

Chaos, confusion and the ordering of experience: the radical empiricism of William James *by Simon Borrington*

Towards the end of his life William James was most definitely a man on a mission. He had pursued a diversity of interests and assumed a number of roles over the years: he had received a medical training; he had been a biologist and field naturalist, taking part in an important scientific expedition to the Amazon Rainforest in 1865; he carved out a niche as an early, and highly influential, empirical psychologist; and he had responded to Ralph Waldo Emerson's challenge to establish a self-consciously American approach to philosophical inquiry by becoming, alongside of Charles Sanders Peirce and Chauncey Wright, one of the 'founding fathers' of 'Pragmatism'. He was also an essayist and lecturer *par excellence* with an outstanding ability for memorable and original phrase-making; for example, 'the sick soul', 'the stream of consciousness', 'the will to believe', amongst others. But one of the most important things to bear in mind, in the context of what follows, is a fact about William James that is often overlooked – he was a convinced and committed Darwinist at a time when this was by no means an orthodox position to hold. (1)

The mission that James was on, from the early 1900s until his death in 1910, at least for the purpose of the story that I wish to tell, was to provide a metaphysical framework for his pragmatist epistemology; in his case a 'theory of knowing' rather than a 'theory of knowledge', and the theory of truth that accompanied this (2). It was not so much that James was setting out to formulate some sort of grand systematic metaphysics that could account for everything; if anything this type of approach was the exact antithesis of how James understood the role of philosophy. What James was more concerned with as a metaphysical position can be best captured by Wilfred Sellars' summation of the project of philosophy, which is "*... to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.*" (3)

I would suggest that the desire to make things 'hang together' is the motivation driving the proposal of his thesis of 'Radical Empiricism', which is set out in a series of essays that were posthumously collected together and published as 'Essays In Radical Empiricism' in 1912. (4)

Radical empiricism was James' response to what he considered to be a somewhat stultifying approach to philosophy that went under the banner of 'British, or Transcendental Idealism', a form of neo-Hegelian rationalism that had come to dominate English speaking academic philosophy towards the end of the nineteenth century.(5) James' desire was to put philosophy onto a more practical and less esoteric footing. By this I do not suggest that James is concerned to set out some sort of 'common-sense' philosophy, but he does want to try to get at what it is that is really going on, what it is that actually *is* the case, in our everyday interaction with the world and how we provide a *philosophical* account of this process, and he wants to capture this without resorting to logical structures that reduce the complexities of human existence to the metaphysical sterility of the orthodoxy to which he was responding.

James' view of the world, as it happens at the interface of experience, is that it is essentially chaotic and we construct and impose order upon this chaos (and in this way we can say that James takes a neo-Kantian stance); but the world, and our place in it as experiential agents, starts out as a messy relationship for James and any philosophy that denies this state of affairs ultimately misses a key point concerning a fundamentally important philosophical topic regarding what it is to be human. The opening section of James' essay 'A World of Pure Experience', clearly states James' targets and intentions, and his underlying rejection of neo-Hegelian rationalist metaphysics. "Life," he says, "is confused and superabundant, and what the younger generation appears to crave is more of the temperament of life in its philosophy, even though it were at the cost of logical rigour and formal purity." (6)

James obviously felt that he had a good enough grasp of 'the philosophic atmosphere of the time', as he puts it, to present his own *Weltanschauung*. This 'world-view' he calls 'radical empiricism'. So what is it that makes his interpretation of empiricism 'radical'? What distinguishes it from previous incarnations, such as those put forward by Locke, Berkeley and Hume? In describing ordinary empiricism, James accepts the Kantian view, that a clear distinction can be drawn between the two main opposing forces of 17th and 18th century philosophy, and he distinguishes empiricism from rationalism accordingly. (7)

James starts by emphasising the particulate nature of empiricism. He says, "Rationalism tends to emphasise universals" (8) and begins with the postulating of the universal and deducing facts about the world from there. This gives rationalism the appearance of being axiomatic in a Euclidean way, and encourages a similar sort of trust in the certainty of what follows from this starting position. Empiricism does not do this. For the empiricist, the indirectly experienced 'universal' is abstracted from the directly experienced particulars – the overall picture is built up from experience.

James describes this empiricist approach as a "mosaic philosophy", and argues that it leads the empiricist to place greater emphasis upon the disjunctive than the conjunctive (9). Regardless of whether this is really the case, it is important that we recognise that James is providing an empiricist critique of empiricism and arguing that it is this weakness, this disjunctive tendency, that causes 'ordinary' empiricism to lose out to rationalism because it does not bring anything significant to bear upon the 'interconnectedness' of reality as it is experienced. Ordinary empiricism does not give an adequate account of experience – it claims that we only know the world through experience, but it doesn't really tell us what this means, and how it accounts for 'knowing'.

