The Jamesian Mind

Sarin Marchetti

James's radicalization of empiricism

Publication details

Michela Bella
Published online on: 29 Dec 2021

How to cite: Michela Bella. 29 Dec 2021, *James's radicalization of empiricism from: The Jamesian Mind* Routledge
Accessed on: 31 Dec 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
1. Introduction

The collection of Essays in Radical Empiricism appeared posthumously edited by Ralph B. Perry on account of William James’s 1907 table of contents. James’s first reference to radical empiricism appears already in his 1896 preface to The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (WB: 5–6). Then again in the 1909 preface to The Meaning of Truth he gives another seminal and more well-known definition of his philosophical doctrine. Radical empiricism is James’s arrival point, and as Gary Hatfield recently recalled (2015: 143), “by 1909, James viewed this ‘radical empiricism’ as more fundamental than pragmatism in his philosophical oeuvre; pragmatism was preparatory for radical empiricism.” In the latter preface James justifies his interest in the problem of truth and his effort to collect a second book on this subject, as mainly due to the logical connection between the pragmatist theory of truth and radical empiricism. Following two great Jamesian scholars, McDermott and Seigfried, many agree that James’s epistemological doctrine of radical empiricism already informed his Principles of Psychology, particularly his understanding of the stream of thought. McDermott’s classical thesis is that James’s philosophical doctrine of radical empiricism was first elaborated in the field of psychology, where he encountered the epistemological difficulties that originated within the new psychology. Moreover, in a pivotal passage of her 1990 book, Seigfried argues that James developed the structures of the flux of experience already in Principles and that “his metaphysics of radical empiricism can be interpreted as a demonstration that the traditional distinction between subjective and objective is only functional” (Seigfried 1990: 94). She thus corroborates the idea of the profound continuity in James’s rethinking of empiricism initially relying on his physiological understanding of relations, and finally turning out to be a key conception of his philosophical doctrine. Before Seigfried’s book, both Perry in his first edition of the Essays and the editors of the critical edition of ERE report that James uses the term “‘humanism’ either as a synonym for ‘radical empiricism’ . . . ; or as that general philosophy of life of which ‘radical empiricism’ is the theoretical ground” (Perry 1912: 193). Perry also closely linked radical empiricism to James’s metaphysical pluralism (cf. Perry 1935, II: 586), and Seigfried supplemented this reading by arguing that the notion of “pure experience” was nothing more than a way of “formalizing ‘the nature of the synthetic unity of consciousness’” (Seigfried 1990: 357). McDermott still recently reiterated that “Pluralism is the pragmatic result of James’s doctrine of relations”
Supporting the view of a strict relation between James’s psychology and philosophy, Hilary Putnam acknowledges the interconnection of “pragmatism – humanism – radical empiricism” as James’s “new and original Weltanschauung” (C10: xxvi), whereas Max Fisch found a profound similarity in the relationship between “radical empiricism” and “pragmatism” in James, and between “synechism” and “pragmatism” in Ch. S. Peirce’s thinking (see ERE: xxxvii).

Summing up, many Jamesian scholars see radical empiricism as the final result of a unitary theoretical path through James’s psychology, epistemology and metaphysics. Considering radical empiricism as a key doctrine embracing all of James’s reflection throughout his entire life, I am going to explore what the philosophical radicalization of empiricism consists in James’s view, starting from its twofold definition and then showing its connections with psychology and pragmatism. The conviction guiding my interpretation is the relevance of the notion of continuity in both James’s epistemology and ontology. In particular, the notion of continuity allows to capture the importance of James’s gradual translation of psychological experimental observations of the continuity of thought into an ontological perspective according to which continuity constitutes a feature of reality (cf. Bella 2019).

