

Sources of Pluralism in William James

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William James held that the “difference between monism and pluralism is perhaps the most pregnant of all the differences in philosophy” (*WB* 5),¹ and he himself came down firmly on the side of a thoroughgoing philosophical (epistemological, metaphysical, and value) pluralism. A century later discussions of pluralism are now infused with a sense of political urgency, which makes it all the more important to step back and critically reflect on the fluency with which our current discussions of pluralism, whether in political philosophy or general epistemology, have come to be conducted in the language of ‘alternative conceptual frameworks.’ No single figure merits a more prominent place in any such intellectual history than William James, who was one of the first thinkers to articulate a comprehensive philosophical vision incorporating what we would now find it natural to call a *conceptual scheme pluralism*. In doing so he introduced conceptions that have since become the mother-tongue of our philosophical thought.

In this essay I propose to examine the nature and sources of James’s wide-ranging pluralism by focusing in particular on the account he offers of the role of *concepts* within perceptual experience. What view of the nature of concepts separated James from his monistic philosophical opponents and underpinned his own attempts to defend a general philosophical pluralism? In addition to its intrinsic historical interest as a prime mover in the development of pluralist conceptions throughout the 20th century, the case of James will also serve to underscore the fact that some of the most difficult and important issues raised by the concept of pluralism have their sources in the seemingly more arcane question of how exactly it is that concepts enable us to grasp *any* truths at all.

In the first section I offer an exposition and analysis of what I see as James’s functionalist account of the nature of conceptual representation. In the second section I then examine the *limits* of conceptual understanding established by James’s critique of ‘vicious abstractionism’ and his account of the ‘perceptual flux,’ and I show how on the basis of these limits James mounted important criticisms of various monistic theses and arguments, thereby providing support for his own fallibilist and empiricist hypothesis of pluralism. In the final section I then turn to James’s own constructive account of the alternative conceptual schemes by means of which we apprehend reality, and conclude by distinguishing and briefly commenting upon four different Jamesian lines of response to the problem of *conflicting* schemes that is raised (and continues to be raised) by this pluralist outlook.

¹ See the list of references for abbreviations of James’s works.

I. THE FUNCTION OF CONCEPTS WITHIN EXPERIENCE

PERCEPTS AND CONCEPTS

Throughout his writings James operates with a fundamental epistemological distinction between *percepts* and *concepts*. Roughly synonymous terms for the percept side of the distinction, he tells us, are ‘sensation,’ ‘feeling,’ ‘sensible experience’ and the ‘immediate flow of conscious life’; and for ‘concept’ he indicates that he freely substitutes ‘thought,’ ‘idea’ and ‘intellection’ (*SPP* 48n). By means of percepts we are said to enjoy knowledge by *acquaintance* with particular sensible realities, while concepts enable us to signify or represent those same realities in thought and thus have knowledge *about* them (*MT* 18-20, 35). James regards both percepts and concepts as indispensable throughout all human experience. “The world we practically live in is one in which it is impossible, except by theoretic retrospection, to disentangle the contributions of intellect from those of sense” (*SPP* 108); and we “use both perception and conception in philosophy as we use both blades of a pair of scissors...” (*EPh* 273-4).

While James thus highlights the essential interplay between concepts and percepts he also argues in favor of what we might call *the primacy of percepts*. In the first place he defends the strong empiricist-abstractionist thesis that all human concepts are “abstracted and generalized from...perceptual instances” (*SPP* 52; cp. 68-9). “All conceptual content is borrowed” from the perceptual flux, he holds, and this “applies as much to concepts of the most rarified order as to qualities” (*SPP* 79-80). And then he argues further that conceptual understanding can in principle never fully adequately represent perceptual experience itself, and that in fact conception by its nature tends to ‘falsify’ the immediate flux (more on this below). In sum, he writes, “concepts are secondary formations, inadequate and only ministerial; and...they falsify as well as omit, and make the flux impossible to understand” (*SPP* 79).

These limitations on conception will form an important part of James’s overall defense of philosophical pluralism, but in order to see how this is so we shall have to take a closer look first at just what a concept *is*, according to James, and at the indispensable and beneficial role that concepts play in human knowledge. James himself suggests that in order “to understand the nature of concepts better, we must now go on to distinguish their *function* from their *content*” (*SPP* 58). What does he mean by this distinction?

JAMES’S FUNCTIONALIST THEORY OF CONCEPTUAL CONTENT

“The perceptual flux as such...*means* nothing,” writes James, “and is but what it immediately is....[It] contains innumerable aspects and characters which conception can pick out, isolate, and thereafter always intend” (*SPP* 49). The stream of experience during any given passing moment is an indefinitely complex presentation of aspects and characters potentially available for conceptual isolation and generalisation. As to their *origin*, concepts arise from our attending to such aspects and (as James puts it) ‘naming’ them, thereby adding to “the store of nouns, verbs,

adjectives, conjunctions, and prepositions by which the human mind interprets life” (SPP 52). Thus arise the various conceptual ‘worlds,’ as he calls them, of common-sense ‘things,’ of mathematical forms, of ethical propositions, and so on, “all abstracted and generalized from long forgotten perceptual instances...By those *whats* we apperceive all our *thises*. Percepts and concepts interpenetrate...” (SPP 52).

More important for James than this question as to the origin of concepts, however, “is that as to *their functional use and value*” (SPP 55-6, italics added), and in particular the “question of whether the whole import of the world of concepts lies in its relation to perceptual experience, or whether it be also an independent revelation of reality” (SPP 63). It is toward answering this question that James develops his broadly functionalist account of the nature of concepts.²

James puts forward the view that the concept of an *F* (his example is ‘man’) “is three things”: (1) “the *word* itself”; (2) the mental *image* or picture (perhaps vague) that one might form of an *F*; and (3) the *functional* aspect of the concept as “an instrument for symbolizing certain objects” (SPP 58; cp. *ERE* 28-9). James refers to the mental image as the “content” or “the substantive part of the concept” (SPP 59, 61). The term ‘content’ in *this* context refers not to what we would call the ‘intentional content’ of the concept (though it may have a part to play in generating such content) but rather to the ‘static’ (James’s term), non-relational properties of whatever mental images or pictures might regularly accompany our conception of an *F*. Years earlier in *The Principles of Psychology* he had similarly distinguished “between two *aspects*, in which all mental facts without exception may be taken; their structural aspect, as being subjective, and their functional aspect, as being cognitions” (PP 452n).³ As James’s analysis proceeds, it becomes clear that on his view the meaning or intentional content of a concept derives from its functional role as a sign or symbol capable of standing in for certain objects and representing them as standing in various relations.⁴ Although the purposes of this essay preclude a full treatment of the issue here, this interpretation demands at least a bit more spelling out.

James claims that in the case of some concepts (e.g., ‘God,’ ‘number,’ ‘substance’) “their whole value seems to be functional”: they “suggest no definite picture” and “their significance seems to consist entirely in their *tendency*, in the further turn which they may give to our action or our thought” (SPP 59). In cases

² For a reading of James along similar lines, see the comparison of James’s views with Brian Loar’s ‘functional role’ account of the content of beliefs in Bird 1986: 64-5. For an alternative ‘phenomenological’ reading of James on intentionality, see for example Wilshire 1968 (e.g., pp. 7-8 against functionalist readings); and Wild 1969. Sprigge 1997 offers an instructive comparison of James with “contemporary externalism about mental content”; see also Sprigge 1993.

³ This passage was quoted by James from his own earlier article, ‘On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology,’ 1884.

