

MIND AND MATTER IN *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

By Michael Davis

IN CHAPTER 8 OF *Dorian Gray*, Dorian reflects on the terrifying discovery, which he has made the previous night, that the painting has been somehow altered to express his own moral state. He speculates thus on a possible explanation for the change in the picture:

Was there some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms, that shaped themselves into form and colour on the canvas, and the soul that was within him? Could it be that what that soul thought, they realized? – that what it dreamed, they made true? (Wilde 93)

At the end of the chapter, he thinks along similar lines:

Might there not be some curious scientific reason for it all? If thought could exercise its influence upon a living organism, might not thought exercise an influence upon dead and inorganic things? Nay, without thought or conscious desire, might not things external to ourselves vibrate in unison with our moods and passions, atom calling to atom in secret love or strange affinity? (103)

Wilde's references to "atoms" encapsulate something of the complexity and paradox which characterise the novel's representations of the mind and its connection with the body. Atoms make up the painting and Dorian's own body, and this reminder of the materiality of both reminds us, in turn, of the possibility that Dorian, and all human selves, may occupy an insignificant yet inescapable place in the wider processes of the physical world. Most pervasively in the novel, and in the *fin de siècle* more generally, anxieties about one such material process – that of evolution, and especially of degeneration – haunt representations of the self. In Dorian's thoughts about "atoms" lies the still more extreme possibility that the very distinction between organic and inorganic may be blurred, a vertiginous sense that human evolutionary kinship extends beyond even the simplest organisms to matter itself, and that the category of the human is thus under greater threat than ever in the light of scientific theories of the material world. At the same time, the questions that Dorian asks himself envisage not the reduction of the mind to matter but the near-opposite of this: the possibility that "thought" may somehow "influence" the matter of the painting. In a fantastical version of the Hegelian idealism which forms an important part of Wilde's philosophical position,

the mind may prove to be the ultimate reality, independent of and dominant over matter, as the state of Dorian's mind is mysteriously given sensuous form in the transformations which the painting undergoes.¹ The atoms of the painting, like the human mind, take on an ambiguous relationship to the material world. The atoms are not fixed but fluid; like the mind itself, they are material and yet seem to act in ways contrary to physical laws of cause and effect, always in process and resistant to external comprehension.

The text's description of the painting in these terms suggests an important, and hitherto under-examined, connection between *Dorian Gray* and contemporary scientific debates about the relationships between the mental and the material. Critics have rightly read the novel in the light of scientific disciplines, such as evolutionary theory, physiology, and neuroanatomy, which seek to re-conceptualise the self on a broadly material basis, and they have pointed to Wilde's ambivalent relationship with the accounts of human identity which those disciplines produced.² Of particular importance in Wilde's own life were the discourses of degeneration and sexology, which informed hostile critiques both of the text and, infamously, of Wilde's own supposedly degenerate sexual identity.³ There is a significant further scientific context, however, in which Wilde's representations of the self might be read, and which is suggested by his references to atoms and to other related images. These images echo intriguingly analogies drawn by late-Victorian psychologists between matter at its most basic – in the form of atoms and molecules – and the complexities of the human mind. Here, I will explore Wilde's use of such physical and chemical language as modes of representing the self in the novel and will trace some of the parallels which this, and other representations of the self in the text, suggest between *Dorian Gray* and contemporary writing about mind, matter, and their connections as instanced in the work of three contemporary theorists: W. K. Clifford, James Sully, and William James. For a suggestive discussion of brain cell as aesthetic object in Wilde's novel, see Cohn. In doing so, I am not, primarily, making an argument about scientific influences on Wilde's writing since there is no evidence that Wilde read the work of Sully and James, although his reading in science generally, and particularly in the wider psychological debates in which these theorists also took part, was considerable.⁴ I want, rather, to suggest that Wilde's novel, as it raises questions about the mind/body relationship, may be usefully read as part of a much wider re-examination of such questions in late-century culture. The theorists on whose work I will focus build on models of mind proposed by Spencer, Tyndall, Huxley, and others, models with which Wilde was certainly familiar, but they also suggest important new directions in concepts of the mind/body relationship. They explore exciting new ways of understanding the mind and seek to theorise subjectivity in close and necessary relation to its physiological and evolutionary correlates while refusing to map the mind narrowly in terms of these last.⁵ Instead, they each emphasise in different ways the complexities of the mind's relationship with the body and the physical world, and each points in differing degrees to the mind's individuality, creativity, and even limited autonomy in the world in which it exists. Reading Wilde's novel in this context, I want to argue, suggests that his nightmarish Gothic vision of mental and physical disintegration, which clearly speaks to contemporary evolutionary discourses, nonetheless should also be understood as an exploration of fundamental questions about the paradoxical relations between mind and body and, crucially, of more fluid and creative possibilities in the self than are suggested by readings of the text which centre on the degenerationist paradigm. Despite Lord Henry's sceptical attitude towards the "arbitrary definitions" (57; ch. 4) of contemporary psychology, that discipline offers a fruitful way of reading Wilde's representations of the self and suggests

that he, far from dismissing psychological theory, often addresses similar issues in similar language.