2. Definitions of radical empiricism

James’s first definition of radical empiricism can be found in the preface to The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (1897), a volume dedicated to Charles S. Peirce, in which he collects a series of discourses published in several reviews with the aim of bringing to the foreground the “philosophical attitude” that he perceives as a common characteristic of these writings and that he already defines as “radical empiricism” (WB: 5). Why does he call this philosophical attitude “empiricism”? The answer is in the hypothetical character of its conclusive stances: experimental certainties achieved in “matters of fact” remain susceptible to future verification and change, they are not given once and for all. And what is the “radical” aspect of this empiricism? It mainly concerns its being a form of anti-dogmatism, with particular reference to the difference between monism and pluralism, which James confirms here as on several other occasions to be the most significant option in philosophy (cf. SPP: 61). He takes a distance from all forms of half-hearted empiricism, either “positivism or agnosticism or scientific naturalism,” on the conviction that radical empiricism “does not dogmatically affirm monism as something with which all experience has got to square” (WB: 5).

We can say that radical empiricism is a form of full-hearted empiricism which takes experience in its unsolved givenness without trying to “‘overcome’ or to reinterpret in monistic form” (WB: 7) its real discrepancies, namely what James quoting Benjamin Paul Blood’s 1893 work The Flaw in Supremacy apostrophes as the “ever not quite” (WB: 6, fn.). His first effort to synthesize and give a name to this philosophical attitude is not yet an “argumentation for its validity”; it is rather a collection of “illustrations” that nonetheless deserves credit, in James’s eyes, for having made this attitude clearly visible overshadowing the dogmatic attitudes that dominated the history of Western philosophy.
The second definition is given in the introduction to *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), where James presents his doctrine in a more argumentative way and clarifies the three statements in which it consists. First, the postulate that “the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience”; then the statement of fact that “relations between things, conjunctive as well as disjunctive, are just as much matters of direct particular experience, neither more so nor less so, than the things themselves.” Finally, the generalized conclusion that “the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience” (MT: 7). This conclusion means that the directly apprehended universe needs, in short, no extraneous trans-empirical connective support, but possesses in its own right a concatenated or continuous structure.

The great obstacle to radical empiricism in the contemporary mind is the rooted rationalist belief that experience as immediately given is all disjunction and no conjunction, and that to make one world out of this separateness, a higher unifying agency must be there. (MT: 7)

The framework within which James develops his mature reflection is a philosophy of experience. Its basic postulate is that only things that can be experienced can be the subject of philosophical discourses, thus marking the methodological parameters within which radical empiricism needs to remain. The heart of the doctrine is the statement of fact that relations between things must be directly experienceable, and in this sense we can understand both McDermott’s and Seigfried’s insistence on the idea that James’s radical empiricism is a theory of experience based on a theory of relations. Radical empiricism strongly depends on the experienceability of relations, and it is therefore on this point that the consistency of the doctrine and its attempt to distinguish itself, on the one hand, from different forms of empiricism and, on the other, from rationalism, falls or stands.

Rationalism and empiricism shared somehow the idea that immediate experience is disconnected. Against this idea, which is the “great obstacle” to the diffusion of radical empiricism in current mentality, James claims that conjunctive and disjunctive relations are directly experienced thus fostering a physiological conviction he already expressed in his psychological writings (cf. PP: ch. XX). This conviction makes it possible not to rely on transcendent principles to explain the unity of the world, that is the idea that there is no need of an “extraneous trans-empirical connective support,” for it is the very structure of the “universe” that possesses “a concatenated or continuous structure” (MT: 7).

Besides stressing the connection between radical empiricism and his epistemological convictions in psychology, this second preface is important also because James connects radical empiricism and pragmatism. By outlining his understanding of truth relations as always concerning possible experiences, we can see how his pragmatist efforts of demystifying intellectualistic meanings sedimented in the contemporary scientific mentality play an indispensable *pars desastrum* for the doctrine of radical empiricism.