⁴ The philosopher perhaps most responsible for developing the contemporary functional role account of intentional content is Wilfrid Sellars, who sees his own view as building on certain aspects of Kant and the later Wittgenstein. For a start, see Sellars 1963, 1969, 1974, 1981. See also Rosenberg 1986 and Brandom 1994.

where there *are* definite pictures or images associated with a concept, James argues that their ‘value’ is primarily aesthetic (in a broad sense), and that this is a less important part of the concept’s significance than are its relational or functional ‘consequences’:

...however beautiful or otherwise worthy of stationary contemplation the substantive part of a concept may be, the more important part of its significance may naturally be held to be the consequences to which it leads. These may lie either in the way of making us think, or in the way of making us act. Whoever has a clear idea of these knows effectively what the concept practically signifies, whether its substantive content be interesting or not (*SPP* 59).

Immediately after this passage, James calls upon his general pragmatic “method of interpreting concepts,” which he here calls “*the Pragmatic Rule*” (*SPP* 60; cp. *P* 27-30), and the result is that what he has just called ‘knowing what the concept practically signifies’ in terms of its functional consequences comes finally to be *identified* with the meaning of a concept:

The pragmatic rule is that the meaning of a concept may always be found, if not in some sensible particular which it directly designates, then in some particular difference in the course of human experience which its being true will make.

[...] In obeying this rule we neglect the substantive content of the concept, and *follow its function only* (*SPP* 60, 61; italics added).

He concludes that “particular consequences are the only criterion of a concept’s meaning, and the only test of its truth” (*SPP* 62). What needs to be further clarified, then, is what James means by the ‘functional consequences’ that constitute the meaning of a concept.

For James the most basic function of conception concerns what he calls the “exclusively practical use” of concepts, which he conjectures to have characterised “the earliest stages of human intelligence”:

Men classed their sensations, substituting concepts for them, in order to ‘work them for what they were worth,’ and to prepare for what might lie ahead. Class-names suggest consequences that have attached themselves on other occasions to other members of the class — consequences which the present percept will also probably or certainly show. The present percept in its immediacy may thus often sink to the status of a bare sign of the consequences which the substituted concept suggests (*SPP* 63-4).

I take James's overall functionalist theory of conceptual content to be something like the following. For a person *S* to have the concept of given kind of thing *K* is for *S* to be so habituated (paradigmatically, if not necessarily,⁵ through social linguistic training) that *S*'s utterance or mental-tokening of 'this is a *K*' will be associated in *S*'s mental set with a general pattern of ready-to-be-triggered inferences involving the term '*K*' (or involving the relevant 'substantive' mental imagery — whatever the particular 'structural' realisation of the concept happens to be in any given case). As a result of the linguistic training and other continuing modes of social inquiry *S*'s patterns of inferences will to a large degree become 'adapted' (James's term) to *S*'s environment in the sense that those patterns will have come to systematically reflect or 'map' the regularities exhibited by *K*s both in *S*'s own experience and according to the generally shared testimony of others. (The 'practical adaptation' and 'mapping' here are discussed by James at *SPP* 63-74.)

To have the concept of a *knife*, for instance, is not a matter of one's adroitness in forming clear mental images of knives (although images may form a part of the substantive, structural realisation of the concept in any given instance), nor is it a matter of a supposed ability to 'reach out mentally and intend' or 'mentally point to' knives with the 'mind's eye' (to take two time-honored but, for James, ultimately unsuccessful ways of explaining the intentionality of concepts).⁶ Rather, to put it baldly, for *S* to have the concept of a knife *just is* for *S* to be one whose perceptual responses, inferences, actions concerning knives can be relied upon (*ceteris paribus*) to satisfactorily reflect the characteristic 'habitudes' or properties of knives, and consequently for *S* to be one whose inferences and actions generally lead to successful dealings (both theoretical and practical) with knives. Whatever subjective "psychic body or structure" concepts and images may genuinely possess for an experiencer at any given time, then, the idea of their having a *general signification* "only has a meaning when applied to their use, import, or reference to the kind of object they may reveal" (*PP* 452-3n). In sum, particular linguistic items or particular mental events have their meaning, intentional content, or "*representative function*" (*PP* 452n) constituted solely by their regular pattern-governed relationships (including various mediating chains of inference) ultimately in relation to the objects we perceptually encounter and act upon.⁷

⁵ James holds the view that "*thought is possible without language*" (*PP* 256ff.). I refrain from engaging that controversy here.

⁶ For James's apparent rejection of the second approach to intentionality, see his "The Function of Cognition" and "The Tigers in India" (the latter taken from "The Knowing of Things Together"), collected in *MT*. Resistance to the functionalist account of the 'aboutness' of concepts sketched above is likely to mirror precisely the sorts of resistance James encountered in relation to his pragmatic account of truth: to his opponents, all of this talk about the 'workings' of our ideas will seem to miss out on *the intentional relation itself, the truth relation itself*, and so on. My sympathies lie with James here. (For a consideration of this general line of objection to James, see Bird 1986, chapter 10.)

⁷ In "A World of Pure Experience" James characterises the overall picture this way: "The towering importance for human life of this [conceptual] kind of knowing lies in the fact that an experience that knows another can figure as its *representative*, not in any quasi-miraculous 'epistemological' sense, but in the definite practical sense of being its *substitute* in various operations, sometimes physical and sometimes mental, which lead us to its associates and results" (*ERE* 31).

On this general view we can now understand more clearly James's statement (quoted earlier) that "the present percept in its immediacy may thus often sink to the status of a bare sign of the consequences which the substituted concept suggests" (*SPP* 63-4; cp. *PP* 954 on 'recepts'). As we have seen, James holds that human experience is a combination of percepts and concepts working together. In his philosophy of *radical empiricism* (with its crucial and difficult doctrine of *pure experience*) James wants ultimately to defend the directly realist view that in perceptual acquaintance with a given physical object *K* we are capable of being directly aware of *K* itself in a manner that requires no intermediary 'idea-images' in the classical empiricist or indirect realist sense (e.g., *ERE* 8, 27; cp. *PP* 450). This is perfectly consistent with that same perceptual experience's being at the same time 'mediated' by the lawlike experiences or regularities that are implicated in one's having acquired a general concept of the kind of thing *K* (as we have seen, the intentional content of the concept is constituted by just this mediating function). In short, James's functionalist account of conceptual representation is quite compatible, it seems to me, with his directly realist theory of sense perception.

A WORD ON TRUTH AND ON INTEREST-RELATIVITY

The "conceptual map-making" (*PU* 123) James has been describing "adapt[s] us to an immense environment" precisely by representing or symbolically mapping in "a topographic system" the lawlike relationships that (we take to) hold among the sensible things themselves (*SPP* 66-7).⁸ Having this account of conceptual representation as 'adaptation' before us we can at least hint at how one ought to understand James's famous pragmatic account of *truth*. In particular, it seems to me (although I cannot attempt the task here) that the above account provides a way of lending some plausibility to James's notorious view that the epithets '*true*' and '*useful*' are interchangeable (*P* 98). For we ascribe truth to our ideas when they are actually and potentially useful in the way that maps and other symbol systems are actually and potentially useful, namely, in *guiding* us successfully (both theoretically and practically) among the things themselves, 'leading us up to them' by (among other things) symbolically representing their properties and tracking their relationships.

