

Radical Empiricism

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James was a philosophically minded psychologist, who towards the end of his life turned into a psychologically minded philosopher. While his writings on psychology are fascinating and reveal an incisive and inquiring mind and are particularly illuminating when he reflects on the nature of consciousness, his writings on philosophy on the other hand are muddled and it is not very easy to discern any distinctive ideas. I am afraid that in this respect his philosophical outpouring does not differ significantly from much other philosophical writing, and had it not been for the prestige his name still inspires would never have been reissued. The collection is a posthumous one, selected from a variety of articles published in philosophical journals, much of it of a semi-polemical ambition addressing long since forgotten colleagues, which clearly aggravates its fragmentary nature. James produces a lot of words, but the reader has little to hold on to, and thus the words become a current, in which the reader may be carried away, being tossed to and fro, but in a mindless way, as if it is only the body that is being carried away, the mind gets distracted and remains on the shore. Clearly James is groping for words, no doubt having a vague sense of what he wants to say, but the sense is so vague and misty, that he can get no purchase. Still some general tenor is in fact discernible, enough to suggest the location of his thoughts, if not their structure.

The guiding passion of James philosophical explorations is the rejection of grandiose metaphysical speculation, the foremost representative of which was Hegel. James projects himself as the practical man of common-sense who does not spell truth with a capital 'T'. In particular this means his rejection of the Absolute and the conceit that we can rationally understand the universe. The latter entails both taking exception to idealism, as explicated by say Berkeley, and the dismissal of dualism. James is hence forced to take a rather naive view as how we perceive the world around us. Namely we see what there is, neither more nor less. His dismissal of dualism forces him to make no ultimate distinction between thought and things, both assumed to be made of the same stuff. In many ways this approach is reactionary, rejecting the advances of the philosophy of the previous centuries, while he retroactively is seen as a champion of materialism and thus a man of modernism. This fits well into the tenor of the times, in which philosophy tried to rid itself of excessive meta-physical baggage and become more scientific. Ironically those ambitions tended to marginalize philosophy, from having formerly been the big brother of science it now was at best reduced to its chronicler and servant, at worst seen as some rather ineffectual garnishing on the cake. While renouncing the grand ontological questions, it became embroiled in technical epistemology and linguistics. As I understand this trend has in recent decades been broken.

The problem with the anti-rational bias of James is that it makes it hard to rationally discuss philosophy, which partly may explain his problems of articulation. On the other hand an anti-rational attitude is forced upon a philosopher who dismisses dualism, because

by identifying object and subject, all kinds of logical paradoxes intrude uninvited. The rejection of reason as an ultimate arbitrator of the universe involves a severe curtailment of human ambition, but it may be a necessary step. The step is known as empiricism, and of course James wants to be the most radical proponent of it. As an empiricist James will have no truck with speculations which have no practical issue. Truth is simply what is satisfactory, and as such subjected to future revisions. Those ideas are not original with James, but appears to have been picked up from Peirce. Their further elaborations and clarifications would later be seen in the works of Popper. Hard-nosed as such pragmatic ideas may be, they can easily be perverted into what is the nilly-willy world of post-modernists. While James philosophy is excellent for a scientist, or at least one dedicated to look at psychology from a materialistic, neurological viewpoint at the turn of the 20th century, it handicaps him when addressing real philosophical issues. This is illustrated by his theory of 'pure experience' which constitute the main theme of his collection.

What is a pure experience? James is not very forthright on this, the closest he arrives at an indication is that a pure experience is a *that* which has not yet turned into a *what*. Thus everything that happens is an experience, an incontestable fact. Thus what James is trying to do is to phrase his sense of realism. There is a real world out there independent of us. The next step, the rejection of dualism, means that not only is this world outside of us, it also contains us, and our 'experiences' of it are direct and not mediated. James contrasts with the visions of an idealist such as Berkeley, in which everyone exists in a self-contained solipsistic universe, independent of each other, and only unified by the grace of God. Thus James envisions strings of pure experiences conjoined with each other. Some of them being what we normally classify as 'things', others what we instinctively refer to as 'thoughts'. Such classifications are but stratagems of convenience, often useful but ultimately confusing and misleading. Thus our conception of a thing is but part of a long chain of 'pure experiences' joined together, in which one end so to speak is in the mind, while the other end is in the 'thing' itself. And the thought somehow is everything taken together (which I gather should qualify as a compound experience, not a pure one, turning a *that* into a *what*, although James is not explicit on this point.). What James tries to achieve with this is to resolve the old paradox of a thing being able to exist at two places at once. There is nothing paradoxical about this, James explains, it is no more paradoxical than that one point can belong to two different lines, provided that the latter intersect. Thus given two observers of Memorial Hall ¹ they will share in the intersections of their 'thoughts' (lines?) the common pure experience of the Memorial Hall.