### 3. Back to psychology: consciousness and feelings of relations

In his *Principles of Psychology*, James was proposing a new starting point for psychological analysis which appealed to the original thickness and continuity of experience as suggested by nineteenth-century experimental psychology. In my interpretation, his philosophy stems from this rich, active and continuous description of mental life. As he clearly explains almost ten years later, in the
preface to the first Italian translation of his masterpiece by Giulio Cesare Ferrari (actually the first European translation), the new theoretical framework he introduced in 1890, also inspired by Darwinism, was supposed to overcome the intellectualistic perspective on the human constitution dominant in psychology by recognizing and enhancing the role of the affective component of mind. One of the aims of his book was to clarify the nature and methods of psychology, freeing it from the strings of metaphysics and placing it neatly on the side of natural sciences. In order to do this, he thought he could find in natural experience a new starting point most widely shared, and he had to accept some compromises to achieve a general harmony between the psychological and philosophical schools that were confronted at the time (associationism, spiritualism and transcendentalism). In this 1900 preface, James confesses that concrete experiential unity of mental states was the pivot around which he structured the book. He also insists on the relevance of the biological perspective he employed to correct the distortions of psychological empiricism, particularly the passive-receptive view of sensation and more generally of the mind. This last point is very important to understand more broadly the Jamesian project, which is presented in this preface in a paradigmatic way.

James's concrete description of mental phenomena allowed to acknowledge the role played by “feelings of relation” and other parts of the stream of thought. The lack of introspective attention and the difficulty fleeting mental phenomena pose to analysis and verbalization caused many psychologists (and philosophers) to ignore the “transitive” parts of consciousness, which are those parts moving at a comparatively faster speed than the “substantive” parts. The feelings of relation and tendency, the internal connections, and the direction of our thoughts are all transitive parts of consciousness, those which we often express in our discourses by using prepositions like “and, but, by” (cf. PP: 238). These parts correspond at the brain level to the phases of passage between two peaks of nervous activity. The analysis of mental phenomena taken in their concreteness, that is in the vague and changing aspects of lived experience, can already be said to be radically empirical or radically anti-intellectualist. Against both empiricism and rationalism, James emphasized the epistemic value of sensible perception as the access point to all the complex and varied phenomenology of mental life recognized in empirical analysis.

Reinstating the relevance of transitive parts of consciousness was not a move intended to undermine the function of the substantive parts of thought, which as stable and defined parts are more easily conceptualizable and likewise important. James's aim was rather to address two great logical fallacies he detected in classic empiricist psychology, from these fallacies stemmed the omissions of both half-hearted empiricism and rationalism. First, it is a mistake to think that one cannot have images except of perfectly defined things; second, it is incorrect to maintain that through subjective feelings we can know the simple qualities of objects but not their relations. By defending the existence of vague perceptions and relations as core parts of a more concrete description of the facts of psychology, he was claiming the necessity of a radical application of the empirical method, which in his view was left almost abandoned in many psychology books. From a fully empiricist perspective, the one he intended to apply, the sacrifice of our perception of the continuity of our stream of thought (cf. PP: ch. IX) in favor of an atomistic conception of the elements of thought was in no way justifiable on introspective observation. Indeed, the atomistic image of mental states shared by empiricism (associationism) and rationalism was nothing more than the result of an intellectualistic analysis of concrete mental activity, and it was responsible for producing paradoxes and contradictions in psychology.

Despite his positivistic assumptions, James's elaboration of psychological continuity substantially moved away from the dualistic standpoint of modern science. His adoption of the “point of view of natural science” (PP: 5), his intention to study the mind introspectively by remaining loyal to the empirical method of investigation, together with his consequent rejection of the
atomistic metaphysics laying behind associationism (and rationalism), can be seen as an early attempt to internally reform the empiricist methodology, and its implicit worldview, on the basis of the new discoveries provided by experimental psychology and the continuous ontological framework suggested by Darwin’s theory of evolution. On the methodological ground, radicalism mainly consisted in an attentive, pluralistic and sensibilistic description of mental phenomena. All his efforts, however, did not prevent him from falling into several philosophical problems and sometimes overstepping the sharp boundaries he tried to establish for the new psychology.

4. Pragmatism and radical empiricism

Even if in a famous passage of the preface of Pragmatism James maintains that pragmatism is not necessarily to be linked to the doctrine of radical empiricism – since the two are independent from one another – a more profound connection seems instead to be established, as mentioned before, in the preface to The Meaning of Truth. There, James writes:

I am interested in another doctrine in philosophy to which I give the name of radical empiricism, and it seems to me that the establishment of the pragmatist theory of truth is a step of first-rate importance in making radical empiricism prevail.