A number of entries in Wilde's notebooks attest to his interest in questions about the mind. The final entry of his *Commonplace Book*, for instance, reads:

How pass from matter which is that which has extension to mind which is that which thinks. certain material changes exterior to our organism are always accompanied by certain other material changes inside our organism – but this does not solve the problem of consciousness. (*Oxford Notebooks* 152)

One approach to addressing this issue which attracted Wilde's attention is in the work of Clifford, the mathematician and exponent of Darwinian theory. In an 1873 lecture, one of several alluded to by Wilde in the notebooks, Clifford argues for a common basis of body and mind: "physiological action is complicated chemistry, in the same way that chemistry is complicated mechanics. The actions that take place in the brain differ in no way from other material actions, except in their complexity" ("Philosophy" 295). This, however, by no means implies a straightforward materialism. In common with a wide range of mid- and late-Victorian psychological theorists, Clifford demonstrates a profound sense of the difficulty of explaining human subjective experience in material terms. His solution to bridging the gap between the mental and the physical rests on the contention, set out in another essay which Wilde knew, that "along with every motion of matter, whether organic or inorganic, there is some fact which corresponds to the mental fact in ourselves" ("Body" 61). Since the doctrine of evolution posits an unbroken line of descent from the simplest organisms, and even from inorganic matter, to human beings, and since there is no definite point on the evolutionary scale at which consciousness can be said suddenly to emerge, it must follow, Clifford argues, that the building-blocks of the matter which composes humans partakes in some way of mental life. In a later essay, he refers to this quality of matter as "*Mind-stuff*," something which is a feature even of "a moving molecule of inorganic matter . . ." ("On the Nature" 85). Wilde echoes this idea in his reference to the concept of a "cell-soul" (*Oxford Notebooks* 112), and this same entry is one of several in which Wilde refers to the possible existence of "protoplasm," a substance which, in a theory popularised by Huxley, was thought to form the basis of life and to blur the distinction between organic and inorganic matter.⁶ It is tempting to draw an analogy between Clifford's particles of matter and the atoms in the painting, which themselves seem to take on a kind of mental and moral life. Such an analogy, too, underlines the shared material basis of the body and painting and thus emphasises the direct connection between human beings and matter itself, to which I pointed in my opening remarks. Rather than attempt to trace any one "source" of Wilde's Gothic conceit, however, I want to draw attention to the way in which even a somewhat dogmatic-sounding figure such as Clifford is in fact engaged in a complex questioning of the relationship between mind and the physical world, a questioning with which Wilde, in a very different literary and intellectual setting, engages too.

While, for Clifford, the concept of molecular reactions in the mind has a literal reality, chemical language also provides psychologists with suggestive metaphors through which to gesture towards the intricacies of the mind's operations. A central metaphor in this respect appears in Wilde's *Commonplace Book*, which includes, as one heading, a reference to "Moral chemistry." Wilde's immediate focus in this entry is Clifford's concept of the "Tribal Self," which he sets out in his 1875 essay "On the Scientific Basis of Morals."⁷ Clifford uses

this term to signify humans' apparently innate sense of connection to their social group, a connection which he sees as the basis of moral sense, and Wilde's interest in the concept is one example of his frequent engagement with questions about human evolution. Wilde's entry, though, also refers to Clifford's "The Philosophy of the Pure Sciences," in which he outlines the connection between "Moral" and the much older idea of "mental" "chemistry." The latter term dates back to Hartley's eighteenth-century associationist theory that the mind is formed by the gradual accumulation of sensory data in lived experience which are then organised in the mind through patterns of association. The concept of mental chemistry provides an image of how this process of organisation might be understood, and it is taken up, more or less critically, by a range of psychologists throughout the nineteenth century who draw on associationism in formulating a new physiology-based psychology. Closely paraphrasing Clifford, Wilde writes that the basis of this analogy between the mental and the chemical is the fact that "the result of two linked impressions [that is, pieces of sensory information] might not put in evidence either of the components any more than water shows us the oxygen and hydrogen it contains" (*Oxford Notebooks* 129).⁸ The comparison with a chemical compound aims to shed light on the means by which the mind organises information: the mind combines and shapes it in ways which might not be predicted by the original pieces of data with which it is presented. While Clifford does not explore further the implications of the image, it has the potential, at least, to complicate the basic idea of associationism by suggesting that the mind does not simply work mechanically or, perhaps, passively, but that it plays some active part in arranging and combining the information which it receives.