There is, finally, a crucial further point to be brought out in relation to James's views on the 'functional use and value' of concepts. Throughout his career James was concerned to stress that all our conceptualization is teleological in the sense being relative to certain interests or purposes. In 1879 in "The Sentiment of Rationality" he wrote:

Every way of classifying a thing is but a way of handling it for some particular purpose. Conceptions, 'kinds,' are teleological

⁸ The practical consequences and advantages that our "conceptual map-making" (*PU* 122-3n) affords us, according to James, are made possible by the fact that our concepts succeed in *getting things right* in the sense of (at least to some degree) correctly representing general aspects and relationships that hold true of things in the sensible world. Contrast Rorty's (1997) non-epistemological reading of James. Hilary Putnam's article in the same volume (1997) provides a useful corrective to Rorty's view.

instruments. No abstract concept can be a valid substitute for a concrete reality except with reference to a particular interest in the conceiver. The interest of theoretic rationality, the relief of identification, is but one of a thousand human purposes. When others rear their heads, it must pack up its little bundle and retire till its turn recurs (*EPb* 56; *WB* 62).

James does not mean by this, of course, that we may simply ignore the theoretical facts in those cases where we have a strong practical interest in doing so.⁹ In contending that all our concepts are teleological instruments, rather, James is arguing that (1) all our conceptions are *selective*: even when we simply ‘look and see,’ we are always attending to some particular *aspect* of the full reality that presents itself to us at any given time; and (2) the selected aspects or kinds which we thus select will always be selected for some purpose or ‘subjective end,’ even if it be only our need to have a simple map of reality enabling successful predictions:

...out of an infinite number of [relations in presented reality] we call certain ones essential and lawgiving, and ignore the rest. Essential these relations are, but only *for our purpose*, the other relations being just as real and present as they; and our purpose is to *conceive simply* and to *foresee*. Are not simple conception and prevision subjective ends pure and simple? They are the ends of what we call science; and the miracle of miracles...is that the given order lends itself to the remodelling (“Reflex Action and Theism,” *WB* 96).

As James puts the same point later in *A Pluralistic Universe*, “there is no really inherent order, but it is we who project order into the world by selecting objects and tracing relations so as to gratify our intellectual interests. We carve out order by leaving the disorderly parts out...” (*PU* 10).

What is likely to provoke controversy here is not so much the claims regarding the concept-dependence and interest-relativity of all our dealings with reality (for here James is developing notions that have since become part of the fabric of our philosophising), but rather the idea that “*there is no really inherent order*” apart from the various orders we impose upon reality. We shall confront this issue again as we now attempt to put the above understanding of the function of concepts to work in exploring James’s philosophical pluralism.

II. MONISM, PLURALISM, AND THE LIMITS OF CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

VICIOUS ABSTRACTIONISM AND THE ‘INSUPERABILITY OF SENSATION’

⁹ In relation to the famous ‘will to believe’ doctrine, for example, it is well-known (if not always sufficiently borne in mind) that the main issue concerns only the sort of question “*that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds?*” (*WB* 20).

James holds that philosophers are especially prone to a particular kind of misunderstanding of the function of concepts that he calls *vicious abstractionism* or *vicious intellectualism*:

Let me give the name of ‘vicious abstractionism’ to a way of using concepts which may be thus described: We conceive a concrete situation by singling out some salient or important feature in it, and classing it under that; then, instead of adding to its previous characters all the positive consequences which the new way of conceiving it may bring, we proceed to use our concept privatively; reducing the originally rich phenomenon to the naked suggestions of that name abstractly taken, treating it as a case of ‘nothing but’ that concept, and acting as if all the other characters from out of which the concept is abstracted were expunged....[M]ore than half the trouble that metaphysicians and logicians give themselves over the paradoxes and dialectic puzzles of the universe may, I am convinced, be traced to this relatively simple source. *The viciously privative employment of abstract characters and class names* is, I am persuaded, one of the great original sins of the rationalistic mind (*MT* 135-6).

Vicious abstractionism thus generates paradoxes through a use of abstract terms as “positively excluding all that their definition fails to include” (*PU* 36). Philosophers of both the rationalist-metaphysical and atomistic-empiricist varieties have in this way been led to portray our perceptual experience as in various ways *defective* as far as the prospects of genuine human knowledge are concerned: “...from difficulty to difficulty, the plain conjunctive experience has been discredited by both schools, the empiricists leaving things permanently disjoined, and the rationalists remedying the looseness by their Absolutes or Substances, or whatever other fictitious agencies of union they may have employed” (*ERE* 26).¹⁰

James’s metaphorical way of expressing the abstractionist misunderstanding of the function of concepts that underlies both errors is in terms of the following schematic argument: (1) the concepts that make up our conceptual schemes are ‘discontinuous’ and ‘static’; but (2) sensible reality, by contrast, is ‘continuous’ and ‘changing’; therefore (3) any “conceptual scheme...can only cover the perceptual flux in spots and incompletely” (*SPP* 81). This principled limitation on the adequacy of *any conceptual scheme* in relation to the perceptual flux is one important source of James’s pluralism (see below), so it will be worth our while to attempt to cash out the governing metaphor of ‘discreteness vs. continuity’ with which James is operating here.

While James was well aware that we do have concepts of aspects of the flux that are continuous and changing — we have the concepts of sensible *change* and of spatio-temporal *continuity* for instance — he argues nonetheless that what he calls the

¹⁰ Though I do not explore the matter further here, James’s metaphysics of ‘conjunctive relations’ is crucial to his overall ‘radical empiricist’ account of the flux of experience.

‘practical’ or ‘scientific-theoretical’ knowledge afforded by such concepts necessarily falls short of a grasp of the essential nature of the sensible flux itself. James articulates this contrast in greater detail in *A Pluralistic Universe*:

...my own experience with ‘pragmatism’ makes me shrink from the dangers that lie in the word ‘practical,’ and...I am quite willing ...to ascribe a primarily theoretical function to our intellect, provided you on your part then agree to discriminate ‘theoretic’ or scientific knowledge from the deeper ‘speculative’ knowledge aspired to by most philosophers, and concede that theoretic knowledge, which is knowledge *about* things, as distinguished from living or sympathetic acquaintance with them, touches only the outer surface of reality (*PU* 111).

As we have seen, our conceptual schemes give us knowledge that is of tremendous practical utility, but James holds that there is a deeper sense in which even the ‘map’ provided by atomic physics, for example — however realistically construed — would give us knowledge only of the surfaces of things (*PU* 123n). The operative contrast between ‘surface’ and ‘interior’ is in this case between, on the one hand, a (supposed) *non-conceptual metaphysical insight into the nature of the perceptual flux*, by direct acquaintance or ‘intuitive sympathy,’ and on the other hand the conceptual knowledge ‘about’ the properties and relations of things which our conceptual maps afford us. James’s general thesis is that our “conceptual knowledge is forever inadequate to the fulness of the reality to be known....‘The insuperability of sensation’ would be a short expression of my thesis” (*SPP* 79).

To take just one of James’s many examples, the intellectual vice of abstractionism has led philosophers to the view that “*activity and causation are incomprehensible*, for the conceptual scheme yields nothing like them. Nothing happens therein: concepts are ‘timeless,’ and can only be juxtaposed and compared. The concept ‘dog’ does not bite...” (*SPP* 85). The suggestion here is that the philosopher who focuses on the analytic entailments of isolated concepts will never (to use Hume’s terms) discover either in the ideas or the impressions any necessary connection between matters of fact. The dogged pursuit of this sort of conceptual analysis, according to James, ultimately leads either to Humean scepticism or else to an appeal to ‘transempirical’ realities of the Platonic, Leibnizian, or transcendental idealist varieties (as James understands ‘transcendental idealism,’ at any rate). In each case that James considers (e.g., self, substance, qualities, change, novelty, tendency, freedom: *SPP* 97) he argues that a commonplace of ordinary experience has been rendered conceptually problematic by philosophers, and his diagnosis is that “many of the troubles of philosophy come from assuming that to be understood (or ‘known’ in the only worthy sense of the word) our flowing life must be cut into discrete bits and pinned upon a fixed relational scheme” (*SPP* 85).