(MT: 6)

In his editorial preface to the Essays, Perry argues that “‘radical empiricism’ and pragmatism are closely allied” (Perry 1912: ix). Indeed, if one focuses on James’s postulate of radical empiricism that philosophy should only deal with “things definable in terms drawn from experience,” and considers it together with his definition of pragmatism as bringing the meaning of propositions down to “particular consequence in our future practical experience,” it is evident, according to Perry, how the two theories converge. The pragmatist treatment of notions like “meaning” and “truth” turns out to be an application of a radically empiricist mentality for the pragmatist method regards dichotomies “as only differences of empirical relationship among common empirical terms” (Perry 1912: x). But besides considering pragmatism as a “special chapter” of James’s theory of knowledge, Perry also shares James’s first stance that pragmatism and radical empiricism are independent doctrines when considering the statement of fact and the general conclusion exposed in 1909. The theory of relations is at the core of both a radical overcoming of classic empiricism and the radically empiricist metaphysical claim that “reality is an ‘experience-continuum’” (Perry 1912: xii). It is clear then that a pragmatist is obliged to adopt neither James’s theory that conjunctive and disjunctive relations are “matters of direct particular experience” nor his general conclusion about reality as a related continuum.

By facing “forward to the future” (P: 108) and turning its back to a priori reasons, fixed principles and closed systems, pragmatism represents the familiar “empiricist attitude . . . both in a more radical and in a less objectionable form” (P: 31). Empiricism and rationalism are two stereotypic philosophical temperaments that James returns to frequently. He identifies the empiricist as a tough-minded “going by ‘facts’” (P: 13). Empiricists are elsewhere described as those who consider the whole as a collection of parts and the universal as an abstraction. The rationalists, instead, are tender-minded “going by ‘principles’” (P: 13), they make the whole have priority over the parts both on the level of logic and of being.

Pragmatism aspires to be a philosophy that satisfies both empiricists’ and rationalists’ demands: “the scientific loyalty to facts” and “the old confidence in human values and the resultant spontaneity, whether of the religious or of the romantic type” (P: 17). On the one hand, pragmatism shares with empiricism the empirical devotion to facts, but does not accept its materialistic
attitude; on the other, it does not programmatically reject the need for religiousness preserved by rationalism. In James’s view, pragmatism is a more powerful empiricist method of research in that it remains as open as possible to all sorts of human experiences. This method operates selection in rebus by the criterion of the cash-value of theories: it does not work on prejudicial exclusion, rather on controlled or qualified inclusion.

Both pragmatism and radical empiricism had to confront empiricism and rationalism in order to distinguish themselves. Like pragmatism, radical empiricism emerges as a renovation of the empiricist attitude in philosophy, which aims to constitute a more inclusive empiricist alternative to both philosophical traditions. In James’s view, their respective insufficiency eminently concerns conjunctive relations that have been neglected by empiricism and have been elevated by rationalism to celestial realities (cf. ERE: 23). In this sense, rationalism has done nothing but correct an otherwise originally fragmented vision of reality by introducing trans-experiential unifying agents, such as substances, categories of intellect or the transcendental ego.

Focusing on truth-relations, unlike rationalism, Pragmatism is not satisfied with the static possession of logical principles of reality as the end of research: abstract notions should finally meet concrete experience and be able to theoretically or practically affect concrete lives. To the rationalist, knowledge is the static possession of true ideas, while to the pragmatist, knowledge is an activity in progress. These two attitudes are based on different assumptions: on the one hand, the idea that the truth relation is static; on the other, the idea that the truth relation is dynamic and therefore its consequences need to be investigated.

The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process, the process namely of its verifying itself, its veri-fication. Its validity is the process of its valid-ation.

