

ON THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PERCEPTS AND CONCEPTS IN WILLIAM JAMES'S PHILOSOPHY OF EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT: William James addresses the issue of the immediacy of experience from different angles and at different stages of his work. The topic looms at the centre of his reflection, mainly affecting the passage from a psychological analysis of the continuity of consciousness to a mature philosophical elaboration of the continuity of experience. Through a theoretical reconstruction of James's 'philosophy of experience,' at the crossroad between psychology and philosophy, this article aims to shed light on James's reinterpretation of perception within a naturalistic and pragmatic conception of knowledge that he developed by analogy to natural cognitive processes. His naturalistic and radically empirical conception of experience, moreover, corroborates the idea of the profound logical and epistemological influence of Darwinism in James's psychology and philosophy, specifically as to the new metaphysical framework provided by Darwin's theory of evolution.

Keywords: William James; pure experience; percepts/concepts; darwinism; ontology

William James addresses the issue of the immediacy of experience from different angles and at different stages of his work, at first within a psychological framework and then, later, from a more philosophical perspective. Indeed, from whatever angle he approaches it, the topic looms at the centre of his thought; its centrality is especially evident if one reads the evolution of his reflection in terms of the passage from a psychological analysis of the continuity of consciousness to the attempt to extend the same continuity to experience (Perry 1935, vol. 2, 583ff; Seigfried 1990, 351ff). From this standpoint, it is essential to understand what is meant by continuity and therefore to pay attention to the perceptual dimension, that is, to concrete, sensible, immediate experience. James combined his notion of experience as synthetic and empirically unitary, with a pluralistic metaphysics. His formulation of radical empiricism thus emerges as a critique of the epistemological and metaphysical assumptions of

classical empiricism as well as that of extreme or absolute rationalism, which he called 'vicious intellectualism'.

When considering James's conception of experience and immediacy, the doctrine of the 'pure experience' soon makes its entrance. As is well known, it was formulated publicly in the *Essays in Radical Empiricism* ('Does 'Consciousness' Exist?' July 1904; 'The Thing and Its Relations', November 1904) but, as can be seen from his notes and correspondence, James spent much more time on this hypothesis because of the cogent objections from Miller and Bode to which he had to reply (James 1988, 65-129). In some articles and essays it is clear how he was trying to elaborate a philosophy of pure experience, in which 'pure experience' was both a metaphysical hypothesis and a methodological principle. In this article, I would like to highlight briefly the central role that this theme – the relationship between immediate and mediated, which in the author's terminology is the relation between percepts and concepts – plays in the Jamesian philosophy of experience. In my view, this reconstruction helps to shed light on the naturalistic and pragmatic conception of knowledge that he developed by analogy to natural cognitive processes. Moreover, I contend that his naturalistic and radically empirical conception of experience helps to corroborate the idea of the profound logical and epistemological influence of Darwinism in James's psychology and ontology. Finally, I would like to consider, in the light of this broader ontological picture, the central passages where the question of the immediacy of experience is raised, and to examine its main contemporary epistemological outcomes.

Notes for a philosophy of 'pure' experience

James's philosophical reflection on immediate experience emerges from his philosophy of radical empiricism. The first definition of his philosophical doctrine can be found in the preface to *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897), a volume in which the author collects together a series of

articles already published in different places. He intends to shed light on their characteristic 'philosophical attitude' which James already calls 'radical empiricism'. In this definition, he refers to the empirical philosophy, since the 'certainties' reached in the 'matters of fact' remain subject to change, that is, hypotheses open to future experiential verifications. The radicalism of this philosophical attitude concerns an antidogmatic tension between monism and pluralism, which James asserts at various places to be the most significant predicament in philosophy. Later, in the preface to *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), a text in which James finds himself having to answer a series of objections and misunderstandings raised by his pragmatic conception of truth, he returns to the definition of radical empiricism:

Radical empiricism consists first of a postulate, next of a statement of fact, and finally of a generalized conclusion. The postulate is that the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience. [Things of an unexperienceable nature may exist ad libitum, but they form no part of the material for philosophic debate.] The statement of fact is that the 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. The generalized conclusion is that therefore the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience. The directly apprehended universe needs, in short, no extraneous trans-empirical connective support, but possesses in its own right a concatenated or continuous structure (James 1975b, 6-7).

