard’s Committee on Academic Dress.

Neither in tailoring nor in legislating does man proceed by mere Accident, but the hand is ever guided on by mysterious operations of the mind. In all his Modes, and habitative endeavors, an Architectural Idea will be found lurking; his Body and the Cloth are the site and materials whereon and whereby his beautiful edifice, of a Person, is to be built.—Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*

While in California in 1898, William James was struck by the sight of a coyote, shot dead by the manager of the hotel at which James was lodged. In a letter to his son Alexander, written August 28 from Berkeley, James described the scene:

The heroic little animal lay on the ground, with his big furry ears, and his clean white teeth, and his jolly cheerful little body, but his brave little life was gone. It made me think how brave all these living things are. Here little coyote was, without any clothes or house or books or anything, with nothing but his own naked self to pay his way with, and risking his life so cheerfully—and losing it—just to see if he could pick up a meal near the hotel. He was doing his coyote-business like a hero, and you must do your boy-business, and I my man-business bravely too, or else we won’t be worth as much as that little coyote. Your mother can find him in those green books of animals, and I want you to copy it.¹

This coyote—which so impressed James with its bravery that he wanted his son to trace out its image—was “without any clothes,” a “naked self.” James was struck not merely by the animal’s lack of property and place of residence but also

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by its nakedness. Clothing had a special significance for James, and the concept of a “clothed self” is conspicuous in the Principles of Psychology.

In his chapter on “The Consciousness of the Self,” James claims that the self, while being constituted of “fluctuating material,” can be broadly defined as

\[
\text{the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account.}\]

James parses the me—one of the things of which the I is aware—into three aspects (material, social, and spiritual) that he subsequently describes in greater detail. He begins with the material self, saying that the body is its central constituent. And then he makes a claim which, at first glance, seems peculiar:

The clothes come next. The old saying that the human person is composed of three parts—soul, body and clothes—is more than a joke. We so appropriate our clothes and identify ourselves with them that there are few of us who, if asked to choose between having a beautiful body clad in raiment perpetually shabby and unclean, and having an ugly and blemished form always spotlessly attired, would not hesitate a moment before making a decisive reply.

Immediate family, home, and property are all secondary to the clothes. Why did James believe that dress is so important? And what does fashion have to do with his concept of the self?

An investigation of James’s clothing provides insight not only into the passage above but also into the parts of the me more generally; and further, into James’s own personality and sense of self. Yet to many readers, an examination of James’s dress might seem a frivolous and trifling endeavor: The idea that any serious development of the personality takes place at the closet door will, at first blush, appear to exaggerate the importance of the mundane daily duty of dressing. Furthermore, some readers may think a study of James’s clothing is downright petty: Is it not, after all, unfair to draw conclusions about a man on the basis of his appearance?

These readers will be relieved to know that I do not attempt to judge the cover without reading the book: I interpret James’s dress in light of his philosophy of clothing, so that, by understanding what James thought clothing signified, we might better understand how James viewed himself. I can proceed with this kind of analysis knowing that James would approve of the endeavor; it is his insistence on the importance of clothes that propels this consideration of his attire.

The Three-Piece Self

Readers who are intrigued by James’s paragraph on the importance of clothes (quoted above) are fortunate to have James’s assistance in interpreting it: In a footnote to the passage, James referred to “a charming passage on the Philosophy of Dress,” found in Hermann Lotze’s Microcosmus.

In this passage, Lotze asserted that any time we bring an object “into relationship with the surface of our body” we invest that object with “the consciousness of our personal existence,” taking its contours to be our own and making it part of the self. The first stage in the development of these feelings is
the wearing of hats and shoes. Once a man has positioned his hat, slightly tilted, atop his head, it is transformed, no longer a lifeless scrap of cloth:

Thus arises the pleasing delusion that we ourselves, our own life, and our strength reach up to that point, and at every step that shakes it, at every puff of wind that sets it in motion, we have quite distinctly the feeling as if a part of our own being were solemnly nodding backwards and forwards.6