It is at this point that James comes up with one of the most extraordinary analogies in western philosophy! He starts by suggesting, with nothing in the way of supporting argument, that we "...liken the universe of absolute idealism to an aquarium, a crystal globe in which goldfish are swimming..."; this makes the point that, in James' opinion, rationalism in its most extreme Platonic form (10) resembles a contained, ordered

and sterile environment in which there is no real place for change and novelty, which of course is antithetical to the project of scientific inquiry, especially when placed in the context of what Darwin had been saying.

The next move is the surprising one. If we accept this scenario, then empiricism, in its traditional sense, is “...something more like one of those dried human heads with which the Dyaks of Borneo deck their lodges.” (11) The story that James is telling here with this unsettling imagery is that, empiricism, as it had been thus far developed, had experience as its nucleus, represented by the shrunken head, but much that can be extrapolated from this centre-piece of experience just sort of hangs, like the decorative feathers, beads, etc., not fully connected with or feeding back into the centre in any substantive conjunctive relationship.

It seems clear that James’ intention is to ‘buttress’ empiricism against this potential flaw. If he can replace this ‘disjunctive tendency’, he can then provide an empiricist account of knowing that has the same kind of logical cohesion that he feels gave rationalism the ‘upper hand’ and enabled it to assume the mantle of orthodoxy in the form of neo-Hegelian idealism. To do this he needs to show that empiricism can provide an account of how we interact with objective reality that places far greater emphasis upon the conjunctive nature of this relationship (12). The conjunctive relation that he believes best captures what empiricism is really about is the one that he denotes by the term ‘continuous transition’ and it is this concept that differentiates ‘radical’ from ‘ordinary’ empiricism: it is ‘continuous transition’ that is the defining feature of radical empiricism, to the extent that James refers to it as “the strategic point”; it is this thesis that is absolutely key to keeping his philosophical position free of the “...corruptions of dialectics and all the metaphysical fictions that could pour into our philosophy” (13), and it is by way of this idea that James is further able to fulfil his stated requirement that in order to be radical any empiricist account must allow that “... 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.” (14)

His version of empiricism sets out to capture the reality of our relation to the world, our ‘knowing’ of the world, because it does “full justice to conjunctive relations” (15), but in a way that does not require the metaphysical complexities and ontological excesses that rationalism seems to demand. It was also his further belief that empiricism in this radical form could avoid the pitfalls of the denial of the material world and the spectre of ‘profound scepticism’ that could accompany earlier renderings of empiricism – the sort of difficulties that Berkeley and Hume appear to encounter when their form of empiricism is followed to its full logical extent. (16)

So, is James in any way successful in this quest? Does he avoid the disjunctive flaws of ‘Dyak’s head’ empiricism? And, perhaps more importantly, does anything hang on whether he is successful or not? To provide any sort of answer to these two questions we are going to need to spend some time considering this key notion of ‘continuous transition’. So what do we know that can aid our understanding here?

We know that James has an intuition that "...[t]aken as it does appear, our universe is to a large extent chaotic." (17) But we also know that, in some way, we are able to impose order upon and make sense of this chaos by means of categorisation and compartmentalisation - so far, so Kantian. But where Kant can be interpreted as proposing the metaphysically troubling notion of there being a set of organisational innate ideas to explain how we come to understand the world, and Hume sort of fudges the issue by waving his hand in the direction of memory, James is putting forward continuous transition as being *the* organising principle, and this organising principle is as much part of experience as the rest of experience that it organises. There is no possibility of there being any sort of ontologically distinct status for continuous transition (and elsewhere James uses these insights in his attempt to do away with the ontological distinction between 'subject' and 'object' (18)) – it is how we experience *being* in the world, and we have no further privileged position in our relationship to reality than that this is the way in which we deal with it.

We also know that continuous transition is one type of conjunctive relation, and we know that James believes it to be the case that these relations that connect what could be misunderstood as disparate individual experiences (because that is just how we have to regard them for the purpose of understanding the imposition of order upon chaos) are as much *real* experiences as those that they conjoin, and are, therefore, proper subject matter for empirical inquiry.

We can also, I would suggest, confidently glean that James wants to provide a philosophical account of reality, or at least that aspect of reality that is a legitimate topic of a philosophical account such as the reality of 'being-in-the-world' (to borrow from Heidegger), that does not depend upon anything that might be construed as belonging to the realm of the non-physical or the supernatural. I do not think that we can go as far as to argue that James is a *physicalist* (he might well be) but I feel confident that we could happily support the view that his empiricism is derived from a position best described as a form of philosophical naturalism.