The philosophical framework within which James carries out his mature research and interests is precisely a philosophy of experience, which elsewhere he will also define as a 'philosophy of pure experience'. The basic postulate is that only things that can be experienced can be the subject of philosophical discourses *strictu sensu*, which then marks the methodological parameters within which radical empiricism needs to remain. However, the heart of the doctrine is the declaration of the fact that the relations between things must also be directly

experienceable. In this sense, we can read James's radical empiricism as a theory of experience based on a theory of relations. Indeed, it strongly depends on the reality (experience) of relations and it is therefore on this point that the consistency of a radically empirical theory of experience and its attempt to distinguish itself, on the one hand, from idealism and, on the other, from empiricism, is at stake¹.

For James, the 'great obstacle' to radical empiricism, and thus to a philosophy of pure experience, is the idea cultivated by rationalism, but ultimately also shared by empiricism, that immediate experience is absolutely disconnected. The claim that already emerged in his psychological writings of the experienceability of relations makes it possible not to rely on transcendent principles of explanation. The unity of the world is not to be achieved through the operation of a superior unifying action, what James calls an 'extraneous trans-empirical connective support'; but it is the very structure of the 'immediate experience' of reality that possesses 'a concatenated or continuous structure' (James 1975b, 7). In other words, it is necessary to recognize the reality (actuality) of conjunctive and disjunctive relations and of a pure or immediate experience in which relations are immediately experienced in sensation. Relations are *real* in their immediacy but not in their specific constitution. They are therefore perceived but not yet classified or defined. It is a process that requires the occurrence of other successive experiences for our apprehension of the universe to move from being something to act upon to something known.

¹ Cf. Seigfried's reading of 'relations' in James (Seigfried 1973).

**Radicalized empiricism:
the interconnection of psychology and philosophy**

It is no coincidence that the thesis that relations are part of the experience itself stems from another thesis James introduces in his *Principles of Psychology*, namely, that there are 'feelings of relation':

there is no conjunction or a preposition, and hardly an adverbial phrase, syntactic form, or inflection of voice, in human speech, that does not express some shading or other of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thought. [...] We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*. (James 1981, 238)

This passage was particularly inspiring for Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was a critical reader of James. According to Russell Goodman (2002) and Richard Gale (1999), *The Principles of Psychology* was among James's works a genuine "intellectual companion" for Wittgenstein². However, because of the lack of introspective attention and the difficulty of confronting ephemeral phenomena, many psychologists and philosophers have been led to ignore what James calls the 'transitive' parts of consciousness, in other words, those parts that move at a relatively faster speed than the parts that he defines 'substantive'. By 'transitive' James intends all the feelings of relation and tendency, the internal connections and the direction of our thoughts, which we often express discursively with the various prepositions and which in the brain would correspond to the phases of passage between two peaks of nervous activity. James's insistence on these

² In Wittgenstein's manuscripts and typescripts there are many references to James's *Principles*. According to Stephen Hilmy (1987), this attention to one single author is sporadic in Wittgenstein. He found particularly interesting the chapters on *The Stream of Thought* and on the *Will* (cf. Boncompagni 2016, 167). For a historical and theoretical reconstruction of Wittgenstein's reading of James see Goodman (2002). For a broader analysis of Wittgenstein and pragmatism see Boncompagni (2016).

aesthetic³ but also relational aspects of our inner life, which have been almost entirely rejected by psychology and philosophy because of the difficulty they pose to analysis and verbalization, is due to their importance in restoring a more concrete, and therefore richer and more plural, image of the human mind. The analysis of mental phenomena taken in their concreteness, that is in the frayed, vague and changing aspects of lived experience, can already be said to be radically empirical or radically anti-intellectualist. In this way, James emphasized the epistemic value of sensory perception⁴, because it is the necessary access point to all the complex and varied phenomenology of mental life recognized in the empirical analysis.

However, James's intention is not to question the function of the substantive parts of thought, which are more stable and defined, as well as the value of concepts; rather, his criticism is directed at two great logical fallacies committed by empirical psychology: 1) thinking that one cannot have images except of perfectly defined things and 2) the idea that through subjective feelings we can know the simple qualities of objects, but not their relations. Thanks to the radical application of the empirical method, James defends the importance of perceptions for a more fundamental and concrete description of the facts of psychology. In his opinion, no introspective observation justifies the sacrifice of our perception of the continuity of our stream of thought.

³ In *Principles* and elsewhere, James uses the expression 'aesthetical and practical interests' to convey the philosophical use of 'aesthetic' in relation to the sensation.