As with Clifford's "mind-stuff," there is no evidence to suggest that Wilde is deliberately echoing the idea of mental chemistry in the references to the painting with which I began. What is striking, however, is the common ground that the painting and the scientific metaphor share as descriptions of the self. Like the "atoms" in the painting, the notion of mental chemistry gestures figuratively towards the necessary connection between the mental and the physical, and indeed for some theorists, including Clifford, it describes something close to the literal, physical reality of mental processes. Yet at the same time the metaphor, like the painting, suggests that there is something more fluid and less predictable in the mind's operations than can be described in straightforwardly physical terms. While the painting's transformation clearly recalls degenerationist theory, therefore, the echoes in Wilde's language of the terms of an argument such as Clifford's also point to a concept of the self which is much less straightforwardly aligned with the body because it gestures towards the mind's own potential creativity and agency.

Other late-Victorian psychologists see the mind/body relationship as even more problematic than Clifford acknowledges. Yet many, too, see chemical analogies as a useful means of expressing and exploring the complexities of the self, and this suggests further points in common with Wilde's novel. James Sully, for instance, in his widely-read textbook *The Human Mind*, published the year after the appearance of *Dorian Gray*, writes about the mental process of association, whereby the mind assimilates and makes sense of new sensory data by relating it to data gained in past experience. In doing so, he draws on some familiar chemical metaphors:

One important feature of this close interweaving of psychical elements into inseparable compounds is transformation. It must never be forgotten that psychical development is not like a mechanical process in which particular material elements persist as such, even in new modes of combination. The

integrated experience that constitutes my knowledge of a person, or my feeling for a locality, though it can be seen by careful inspection to presuppose and to involve a number of elementary experiences, is not merely the sum of these. The whole idea or feeling is a *new* type of psychosis [that is, mental event]. (190)

Sully outlines the Hartleyan model of mental chemistry here, but he highlights more emphatically than Hartley or Clifford the creative connotations potentially attached to the metaphor. The analogy with chemistry, particularly as Sully nuances it, implies not a mechanical, or even regular or predictable, process of combination of “elements” but instead a transformative process which produces entirely new mental products.

Sully’s book draws and expands on many of his central interests as a psychologist over the previous two decades, indicating the continued currency of issues which he explores in psychological debates both in the period of Wilde’s notebooks and in the 1890s. In an 1878 essay, for example, we find a discussion of a more concrete instance of mental chemistry in action. There, Sully discusses the mental processes at play when, for example, we look at a work of art or a beautiful landscape:

We leave many sources of gratification undetected. The whole effect, further, seems to be something more than the sum of the separate elements, even supposing these to be ascertained. In the scene before us the pleasures of light, colour, and form, and of poetic suggestion partially blend and lose their distinct characters. In other words, the intermingling of these elements affects us differently from the elements experienced apart. (“Undefinable” 562)

The painting of Dorian Gray inspires horror above all, yet there are similarities between the descriptions of viewers’ reactions to it and Sully’s description here. While the novel’s central conceit, as I have suggested, keys into contemporary discourses of degeneration which seek to read the human form in terms of discrete classifiable physical features, the painting’s impact on its viewers at times seems much less open to clear analysis. Having refused to let Basil see the painting, for instance, Dorian checks it again for any sign of further change:

Was the face on the canvas viler than before? It seemed to him that it was unchanged; and yet his loathing of it was intensified. Gold hair, blue eyes, and rose-red lips – they all were there. It was simply the expression that had altered. That was horrible in its cruelty. (115–16; ch. 10)

The gradual alteration which occurs in the painting over the course of the narrative is like a speeded-up version of the kind of human degeneration which Maudsley and others posit, and in this sense the image offers an all too readable representation of the self. But at this point in the story the painting seems largely “unchanged” from its previous state. It is not, therefore, easily decipherable in physiognomic terms, and yet it is still able to inspire “loathing.” Similarly, when Basil finally gets to see the painting in its transformed state, he proceeds to look at each of the facial features in turn in order to read the changes in them, but his initial reaction is simply that “there was something in its expression that filled him with disgust and loathing” (149; ch. 13). There is a noticeable echo, in these examples, of the inability of Stevenson’s characters to specify what exactly it is that repels them about Mr Hyde.⁹ In both stories, there is a strong sense of the self’s resistance to classification in any straightforwardly physical terms, and this highlights both novelists’ frequent subversions of physiognomical-criminological reading. But a further implication of these reactions to