In contrast, James holds that our references to activity and to necessary connections (to continue with this example) reflect not only our ‘practical’ conceptual mapping of lawlike connections between kinds of event, but also at a deeper metaphysical level such references allegedly derive their meaning from a *direct non-conceptual acquaintance* with the perceptual reality of *activity* itself (“in our own personal

activity-situations,” *SPP* 210). In the end, I take the suggestion to be, we must recognize that there are no satisfactory *conceptual* resolutions of such classic philosophical puzzles forthcoming, and that the most important truths concerning reality are directly apprehended in such a way that we can give no sufficient conceptual account of them (or worse, the conceptual account of which leads to deep misunderstanding: *ERE* 25). The general conclusion is that our conceptual schemes by their very nature must always fall short of the reality to be known:

...it is enough to recognize this fact, that altho by means of concepts cut out from the sensible flux of the past, we can re-descend upon the future flux and, making another cut, say what particular thing is likely to be found there; and that altho in this sense concepts give us knowledge, and may be said to have some theoretic value...; yet in the deeper sense of giving us *insight* they have no theoretic value, for they quite fail to connect us with the inner life of the flux... (*PU* 110).

Concepts, in short, “are always insufficient representatives” of the sensible flux of life itself (*SPP* 97). I will return again to this notion of the ‘insuperability of sensation’ (or equivalently, the *insufficiency* of conceptual schemes) in section three below. First, however, it is time to apply the lessons just learned to the question of monism versus pluralism.

PLURALISM, ABSTRACTIONISM, AND FALLIBILISM

The doctrines concerning both the function and the limits of conceptualization discussed above provide the key to understanding the grounds for what James variously calls his “radical pluralism” or his “pluralistic pragmatism” (*PU* 26; *P* 125). The following passage provides a convenient starting point:

The alternative...between pluralism and monism...is the most pregnant of all the dilemmas of philosophy. Does reality exist distributively? Or collectively?—in the shape of *eaches*, *everys*, *anys*, *either*s? or only in the shape of an *all* or *whole*? An identical content is compatible with either form obtaining...Pluralism stands for the distributive, monism for the collective form of being...[Pluralism] at the outset...only has the negative significance of contradicting monism’s thesis that there is absolutely *no* disconnection [between things]. The irreducible outness of *anything*, however infinitesimal, from anything else, in *any* respect, would be enough, if it were solidly established, to ruin the monistic doctrine (*SPP* 114-15).

The initial task described here of demonstrating merely that there exist *some* respects in which *some* things are independent in *some* respectable sense of the term ‘independent’ might strike us as a job for a philosophical rookie, but I think that

James's denial of monism even in this form has a generalisable significance and is of broader interest.

In the chapter on "Monistic Idealism" in *A Pluralistic Universe* James examines specific monistic arguments against the possibility of what he has referred to in the above quote as 'disconnection' between things. James reads the monist (e.g., Lotze) as arguing that if, on the one hand, we admit *any* connection between things (for example, that A and B *interact*), then we are led inevitably to the conclusion that all things are necessarily interrelated in an absolute unity; if on the other hand we admit the slightest 'independence' between any two things, then we are led to a universe of complete chaos (*PU* 30ff.). I will not attempt (as James does) to rehearse any of the monists' specific arguments for such views. James's central contention is that there are fallacies involved in all of the monists' attempts to demonstrate *a priori* that all things are *necessarily* interrelated or unified (the characterisation of the overarching unity differs for different monisms); in particular he argues that what makes this sort of monism seem necessary is precisely the vicious abstractionist misunderstanding of the function of concepts (*PU* 31ff., and *passim*). For the abstractionist error consists in treating the mere definition of a given concept as if it were a full equivalent for the things that fall under that concept, and on this basis James offers detailed (and often convincing) diagnoses of the gradual slide of the Hegelian monists into an intellectualist equation of 'the real' with the domain of conceptual abstractions.

What the various considerations examined so far suggest is that James's pluralism at its core rests upon a distinction between two senses — one legitimate and the other fallacious — in which a concept may be said to 'substitute' for a thing.¹¹ In the first sense, concepts serve as proper functional substitutes for or symbolic representatives of the things themselves (as argued in section one), while in the second sense concepts are used in the vicious abstractionist manner which illegitimately substitutes only the *definition* of some aspect of the thing for the thing itself. The fallacy arises, as I understand James's view, when the vicious abstractionist dips back into the particulars of experience and then (knowingly or unknowingly) tries to insinuate upon us a simultaneous acceptance of two incompatible understandings of the same term. On the one hand, we are to preserve in the background the (correct) notion that the given concept is the very concept that it is solely because of its experience-mediating function. But on the other hand, and at the same time, we import the abstractionist notion that the given concept *cannot* be applied to any item which possesses a property that is not *entailed* by (included within the 'analysis' of) that concept. What James's arguments on the whole suggest, I think, is that the uncritical use of both formal and informal *conceptual analyses* has been a main source of support for the (often inexplicit) denial that philosophical pluralism represents even a *possible* outlook on the ultimate nature of things.

Having thus criticized the general form of *a priori* argumentation employed by the monists, the way now lies open for James to consider monism and pluralism simply as competing explanatory *hypotheses* as to the nature of reality. James understands "pluralism's doctrine" as the "hypothesis, of a world imperfectly unified still, and perhaps always to remain so..." (*P* 79). In various places where he discusses the problem of 'the one and the many' and considers the manifold senses in which

¹¹ On James's notion of 'substitution' here, see also Bird 1986: 109-10.

philosophers and common sense have considered the world to be a *unity*, his main contention is that in no case are we (at present) warranted in holding that reality is either completely or necessarily unified by any of the suggested unifiers.

Philosophers typically attempt to present “some one vehicle of conjunction...as all-inclusive, like one origin, one purpose, or one knower” (P 74). For example, while James grants that *space and time* are two comprehensive “vehicles of continuity by which the world’s parts hang together” (P 66), he rejects the general Kantian claim that such an all-comprehensive spatio-temporal unity in experience is in any way *a priori* necessary (PU 98, 106-8). Similar remarks hold in relation to the *causal* relations that unify the experienced world (P 66-8). “No one single type of connection runs through all the experiences that compose [the universe]. If we take space-relations, they fail to connect minds into any regular system. Causes and purposes obtain only among special series of facts” (ERE 24; cp. P 67). As it thus rejects both *a priori* epistemological legislation and essentialist metaphysics, James holds generally that pluralism must incline us toward empiricism (P 79; more strictly, to “a revised empiricism”: PU 9).