⁴ Perry's perspicuous comment on the role of perception in James's philosophy is worth to be quoted here: '[...] if perception was qualified to play so great a role, it was because this faculty had long since lost the character which it possessed in the earlier empirical tradition. It had been a leading motive in James's philosophy not only to emphasize perception, but to reinterpret it; and in particular to impute to it a continuity and depth, a synthetic grasp and reach, which differed radically from the notions held by his predecessors.' (Perry 1935, vol. I, 459)

Indeed, any paradoxes and contradictions are produced precisely by the atomistic image of mental states shared by associationism and rationalism, and that for James is nothing more than the result of an inaccurate and faulty original description.

What is wrong with empiricism and rationalism?

The theory of relations that James gradually elaborates also on a philosophical level must therefore be framed in terms of his confrontation with the empiricism and rationalism. Empiricism and rationalism are paradigmatic philosophical attitudes that are also the expression of different mentalities or ways of thinking, as well as temperaments. Using broad and non-technical definitions, in order to sketch the main currents of thought which both pragmatism and radical empiricism had to confront for distinguishing themselves, the empiricists can be identified as those who explain the whole through the parts; that is, they privilege the parts, the elements, the individual, and consider the whole as a collection of parts and the universal as an abstraction. The rationalists, instead, are those who explain the parts by the whole, emphasize the universal and make the whole have priority over the parts both on the level of logic and of being. The same characteristics of these two positions can be found in many texts, both published and unpublished, not least in the article 'A World of Pure Experience' (James 1976, 21-44), in which James tries to formulate his philosophy of experience more explicitly and coherently. The rationalist temperament is defined as tending dogmatism, as it demands necessary conclusions; while the empirical temperament is more modest and works on hypotheses.

The problem is the inadequacy of both idealism and associationism, respectively connected to rationalism and empiricism, as philosophies which, in different ways, do not faithfully describe the real, concrete way in which we have experience. On the one hand, the idealistic drift offers a principle of unity and an apodictic source of intelligibility but without being able to account for

specificity; on the other, empirical associationism, while remaining close to the particularity of experience, could not offer a principle of unity or continuity.⁵

James's philosophy attempts to restore the philosophical legitimacy of our feeling of agreement or disagreement with reality by correcting the mistakes of these two-great philosophical traditions. As a kind of empiricism, it adheres to a world description which considers the parts as a first order being and treats the whole as a second order being.⁶ This means a 'mosaic' philosophy that does not reduce plural facts to a unique substance (which is inert) or an absolute mind (which creates them). It is also 'radical' in not admitting elements that are not experienced directly, nor in excluding any element directly experienced. In particular,

the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system. (James 1976, 22)⁷

The classical empiricism of Berkeley, Hume and Mill lays itself open to criticism with its tendency to fragment experience on the basis of an atomistic metaphysics, thus requiring a choice between cosmic disorder and

⁵ For James, John Stuart Mill, Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer were empiricist-materialists; while Thomas Hill Green, Bernard Bosanquet, John and Edward Caird, and Josiah Royce exemplified the rationalist-spiritualist tendency.

⁶ James explains that concepts are only designative and argues that 'the concept 'reality' once given back to immediate perception is 'no new conceptual creation, but only a kind of practical relation to our Will, perceptively experienced' (James 1979, 60). In other words, his attempt to recover a broader realm of reality is not to deny that concepts are real. Instead, it is to show how sensations and intellections are practically dynamically interrelated in an antifoundationalist fashion.

⁷ Moreover, 'pure experience is also a methodical postulate' according to which 'Everything real must be experienceable somewhere, and every kind of thing experienced must somewhere be real'. In conclusion, he strongly suggests that 'real effectual causation as an ultimate nature, as a 'category,' if you like, of reality, is just what we feel it be, just that kind of conjunction which our own activity-series reveal' (James 1976, 93-4).

rational order. This original fragmentation of reality is also a vision shared by rationalism. In this respect, rationalism has done nothing but correct an otherwise irrational vision by introducing trans-experiential unifying agents, such as substances, categories of intellect, or the transcendental ego. The problem eminently concerns conjunctive relations that have been neglected, even eliminated, by empiricism and have been elevated by rationalism to celestial realities, 'as if the unity of things and their variety belonged to different orders of truth and vitality altogether' (James 1976, 23).