Dorian's picture and to Hyde's face, reactions which those involved struggle to rationalise or describe, is a sense of the mind's ability to process and transform complex information and to create from it new mental products. In Dorian's case, this ability produces a horrified awareness of the painting's expression of malevolence, an awareness which centres on the painting's general "expression" rather than on readily definable facial features. In other contexts, such as are suggested by Sully, it points to the mind's more explicitly creative potential, and this helps to foreground Wilde's implied insistence on the power of human perception not only in the novel's exploration of aestheticism but also even at moments at which we are confronted with the spectacle of mental and physical degeneration.

A major influence on Sully was the revolutionary work of William James, and in his writing these creative possibilities receive perhaps their fullest theorisation in the period. While Freud is transforming concepts of the unconscious, James is formulating, among other things, a theory of consciousness which remains influential in the early twenty-first century. In a seminal essay of 1879, "Are We Automata?," James directly rejects the models of the relationship between mind and physical being proposed by Huxley and others on the grounds that they treat the mind as machine-like and as essentially passive in the face of external stimuli. James is dismissive, too, of Clifford's mind-stuff theory, sardonically imagining the supposed mental properties of a "rain-drop flowing downhill" which is somehow able to imagine "an impossible ascent as its highest good" (6). His broader point, though, is to insist on "the efficacy of Consciousness" (3) as a factor which, in itself, is able to exert meaningful influence on mental operations. James's model of consciousness states that the mind is able to select aspects of sensory data for special attention according to the particular interests of the individual subject. As in a chemical process, data is "sifted" to produce a "distillate" (13) which reflects these interests. It is striking to note that here James adapts the mental/chemical analogy precisely to argue against theorists who propose an atomistic model of mind. The mind, then, far from being simply the passive receiver and organiser of sensory data, plays an active part in choosing and shaping the mental products which the data go to make up. This means that mental life, though grounded in physical being, is not straightforwardly subject to the effects of events or objects in the external material world.

Several aspects of James's theory suggest connections both with Wilde's representations of the self and with the work of Walter Pater with which *Dorian Gray* critically engages.¹⁰ In a passage which in some ways anticipates Dorian's musings on the properties of the painting's atoms, James writes:

The world as a Goethe feels and knows it all lay embedded in the primordial chaos of sensations, and into these elements we may analyse back every thought of the poet. We may even, by our reasonings, unwind things back to that black and jointless continuity of space and moving clouds of swarming atoms which science calls the only real world. But all the while the world we feel and live in, will be that which our ancestors and we, by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, as the sculptor extracts his statue by simply rejecting the other portions of the stone. ("Are We Automata?" 13–14)

Pater also draws on the language of matter in the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*, where he notes that human life, described in physical terms, is composed of "natural elements" such as "phosphorous and lime and delicate fibres," which are common both to the human body and to "places most remote from it," human beings sharing a material basis with these

elements and with physical processes whose action “rusts iron and ripens corn” (150). James and Pater address the unnerving idea that there is no fundamental distinction between human and non-organic matter, yet both, too, insist on the active power of the human mind as a distinct entity. This is central to Pater’s famous injunction that we should “burn always with this hard, gem-like flame” (152), here using another chemical image to suggest not the mind’s necessary oneness with the material world but, instead, its own active power. James, too, posits the mind as an active and autonomous entity which shapes the inputs which it receives from the physical world. The world as we know it, therefore, is as much the product of human choices and interactions as it is a collection of matter, since human beings are able to exert a powerful influence over the material world of which they are also a part. In Wilde’s story, the picture seems in one sense to be a random collection of atoms selected by Basil, as though Dorian’s identity itself threatens to dissolve into pure materiality, and yet thought seems able to exert an influence on the matter of the painting which is analogous to the role which James ascribes to consciousness, though in the novel that influence is far more tangible and monstrous. In all three writers’ work, as in Sully’s, human identity seems deeply embedded in matter and yet radically separate from it, because the mind is able to exert an agency of its own.