We are now perhaps in a position to understand the meaning of James’s statement quoted earlier that in the debate between pluralism and monism an “identical content is compatible with either form obtaining” (SPP 114-15). For the crux of the dispute does not primarily concern whether or not certain entities *exist*. Rather, the more fundamental dispute concerns the epistemic and modal status of what are for the most part agreed facts. James is arguing that the various claims made by philosophers to the effect that the realities to be accounted for must be related in certain systematic ways all amount only to fallible hypotheses.¹² His defence of pluralism, as the hypothesis that the ‘unfinished’ universe is and may always remain ‘imperfectly’ or ‘incompletely’ unified (PU 25; P 79), thus builds upon the negative thesis (as supported by the general critique of the abstractionist mishandling of concepts) that none of the various all-comprehensive ontologies or alleged epistemological necessities defended by monistic philosophers represents a more reasonable hypothesis than its denial. As opposed to monism, therefore, pluralism “leaves us with the common-sense world, in which we find things partly joined and partly disjoined” (P 79). “What pluralists say is that a universe really connected loosely, after the pattern of our daily experience, is possible, and that for certain reasons it is the hypothesis to be preferred” (PU 39).

Having climbed our way back toward the ‘manys’ of ordinary experience, then, let us take up finally the question of pluralism in relation to our manifold knowledge of the sensible world. If the story as outlined so far is accepted, then James will have succeeded in defending a philosophical pluralism broadly characterizable as a fallibilist and non-reductive empiricist outlook, one which is capable of giving us principled grounds for resisting a variety of perennially tempting monistic positions and attitudes. Pluralism understood in these general terms has become so thoroughly ensconced in our philosophical consciousness that we may have difficulty appreciating the significance of James’s hard-earned victory less than a

¹² This holds true, incidentally, even for the various *a priori* ‘necessary truths’ that, according to James, concern only ‘relations among our ideas’ in Locke’s sense. See *PP*’s final chapter, “Necessary Truths and the Effects of Experience,” and P 119.

century ago. In the final section I want to examine the various ways in which James's pluralism cut deeper still and bequeathed to us some of the main lines of approach to the problems that continue to resurface in current discussions of pluralism.

III. PLURALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF CONFLICTING CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES

THE CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES OF COMMON SENSE AND ITS COMPETITORS

In the *Pragmatism* lecture entitled "Pragmatism and Common Sense" James suggests that our inherited common sense understanding of the world embodies a conceptual scheme constituted of such concepts as the following: "Thing; The same or different; Kinds; Minds; Bodies; One Time; One Space; Subjects and attributes; Causal influences; The fancied; The real" (P 85). He puts forward a variety of reasons to support the hypothesis that our common sense conceptual scheme was itself probably at one time a discovery or invention. He also argues that the common sense scheme has been shown to be of increasingly *limited application*, both in relation to scientific advances and when reflecting philosophically on certain non-paradigmatic cases (Is a magnetic field a 'thing'? Is a disassembled artifact 'the same?'). Such considerations as these are put forward by James to support the idea that even our most basic and practically indispensable common sense conceptual scheme ("the mother-tongue of thought," P 88) is only one among several imperfect human attempts to conceptually *sort things out*, as it were.

In fact, James argues not only that there are aspects of sensible reality that are not accounted for within the general conceptual scheme of common sense, but also that some of these other aspects are in *prima facie conflict* with those isolated by common sense. In particular he outlines conflicts between the following four conceptual schemes: "(1) Common sense, (2) common science or corpuscular philosophy, (3) ultra-critical science, or energetics, and (4) critical or idealistic philosophy" (P 93-4, numbering added). What are these alternative conceptual schemes? In what sense do they conflict? And how does James attempt to address the resulting difficulties concerning a pluralism of apparently *conflicting truths*?

By 'common science' James refers to a straightforwardly scientific-realist construal of such postulated 'hypersensible entities' as atomic particles and ether-vibrations (P 93). It is important to recognise that he interprets common science in such a way that there is a conflict between science and common sense. "If common sense were true, why should science have had to brand the secondary qualities...as false, and to invent an invisible world of points and curves and mathematical equations instead?" (P 92). Or as he put the same basic point years earlier in the *Principles of Psychology*:

Sensible phenomena are pure delusions for the mechanical philosophy. The 'things' and qualities we instinctively believe in do not exist. The only realities are swarming solids in everlasting motion....The modern mechanico-physical philosophy of which we are all so proud...begins by saying that the *only* facts are collocations and motions of primordial solids...(PP 1258-9).

Concerning the new ‘ultra-critical science,’ for its part, James comments as follows:¹³

Just now, if I understand the matter rightly, we are witnessing a curious reversion to the common-sense way of looking at physical nature, in the philosophy of science favored by such men as Mach, Ostwald and Duhem. According to these teachers no hypothesis is truer than any other in the sense of being a more literal copy of reality. They are all but ways of talking on our part, to be compared solely from the point of view of their *use*. The only literally true thing is *reality*; and the only reality we know is, for these logicians, sensible reality, the flux of our sensations and emotions as they pass. ‘Energy’...is the collective name (according to Ostwald) for the sensations just as they present themselves...when they are measured in certain ways (*P* 93).

Ultra-critical science¹⁴ has the great advantage of theoretical *simplicity*, according to James, but it is important to note his concession on the same page that “the hypersensible entities, the corpuscles and vibrations, hold their own with most physicists and chemists, in spite of its appeal” (*P* 93). The philosophical debate concerning scientific realism, as we currently refer to it, is in James’s eyes an open question as to the overall best philosophical hypothesis on the matter; it is *not* one decidable ahead of time, for example, on the basis of a verificationist or anti-realist restriction on the meaningfulness or possible reference of theoretical terms.¹⁵ While it is true that James lays his own bets on the overall theoretical advantages that he thinks are emerging in connection with the ultra-critical interpretation of science, he grants that common scientific realism has the undeniable advantage of straightforwardly embracing all the different kinds of entities that scientists think they have discovered; seen in this light, he remarks, the hyper-critical account “seems too economical to be all-sufficient. Profusion, not economy, may after all be reality’s keynote” (*P* 93).

Note, furthermore, that although James in the quoted passage describes ultra-critical science as a “curious reversion to the common-sense way of looking at physical nature,” in this case, too, he holds that there is a *conflict* between the two schemes: ultra-critical science conflicts with common sense in its rejection of the ordinary notion of ‘causal influences,’ for instance (*P* 92). And when we add the fact, finally, that the conceptual scheme of ‘critical or idealistic philosophy’ is seen by James as threatening to undermine the claims put forward by the schemes of both common sense and science, we have before us the view that while each of the four

¹³ For further discussions by James on the interpretation of science, see for example: *P* 33-4, 93, 103-4; *PP* 1230ff., 1250, 1258-1262; *SPP* 70, 90n; *PU* 112-3n; *ERE* 40-1; *MT* 44-5.

¹⁴ I will continue to use James’s term, leaving aside consideration of distinctions between instrumentalism, conventionalism, fictionalism, constructive empiricism, etc.

¹⁵ For an overview of current debates on this issue, see Leplin 1984.

conceptual schemes is useful for certain purposes, they are nonetheless in conflict in the sense that basic claims in each scheme *contradict* basic claims in the others. The question then naturally arises as to which of the conflicting pictures of reality presented by these alternative conceptual schemes is ultimately *true*, and according to James this is a deep and difficult question to answer:

The whole notion of truth, which naturally and without reflexion we assume to mean the simple duplication by the mind of a ready-made and given reality, proves hard to understand clearly. There is no simple test available for adjudicating offhand between the divers types of thought that claim to possess it...[The four schemes] all seem insufficiently true in some regard and leave some dissatisfaction. It is evident that the conflict of these so widely differing systems obliges us to overhaul the very idea of truth...(P 93-4).

I will close by distinguishing four different strains in James's overall response to this fundamental issue of the apparently conflicting truths presented by the plurality of our conceptual schemes. Although I cannot attempt an adequate assessment of these strategies here, I hope to convey a sense of the live possibilities that were in many ways first opened up by James.