A world of experienced relations

The challenge is therefore to rehabilitate the direct experience of various types of conjunctive relations, with different degrees of intimacy and inclusiveness which span from simple co-presence, through contiguity, resemblance, activity and causality, to the continuous transition between states of consciousness. The universe of human experience appears to be mostly chaotic, and this means that some parts are only co-present and (in any case): 'No one single type of connexion runs through all the experiences that compose it [our universe]' (James 1976, 24).⁸

The conjunctive relation that a radical empiricist must consider most important is the *co-conscious conjunctive transition*. It is philosophically the most problematic, but it is also the phenomenon that allows us best to describe our experience in concrete terms. A co-conscious transition is a process whereby a specific experience of mine goes from one personal experience into another. This hypothesis implied some logical difficulties that James, in many of his writings, did not fail to recognize and tackle. In short, the distinction between

ultra-rationalism and radical empiricism is about defining the *nature* of relations. In fact, despite the world of internal and essential relations that absolutism projected onto experience, James provides an empirical description of it in terms of particular external or accidental relations. To understand relations between terms in a constitutive way seemed necessarily to imply a static and absolute image of reality, according to James, in which even the most ordinary experiences would become unintelligible.

Specifically referring to his chapters on the 'Stream of Consciousness' and the 'Self' in *Principles* for a psychological description of the matter, James argues that *change* is a continuous transition, thus a conjunctive relation, which as such we experience immediately (it implies duration, or non-conceptual immediacy). Between two moments of our experience we feel that the transition is continuous, just as we feel that the transition is discontinuous between an experience lived and one merely conceived – for instance, someone else's experience. The nature of this relation, which is of all the most intimate of which we are aware, is the same sense of continuity that we feel and which constitutes a real empirical content, as much as the sense of discontinuity that we feel in the other possible experience:

Practically to experience one's personal *continuum* in this living way is to know the originals of the ideas of continuity and of sameness, to know what the words stand for concretely, to own all that they can ever mean. (James 1976, 26)

The radically empirical understanding of *conjunctive relations* is also a way of considering knowledge or cognitive relations as relations of continuous transition. This is precisely one of the three conceptual tools that radical empiricism employs 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. Other indispensable tools are the notion of *pure experience* and the logical function of *substitution*.

⁸ This passage is pivotal. Pluralism means that the world of experiences is not reducible to a single type of connection; in other words, it is not entirely homogeneous. Some connections in fact – such as space connections, causes and purposes, etc. – do not work in specific contexts, though they do work in others.

A processual view of experience

In the first of his radical empiricist essays, 'Does Consciousness Exist?' published in July 1904 and presented as a shorter version the following year at the Fifth Congress of Psychology held in Rome, James declared that 'consciousness' as traditionally investigated does not exist. Consciousness is a type of external relation, not internal (or constitutive) as rationalism has intended it to be. It is itself a function and not a substance, the function that our experiences are known. The distinction between the knower and the known is explained as a functional and not ontological difference that depends on external factors, specifically the different relational contexts to which experience is retrospectively connected:

I think I may now claim to have made my thesis clear. Consciousness connotes a kind of external relation, and does not denote a special stuff or way of being. *The peculiarity of our experiences, that they not only are, but are known, which their 'conscious' quality is invoked to explain, is better explained by their relations—these relations themselves being experiences—to one another.* (James 1976, 14)

Pure experience is, therefore, a fundamental hypothesis for a philosophy of experience since it requires that in immediate experience (or perceptive intuition) all of reality is given – including conjunctive and disjunctive relations that retrospectively make it possible to classify the parts of the experience. By 'experience' James clarifies that he intends a process that takes place over time through a series of terms that can be replaced and are in fact replaced through experienced relations that are as particular and real as the terms between which they occur⁹.

As mentioned, pure experience is both a metaphysical hypothesis and a methodological postulate. In the introduction to James's *Manuscripts*,

⁹ For an accurate comparative analysis of James's notion of pure experience and Husserl's neutrality, see Lanfredini (2017).

Essays and Notes, Ignas Skrupskelis points out that the notion of pure experience appears very few times in his published writings. It can only be found in the *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. In the following three excerpts, it is evident how similar are James's descriptions of pure experience in 'A World of Pure Experience' and in 'Does Consciousness Exist?'. In the latter, we can read:

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. (James 1976, 13)

Experience, I believe, has no such inner duplicity; and the separation of it into consciousness and content comes, not by way of subtraction, but by way of addition. (James 1976, 6-7)

Here, pure experience is defined as the experience that precedes subject-object distinction, therefore as something [*stuff*] that has no internal duplicity (which is only later added to it), and that yet accepts other predicates – i.e. spatiality, intensity, etc. In another article, a few months later, 'The Thing and Its Relations' (Nov. 1904), James defines pure experience in a slightly different way:

'Pure experience' is the name which I gave to the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories. [...] Its purity is only a relative term, meaning the proportional amount of un verbalized sensation which it still embodies. (James 1976, 46)

In this second definition, there is no explicit reference to the absence of subject-object duplicity that we found in the first, and in this context pure experience seems not to accept any predicate. It is identified with the 'un verbalized sensation': pure experience is another name for 'feeling or sensation'. This condition is only possible, however, in infants and people who wake up from a semi-coma; it is not possible in adults in normal psycho-physical conditions. In fact, pure experience is a

that which is not yet any defined *what*, though it is ready to be any kind of 'whats'. Adult experience loses at least part of its purity, that is it is widely conceptualized, and more and more it contains 'adjectives, names, prepositions and conjunctions'. The description of the contents of immediate experience inevitably degrades its purity, which remains a relative term.

In the hypothesis of pure experience there is no epistemological leap between the knower and the known – respectively solved by other philosophical schools via either representationalism, or the capacity of self-transcendence of ideas, or else by the act of an absolute agent. For James, knowledge is a natural process that runs entirely within the texture of our finite experience; it is made up of external relations that develop over time: 'Certain *extrinsic* phenomena, special experiences of conjunction, are what impart to the image, be it what it may, its knowing office' (James 1976 [1912]: 28). In James's famous example of the Memorial Hall, he shows how an 'idea' of mine leads me through a series of possible paths – therefore of external, accidental and particular relations – to the direct experience [acquaintance] of the Memorial Hall, within a relational context that demonstrates the non-coincidence of the fact (e.g. I can talk about its history, I feel that my idea and perception of it correspond, etc.), and thus that the final perception of the Harvard building was what I meant by my 'idea' in the first place. Therefore, the trans-experiential continuity ensures that the process of knowledge is not interrupted on the way, and at the end it is possible to classify the starting point as the knower, and the perceptual term as the known – the one which in a certain sense creates the cognitive function. This is for James the nature of knowledge in terms of experience; both the type of perceptual knowledge, in which there is a direct experience of a present object, and the type of discursive knowledge, in which the object is not immediately present.

The unions we come to know in this way are however empirical unions, that is, unions by continuous transition or continuity, not substantial in the sense of a-temporal absolutes. This is the case not only for experiences of discursive knowledge (going from idea to perception) but also for personal identity or logical predication ('is'). Furthermore, even starting from the very same point, the experiential process can run through different possible paths. Some experiences can functionally replace others in their task of leading us to the same perceptual goals. Indeed, substitution is an essential logical function and overall conceptual experiences, as alternative paths, are much more convenient and more rapid ways compared to perceptual ones. The majority of our knowledge is never completely verified, they never reach the perceptual term from which they would obtain a full retroactive validation. For the most part, we remain in the 'virtual stage' of *transiting* knowledge. Indirect verifications prove to be sufficient in ordinary life, for we only need it to be possible that our thoughts proceed without any contradiction being felt between the present experience and the context of our acquired knowledge.

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' (James 1976, 37).

The difference between percepts and concepts

Finally, the functional replacement of perceptions with conceptions implies a necessary reduction of perception.

Now the immediately present moment in everyone's experience, however complex the content of it may be, has this same absolute character. [...] So far as we tend to act on that, it is real naively or practically. So far as we reflect on it and criticize and 'reduce' it, it appears to us to have subjective status merely, to be a simple 'state of mind' of our own, one of our errors, or delusions perhaps. [...] Our percepts reduce our concepts and, unreduced themselves, constitute our world of material reality. (James 1988, 30)

The relations between immediate and mediated knowledge, or perceptions and concepts, is something that commits James both psychologically and philosophically to the task of showing how much they are effectively interwoven in our ordinary experience and what risks are involved in an 'intellectualistic' or absolute philosophy, which excludes the somatic-physiological component from the factors of knowledge. In *Principles*, the terms perceptions and concepts denote those complex objects, more vivid or faint, to which our substantive mental states refer. They correspond respectively to the sensation and the image as far as simple objects are concerned. We can analytically distinguish the respective semantic areas of the two terms, so that synonyms of 'concept' are terms such as 'idea, thought and intellection', all that is the mediated; whereas, the term 'perception' stands for what is immediate or simply perceived, therefore its synonyms are 'sensation, feeling and intuition' and expressions such as 'sensitive experience, immediate flow'. Their most distinctive characteristic is that perceptions are continuous, while concepts are discreet as regards their meaning. In fact, as he states again in the posthumous *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1911), a concept means what it means and nothing else, while a perception means many things together and without that 'much-at-onceness' it implies a contradiction. The perceptual

stream shows the characters of 'duration, intensity, complexity or simplicity, interestingness, excitingness, pleasantness or their opponents' (James 1979, 32).