(P: 97)

Despite the harsh criticisms drawn by this conception of truth (Bordogna 2008), James was revealing the world of provisional meanings and plural truths, which under the same consolidated names flow continuously in concrete living. Pragmatism is mainly concerned with meaning, and meaning deals with practical (read particular, cf. MT: 38) consequences, namely, concrete contexts, time, interests and personal preferences. In this sense, the continuity of reality as experienced is the way in which meanings practically bridge what James calls the “epistemological gulf” (MT: 32, 98) between the subject’s idea and the object. As affective and fallible beings, we are the vectors of continuous processes of interpretation of reality, and truth relations serve the function of leading us through worthwhile moments of experience.

Therefore, the “triumph” of pragmatism as a method goes together with the radicalization of the empirical approach in philosophy, and turns out to be beneficial for both the defeat of the “ultra-rationalistic” mentality and the reconciliation between science and metaphysics (cf. P: 31).

5. Radicalizing empiricism: conjunctive relations, pure experience and substitution

The essay On the Function of Cognition (1885) opening the collection The Meaning of Truth (1909) can be seen as a trait union between James’s psychology and pragmatist epistemology. This essay expresses the rehabilitation of sensible perception in epistemology, and at the same time confirms that the pragmatist conception of truth, which Charles Augustus Strong addressed as
James's radicalization of empiricism

“the James–Miller theory of cognition” is but “that earlier statement more completely set forth” (MT: 79). Particularly as to what concerns truth relations, in this collection epistemology and ontology appear as effectively bridged within experience: the feelings of relations that emerge at the level of psychological introspection as transitive parts of thought serving the function of leading to substantive parts, at the epistemological level take the form of ideas leading us through experience.

Radical empiricism uses three conceptual tools to provide a fully empirical solution to the paradox of the self-transcendence of knowledge, namely the epistemological leap between the idea and the object: the relations of conjunction, the notion of pure experience, and the logical function of substitution. With regard to conjunctive relations, radical empiricism aims at rehabilitating the direct experience of conjunctive relations, proclaiming that just like disjunctive relations, conjunctive relations exist and are directly perceived. They present in various types with different degrees of intimacy and inclusiveness, spanning from simple co-presence; through contiguity, resemblance, activity and causality; to the continuous transition between states of consciousness. The conjunctive relation that a radical empiricist must consider most important is the co-conscious conjunctive transition. It is a process whereby a personal experience passes into another. For a psychological description of what is meant by co-conscious transition, that is the maximum degree of intimacy of which we are aware between two moments of our experience, James refers to his chapters on the “Stream of Thought” (IX) and the “Consciousness of Self” (X) in Principles. The nature of the transition between two first-person experiences consists precisely in the sense of continuity that we perceive, and which according to James constitutes a true empirical content, just as the sense of discontinuity constitutes the nature of the relation of disjunction that we experience in the transition between a personal experience and a conceived experience, such as the experience of others (cf. ERE: 26).

This hypothesis implies some logical difficulties concerning the nature of relations and the general consistency of his theories (see Moller 2001). Ultra-rationalism depicts a world of internal and essential relations, whereas radical empiricism provides an empirical description of them in terms of particular external or accidental relations. To a radical empiricist, human experience appears as mostly chaotic in that it presents no necessary connection or disconnection, being some parts of experience only co-present to one another. James depicts his “radical empiricism” as “a mosaic philosophy, a philosophy of plural facts” (ERE: 22). James talks about “concatenated union,” since for a radical empiricist every relation has only limited power. Pragmatically speaking, the pluralistic vocation of radical empiricism “means only that sundry parts of reality may be externally related. . . . Things are ‘with’ one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything” (PU: 145). External relations are “adventitious” in the sense that, for instance, spatial relations may change without simultaneously changing the inner nature of the things they relate. As many conjunctions in experience appear to be external or accidental, “a philosophy of pure experience must tend to pluralism in its ontology” (ERE: 54).

In “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” (1904), James claims that consciousness does not exist as an entity but stands for the function of knowing – the function that our experiences “not only are, but are known” (ERE: 14). The distinction between knower and known is explained as a functional and not ontological distinction that depends on external factors, specifically the different relational contexts to which we can retrospectively connect an experience.