A PLURALITY OF JAMESIAN RESPONSES TO THE PROBLEM OF CONFLICTING SCHEMES

The four Jamesian lines of response to the conflict I have in mind may crudely be labelled as (1) *instrumentalism*, (2) *scheme-relativity*, (3) *truth-convergence*, and (4) the *plenitude of the given*. The last mentioned strategy is the least familiar, though it arises out of the Jamesian themes discussed in section two above. Each of the first three strategies is at least hinted at in the passage with which James closes the lecture we have lately been examining:

Ought not the existence of the various types of thinking which we have reviewed, each so splended for certain purposes, yet all conflicting still, and neither one of them able to support a claim of absolute veracity, to awaken a presumption favorable to the pragmatistic view that all our theories are *instrumental*, are mental modes of *adaptation* to reality, rather than revelations or gnostic answers to some divinely instituted world-enigma?...Certainly the restlessness of the actual theoretic situation, the value for some purposes of each thought-level, and the inability of either to expel the others decisively, suggest this pragmatistic view....May there not after all be a possible ambiguity in truth? (P 94)

Let us turn, first, to the instrumentalist strategy.

(1) *Instrumentalism*. On its usual interpretations, instrumentalism does offer the theorist a way of responding to the problem of conflicting conceptual schemes. For on such a view the reference of the 'theoretical' terms incorporated in our various conceptual schemes (including common sense!) is not at issue, but only whether such theories (however interpreted, or as 'uninterpreted calculi') enable the successful prediction and control of our sensory experiences. If the only realities we need strictly countenance are our own sensations, for instance, then there would appear to be no conflict represented by the fact that both our common sense talk and our scientific abstractions enable us to predict the course of those sensations. The instrumentalist strategy has been much exploited throughout the 20th century, and it is well-known that James presents pragmatism as itself a generalization from the new 'ultra-critical' philosophy of science:

...so many rival formulations are proposed in all the branches of science that investigators have become accustomed to the notion that no theory is absolutely a transcript of reality, but that any one of them may from some point of view be useful. Their great use is to summarize old facts and to lead to new ones. They are only a man-made language, a conceptual shorthand, as someone calls them, in which we write our reports of nature; and languages, as is well known, tolerate much choice of expression and many dialects. [...] Riding now on the front of this wave of scientific logic Messrs. Schiller and Dewey appear with their pragmatistic account of what truth everywhere signifies. Everywhere, these teachers say, 'truth' in our ideas and beliefs means the same thing that it means in science....This is the 'instrumental' view of truth... (P 33-4).

Such passages as this naturally lead one to suppose that James holds that *all* our alternative conceptual schemes are simply devices for predicting the course of our subjective sensations; in which case *there are no* facts of the matter concerning which there may be genuine conflicts, apart from questions concerning the most useful and economical predictor of the flux of our sensations.

This, then, is one time-honored strategy for coping with a plurality of apparently conflicting truths. Nevertheless I would suggest that this interpretation is in danger of misrepresenting James's views. Instrumentalism in the philosophy of science generally rests upon the notion that there is a basis of theoretically *neutral observations*. For it is the latter's (alleged) freedom from conceptual commitments that makes possible the view of 'conflicting' conceptual schemes (*including* the scheme of common sense 'things') as simply alternative tools for calculating the flow of our more basic sensory experiences. As we have seen, however, James's view of perception is that our perceptual responses are concept-laden through and through: the direct objects of perception for James are the objects *as intentionally conceived* (for example, as *that chair*), not a stream of subjective sensory qualia. If there are respects

in which James ultimately falls into the myth of the given (see (4) below), I do not think it is primarily at *this* level.¹⁶

Admittedly James's doctrine of 'pure experience' has been interpreted along lines favorable to the generalised instrumentalist strategy, and here I can only register my grounds (based partly on the first section above) for having difficulty with such a reading.¹⁷ As I understand his *radical empiricism*, James articulates his direct realism — basically, that there are no 'intermediaries' separating the knower from the known — in the following way: all knowledge (and intentionality in general) involves the conceptualization or functional sorting of a neutral given content (the 'pure experience,' a bare posited 'that') into both objective terms (that *chair*) and subjective terms (*my sensation of that chair*). On this view our awareness of our own subjective stratum of sensations is as much a *product of conceptualisation* as our awareness of independent objects; and it is this wider aspect of James's view that I find uncongenial to classical instrumentalism. The tight connection here between percepts and concepts is indeed ultimately broken apart by James, but this (as we have seen) occurs primarily at the supposedly deeper level of an *ineffable and speculative metaphysics* (see (4) below, and section two above).¹⁸

But if I am right about this, in what sense *is* pragmatism, as James suggests, to be taken as the "view that all our theories are *instrumental*"? We might recall how James himself stated the matter in the passage quoted above: our theories are "mental modes of *adaptation* to reality, rather than revelations or gnostic answers to some divinely instituted world-enigma" (*P* 94). The general analogy James draws with instrumentalist philosophy of science, it seems to me, is that just as (for instance) the new ultra-critical science upholds 'alternative geometries' as against the metaphysical essentialist view that 'God geometrizes' (*MT* 40), so pragmatism holds quite generally that the truths revealed by our concepts are mutable and partially created by our own

¹⁶ Wilfrid Sellars's attack on 'the myth of the given' is basically a criticism of the notion that there exist states of the knower that are somehow both (a) basic knowings and yet (b) are not dependent in an essential way upon the acquisition of concepts. Foundationalist sense-datum theories are classic examples of the Myth, but so is, for example, any view (such as Plato's or Chisholm's) that endows *the intellect* with a power of 'directly grasping truths' in a way that is not at bottom *derivative* from our *linguistic* practices. I briefly indicate below the level at which I suspect James is in danger of falling prey to the Myth. See Sellars's classic 1997, with a helpful study guide by Robert Brandom.

¹⁷ In a similar vein, see Bird's critical assessment of Ayer's phenomenalist reading of James's doctrine of pure experience (Bird 1986: 118-20; Ayer 1968: 302-3). Russell, of course, characterised James's account of pure experience as a 'neutral monism', 1956: 138-159. I cannot do justice to the notion of pure experience here, but the reader should note James's qualification of that doctrine at *ERE* 14-15.

¹⁸ See the discussion of the latter distinction in the second section above, concerning 'the insuperability of sensation,' as well as the discussion of the 'plenitude of the given' below. Note, by the way, that I do not mean to suggest that James's doctrine of pure experience is free from all difficulties concerning the myth of the given. To the contrary, the main difficulties with that doctrine stem from the fact that since on James's own reckoning the 'pure experience' itself cannot in any way be *described* (since to do so is already to conceptually sort the experience in the ways just discussed), it will always remain unclear just what a pure experience *is*.

active contribution, rather than being ‘eternal and fixed.’ If this anti-essentialist yet realist interpretation of James’s view is correct, however, it brings us straight back to our original problem of conflicting conceptual schemes: for granted that we have alternative ‘instruments’ for coping with reality, if these conceptual schemes are realistically construed how then do we cope with the fact that such schemes present us with *conflicting* conceptions of the world’s realities?