Wittgenstein made an interesting point about concepts in James's *Principles*. Besides being a scientist, James claims his belonging to the empiricist tradition of Mill and Hume. This was quite a distant background from Wittgenstein's view. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein saw James's employment of the introspective method of analysis as particularly problematic for its possible metaphysical outcomes: "We are not analyzing a phenomenon (e.g. thought) but a concept (e.g. that of thinking), and therefore the use of a word" (Wittgenstein 2009, § 383)¹⁰. According to Goodman, Wittgenstein dismisses James's conviction that any reference to or description of experience could provide a sort of special 'bedrock' for meaning. He warned instead that:

Philosophical investigations: conceptual investigations. The essential thing about metaphysics: that the difference between factual and conceptual investigations is not clear to it. A metaphysical question is always in appearance a factual one, although the problem is a conceptual one. (Wittgenstein 1980, § 949)

In this sense, that between grammar and experience remains a significant distinction for Wittgenstein and a matter of disagreement with James. Even though empirical propositions may sometimes work as regulative-normative ones, in his view, logic still 'brings a different kind of certainty' (Goodman 2002, 27). The 'riverbed of thoughts' metaphor he uses to investigate empirical propositions has been interpreted by Anna

¹⁰ This critique partially resonates with Richard Rorty's critique of Dewey's metaphysics of 'experience', and more generally with the supposed opposition of 'language' and 'experience' in pragmatism. According to Rosa Calcaterra (2018, chap. 2), the pragmatist notion of experience can be understood as a form of epistemological holism which is framed within a processual and dynamic view of cognitive processes. For a critical analysis of Dewey's attempt to think 'language' and 'experience' in an anti-dichotomic perspective, see Dreon (2014).

Boncompagni (2016) as a criticism of James's 'stream of thought'. Wittgenstein considers James's confusion between logical and empirical propositions as a defect of his description. Boncompagni rightly suggests that 'the continuity between logical and empirical is not a defect, but a precise claim' of James (247). Such a claim should be considered as an aspect of the naturalistic and scientific view shared by pragmatists, in parallel with their insistence on the continuity between philosophy and science. A view that Wittgenstein could not share.

For James, concepts introduce ideal cuts in perception by isolating and defining the immediate sensible life that comes as 'a big blooming buzzing confusion'¹¹, an expression James uses to convey the aspects of vitality, variety, confusion, excess and continuity of reality. In dealing with perceptions, we can feel no neat boundaries in a continuous fusion of aspects that suffuse even the marginal or successive parts of the present moment. The unity of the stream of experience is unbroken, as its edges or margins are also part of the same stream. Our intellectual life systematically substitutes the abstract order of concepts for the perceptual order of experience. Concepts ideally and eternally identify those objects that our attention has carved out of the perceptive abundance for aesthetic or practical purposes. We cut out portions of the experiential continuum to which we give names and which we classify according to temporary purposes, and in doing so we also modify the order of perceptual experience as initially perceived.

The practical utility of concepts as well as their reality is undeniable, especially for those who, like James, would consider themselves *meliorists*. Indeed, both percepts and concepts are fundamental to our

existence for us to be able fully to know and deal with reality. In every actual situation, concepts are mixed with our present and future perceptions, and concepts enable us to extend our immediate perceptual environment beyond the here and now, as well as to organize and drive perceptual experiences according to our practical and aesthetic interests. As James explains again in 1909 – and long before in *Principles*¹² – things are 'special groups of sensible qualities, which happen practically or aesthetically to interest us, to which we therefore give substantive names, and which we exalt to this exclusive status of independence and dignity' (James 1979, 274).

As in a topographical system, the substitution of percepts for concepts allows us to introduce the whole system of conceptual relations involved and thus to be in a position to say a great deal more about the replaced perception. The important thing, however, is not to forget the perceptive origin of all our possible 'universes of thought' (i.e. such contexts as: the world of common-sense 'things', the mathematical world of pure forms, the world of music), otherwise there is the risk of an indiscriminate rationalization of all the sensible aspects of reality. In fact, to maintain that the perceptual stream is continuous is once again a way to contradict the Kantian idea that discontinuity characterizes experience. This position is crucial to the aim of avoiding reliance on logical conditions that guarantee the possibility of connection; that is to say, rejecting the idea that whatever connection there is can only be a matter of conceptual understanding. It is quite the opposite. Just as with the nature of concepts, so the patterns of relation between concepts are static; and against Wittgenstein's view, the logical relations do not reveal a more profound or less illusory level of reality than the stream of sensations.