My thesis is that if we start with the supposition that there is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff “pure experience,” then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter. The relation
itself is a part of pure experience; one of its “terms” becomes the subject or bearer of the knowledge, the knower, the other becomes the object known.

(ERE: 5)

James’s monistic hypothesis of pure experience is an alternative to traditional dualistic ontologies. He believed that the hypothesis of “only one primal stuff” converged with other contemporary scientific and philosophical tendencies. His first move is to elucidate his notion of pure experience to avoid possible confusion with other notions, first and foremost with the neo-Kantian notion of consciousness. For neo-Kantians, consciousness stands for the dualistic structure of actual experience, which is constituted by consciousness plus content. James contests that the inner duplicity of experience exists and can be achieved by analytic subtraction. Divisions are not constitutive of experience but added after reflection. Accordingly, any undivided portion of experience taken in different contexts of association can play different parts according to different functions: the knower or the known, consciousness or content. The epistemological dualism conveyed by the notion of “experience” is translated by James into a issue about relations, and it is explained in a “verifiable and concrete” way. No ontological dualism is ever in the bits of pure experience, but it is added retrospectively, or when one has to consider experience and talk about it in dualistic terms. Subjectivity and objectivity are “functional attributes” of pure experience. Such is the anti-Cartesian thesis of James: consciousness is not a special stuff like the res cogitans, rather consciousness connotes a kind of external relation.

The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the “pure” experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality or existence, a simple that. In this naïf immediacy it is of course valid; it is there, we act upon it; and the doubling of it in retrospection into a state of mind and a reality intended thereby, is just one of the acts.

(ERE: 13)

This passage is very indicative at least for three reasons. James provides a further definition of “pure experience” explicitly connecting it with the present moment. He states the priority of “conduct” over knowledge, which is a common trait of Pragmatist thinkers. In a note, James also observes that a very similar view is that of his friend and colleague Perry (cf. Perry 1904). The interesting aspect of their explications is the “through and through,” or continuous process of correction of truth made by experience without appealing to the self-transcendence of the idea or to representationalist theories.

James’s analogy of the system of truths as a credit system shows how close his conceptions of knowledge and reality are as natural processes in the making. The same argument can be found in the discussion of the notion of truth in Pragmatism (1907), in which truth ideas are presented as cognitive relations in the making. This notion of ongoing knowledge, which combines with that of “pure experience” as something on which I “proceed and act” and that only retrospectively conceive in a more structured way, obviously involves various issues including the validation of the cognitive process – even assuming that, as James believes, it is “a function of our active life” and not “a static relation out of time” (ERE: 37). There is a distinction to make between complete knowing and transitional knowing. We live in a system of continuous indirect verifications which rely upon our perceptual capacity. The feelings of tendency are sufficient to orientate our cognitive paths and eventually corroborate our direction. And although until the leading process is completed, there is no certainty that our idea is truly cognitive,
nevertheless, we may discover at that point that we were virtual knowers long before we became actual knowers.

Finally, we have to consider substitution as the third tool of radical empiricism. Substitution is an essential logical function. Some experiences, and overall conceptual experiences, can functionally replace others in their task of leading us to perceptual terms. Conceptual alternative paths are more convenient and rapid compared to perceptual ones. The functional replacement of perceptions with conceptions introduces ideal cuts in perception by isolating and defining the unbroken stream of experience. Conceptualization introduces static orders of relation that can only be analytically compared, but cannot replace the dynamic relations of the experiential stream. Concepts fail to let us know the nature of reality faithfully and fully, and here emerges his thesis of the “insuperability of sensation” (SPP: 45). Reality in its concrete integrity is given to us in immediate perception, and only superficially in concepts. However, the practical utility of concepts and their reality is undeniable, especially for a meliorist. In concrete situations, there is no clear distinction between concepts and percepts, which are mixed. With concepts we extend our immediate perceptual environment beyond the here and now, and organize perceptual experiences according to our practical and aesthetic interests.