(2) *Scheme-relativity*. A second, equally influential line of approach to the question of conflicting schemes is to be found throughout James’s writings. One might argue that, properly understood, there really is *no conflict* at all, even when the relevant propositions are straightforwardly and realistically interpreted, but rather each proposition may be held true ‘relative to’ or ‘from the point of view’ of its own framework. As P. F. Strawson has recently argued in “Perception and its Objects,” we may regard the admittedly ostensibly conflicting common sense and scientific accounts of the world, for example, as “two discrepant descriptions, each valid from its own viewpoint”.¹⁹

I acknowledge the discrepancy of the two descriptions, but claim that, once we recognise the relativity in our conception of the real, they need not be seen as in contradiction with each other. Those very things which from one standpoint we conceive as phenomenally propertied we conceive from another as constituted in a way which can only be described in what are, from the phenomenal point of view, abstract terms.

We have seen James stress that each conceptual scheme is “splendid *for certain purposes*” but not for others (*P* 94), and that our acquiring concepts is a matter of *selecting out* aspects of the chaotic flux of perception that are salient *relative to certain of our interests* (section one above): “we have so many different businesses with nature that no one of them yields us an all-embracing clasp” (*PU* 19). Like Strawson, James makes liberal use of the metaphor of alternative *points of view* (e.g., *MT* 55). In the context of discussing pragmatism as a theory of *truth*, as we have seen, he contends that even in the sciences “no theory is absolutely a transcript of reality, but...any one of them may from some point of view be useful” (*P* 33) — which, given the nature of the connection in James between utility and truth (see section one), certainly seems to entail that *truth* is relative to points of view or standpoints, perhaps in something like Strawson’s sense of a ‘relativity in our conception of the real.’

Again, Strawson argues that in the relevant cases of conflict we “shift our standard” and that such shifts do not “condemn us to internal conflict. The appearance of...conflict vanishes when we acknowledge the relativity of our ‘realitys’.”²⁰ James, too, emphasises the relativity of our assertions to a multiplicity of standards when, defending the humanist doctrine that truth consists in satisfactoriness of belief, he argues that “satisfactoriness has to be measured by a

¹⁹ See Strawson 1979: 58-9.

²⁰ Strawson 1979: 57.

multitude of standards” (*MT* 40).²¹ The following passage from “The Sentiment of Rationality” presents one of the more striking indications of this general line of response in James’s writings:

There is nothing improbable in the supposition that analysis of the world may yield a number of formulae, all consistent with the facts. In physical science different formulae may explain the phenomena equally well, — the one-fluid and the two-fluid theories of electricity, for example. Why may it not be so with the world? Why may there not be different points of view for surveying it, within each of which all data harmonize, and which the observer may therefore either choose between, or simply cumulate one upon another? A Beethoven string-quartet is truly, as some one has said, a scraping of horses’ tails on cats’ bowels, and may be exhaustively described in such terms; but the application of this description in no way precludes the simultaneous applicability of an entirely different description (*WB* 66).

There are certain difficulties, however, with the idea that the ‘scheme-relativity of truth’ constitutes a sufficient response to the problem of conflicting schemes, both in general and as an interpretation of James. The general difficulty with such ‘quietist’ views (to borrow a term from Simon Blackburn)²² is that it is hard to see how a benign acquiescence in each of several conflicting schemes really resolves the apparent conflict, especially if we admit (as both James and Strawson do) that the meanings of the terms are to be straightforwardly construed in such a way that there really is at least an ostensible conflict in the first place. James’s suggestion that we may “either choose between” the alternative points of view “or simply cumulate one upon another” is likely to lead to the accusation that he is committed to an objectionably strong form of *relativism* concerning truth and reality. And in fact it is partly in response to such accusations (for example, in “Abstractionism and ‘Relativismus,’” *MT* 141-145) that James makes use of a third general line of response to the problem of conflicting truths, invoking a distinction perhaps more familiar in relation to its more developed use by C. S. Peirce. Without intending to deny the presence and importance of the scheme-relativity strategy in general and in James, then, I turn now to the question of ‘absolute truth.’

(3) ***Truth-convergence.*** I gave some indication in the first section as to how we might plausibly understand what James means by equating truth with ‘usefulness,’ ‘satisfactoriness,’ ‘adaptation,’ and so on, in terms of his functionalist account of concepts and intentional content. But however plausible a non-reductive and realist reading we might offer of the general idea that ‘truth is what works,’ we are still going

²¹ Compare also James on the different levels, dimensions and varieties of *rationality* (for example, *PU* 54-5 and 144-5).

²² See Blackburn’s objections to “*quietism* or *dismissive neutralism*” (which he attributes to the later Wittgenstein), in Blackburn 1984: 146; see also Blackburn 1993. For an objection to Strawson on this issue, see Hacker 1987: 198-204.

to run into the difficulty that there are bound to be cases in which the particular account of objective reality found satisfactory on the whole to one person, period, or culture will generally not be found thus satisfactory (or will be found unsatisfactory) to some other person, period, or culture. For terminological convenience, let us say that what is true is what is on the whole ‘acceptable,’ where acceptability must be understood as what is acceptable *to* some particular person, *from* some viewpoint, *within* some conceptual scheme, and so on.²³ James is initially pulled in two different directions when he considers such questions as the following: was the ancient belief that the earth is flat *true* for those to whom this belief was acceptable (cp. *P* 107)? Since what is true is what is the case, and since *we* take it to be objectively true that the earth is not flat, accepting the previous assertion would seem to have the objectionable consequence that the earth both is and is not flat (or that the earth *changed* from being flat to not being flat). But how can James avoid that consequence, if he holds (as he does) both that being true is a matter of being overall acceptable from some standpoint, and also that such standpoints render *conflicting* assessments both over time and across persons and cultures?

Appealing to the fallibilist idea that our opinions by their very nature are always open to correction (see section two), James contends that to “admit, as we pragmatists do, that we are liable to correction (even tho we may not expect it) *involves* the use on our part of an ideal standard” (*MT* 142).²⁴ Thus James introduces the notion of an “absolute truth” or “an ideal set of formulations towards which all opinions may in the long run of experience be expected to converge” (*MT* 143). In the *Pragmatism* lecture on “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth” James applies this distinction to the issue of ostensibly conflicting truths in the following way:

‘The true,’ to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking....Expedient in almost any fashion; and expedient in the long run and on the whole of course....The ‘absolutely’ true, meaning what no farther experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge....Meanwhile we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood. Ptolemaic astronomy, euclidean space, aristotelian logic, scholastic metaphysics, were expedient for centuries, but human experience has boiled over those limits, and we now call these things only relatively true, or true within those borders of experience. ‘Absolutely’ they are false; for we know that those limits were casual, and might have been transcended by past theorists....When new experiences lead to retrospective

²³ I should mention that there is an important issue as to whether James is ultimately guilty of confusing the question of the experiential consequences following from the truth of a given proposition with that of the satisfactory consequences (e.g., emotional) following from *one’s belief in* that proposition. See Lovejoy 1963, chapter one; and compare a related criticism by Bird 1986: 188. Meyers 1971 attempts a defense of James on this issue, following Perry 1958.

²⁴ For one possible way of cashing out James’s inference here (namely, from ‘liability to correction’ to ‘involving the appeal to an ideal standard’), see Simon Blackburn’s interesting discussion of Hume’s ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ in Blackburn 1984: 197-201.

judgments, using the past tense, what these [later] judgments utter *was* true, even tho no past thinker had been led there....[The earlier ones] may have been truth-processes for the actors in them. They are not so for one who knows the later revelations of the story (*P* 106-7; cp. *MT* 45, 48f., 55, 105, 114n, 129-1, and especially 142-5).