So how does this organising principle that James denotes by the term 'continuous transition' work? I think that James is confident that this is really quite simple to understand (although perhaps a little bit harder to express succinctly) (19) if we just take a moment to consider what 'experience' actually is. James seems to be arguing that 'experience' is essentially 'change' as undergone from a particular perspective, each 'bit' of the process occurring in relation to previous 'bits' and future 'bits', and made sense of by means of the public context of language. It is language that serves as the arena in which the personal experience of the experiential agent is tested to see how well it captures objective reality by its provision of a valid representation of what has been experienced, which we could label the 'matter of fact' or the 'state of affairs', and how well it fits in with how those and other related experiences have been dealt with previously. To this extent, James' thinking is very contemporary, sharing common threads with Dennett's description of the self as a "centre of narrative gravity" (20) and Stephen T. Asma's notion of how we "...use language to weave together a coherent story out of our disparate experiences." (21) Note also that here James is showing that knowledge is not something that is either 'correspondence' or 'coherence' but is an amalgamation of

both, and it is certainly not a privileged representation of reality as-it-is-in-its-own-terms but is a construction that makes sense for our practical purposes of dealing with reality as experienced, in this way indicating that knowledge serves a functional role. This adds up to an interpretation of James that has knowledge as being the *narrative* of continuous transition; it is the conceptual expression of the very act of being-in-the-world.

Now, there were quite a lot of variations on the use of the word 'experience' in the preceding paragraph, but actually, and perhaps somewhat contentiously, James wants to argue that experience is all that there is. His ultimate metaphysical position, for which radical empiricism provides the framework, and for which 'continuous transition' provides the organising principle, is a 'monist' position. Reality consists of only one kind of 'stuff' and that stuff is experience (22); a position which entails that empiricism *has* to be our initial starting place in our knowing of the world. How this 'stuff' presents on a phenomenal level is in a plurality of forms (the chaos) but it is 'experience' that underpins anything that is our relationship to the phenomena, so from our point of view, as experiencing beings, that is all that we can safely say that there is. But, although James claims 'neutral' status for his monism, it being neither materialist nor idealist, is this monism of 'pure experience' a denial of the existence of objective reality; is it just another form of anti-realism that ultimately takes us down a Berkeleyan path, or to where Hume's 'bundle theory' might take us when pushed hard enough?

Let us keep in mind James' notion that knowledge is a function: it is, after all, the means by which we interact successfully with the world by making sense of experience. I think we can then start to construct an interpretation that presents James as arguing that 'knowing' is not unlike, at least in kind, 'seeing', 'hearing', 'feeling'; it is experiential. (23) It is a biologically evolved function, and we as a species have developed it beyond the rather primitive forms of knowing demonstrated by other sentient beings. And we have developed it to such an extent that we have, in the stories that we tell concerning our construction of 'The Self', privileged it as something ontologically different to these primitive forms rather than understanding it for what it really is. So, perhaps, in this way James might not be entirely dismissive of contemporary notions that are recognised as having a similar archaeology to rationalism, such as the nativism of Chomsky, Pinker and others. But I think that he would argue that this should not be placed alongside of the Platonic metaphysics of 'innate ideas' which is the real defining feature of rationalism that brings something more metaphysically troublesome to the table in our exploration of how it is that we seem to know things that are not directly experienced. This isn't to argue that nativists ought not describe themselves as rationalists if they wish – just that the position that they hold has its origin as a response to experience and is not, therefore, necessarily out of bounds to an empiricist, providing that empiricists are willing to be radical enough in their interpretation of the concepts of 'empiricism' and 'experience'. (24)

Is James truly an empiricist? Well, he does have a form of *tabula rasa* with his pre-cognitive experience of reality as chaos. I think he would ultimately argue the case that the physical functions that give rise to our cognitive abilities evolve as a response to experience in a profoundly Darwinian way; and I think that he

would also argue that cognitive abilities do not begin to function until subjected to experience. (25) It would seem that as biological entities, at a fundamental level, we do nothing but experience and it would be not unreasonable to propose that there is probably nothing else that precedes this biological fact. It could be argued that the genotype brings an awful lot of information with it, but it is important to be cautious as to how we understand and describe that information. Can we really define it in terms of conceptual knowledge or ideas? I think that James provides us with a 'phenomenology of knowing' in which knowing is itself a conjunctive relation – it is our connection with the world. I am not sure yet whether we could claim that he solves the problem of empiricism as such, which would require him to provide a stronger case than anything that I have yet found in his essays for how we come by the sort of knowledge that does not appear to come from experience, but I think that he provides a framework that could be developed for this purpose, and one gets the feeling that this is what he was working towards, and to this extent he offers a means by which we can salvage empiricism from the logical consequences of its worst excesses – but that is another conversation.