Furthermore, Lotze contended that the hairstyle on which the hat is perched can say quite a bit about the individual who wears it. “Has not Nature herself adorned our head with floating hair?” he inquired. Curling the hair and gathering it up, he claimed, was

naturally the first task of fancy, and it would not be impossible from the style of headdress preferred by particular nations to draw conclusions as to the character of their imagination, and as to their preference for severity and stiffness or for greater geniality and freedom.7

Next comes “hanging and waving drapery.” The sway and shimmy of our clothing, said Lotze, gives us the pleasing sensation of swaying and waving ourselves.8 The weft and weight of the fabrics that surround one’s body help determine the attitude of the wearer: “The greater or less tension and firmness possessed by the material in itself, or due to its cut, is transferred to us as if it resulted from our bearing.” Clothes with stiffness and structure will “fill a boy with pride in the manly vigour of his existence, even though the ideal of his wishes remains the steel suit of armour.”9 On the other hand, the female of the species, though she might enjoy the breathless confines of her stiffly constructed corsets, also appreciates gauzy, flowing garments. These do not merely give her a svelte appearance:

On the contrary, the wearer herself is by feeling directly present in all the graceful curves that with feather weight touch but a few points of the skin, and yet through these points excite the most distinct sensation of the breath, lightness, and softness of their sweep. Nay, even the pleasure afforded by such a sight is derived far less from the pleasing effect of the drapery which we see than from the fact that we can transport ourselves by thought into the imaginative, joyous, or dainty vital feeling which the myriad petty impressions from the garments must infuse into the form which they conceal.10

Following this rapturous account, Lotze surveyed his work on the philosophy of clothing and pronounced his approval: “After having by the laying down of these three fundamental laws performed for the exact science of dress the same service as Kepler for astronomy, I make over to others the further scientific profit therefrom accruing.”11

From Lotze’s passage the reader can glean one clue to the importance James placed on clothes: They are capable of being felt as a part of the wearer’s own body, fabric extensions of the flesh. A person’s bearing and attitude are directly related to the sensations he or she gets from his or her clothing; thus, clothing holds a position of high importance in the hierarchy of the material self’s composition. But is clothing an important element in the spiritual and social selves as well?
It is not difficult to understand the importance clothes have for the social self. “A man’s Social Self,” James explained, “is the recognition which he gets from his mates. We are not only gregarious animals, liking to be in sight of our fellows, but we have an innate propensity to get ourselves noticed, and noticed favorably, by our kind.” Clothing determines, in part, whether a person achieves such notice and what impression he or she offers others. When James, in his letters, wanted to convey succinctly the character of a person he was describing, he referred to clothing and physical attributes. For instance, on November 13, 1882, he wrote to his wife from Leipzig:

I heard several lecturers. Old Ludwig’s lecture in the afternoon was memorable for the extraordinary impression of character it made on me. The traditional German professor in its highest sense. A rusty brown wig and broad-skirted brown coat, a voluminous black neckcloth, an absolute unexciteability of manner, a clean-shaven face so plebeian and at the same time so grandly carved, with its hooked nose and gentle kindly mouth and inexhaustible patience of expression, that I never saw the like.

And writing to his sister Alice from Berlin in October 1867, James gave a colorful description of Wilhelm Dilthey, Herman Grimm, and himself. When James arrived at Grimm’s house for dinner, he found himself among eccentrically attired dining companions:

I, with my usual want of enterprise, have neglected hitherto to provide myself with a swallow-tailed coat; but I had a resplendent fresh-biled shirt and collar, while the Professor, who wore the “obligatory coat,” etc., had an exceedingly grimy shirt and collar and a rusty old rag of a cravat. Which of us most violated the proprieties I know not, but your feminine nature will decide. Grimm wore a yellowish, greenish, brownish coat whose big collar and cuffs and enormous flaps made me strongly suspect it had been the property of the brothers Grimm, who had worn it on state occasions, and dying bequeathed it to Herman.