On this view, truth is still understood (basically) as acceptability relative to some perspective or other, but the “regulative notion of a potential truth to be established later, possibly to be established some day absolutely” (*P* 107) brings in the *idea* of what would be acceptable from a maximally corrected perspective, a set of opinions that would withstand the test of all relevant experiences in the long run. The postulation of this ideally corrected standard enables us to assert not only that the flat-earth view is and was *false*, but (allegedly) also to assert that there is in general *one objective truth* toward which we may be expected to converge in the long run. In relation to the justification for thus hypothesising that there *is* such an ideal truth “towards which all opinions may in the long run of experience be expected to converge,” James at one point offers the rather subtle defense that (to state here only its concluding sentence) the “hypothesis [of one absolute truth] will, in short, have worked successfully all round the circle and proved self-corroborative, and the circle will be closed” (*MT* 144).

Any reader familiar with the tradition of American pragmatism as continued in the writings of Quine, Sellars, Putnam, and Rorty will recognize that the notion of truth-convergence continues to be a hotly disputed resource in the pragmatist’s arsenal.²⁵ On the one hand, to the extent that the idea of a final truth (to be reached in the limit by ideal inquiry, etc.) is made more precise, to that extent one would certainly have to devote more argument than we find in James for the conclusion that we can know that we are bound to converge to any such final scheme. On the other hand, if James’s idea of an ‘absolute truth’ is softened merely to our grounds for believing that there will always be room for improvement in our schemes, then we are essentially left back with the second, scheme-relativity strategy. There is, however, at least one further line of response to the problem of conflicting schemes to be found throughout James’s writings.

(4) *The plenitude of the given.* What I am calling James’s ‘plenitude’ response to the problem of conflict derives in large part from doctrines discussed earlier in relation to the ‘insuperability of sensation’ and the insufficiency of conceptual schemes (section two). For obvious reasons, both the scheme-relativity and the truth-convergence strategies focus upon the role of conceptual schemes in constituting our various points of view on the world. Consequently such approaches usually explicitly reject the myth of the given; this is certainly the case with such thinkers as Strawson, Sellars, Kuhn, Rorty, and Putnam, and we have seen that in most respects this holds in the case of James’s account of percepts and concepts as well. As we also saw earlier, however, an important part of James’s general defense of pluralism consisted in arguing for the thesis that “conceptual knowledge is forever inadequate to the fulness of the reality to be known” (*SPP* 78). In certain crucial respects James thus defends a position that is quite unlike what we find in most present-day

²⁵ Quine argues against the idea of convergence in 1960: 23. Sellars argues in favor of convergence in 1968 Chapter V, and this Sellarsian outlook is further developed in Rosenberg 1980 and 1988. Putnam at times argued in favor of a conception of convergence (e.g., 1981: 56), but he has since come to abandon it.

conceptual scheme pluralists, for in this case it is the *conceptually unrepresentable richness of the given* to which James ultimately appeals in support of the intelligibility of his own conceptual scheme pluralism.

We have seen that the function of concepts for James is to “*carve out* order by leaving the disorderly parts out,” which James understands after the analogy of a block of marble from which “statues may be produced by eliminating irrelevant...chips of stone” (PU 10). The scheme-relativity, truth-convergence, and even the instrumentalist strategies tend to focus on the alternative ways in which these various *orders* are produced. The non-conceptual insight that the Jamesian metaphysician is supposed to grasp, however, is that all of the alternative and often conflicting ways in which we conceptualize the flux were, so to speak, *already contained “in solution” in the flux itself* (see, e.g., SPP 199, PP 277, PU 127ff):

Look where you will, you gather only examples of the same amid the different, and of different relations existing as it were in solution in the same thing. *Quâ* this an experience is not the same as it is *quâ* that, truly enough; but the *quâs* are conceptual shots of ours at its post-mortem remains, and in its sensational immediacy everything is all at once whatever different things it is at once at all.

[...] Of course this *sounds* self-contradictory, but as the immediate facts don’t sound at all, but simply *are*, until we conceptualize and name them vocally, the contradiction results only from the conceptual or discursive form being substituted for the real form (PU 120, 121).

This appeal to “raw unverbilized life as more of a revealer” of the nature of reality than any of our *conceptions* of reality (PU 121) is a veritable celebration of the myth of the given — here put forward not as myth, of course, but as the deepest of metaphysical insights into the nature of reality. The conclusion seems to be that we are entitled both to realistically construe the meanings of our terms in the way explained in section one, *and* to accept that our conceptual schemes present intrinsically conflicting pictures of reality. This will always appear objectionable to the intellectualist, who will quite reasonably wonder how we can get away with ascribing contradictory features to reality. The thrust of James’s overall argument, however, is that the intellectualists, on the negative side, have failed to understand the limits of conceptualization, and on the positive side, have failed to achieve the relevant (non-conceptual) insight that the given chaos of sensible reality is the primordial repository for whatever contradictory aspects our various ‘post-mortem’ conceptual ‘shots’ may succeed in abstracting from it.²⁶ That variants on such a view were held by James not only in the later ‘Bergsonian’ stage of his career but also from his earliest writings is suggested by this striking passage taken from the end of the famous ‘Stream of Thought’ chapter in *The Principles of Psychology*:

...the mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities. Consciousness consists in the comparison of these

²⁶ On conceptual distinctions as “post-mortem” see also SPP 99: “Properly speaking, concepts are post-mortem preparations, sufficient only for retrospective understanding....”

with each other, the selection of some, and the suppression of the rest...The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. In a sense the statue stood there from eternity. But there were a thousand different ones beside it, and the sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest. Just so the world of each of us, howsoever different our several views of it may be, all lay embedded in the primordial chaos of sensations, which gave the mere *matter* to the thought of all of us indifferently. We may, if we like, by our reasonings unwind things back to that black and jointless continuity of space and moving clouds of swarming atoms which science calls the only real world. But all the while the world *we* feel and live in will be that which our ancestors and we, by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, like sculptors, by simply rejecting certain portions of the given stuff. Other sculptors, other statues from the same stone! Other minds, other worlds from the same monotonous and inexpressive chaos! My world is but one in a million alike embedded, alike real to those who may abstract them. How different must be the worlds in the consciousness of ant, cuttlefish, or crab! (*PP* 277).

In general, to the extent that the plenitude response goes beyond the scheme-relativity strategy it seems to me to be highly problematic. It is difficult to see, for example, in what sense James can maintain (*PU* 120-1, italics added) that “*all living language conforms*” to the flux of “sensational life” when the latter is thus understood as a “primordial chaos” in the way required by the plenitude strategy; for James contends that we must turn a “deaf ear” to “discursive thought” in order to achieve the relevant metaphysical insight here. “As long as one continues *talking*,” he insists, “intellectualism remains in undisturbed possession of the field” (*PU* 131). Such a blanket appeal to the ineffable given is unlikely to carry weight with philosophers concerned to clarify the problem of a pluralism of apparently conflicting truths. As long as we continue *talking*, at any rate, we seem to be faced with a difficult dilemma once again. For if, in the metaphor exploited by James above, the alternative statues are to be conceived as *actually* in the marble, then we seem to be left with an incoherence that no appeal to ineffability will appease; but if the alternative statues are understood as merely *possible* constructions out of the marble, the deeper problems concerning our actually conflicting schemes would seem to be left unresolved.

The coherence of this fourth aspect of James’s pluralist philosophy is therefore questionable. If past experience is any guide, however, then perhaps even this last Jamesian idea somewhere harbors insights for those struggling to make some uniform sense of our multifarious conceptual schemes.

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