

Pragmatism

W. James

July 1 - July 4, 2005

The book consists of eight lectures transcribed. This has its advantages and disadvantages. The lectures being aimed at the general educated public means that James is very conscious about his role as a communicator. He thus aims for maximal clarity and thus eschews whenever possible all philosophical jargon. The pace is controlled, and thus punctuated with concrete examples and charming anecdotes to ease the strain. The disadvantages are over-simplification and more seriously an emergent drive to proselyte. James does not only want to explain, but to propose and convert¹.

He starts out by a general survey of philosophy, pointing out that philosophers trying to understand the universe do so under the influence of their temperaments. Clearly it is the psychologist inside James who pontificates. Still one has to concede him an important point. In philosophy, more than in science, the personality of the the author shines through. James speaks about two types of philosophers. The tough-minded and the tender-minded. The former celebrates the confusing variability of the universe, while the latter seeks the grand unifying principles. The universe of the tough-minded is confusing but wonderfully rich, while the tender-minded dwells in an abstract universe, maybe of great beauty and dignity, but somehow irrelevant to our quotidian cares. There are some very important philosophical questions. Like the existence of God, or by whatever manifestation it will be known, the question of free-will and determinism, or the possibility of secure knowledge. Questions that have inspired philosophers for ages, and which everybody with a philosophical strain in him cannot help but consider. Now, James suggests, most people in the audience as amateur philosophers, do not belong to either kind, but are rather a mixture of both. They both believe say in a free-will and determinism, or whatever feels good. The distinction between a philosopher at ease, and one dead serious, is that the former can live with inherent contradictions, while the latter has to be of a sufficiently extreme temperament as to take up an excentric point of view. After illustrating other aspects of the duality between the rationalists, those to whom philosophy is an exalted activity, and who seek the One, the ultimate explanation, on one hand and the empiricists on the other. James is about to launch on what he considers the synthesis of both points of view, namely pragmatism.

Pragmatism, as a denotation of a philosophical attitude, stems back to Charles Peirce, who in an article in *Popular Science Monthly* (of all places) launched it in the 1870's². His point of departure is the non-sentimental attitude of the natural scientist or the engineer,

¹ An additional, rather quirky, effect of it being lectures, is James repeated appeals to the audience, what would they think, would he start acting outrageously? How would that effect the way they would take in the contents? One may see this as an innocent pedagogical prop, but the fact that it is repeated makes you suspect it does pertain to some repressed psychological needs of the lecturer

² January 1878

with a focus on what works. If a controversy does not have any practical consequences it is of no interest, just a proverbial splitting of hairs. James refers approvingly to the German chemist Ostwald, who settled an on-going chemical controversy concerning how atoms were joined in a certain compound, by asking what practical consequences either of the views would entail. Having satisfied himself that there were none, he dismissed the question as irrelevant. This is a wonderful principle, James explains, because it clarifies issues, exhibits the vacuity of much meta-physical speculation, and turns philosophy to its main task, namely away from the exalted artificial edifices of thought, to the manifold of down-to-earth reality; and thus rather than being a dead-end of perfection, leads us into an interminable adventure of continual improvement. In fact, as to a synthesis between the two extremes James has been painting, the reader concludes that it is much closer to empiricism, in spirit and fact, than to rationalism, and James' contempt for grand system-builders like Hegel is thinly veiled indeed. In fact James' philosophical stand is more empirical than most empiricists, thus earning him the label of radical empiricism. But of course pragmatism is not meant as a compromise between the two extremes, rather as a new way of looking at philosophical problems. James quotes with approval the Italian futurist Papini who likens pragmatism to a corridor, connecting all the different rooms of philosophical study.

The 19th century saw the decline of metaphysics and thus a marginalized place for philosophy, especially the grand kind. Science on the other hand was in ascendancy, their attitudes, methods and especially results, being an object of emulation as well as envy. James remarks that Locke, Hume, Berkeley, Kant and Hegel have been utterly sterile as far as shedding any lights on the detailed working on nature, nor can any practical invention be traced to their peculiar thoughts. This indicates, to James, the ultimate worthlessness of traditional philosophy, and thus its need to find a new direction, although his enthusiasm for science is not un-qualified, voicing a concern that its momentum of inventory feeding on itself may result that Man will drown in his wealth, like the baby in the bathtub, who has turned on the water but cannot turn it off.