In the preceding two vignettes James relies on the importance of dress to the social self, expanding his characterizations outward from the first impression that the clothes give. The clothes enter first, and gradually, over the course of his description, James fills them in with pieces of the personality that they express.

I now turn to the spiritual self, which James called “a man’s inner or subjective being.” It is the spiritual self that seems most to speak for the individual: “We take a purer self-satisfaction when we think of our ability to argue and discriminate, of our moral sensibility and conscience, of our indomitable will, than when we survey any of our other possessions.” How is it that clothes play a role in this most important aspect of selfhood, this “self of all the other selves?”

The mechanics of dressing—the knotting of the tie, the fastening of buttons—are the territory of habit: “A man says to himself, ‘I must change my clothes,’ and involuntarily he has taken off his coat, and his fingers are at work in their accustomed manner on his waistcoat-buttons.” Habit was of great importance to James; most of one’s life consists of habitual actions, good and bad. “Could the young but realize how soon they will become mere walking bundles of habit,” he
remarked, “they would give more heed to their conduct while in the plastic state. We are spinning our own fates, good or evil, and never to be undone.” Habits are indeed powerful, and the link between habit and habiliment transcends mere etymological connection. But it is important not to overlook the role of the will in habit.

Habits, according to James, are series of “muscular contractions” which, when the command “start” is issued by the mind, cue one another in proper order, like dominoes falling each in turn. To convey this process, James used a diagram (see Figure 1). The $V$ represents the command to start (volition), the muscular contractions are $A–G$, and the sensations excited by the muscular contractions are $a–f$. It is likely no accident that the trajectory of sensation to contraction to sensation (e.g., $aBb$) plots a $V$-shaped course: The individual contractions that form the chain of habit must, of course, be learned voluntarily through acts of will. In the habitual movements made by fingers fastening buttons there remains the vestige of volition.

Each morning when a particular bundle of habits rises from his bed, he chooses what he will wear. Whereas habits are habitual for monks and soldiers, the free man can—and must—decide. He issues, from within his spiritual self, a “fiat of the will.” Although habit may ensure that a person leaves the house with shoes tied and pants zipped, it is the spiritual self that decides on the particular color, fabric, and cut of the trousers and whether the shoes will be leather, or canvas, or otherwise. “A physiologist who should reflect on it in his own person,” James wrote, “could hardly help, I should think, connecting [the spiritual self] more or less vaguely with the process by which ideas or incoming sensations are ‘reflected’ or pass over into outward acts.” Thus, in the daily act of dressing, the individual deliberates; he chooses what information he wishes to convey about himself, what garments he wants to don as extensions of his own body, and which elements of his wardrobe best reflect his idea of himself. Clothing is a form of self-expression, a way to allude to attributes of one’s most essential being, one’s place in the world, or one’s sense of beauty. Kingfishers catch fire, politicians wear red ties; the self announces its attributes with clothing.

Loosened Suspenders and Spotted Cravats

How, then, did James express himself in his dress? Was his philosophy of dress borne out in his own attire? To address these questions, it is first necessary to describe the kind of clothes James typically wore.

During his professorship at Harvard, James’s mode of dress was distinctively casual: In the introduction to *The Letters of William James*, James’s son Henry reported that

James was always as informal in his dress as the occasion permitted. The Norfolk jacket in which he used to lecture to his classes invariably figured in college caricatures—as did also his festive neckties. But there was nothing that disgusted him more than a “loutish” carelessness about appearances. A friend of old days, describing a first meeting with him in the late sixties ejaculated, “He was the cleanest-looking chap!”

*Figure 2.* Two undated portraits in which James wears polka-dot ties. The photograph on the left was most likely taken in the early 1880s, and the portrait on the right was probably made in the early 1890s. Dated photographs show James wearing a polka-dot tie as early as 1887 and as late as 1907.) Photographs courtesy of the Harvard University Archives.
James’s “informality” surfaces again in a letter from one of his students, Ralph Waldo Black, to Ralph Barton Perry. Black recalled that

There were only a few of us, Carnochan, Coggeshall, Cummings, I believe, and Santayana, among them in Phil. 9. We met once a week in James’ study or library (was it in Appian Way or Garden Street) and once he discoursed with us in undershirt and loosened suspenders.20

Recollections such as these are the best source of information about James’s manner of dress; there are many formal portraits of James but no snapshots that capture him in the classroom or in his private meetings with students and friends. Portraits call for exactly the kind of formal dress that James wore only when absolutely necessary.