6. Conclusion

Radical empiricism as a “radical standing by experience” (ERE: 27) moves from James’s understanding the continuity of relations first in psychology, and then in philosophy. It took him many years to solve the classic subject-object dualism through a radical Pragmatist switch, with all the conceptual difficulties to which the original perspective of radical discontinuity gave birth. He pragmatically reconsidered it in the light of the radical continuity of experience, and this change of view, as he argues in The Meaning of Truth, is fundamental for offering a serious alternative to paradoxical theories of knowledge. For its conception of evolving knowledge and reality, radical empiricism is in tune with natural realism. This doctrine makes it possible to appreciate the variety of concrete experiences; that is, not to leave part of our experience outside the philosophical discourse. Even if James does not claim rigorous interdependencies between radical empiricism, pluralism and pragmatism, he emphasizes their functional connections. Life forces us to consider experience directly: as human beings we cannot conceptualize and solve vital questions without passing through them with the aid of all our faculties, making mistakes and learning to participate more and more deeply in the praxis of the multitude of situations that life opens up for us (cf. PU: 131–32).

Notes

1 A core group of these essays was written between 1904 and 1905. For a detailed reconstruction of Perry’s interventions see ERE (200ff.).
2 On the Function of Cognition (1885), The Knowing of Things Together (1895), and On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology (1884) contain the main features of James’s radical empiricism (cf. ERE: xxiii).
3 Seminal readings on the interconnection of epistemology and ontology in pragmatism are Rosenthal (2005), Pihlström (2007), and Duvernoy (2015). On the mind-world continuity in Peirce and James, see Calcaterra (2011) and Maddalena (2015).
4 Some scholars extended this connection to the religious field (Lamberth 1999; Brown 2000). However, not all scholars agree with the continuity perspective; particularly successful was Gale’s idea of the “two-James,” the pragmatist and the mystic (Gale 1999).
5 For a critical examination of James’s criticism of empiricism, see Inukai (2018); on James’s empirical attitude, see Madelrieux (2008).
Michela Bella

6 On James’s radical empiricism and pluralism, see Slater (2011), Thayer-Bacon (2017), and Campbell (2017: ch. 5).
7 We only have the Italian translation by Ferrari of the original version written by James. Cf. James (1901).
8 In Principles, James adopts the dualistic perspective of natural science, but this was according to Myers just “an advertised stratagem, not a conviction” (PP: xviii).
9 Together with the method of introspection, which is fundamental for psychology, James employs the comparative and experimental methods (cf. PP: ch. VII).
10 On James and Darwinism, see Franzese (2009), McGranahan (2017), and Pearce (2018, 2020).
11 With the expression ‘neo-Kantians,’ James refers to the authors of this philosophical tradition, such as Paul Natorp. Expressions like “successors of Kant” or “post-Kantian idealists, or absolute idealists such as Green, the Cairds, Bradley, and Royce. For a detailed analysis, see Thayer’s introduction (MT: xiv–xvi).
12 At the Fifth International Congress of Psychology held in Rome in 1905, James presented a French version of this essay, La notion de Conscience. James gave a most positive content to his functional dualism during the question-and-answer time following his lecture.
13 James calls his view of concepts as a coordinated realm of reality as “logical empiricism.” He also declares that Some Problems of Philosophy is an excentric work “in its attempt to combine logical realism with an otherwise empirical mode of thought” (SPP: 58). For further reading, see Uebel (2015) and Pihlström, Stadler and Weidtmann (2017).
14 As to James’s slightly different definitions of pure experience, see Skrupskelis’s introduction to Manuscripts, Essays, and Notes.
15 For an analysis of the relevance of ethical conduct for social and political development in James, see Marchetti (2015).
16 The hypothesis of pure experience allows for an anti-representationalist account of perceptual and conceptual experience. This achievement of pragmatism is now acknowledged among cognitive scientists; see Johnson (2006), Chemero (2009), and Gallagher (2017).
17 In 1905 James corroborates this classification of his view as a form of “natural realism” (cf. De Sanctis 1906: 155).

References

James's radicalization of empiricism