This theory if of course charming, and it fulfills the role which is popularly assumed of all philosophies, namely to provide comfort to those who embrace them. And it is indeed comforting, it places us firmly in the world, and it reassures us that the world we perceive is the 'True' one (forget that truth should never be spelled with a capital 'T') and not some ghost. Yet as an intellectual construct it does not lead anywhere, it appears more like a comforting reformulation of the obvious. It does not challenge any preconceptions, it does not invite any lines of inquiry, on the contrary once we start to ask more technical

¹ A brick building stemming from the time of the Civil War, located in the center of Harvard University Campus, the site of concerts and examinations. This clearly gives some sense of location as to James and his musings

questions, it rewards us by nothing more than mere frustration.

The real value of James attitude, as opposed to his attempt at a philosophy, is its emphasis on always returning to the concrete fact, and not to lose oneself into airy intellectual speculation. You may call those concrete facts 'pure experiences' if you prefer, to stress the fact that one should never talk about things of which one has no direct experience. This is an excellent and admirable maxim, but everyone cannot live by it all the time. After all the point and purpose of doing philosophy is to transcend it. Philosophy as we know it would be impossible were we restrained by it. To James intellect becomes identified with the power that discern separations, and hence the aim of the intellect is to classify and fragment, what common-sense holds to belong together. While he also derides the propensity of the intellect to unify. But, as noted above, the rejection of reason, or at least higher reason as opposed to practical, makes for confusion in any attempt of systematic exposition. What does he really want? Consciousness is a good example, and James can rightly be considered one of the founders of the systematic study of consciousness. Does he believe in its existence or not? The initial essay bears the title 'Does Consciousness exist?' and James seems prone to deny it altogether, claiming that it evaporates on closer inspection; while in other places he is liable to take a more common-sense attitude to the phenomenon, implying that it is what it is. As he puts it in 'How two minds can know each other'² *While physical things, namely, are supposed to be permanent and to have their 'states', a fact of consciousness exists but once and is a state. Its esse is sentire; it is only so far as it is felt; and it is unambiguously and unequivocally exactly what is felt.* Thus in particular consciousness is more or less identical with the perception of it (but was this not the same with things ultimately?). One has no quarrel with such an observation, but it does not exactly tally with everything else in the essay, because elsewhere he flatly denies the existence of such a phenomenon and regards it as mere chimera. An essay, which only being a slice of life, instead of life itself, should be required to exhibit some minimal measure of consistency. Now, when James admits the existence of consciousness, especially its 'enveloping' nature, he is then forced to admit as a possibility larger consciousness, such as the Earth-soul of Fechner, as philosophically quite in order³. Hard-nosed materialist as James may be, one should not view him too anachronistically. He was in fact, like many of his colleagues at the time, open to the idea of telepathy, a liberality of thought, that may very well have influenced him in his views of religion and religious experiences. A confirmed materialistic view can accommodate quite a lot of what we now dismiss as pure superstition⁴. But if James direct ideas of consciousness are taken at face value does that not make any scientific explanation of them, by definition impossible? And that very

² The titles of the essays seem to have very little specific to do with their actual contents, and one suspects that they could be more or less arbitrarily permuted without the reader noticing anything in particular. This is, however, not a very serious criticism.

³ James momentarily flirts with the idea of 'Humanism' as a religion, but makes the point that such a religion cannot be mono-theistic. God will not be omnipotent, only the largest conscious entity (including all others?). This is actually rather interesting constituting a possible line of religious development which actually never took place.

⁴ At the time of James the notion of atoms and molecules were often thought to be but scientific models, with no corresponding 'hard' reality.

immediate knowing of consciousness how can that be given a purely materialistic basis? Not that it may not, but James approach gives no clue.

Related to consciousness is of course the perennial question of free will, which James prudently does not confront, and the relation between small actions and big actions? When I am groping for words, James asks rhetorically in a lecture, there is both my conscious intention and the nerve firing of my brain cells, are the latter just their to do the bidding of my conscious self (which would assume some sort of dualism) or is my conscious intention just the manifestation of mindless nerve activities? The shadow of something quite different? In this discussion James refers to Bergson (this windbag) and Strong (who is this?) as with the hunters instinct pursuing fruitful trails. On this James performs but feebly.

James is of course very serious about his proposed philosophy, but it cannot be stretched too much, that it is not a philosophy of intellectual architecture, but one to make him feel good. It is a philosophy that puts the emphasis on facts, and facts James reminds the reader cannot be reasoned away by logic.

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