Nevertheless, the formal portraits are not completely barren of insight into James’s style (see Figure 2): They reveal James’s enduring attachment to polka-dot ties. In the collection of portraits of James in the Harvard archives, there are eight photographs featuring James at various ages wearing different styles of spotted cravats. Although they are not all dated (the ones that are indicate a range
of 1887–1907), some of the pictures show an obviously youthful James: His polka-dot tie collection apparently began early.

These spotted ties are notably unfashionable; whereas striped ties and checked ties were sometimes acceptable in the latter half of the 1800s, a polka-dot tie was a deviation from the polite standard.21 The goal of the well-dressed man of the latter half of the 1800s was to avoid standing out in any way, and guides to good manners stressed this criterion. In 1890, for instance, *Every-Day Etiquette* proclaimed that “in large cities, men rarely walk in the streets in their dress-suits without wearing a very thin overcoat, even in summer. This is to avoid being conspicuous.”22

Reflecting this ideal, dress had grown more and more subdued over the course of the 19th century. Colors darkened, and patterns were simplified. Another etiquette book, *Manners Culture and Dress*, guaranteed its readers that “however ugly you may be, rest assured that there is some style of habiliment which will make you passable”; and the most important step on the road to passibility, counseled the book, was “plainness” in dress.23 Lest readers feel overwhelmed by the rules of polite dress, *Every-Day Etiquette* advised that assiduously following the fashions of the time was not necessary, so long as one remembered that “one must be clothed in harmony with the time, the place, and the position in order to be self-forgetful.”24

James, contrary to the fashion dictums of his time, was quite conspicuous in his dress. In his checked pants and “festive neckties,” he hardly looked plain to his students and colleagues. Self-remembrance and self-awareness—not “self-forgetfulness”—were at the heart of his style.

**James’s Account Book**

Perhaps the conspicuous polka-dot cravats were among the ties catalogued in James’s account book. James recorded his purchases from 1861 to 1864 in the front half of the book; and, after an interval of blank pages, in its latter half he recorded purchases from 1882 to 1883 and from 1886 to 1887.25

In the 1860s, James listed all the purchases he made each month. Clothing purchases are interspersed with travel expenses, groceries, and some less-than-essential epicurean indulgences (among them sardines, a guava, cheese, and oysters). On occasion, garments are partnered with unrelated items; for instance, James listed “collars, transcripts, & charity $64” in February 1862. I have reproduced some of James’s clothing-related entries below, so that the reader may see what kinds of purchases James made and observe his manner of recording their costs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oct 1861</td>
<td>Cravat 75 cents, gloves 1.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26th Shoes $8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>28th slippers for gymnasium $1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 1862</td>
<td>suspenders .75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pantaloons 8 × 8.00 (unpaid)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29th adorning hair .50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In 1886, James’s accounting style changed: Instead of continuing to compile monthly lists of all kinds of purchases, he began to categorize items and list them by the year. Written across the top of the notebook, spanning two pages, is the title “Clothes of W.J. 1886.” Beneath this heading, the first entry reads:

Dec.  
Noera’s bill (overcoat) 3.50  
socks 2  
" .75  
Drawers 5  
undershirt 2.75  
canvas for dressing gown .46  
pajamah drawers 1.50  
white cravat .25  
hat 8  
shirt 3.25  
breeches patched .75  

26.21

James continued to use this style of recordkeeping through 1887. Along with hats, gloves, tailored suits, overcoats, and gym slippers, James recorded deposits from his father in the 1860s. April 1862 contains the following entries:

April  
3rd received cheque from Father  
a few days later  
from Father, for shoes 14.50  
and Tailor’s bill 50.00

Henry James Sr.’s contributions to William’s clothing budget are not terribly surprising, because the elder James also had a penchant for fine attire. One of the many points of friction in Henry Sr.’s relationship with his father, William, originated in Henry’s purchase of an expensive suit before he left his parents’ home for Boston (he had the tailor’s bill sent to his father without having obtained permission beforehand). According to Howard M. Feinstein in Becoming William James, “Henry had spent about $100 for ‘segars and oysters. . .and cloth from taylors’ without his father’s consent.” Years after the suit debacle, Henry Sr. battled with his son William over William’s career, just as the elder William had battled with Henry over Henry’s vocation; however, where William’s wardrobe was concerned, Henry Sr. seems not to have shared his father’s attitude toward the purchase of pricey apparel.

Henry James Sr. was less happy to support William’s art lessons; he wanted his son to be a scientist, not a painter. To some degree, Henry got his wish; but although William gave up his ambition to become a professional painter, he was not purged of an artist’s sensibility. When William died, his brother Henry wrote of him that

He was that rare thing, a figure—which innumerable eminent and endowed men (and particularly in this country) haven’t been. And he was the intellectual or temperamental artist as no one else has ever been here. Great, on that score, in this vastly vulgar air, should be his glory, should remain his example.
Several historians have pointed to the relationship between James’s literary style and his artistic sensibility. But his artistic bent was evident in his attire as well; and this correspondence did not go unnoticed by his student John Elof Boodin, who described the marriage of James’s philosophy and his image:

One reason why James was so attracted to me was doubtless his love for the unusual, for the picturesque. . . . James showed this love for the picturesque in his own life. Of course we all know it in his style, in those matchless descriptive metaphors everywhere. He showed it in the variety of his outlandish friends. But he showed it also in little details such as dress. I remember how amused we used to be one winter at James’s appearance in coming to class. He wore a pair of tan shoes, a silk hat, cane, frock coat and red-checkered trousers. But somehow he did not seem freakish. There was a fitness about it. His appearance gave color and atmosphere to his philosophy. And he was handsome and striking with it all.30

Another appreciative observer of James’s idiosyncratic style, John Dewey, wrote that “[James] was an artist who gave philosophic expression to the artist’s sense of the unique, and to his love of the individual.”31 This Jamesian delight in individuality played a role in another element of his connection to clothing: James’s responsibilities in the last years of the 19th century included researching academic dress and weighing the Harvard community’s growing desire for a uniform appearance against the right of the individual to dress as he or she pleased.

Clothing the Campus

While James was making an impression on his students with his unorthodox dress, the attire of students and of the academic community in general came under increasing scrutiny. On October 20, 1876, an article titled “Caps and Gowns” (no writer is attributed) informed the Harvard Crimson’s audience that “On Class Day and Commencement it is, of course, fitting that all Seniors should wear a distinctive, appropriate, and uniform dress.” Eleven years later, the issue of academic garb was still at stake: The March 1, 1887, Crimson featured a letter to the editor on the subject of scholarly dress. The author of the letter, who signs his missive “87 no. 2,” refers to a previous correspondent from his class (“87 no. 1, presumably). No. 1’s letter had denounced the practice of wearing dress suits on the day of commencement, and No. 2, seconding this sentiment, added that although he was “not an advocate of Anglomania,” caps and gowns ought to be considered as an alternative to the suit. He concluded with an urgent imperative: “Should the adoption of the gown be found—at after submitting the matter to a vote of the class—impracticable, some action must be taken and taken now.” Finally, in the last decade of the 19th century, the university did indeed take action on the matter by calling on James to interpret recently established rules of academic dress.