In his 1884 essay “On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology,” James elaborates further on his theory of consciousness. Again, he rejects the atomism of association-based physiological psychology and famously insists that consciousness is a “stream” (10) rather than a succession of separate sensory data. The “stream” underlies the mind’s ability to deal with complex information and especially to perceive the relationships between objects as well as objects themselves. To express this idea, James turns once again to a chemical analogy, one which runs directly counter to the atomistic connotations of traditional associationist ideas: every “definite image” in the mind, he writes, “is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it” (16).

This perceptual ability necessarily also implies fluidity in human identity more widely. In the mental “stream,” James remarks, “we never bathe twice in the same water . . .” (“On Some Omissions” 11). In his chapter on “The Consciousness of Self” in *The Principles of Psychology*, James explores some of the implications of this for personal identity. Our sense of self, he argues, is based on our feeling of “resemblance” and “continuity” between our past and present selves. As a result, “where the resemblance and continuity are no longer felt, the sense of personal identity goes (1:335).” A common example of this is the fact that adults can remember little or nothing from early infancy and that a very young self is effectively a “foreign creature” to the adult whom he or she turns into. For James, though we have a strong sense of having “one self” in that we perceive continuities in our own mental processes, it is also true to say that, given the constant flux in consciousness, we are “not one but many selves” (1: 335).

There are clear parallels to be drawn between James’s theory and Pater’s reference to “the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations” in human perception, and to “that strange, perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves” (Pater 152) which results. Pater celebrates the ability of the reflecting mind to appreciate the world in subtle and detailed ways by dividing an initial perception into a more finely distinguished “group of impressions” (151), while for James it is precisely the mind’s capacity to perceive the world holistically and dynamically which lies at the heart of its power. Both nonetheless celebrate human perception and see the self as necessarily fluid, and James’s work, like

Pater's, provides a suggestive context in which to read Wilde's novel. The painting itself, and Wilde's descriptions of some reactions to it, both present the self as characterised by a paradoxical combination of physicality and radical fluidity which offers interesting analogies with James's theory. Elsewhere, Wilde's novel points to a similar fluidity in other selves. As an amateur psychologist, Lord Henry has "begun by vivisectioning himself" and has "ended by vivisectioning others," yet the reassuring tangibility implied by this metaphor, which seems to offer a vision of the self as stable and mappable, soon breaks down in the ensuing description of his psychological investigations:

It was true that as one watched life in its curious crucible of pain and pleasure, one could not wear over one's face a mask of glass, nor keep the sulphurous fumes from troubling the brain and making the imagination turbid with monstrous fancies and misshapen dreams. There were poisons so subtle that to know their properties one had to sicken of them. . . . To note the curious hard logic of passion, and the emotional coloured life of the intellect – to observe where they met, and where they separated, at what point they were in unison, and at what point they were at discord – there was a delight in that! (56; ch. 4)

If this passage expresses Lord Henry's aestheticism and cynicism, anticipating his gift of the "poisonous book" (121; ch. 10) to Dorian, it may also suggest a fluidity which is fundamental to any self. Again, chemical imagery offers a resonant image for Wilde's narrator. The danger that "sulphurous fumes" might "troubl[e] the brain" hints at Dorian's later drug addiction, in which the self is re-shaped by literally chemical means. At the same time, it underscores the vulnerability of the tangible, physical self to the effects of psychological influences which share the ephemerality of actual "fumes" but which may prove much more difficult to quantify and analyse. Such fluidity, moreover, seems to be a necessary, rather than exceptional, feature of the self: in Lord Henry's own reflections, the polarities of "logic" and "passion" are necessarily blurred, while, similarly, the "intellect" has an "emotional coloured life," this last description, again, redolent of the language of chemistry. Such fluidity carries with it dangerous possibilities of dissolution, but for Pater, James, and Wilde, it is inseparable from the mind's ability to engage with complex experience; Lord Henry, of course, is describing his own perspective as a Paterian aesthete for whom openness to sensory variety is paramount.

Read in this context, Dorian's growing monstrosity, which is central to Wilde's fable about the dangers of excess, may also be seen as a depiction of the openness to transformation of any self and of the fundamental indeterminacy and unpredictability of the relations between mind, body, and external influence which this implies. The heightened sensory experience of aestheticism entails the basic instability of the self because it is precisely that instability which enables, and is compounded by, aesthetic response. Reflecting on the new Hedonism by which he has lived, Dorian imagines the "spiritualizing of the senses" at which his creed aims, yet the harmony of body and spirit which this seems to imply is automatically thrown into doubt by the admission that "men" feel "a natural instinct of terror about passions and sensations that seem stronger than themselves, and that they are conscious of sharing with the less highly organized forms of existence (126; ch. 11)." Notwithstanding the narrator's assertion that conventional morality itself has pathologised these bodily experiences, demanding "monstrous forms of self-torture and self-denial" (126; ch. 11), those senses and passions in themselves retain a visceral power, and one shared with "less highly organized" animals

lower down the evolutionary hierarchy, which must always carry at least a potential threat to the self's stability and autonomy.