What is the difference between God, an Absolute and our material conception of the universe, James asks. If time would end at this moment, and we would be confined to study only the past, the practical differences would amount to none. What difference does it make to say that the wonderful world we live in, is conceived by a God, or the manifestation of physical laws. The intricate ways matter combines is surely as exciting an explanation as the glory of God, in fact even more so, as it can engage us at many different levels. And also what difference does it make whether we were created by design, or through the Darwinian process of natural selection, because is not the latter as much of a wonderful design as the former? But the difference emerges once we also take into consideration the future, especially the distant one. It does make a big difference whether we have been put into existence by a benevolent being, personalized as God or abstracted as the Absolute, or whether we have been accidentally molded by blind forces, completely insensitive to our ultimate fate. In the latter case human life, and life in general may be completely blotted out, reducing a universe to a cold place in which the spark of self-awareness will for ever be extinguished. This is indeed a prospect hard for most people to seriously contemplate, and how much nicer would it not be for most of us to conceive of a

benevolence.

Central to all philosophy is the notion of truth. To the rationalist philosopher Truth is indeed spelled with a capital 'T'. There is but one Truth which cannot tolerate any rivals. One Truth dogmatically asserted. To the pragmatism there are many truths, none of them spelled big. Truth is what is useful, and thus provisional in nature. Truths can be overturned in the future when new empirical data will challenge it. James talks about common sense as being the distillation of ancient truths acquired throughout the ages, in fact constituting the categorizing matrix through which we view the world, and to which every new fact has to accommodate. The process of modifying truths is a slow one, as we all are very conservative as when it comes to truths. We want any new truth to harmonize as much as possible with former truths, and the modifications we are willing to do are the minimal one necessary to accommodate the new.

James never talks about falsification but brings up the problem of verification. Most of truth about things we need for our daily lives simply have to be taken on trust. James brings in the simile of bank-notes, which when challenged should be able to turn into more tangible cash. Thus his claim that truth lives for the most part on a credit-system.

While the point of departure for James is the no-nonsense scientific one, as the lectures development the theme of subjectivity becomes more and more pervasive, especially in the lecture on Pragmatism and Humanism. Man is not just a passive on-looker but his presence makes a difference, changing the nature of truth. This is a cause for celebration, as man is not fixed to a destiny, be it of the optimistic or pessimistic kind, but at each moment able to direct the course of the world. More concretely it means that sense-data has no direct independent meaning, but is interpreted according to preconceived schemes. James writes

A sensation is rather like a client who has given his case to a lawyer and then has passively to listen in the courtroom to whatever account of his affairs, pleasant or unpleasant, the lawyer finds it most expedient to give.

and further down

As a matter of fact we can hardly take in an impression at all, in the absence of a preconception of what impressions there may possibly be.

And concludes

We plunge forward into the field of fresh experience with the beliefs our ancestors and we have made already; these determine what we notice, what we notice determines what we experience; so from one thing to another, altho [sic] the stubborn fact remains that there is a sensible flux, what is true of it seems from first to last to be largely a matter of our own creation.

To James there is a definite temperamental difference between the rationalist and the pragmatist philosophers, whose case he is so ardently promoting. He accuses the rationalist mind of being of a *doctrinaire and authoritative complexion*, while the pragmatist is a happy-go-lucky fellow with an anarchistic bent, more liable than not to live like Diogenes in a tub. In the words of James, the loose universe of the pragmatic might affect the rationalist in the same way as freedom-of-the-press may affect a veteran of the Russian bureau of censorship or simplified spelling an elderly school-mistress. Such censure on

the part of James may be thought of as mere frivolous teasing, more seriously, to the tough-minded pragmatic, the absolute reality of the tender-minded rationalist is nothing but names for facts, and then treated as *previous and explanatory*. The mystic craving for One-ness, to which the rational philosophy shows such sympathy, is nothing more than a fear of life. In fact James writes

The peace and rest, the security desiderated at such moments in security against the bewildering accidents of so much finite experience. Nirvana means safety from this everlasting round of adventure of which the world of sense consists. The hindoo [sic] and the buddhist, for this is essentially their attitude, are simply afraid of more experience, afraid of life.

But as to the *credo* of the pragmatist James proposes

It is then perfectly possible to accept sincerely a drastic kind of a universe from which the element of 'seriousness' is not to be expelled. Whoso [sic] does so is, it seems to me, a genuine pragmatist. He is willing to live on a scheme of uncertified possibilities which he trusts; willing to pay with his own person, if need be, for the realization of the ideals which he frames.

The initial lecture ties up with the introductory by bringing in the religious element. James avows that there is a spiritual presence in the universe superior to that of man. In fact he likens our relation to it to that of our domestic pets visavi our own. The latter share in our lives, being present in our dining rooms and living-rooms, without understanding properly what is going on.

In conclusion. James has many a reasonable thing to say, and his point of departure is sound, eschewing mere word-play, and getting philosophy down to earth (although he concedes that too much of that reveals a shallow ambition) and doing away with nonsense through 'show-me' demands. Still during the journey of his lectures, he degenerates to a kind of proselytism, more worthy of propagating a new diet, than a philosophical approach. In the process he does say, as the reader can appreciate, if not always enjoy, a few rather silly things.

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