By the 1890s, caps and gowns were in use at universities across the United States, but there was no uniformity. According to the Intercollegiate Commission on Academic costume, arriving at a standardized system of dress required considering

the varying and almost motley character of the gowns and hoods worn by the holders of degrees, and the confusion and lack of meaning which hoods were liable to reach through a multiplication of arbitrary codes of pattern and coloring.32

It was clear to the commission that the time for codification had arrived.
In May 1895, the commission issued a report on sessions held at Columbia College. Chaired by President Low of Columbia College, the commission also had delegates from Princeton, Yale, and the University of the City of New York. The purpose of the commission’s meetings was to secure a uniform practice among the American colleges and universities, whereby the cap and gown and hood shall indicate not only the degree of the wearer and the faculty under which it was obtained, but also the institution by which the degree was conferred.

Harvard, having sent no delegate to the meeting of the Intercollegiate Commission, needed to consider the commission’s findings and to determine whether Harvard ought to adopt an identical or similar scheme. For this task, the Harvard Corporation turned to James, appointing him Chairman of the Committee on Academic Dress. James penned the committee’s report in 1899, recommending that Harvard use a more elaborate costuming system than that used by other American institutions. Although James and his committee found no fault with the general outlines of the scheme used by Princeton, Yale, and Columbia, they felt that in Harvard’s case a few modifications were in order:

After careful consideration, the Committee could see no objection, historical or other, to the main lines on which the American scheme is drawn; they did see advantages for the University (some of which were set forth at a recent meeting of the University Council) in the adoption of a scheme which is already so widely in use. In some details, however, the Committee found that the scheme required amendment or amplification to suit it to the needs of this University.

Of particular interest is the proposal’s insistence that the dress scheme it outlines be optional:

With regard to [all the academic costumes described], the Committee hope [sic] that no member of the University would be required by vote to wear the costume on any occasion, but that such votes as may be passed will be merely permissive.

This recommendation must have displeased many advocates of the cap and gown: As letters to the Crimson indicated, one of the advantages of a system of academic dress was the prospect of a uniformly attired university. In fact, in 1895, the Class Day Committee had directed students to obtain their gowns from a single manufacturer, because “the purpose of the cap and gown will be defeated unless absolute uniformity is secured.”

The committee’s report, on the other hand, aimed to secure a certain measure of diversity. Although James’s personal opinion might have differed in some respects from the opinion expressed in the committee’s report, the sentiment quoted above jibes with James’s sense of clothing as an important personal choice. Moreover, because of his pluralistic and increasingly anarchist sensibilities, James would have bristled at the idea of subjugating individuals to the university by compelling each student to don its robes.

The members of the Harvard Corporation eventually rejected the committee’s proposal; they deemed it too complicated. Instead, they adopted the scheme favored by the other American institutions.
Conclusion

James’s casual dress was appropriate for a man whose students remember him as approachable and affable; and it suits a writer who produced clean, elegant, and energetic prose, whose books have an accessibility and intimacy about them. James recognized that certain choices—decisions about dress among them—were necessary in defining the self. “Not that I would not, if I could,” he wrote,

be both handsome and fat and well dressed, and a great athlete, and make a million a year, be a wit, a bon-vivant, and a lady-killer, as well as a philosopher. . . . But the thing is simply impossible. . . . Such different characters may conceivably at the outset of life be alike possible to a man. But to make any one of them actual, the rest must more or less be suppressed. So the seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully, and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation. All other selves thereupon become unreal, but the fortunes of this self are real. Its failures are real failures, its triumphs real triumphs, carrying shame and gladness with them.40

Students and colleagues perceived the connections among James’s thought, his clothing, and his writing. In his essay “A Memory of William James,” Dickinson Sargeant Miller recalled that

My brother, a visitor at Cambridge, dropping in for an hour and seeing him with his vigorous air, bronzed and sanguine complexion, and his brown tweeds said, “He looks more like a sportsman than a professor.” I think that the sporting men in college always felt a certain affinity to themselves on one side in the freshness and manhood that distinguished him in mind, appearance and diction.41

James’s clothes were appropriate to his personality, to his writing, and to his thought. His thinking was marked by color and creativity, and in his dress he made choices that signified—and perhaps contributed to—those attributes.