The inseparability of the mind's perceptual and imaginative powers from dangerous possibilities of distortion or dissolution is still more acutely evident a few lines further on, as Wilde's narrator describes the "horror and misshapen joy" and "phantoms more terrible than reality itself" encountered in nightmares, and sees these common human experiences as lending "enduring vitality" to "Gothic art . . ." (126; ch. 11). Here dreams are associated with horrors akin to those of Dorian's own Gothic story, but the passage goes on to suggest that such dark visions may also lead to a revisioning of the world in waking life:

Out of the unreal shadows of the night comes back the real life that we had known. We have to resume it where we had left off, and there steals over us a terrible sense of the necessity for the continuance of energy in the same wearisome round of stereotyped habits, or a wild longing, it may be, that our eyelids might open some morning upon a world that had been refashioned anew in the darkness for our pleasure. . . . It was the creation of such worlds as these that seemed to Dorian Gray to be the true object, or amongst the true objects, of life . . . (127; ch. 11)

The echo here of Pater's remark that "our failure is to form habits," since habit implies an engagement with the world which is "stereotyped" and thus limited (152), is an obvious instance of Wilde's critical engagement with Pater's aestheticism. The seductive prospect of a re-imagining of the world so as to provide the individual with new and ever-varied "sensations" (127; ch.11) is simultaneously subverted by the narrator's ironic distancing from Dorian in the observation that such a prospect merely "seemed to Dorian Gray" to be "the true object . . . of life," and, in Dorian's own case at least, the pursuit of "sensations" leads to monstrous excess. At the same time, the description of Dorian's creative vision here also suggests parallels with James's view that "the world we feel and live in" has been formed "by slowly cumulative strokes of choice . . ." ("Are We Automata?" 14). Read in this light, Dorian's desire to create new worlds through the senses and the imagination acquires a significance beyond the fact of his own commitment to aestheticism to gesture, in addition, towards the potential creativity of any mind, creativity which, for James, has been crucial to shaping the world. James's and Sully's theories focus on minds' everyday processing and shaping of sensory information, while Dorian's story is one in which the search for sensations reaches such extremes that it threatens to overwhelm the self and deprive it of the very mental agency on which meaningful sensory experience depends, yet the parallels between novel and psychological theory here suggest that Dorian's case may be read as an exploration, in extreme form, of fundamental features of the mind's engagement with its environment.

Wilde's exploration of aestheticism and dissolution is one feature of the novel's serious engagement with wider fundamental, and scientifically pertinent, questions about the relations between mind, body, and environment. That engagement is perhaps most explicit in Lord Henry's ruminations about the self which follow his reflections on his experimental ambitions which I discussed earlier:

Soul and body, body and soul – how mysterious they were! There was animalism in the soul, and the body had its moments of spirituality. The senses could refine, and the intellect could degrade. Who could say where the fleshly impulse ceased, or the psychological impulse began? How shallow were the arbitrary definitions of ordinary psychologists! (57; ch. 4)

Notwithstanding Lord Henry's dismissal of "ordinary psychologists," the question of the relations between the "fleshly" and the "psychical," as we have seen, is a central one which Wilde shares with contemporary psychological theory. His references to "soul" also suggest parallels with James. James insists that, given the intractability of the issue of the mind/brain relationship, "one cannot afford to despise any . . . great traditional objects of belief" (*Principles* 1: 181) such as the soul, and that such a concept is by no means incompatible with a psychology which also draws heavily on physiology and neuroanatomy; later in his career he was to take a close and sympathetic interest in the nature of religious belief in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In Wilde's passage, the term clearly has theological and metaphysical resonances but also seems potentially close in meaning to "psychical," since soul, "body," and "animalism" appear closely bound up.