Notes and References

1. Menand, Louis: 'The Metaphysical Club'; Harper Collins, 2001.
2. Dooley, Patrick Kiaran: 'Pragmatism As Humanism: The Philosophy of William James'; Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1975.
3. Sellars; 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man' (in 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind'; Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, pp1-40)
4. The collection was edited by Ralph Barton-Perry. They can be found online at www.uni-potsdam.de/u/philosophie/lehre/James/James_Radikal_engl.pdf. All quotes are from Chapter II: 'A World of Pure Experience'(WPE). Page references, etc. are from this edition.
5. There is a short piece on 'British Idealism' in Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_idealism) and in the 'Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy' entry on analytic philosophy (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/analytic/#H1>). As this second source illustrates, the English speaking philosophical world was in some ferment and James was attacking this neo-Hegelian orthodoxy in the company of Moore and Russell and the young Wittgenstein.
6. 'WPE', p.19, LL6-8. I do not think that the 'younger generation' refers to the proto-analytic philosophers of early 20th century Cambridge, especially given the reference to 'logical rigour and formal purity'.
7. That the differences between the two postulated schools of thought were always far more subtle (which is, arguably, Kant's real insight) is not a necessary acknowledgement that James needs to make in his telling of the story for the purposes of his critique of rationalism.
8. 'WPE', p.19, L28.
9. The accusation that James levels at 'ordinary' empiricism in emphasising the disjunctive is alluded to in 'WPE', p.20, LL3-31. As any discussion of this would easily merit 3,000 words you will have to draw your own conclusions as to its validity as a thesis – for my part I am still looking into the matter!
10. My feeling is that the rationalism that James critiques with the 'goldfish bowl' analogy is more Parmenidean than Platonic, and he rhetorically denies the dynamics of the Hegelian thought. It could be the case that *his* account of rationalism has a touch of the 'straw man' about it.
11. 'WPE', p.21, LL 20-21.
12. What it is that James finds attractive about the form of rationalism that he is attacking is that it holds to a 'coherence theory' to underpin its epistemology. When James is talking about 'conjunctive relations' over 'disjunctive' it is because he wants to prioritise this in the context of the pragmatic theory of truth that he holds (see Dooley, *op cit*). That Quine, Neurath and others were 'coherence empiricists' gives us an idea of where James was going with this.
13. 'WPE', p.22, LL 1-2.
14. 'WPE', p.20, LL 9-11.
15. 'WPE', P.20, LL 28-29.

16. It is something of an anomaly that when empiricism, which seems to start out from a position of bluff common-sense, has to really explain itself it can end up sounding far 'wackier' than anything put forward in the name of rationalism; cf. Berkeleyan idealism and Russell's 'logical constructionism' as set out in 'Our Knowledge of the External World' (1914).
17. 'WPE', p.21, l 14.
18. For more on James' efforts to overcome what he considers to be the last stronghold of dualism see 'Does Consciousness Exist?', the opening chapter of 'Essays in Radical Empiricism' (note 4, above).
19. It is hard for James to express succinctly because in trying to overcome the 'subject-object' distinction, James is hampered by having to express his thesis in language that is imbued in dualist assumptions. However, it is this that James refers to as the "...first great pitfall...the artificial conception of the *relations between the knower and the known*..." ('WPE', p.23, ll 4-5). This topic takes up most of chapter II and also features heavily in Chapter IV 'How Two Minds Can Know One Thing'.
20. D. Dennett, 'The Self As A Centre of Narrative Gravity' (in F. Kessel, P. Cole and D. Johnson, eds, *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1992)
<http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/selfctr.htm>
21. Stephen T. Asma: 'You Are an Abstraction: Mistakes of Metaphysical Individualism'
(http://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2013/06/you-are-an-abstraction-mistakes-of-metaphysical-individualism.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+3quarksdaily+%283quarksdaily%29)
22. There is plenty of information about neutral monism at
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neutral_monism and <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/neutral-monism/> and <http://www.iep.utm.edu/>.
23. There is an extent to which this may tie in to some degree with whatever Hume was conveying with the phrase "perceptions of the mind" in Section II of 'The Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding'.
24. The point here being that the current 'labelling' of some contemporary views of knowledge acquisition as being 'rationalist' seems to miss the point; the sort of 'nativism' expressed by Chomsky and Pinker, for example, is not a theory of innate ideas of the kind suggested by Plato or Descartes.
25. I think there are good grounds to feel confident that James is putting forward a philosophical framework that would sit comfortably with developments in evolutionary psychology.