¹¹ In 1865 James joined as a teaching assistant Louis Agassiz's 'Thayer expedition' to Brazil. In my forthcoming book (Bella 2019), I suggest that James's experience of the tropical rainforest, the overwhelming impression of which he described in a letter to his brother Henry Jr. James, forced him to appreciate the *variety* of nature ever after.

¹² 'But what are things? Nothing, as we shall abundantly see, but special groups of sensible qualities, which happen practically or aesthetically to interest us, to which we therefore give substantive names, and which we exalt to this exclusive status of independence and dignity.' (James 1981, 274)

The conceptual order is static with respect to the stream of experience, for static and abstract objects produce fixed orders whose relations and patterns are static in turn. Conceptual relations can be analytically compared, but they can by no means entirely replace the dynamic relations of the experiential stream. James does not intend to establish an absolute difference between knowing and living; these two processes are somewhat inseparable from each other. However, from the empiricist standpoint, he argues that: 'the significance of concepts always consists in their relation to perceptual particulars' (James 1979, 36); 'to hold percepts fast – in James's words – if our conceptual powers are to mean anything distinct' (James 1979, 44).

The 'theoretical' inadequacy of concepts concerning the function of letting us know the nature of reality and the implicit thesis of the 'insuperability of sensation' strongly emerges in the changing character of experience and therefore in the problematic question of a dynamic identity¹³. In continuous processes, the punctual reduction of perceptions to concepts (therefore the translation of a perceptive experience into the conception of the same), fails to reproduce it faithfully and *fully*¹⁴. And indeed, the attempt to reconvert the conceptual analysis of reality into the original perceptual continuum is entirely misleading, as we can see in all those processual experiences that turn out to be incomprehensible at the level of conceptual explanation: activity and causality, the conceptual impossibility of personal identity and the attribution of conceptual limits to all reality. The reality in its integrity is given to us in the immediate perception that grasps the deepest and

thickest aspects of it, while more superficially, as a subtler representation of sensation, it is given to us in the concepts that help us to extend and ideally complete those same contents.

Conclusive observations on pluralism and indeterminism in an evolutionary perspective

In 1909 James published *A Pluralistic Universe*, a book that reveals the strong interconnection between his idea of the continuity of experience and his radical reconstruction of empiricism. Radical empiricism is conceived as a doctrine of experiential continuity, which takes advantage of the immediate and therefore sensible experience of continuity; such an approach discloses the intimate interconnection between his principal conceptions, namely pure experience, radical empiricism, pragmatism, humanism and pluralism. They are all ways of illustrating the relation of empirical and contingent continuity that constitutes the field of possible experience in which we operate, as well as of reducing the value of abstract knowledge. Knowledge is above all a means to lead us somewhere in experience. According to James's philosophical reception of Darwin's theory of natural selection, ideas are instruments of adaptation to reality. In this sense, James like Peirce seems to stress the idea that knowledge has an existential dimension: it is needed to live. It is only because something happens to fall into one's universe of connections that one comes to care about it.

James is proposing a 'philosophy of experience' that connects with humanism in its attempt to reconcile our intellectual faculties with our sensible ones and to disregard any dogmatic, incontestable or absolute form of knowledge. Such a philosophy has to be tailored to reality as integrated and plural as possible. It should avoid depriving reality of its qualitative characteristics, even if vague and more challenging to take into account, to make it apparently more intelligible. In this effort, it is evident how James's theory is in sharp contrast to any absolute, naturally and socially disembodied use of

¹³ In Maddalena's theory (2015), complete 'gestures' as synthetic instruments allow dealing with identities as changing processes.

¹⁴ James insists that the 'full nature of reality' is not conceptual, rather it is only given in the perceptual flux. Concepts are secondary 'in point of genesis', they are secondary order realities: 'concept-stuff may often be treated, for purposes of action and even of discussion, as if it were a full equivalent for reality. But [...] no amount of it can be a full equivalent, and [...] in point of genesis it remains a secondary formation.' (James 1979, 59).

intellect because of its perverse and illusory outcomes, while also explaining his urgent call for a constant confrontation with Anglo-American idealism.