The difficulty of separating analytically mind, body and soul implies the self's resistance to description and comprehension according to any one theoretical paradigm. The transformation of the self into aesthetic object, for instance, reflects Lord Henry's proposition that "the true mystery of the world is the visible" (24; ch. 2), and Dorian thus views the picture "as if he had recognized himself for the first time (27; ch. 2)," since it prioritises and, by taking on his sins, preserves his own bodily beauty, allowing him to live as an inspirational "visible" object in the world. The descriptions of the painting with which I began nonetheless suggest that the self must also, of course, be innately physical, embodied not simply as outward surface but as developing, unruly corporeality. Such is implied, too, in the physiological language which the narrator employs at the very moment at which Dorian recognises himself in the picture. The impact of Lord Henry's words about youth and beauty "flashe[s] across him" in the manner of an electrical neural impulse, while the thought of aging makes "each delicate fibre of his nature quiver" (27; ch. 2), a description which echoes widely-used references by physiologists to nerve fibres. He exists as an inwardly, as well as outwardly, physical being, and one who must necessarily be in constant process and interaction with the material or social environment.

Conversely, even Lord Henry's most forthright statement of biological determinism, which grounds the self in the body rather than as aesthetic object, serves, predictably enough, to raise questions about the relationship between mind and body rather than to propose simple answers. He insists that "life is a question of nerves, and fibres, and slowly built-up cells in which thought hides itself and passion has its dreams (206; ch. 19)." If this assumes that the self is, ultimately, shaped by physical processes, it nonetheless clearly implies much more than a simply mechanistic view of psychology. The references to "thought," "passion," and "dreams" describe subjective experience which is based in physiological processes and yet not reducible to them. The complexity of mental processes, whether understood on a physiological or subjective level, is necessarily implied in Lord Henry's insistence on the Proustian psychological power of:

a chance tone of colour in a room or a morning sky, a particular perfume that you had once loved and that brings subtle memories with it, a line from a forgotten poem that you had come across again, a cadence from a piece of music that you had ceased to play . . . (206–07; ch. 19)

These particular, fleeting sensory experiences are not encountered in isolation but instead must necessarily interact with the wider feeling and remembering subject, and this suggests that selves must be complex, dynamic, and individual. It is only under the dominating influence of Dorian's addiction to opium, when "every fibre of the body, as every cell of

the brain, seems to be instinct with fearful impulses,” that he becomes like an “automaton (181, ch. 16).” The description of his mind as “stained” (181; ch. 16) once again recalls the language of chemistry and suggests both the literal domination of the self by the drug and, figuratively, the submersion of Dorian’s individuality beneath its influence. In Wilde’s Gothic fantasy, even human anatomy itself becomes radically transformable, as Basil is converted to “a handful of ashes that . . . [Dorian] may scatter in the air” (161; ch. 14), having been broken down through a chemical process into the atoms which once constituted his body, just as Dorian’s body undergoes a hideous metamorphosis at the end of the story. Both instances present the self as innately, even grossly physical, and both are replete with contemporary anxieties about degeneration. Yet at the same time, these bodies seem as transformable, and even ephemeral, as the mind, and this undermines the notion of locating any stable selfhood in the body.

Wilde’s explorations of the mind/body relationship carry important implications, too, for his engagement with contemporary evolutionary theory. As Smith and Helfand and others have shown, concepts of evolution, particularly as articulated by Spencer, are alluded to extensively in the Oxford notebooks, and in *Dorian Gray* Lord Henry’s declaration that “to be highly organized is, I should fancy, the object of man’s existence” (72; ch. 6) paraphrases Spencer’s theory of evolutionary development as a gradual movement towards “heterogeneity” of form which means that organisms are more complex and hence more closely adapted to the demands of their environments (Spencer 52).¹⁰ As we have seen, evolutionary theory also makes its presence felt in the text through allusion to contemporary anxieties about degeneration. Yet though Dorian’s thoughts about his own identity are strongly influenced by the sense that he is part of a much wider evolutionary trajectory, his relationship with this is by no means straightforward:

He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead. (137, ch. 11).

The effects of heredity are powerfully present here as “strange legacies” in Dorian, but so, too, is the sense of the sheer multiplicity and complexity of the self as it lives and experiences the world. While the self may be shaped by inherited traits, that is, it eludes any simple analysis in terms of heredity or of any other model. As the atoms of the painting suggest, the self is “myriad,” both in the fluidity of its identity and in its ability to engage in complex perceptions of the world. Dorian speculates on the existence of some “poisonous germ” which “crept from body to body till it had reached his own” (137; ch. 11), yet in practice this evades any clear definition. If the “germ” may be read as an allusion to Dorian’s illicit sexuality, its vagueness of reference also, again, suggests the partiality of any one psychological concept as a means of understanding a subject. Dorian’s speculations about the paintings of his ancestors are, precisely, speculations rather than confident diagnoses, and the individual and historically specific details of physiognomy, costume and pose, which Dorian examines, depict these selves as complex psychological wholes rather than as pathological cases to be read, thus highlighting the difficulty of tracing the effects of heredity in the self. As if to underline this point, Dorian goes on to wonder about “ancestors in literature” (138; ch. 11) whose influence on him may be just as strong.