James’s conception of the clothed self is not unlike that expressed in a passage from his brother Henry’s novel The Portrait of a Lady. Madame Merle, chastising Isabel for failing to take a person’s “shell” into account in her judgments, asks:

What shall we call our “self”? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I’ve a great respect for things! One’s self—for other people—is one’s expression of one’s self; and one’s house, one’s furniture, one’s garments, the book one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive.42

Isabel replies that she doesn’t believe her clothes express her self; if they express anyone, she says, it is the dressmaker. Furthermore, she argues, clothes are “imposed upon me by society.” In response, Madame Merle asks, “Should you prefer to go without them?”43

Isabel has no retort to that question. And indeed she should not: William James’s courageous Berkeley coyote could do his coyote-business naked, but neither man-business nor woman-business can be accomplished unclothed. The business of living, James saw, is inseparable from presentation of the self and from the clothes with which a person expresses his or her “me.” One’s house, furniture, books, and companions (accoutrements that Madame Merle appends to
the self) can be left at home, but so long as a person is in the company of others, he must rely on clothing to help him carry out his business, and to paint accurately a portrait of himself.

“Nothing we do is, in strict scientific literalness, wiped out,” James concluded in his chapter on habit. “As we become permanent drunkards by so many separate drinks, so we become saints in the moral, and authorities and experts in the practical and scientific spheres, by so many separate acts and hours of work.”

Perhaps James’s daily choice to dress colorfully and casually even bolstered and advanced his creativity and his open and sympathetic nature, his simplicity and manliness: Our actions and decisions, James would contend, chart a course for our minds, while simultaneously our minds are reflected in our outward selves.

Notes

3. Ibid., 280.
4. I argue that James’s concern with clothing was persistent, and consistently related to the self. I do not, however, wish to suggest that his ideas about the self remained static throughout his lifetime. Rather, I contend that although he continued to develop them, James’s ideas about the self are stitched throughout with his attention to his own dress and that of others. This consistent thread—James’s theory and practice of dress—is the focus of this article. On the evolution of James’s theory of self, see David E. Leary, “William James on the Self and Personality: Clearing the Ground for Subsequent Theorists, Researchers and Practitioners,” in Reflections on The Principles of Psychology, eds. Michael G. Johnson and Tracy B. Henley (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1990).
6. Ibid., 593.
7. Ibid., 594.
8. Ibid., 594.
9. Ibid., 595.
10. Ibid., 595.
11. Ibid., 596.
15. James, Principles, 283.
16. William James, Psychology: The Briefer Course (1892; reprint, South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 288.
17. Ibid., 17.
20. bMS Am 1092.10 (7). Ralph Waldo Black to Ralph Barton Perry, 1931, James Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
21. According to Joan L. Severa’s Dressed for the Photographer (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1995), 106, in the 1850s, black or checked ties were acceptable. Men of the 1860s most frequently wore minimal black ties; Severa, Dressed, 259. In the
1870s, men often wore stripes; Severa, _Dressed, _314. The polka-dot pattern seems not to have been an option for the well-dressed gentleman. Of the latter years of the 19th century, Lady Dorothy Neville wrote in _Reminiscences Under Five Reigns_ that “During the [18-] sixties there was a craze amongst men for large and loud checks and plaids. Some people carried this to a great extreme. The modern tendency would appear to be to suppress all eccentricity of colour or cut in man’s dress. In fact, the whole object of a well-dressed gentleman is now to escape notice by the unobtrusive nature of his well-cut clothes.” Quoted in Norah Waugh, _The Cut of Men’s Clothes 1600–1900_ (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1964).

22. Louise Fisk Bryson, _Every-Day Etiquette_ (New York: Kerr, 1890), 38.
27. Ibid., 51.
28. Ibid., 57.
30. Ibid., 210.
33. Ibid., 10.
34. Ibid., 11.
36. Ibid., 63.
39. James, _Essays_, 62.
40. James, _Principles_, 309.
43. Ibid., 288.
44. James, _Psychology: The Briefer Course_, 17.

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