The pragmatic perspective, from which radical empiricism does not *de facto* diverge, is rooted in the concrete character of the present experience and always remains open to its future convalidation. This view goes in the direction of an indeterminist epistemology and metaphysics, as future consequences are never fully predictable as far as their concrete (contingent and contextual) developments are concerned. This complex interconnection of psychology, epistemology, and ontology also reveals how profound was the influence of a logical understanding of Darwin's theory of evolution on James.¹⁵ The flowing structure of consciousness is thus analogous to the current of experiences. In other words, we can translate continuity into the practical-ambulatory transcendence of meanings, in the sense that as human beings, affectable and fallible, we are vectors of continuous processes of change concerning which reality proves to be to a certain extent modifiable or 'plastic'. Like Dewey and Schiller, James's argumentation is based on the inductive generalization of psychological processes on the basis of an analogical connection with natural processes. There are interesting connections between the definitions provided by pragmatism and the direction taken by scientists towards more genuine scientific criteria, in particular, the notions of approximation, indeterminateness and pluralism. James's scientific hypothesis points toward a level of approximate generalization, that is, an abandonment of

the idealistic view of natural laws, as well as a move toward the acceptance of the indefiniteness that constitutes the peculiar traits of the 'living present'.¹⁶

This is why James proposes the metaphysical view of a reality that, unlike the absolute idea of a world which has always been given, is still 'in the making', that is, that at the same time it undergoes and acts continuous processes of change which involve some real 'variation', or the 'free play' on which metaphysical pluralism is built¹⁷. Despite the accusation of endorsing a downgraded form of utilitarianism¹⁸, James's philosophical intention is to highlight that, beneath consolidated and seemingly irremovable definitions, meanings are continually flowing and undergoing profound changes according to practical conveniences, or evolutionary processes. This is not a claim for relativism; as far as thought processes are concerned, which are conceived as analogous to natural processes, there is a constant interplay between function and structure, so that pure arbitrariness does not really exist. In thought, it is coherence and continuity that connect us to the past and the future. It is within the epistemological and ontological evolutionary perspective that one can also appreciate the value of the demystifying work James carries out in his intense pragmatist analysis of conventional meanings, by asking for their 'cash-value'. His attitude, however, is that of a man of science – the new science – who is tirelessly campaigning for the abandonment of any undue introduction of *a priori* metaphysical notions, insisting instead on the fundamental significance of the

¹⁵ The debt of Peirce and James with Chauncey Wright's logical and epistemological understanding of Darwinism is evident here. See Parravicini (2012). On pragmatism and Darwinism see McGranahan (2017); Fabbrichesi (2011); Franzese (2009). However, this is not to deny the well-known influence of other authors on James's conception of pluralism, first of all that of Charles Renouvier (see Perry 1935, vol. 1, 659ff). More recently, Russell Duvernoy (2015, 508) talked about 'the intersection of an epistemic need (or condition of possibility) with a quasi-metaphysical intuition or postulate (continuity)' in James.

¹⁶ James's attention to the 'present' goes in the direction of what G.H. Mead claims in his *The Philosophy of the Present* (1932), namely to take time seriously. In this view, pragmatists' anti-reductionist naturalism anticipates several issues related to 'emergentism.' See Baggio (2013).

¹⁷ In *Pragmatism*, James underlines that *pluralism* is satisfied with just 'some separation among things, some tremor of independence, some free play of parts on one another, some real novelty or chance' (James 1975a, 78).

¹⁸ For James's reply to this accusation, see James (1975b, chap. 8).

philosophical treatment of scientific hypotheses. James opposes any form of dogmatism, either philosophical or scientific, therefore both absolutism and scientism, asking them to give reasons in concrete, 'cash-value' form for their convictions so that they can be verifiable in principle. He sheds light on the fact that even scientific convictions inevitably involve personal temperament, preferences, and conventional beliefs. Therefore, he advocates the necessity for scientists to 'lay their cards on the table', so that all personal, social and political matters ultimately would fall within the supposed neutral, rational arena of science.

Only such a change of perspective can make it possible to achieve greater freedom of movement in the field of research: every domain of human life can be the subject of scientific investigation – as James himself demonstrated when dealing with religious experience and other paranormal phenomena. Furthermore, science has to investigate everything that is human by involving humanistic methods and criteria. Science can investigate everything, and indeed it is right that it can do so, as long as we clarify what 'science' means and enlarge its boundaries to redeem its humanist origins and philosophical depth.

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