There is another parallel here between Wilde's novel and the work of contemporary psychologists. While figures such as Huxley, Spencer, and Clifford adopt a broadly evolutionary account of mental operations, others, among them Sully and James, incorporate evolutionary theory as a central part of their models of mind but refuse to reduce the mind to the terms of that paradigm. In his essay on "Genius and Insanity," for instance, Sully acknowledges the work of Francis Galton on the role of heredity in human psychology yet is also forthright about the limitations of evolution as a mode of explaining the idiosyncrasies of individual minds: "these researches supply no answer to the supremely interesting question, How does the light of genius happen to flash out in this particular family at this precise moment?" While modern science offers a clearer sense of the "organic composition" of the mind, we "have hardly advanced a step with respect to a knowledge of its genesis and antecedents" (961). Similarly, in a review of an evolutionary account of the human will by G. H. Schneider, a figure in the German *Darwinismus* movement in which Dorian is briefly interested,¹¹ Sully acknowledges the value of evolutionary psychology but argues that "even in the most ingenious hands the doctrine of evolution can only be made to yield a partial understanding of the facts of human psychology" (127). One reason for this is that "the psychological element becomes a necessary co-operant condition in action as life evolves" (128). The mental, as opposed to physiological or hereditary, life, that is, has a degree of causal efficacy of its own which must be taken into account and which must always complicate any evolutionary-based description of the self. In this respect Sully is clearly aligned with James, who, as we have seen, makes a similar argument about the mind's powers and relative autonomy.

Attention to the shared features of Clifford's, Sully's, James's, and Wilde's explorations of the mental and physical, then, suggests that *Dorian Gray* needs to be read not just in the context of anxieties about degeneration or psychopathology but also in relation to the developments in psychology which I have been outlining. Wilde's novel resonates with innovative ways of thinking about the self, of which James's theory is the seminal expression, as necessarily physical but also plastic and creative. While in Wilde's story, the self is threatened with disintegration in the wake of physiological and evolutionary forces, this very fact, read in the context which I am proposing, may gesture towards a new, more fluid and dynamic concept of the subject, one which is grounded in biology but which refuses to reduce the self to this, despite the strength of physical science's explanatory power. Equally, however, these fluid possibilities exemplify Wilde's sense of the self's fundamental indeterminacy and resistance to any theoretical model. Mind and body exist in intimate and yet ambiguous combination, each necessarily part of the self and neither reducible to the other. Each, too, is vulnerable to the incalculable influences of the external sphere, as well as being an agent in that sphere. Read in this way, the text's central conceit resonates with a significance beyond the contexts of evolution and aestheticism, to speak to a wider questioning, in late-Victorian culture, about mind, matter, and their connections.

University of the West of England

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the novel in the context of Wilde's interest in evolutionary theory and Hegelian aesthetics, see *Oxford Notebooks* 96–104.

2. See Haley, Hassler, Seagroatt, Sloan 139–51, and *Oxford Notebooks*.
3. For discussion of Wilde's work in relation to discourses of degeneration and psychopathology, see Mighall 195–99 and the Introduction to the Penguin edition. Arata examines the text's exploration of the connections between sexuality, identity and writing. For a discussion of *Dorian Gray* in the context of mesmerism and contemporary anxieties about "influence," see Thurschwell.
4. For discussion of Wilde's scientific reading, see *Oxford Notebooks*, especially 27–34, and Sloan 139–51.
5. It is in relation to this point, in particular, that my discussion differs from Seagroatt. Seagroatt's interesting exploration of the relations between art and science in the novel nonetheless tends to present contemporary psychology simply as reductively materialist, and takes little account of the crucially important innovations which I am discussing, or of the common ground, which they suggest, between Wilde's story and scientific concepts of mind.
6. See Huxley and *Oxford Notebooks* 178.
7. See Clifford, "On the Scientific Basis of Morals" 109.
8. See Clifford, "The Philosophy of the Pure Sciences" 278.
9. For discussion of *Jekyll and Hyde* in relation to some of the theorists and ideas discussed here, see my "Incongruous Compounds."
10. For readings of *Dorian Gray* in relation to Pater's aestheticism, see Clausson and Riquelme.
11. See especially Smith and Helfand 27–29.
12. See Wilde 128.

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