Introduction

> It is curious how little countenance radical pluralism has ever had from philosophers. Whether materialistically or spiritualistically minded, philosophers have always aimed at cleaning up the litter with which the world apparently is filled. They have substituted economical and orderly conceptions for the first sensible tangle; and whether these were morally elevated or only intellectually neat, they were at any rate aesthetically pure and definite, and aimed at ascribing to the world something clean and intellectual in the way of inner structure. As compared with all these rationalizing pictures, the pluralistic empiricism which I profess offers but a sorry appearance. It is a turbid, muddled, gothic sort of affair, without a sweeping outline and with little pictorial nobility. Those of you who are accustomed to the classical constructions of reality may be excused if your first reaction upon it be absolute contempt – a shrug of the shoulders, as if such ideas were unworthy of explicit refutation. But one must have lived some time with a system to appreciate its merits. Perhaps a little more familiarity may mitigate your first surprise at such a program as I offer.
>
> William James[1]

On 4 May 1908 at Manchester College, Oxford, William James approached the podium to begin the first of his eight Hibbert Lectures on Metaphysics. At the height of his international fame as a philosopher, James was also in declining health. Although he had retired from his official duties at Harvard University, he had accepted the lectureship with the idea of striking a mortal blow to absolute idealism, his chief philosophical rival throughout his long and varied academic career. The lectures, titled "The Present Situation in Philosophy," seek instead to advance James's own systematic, pluralistic position – known most frequently by the name of "radical empiricism." Repeated that summer

[1] William James, *A Pluralistic Universe, The Works of William James*, Frederick Burkhardt and Fredson Bowers (eds.) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 26.

at Harvard, they were the last major public presentation James made before his death in 1910.

James's rhetorically self-deprecating comparison between the world-view of absolute idealism and that of his own pluralistic empiricism indicates a great deal both about James's own view itself and about the difficulties and benefits attendant on one who considers it seriously. The passing of almost nine decades has rendered unfamiliar – and perhaps even strange – the "classical, aesthetically pure" perspective of absolute idealism that James presumes for his audience. James's own "turbid, muddled, gothic . . . affair" is, however, most likely no less difficult to comprehend now than it was at the beginning of the century. And, while our contemporary philosophical constructions of the world may admit of less sweep and possibly less pictorial nobility than those of absolute idealism, most of them still substitute rather "economical and orderly conceptions for the first sensory tangle." We too, then, may be excused if we shrug our shoulders at first in reaction to James's unfamiliar presentations. If we are to have any opportunity to benefit from the potential insights and advantages of James's view, or even to gain a deeper understanding of it, however, we must take his advice and live for some time with his system. In this book, I propose to do just that.

This interpretation derives its central, interpretive strategy from James's mature self-characterization to his audience at Oxford in 1908, where he treated his own ideas as together constituting a single system, which he characterized as both a "radical pluralism" and a "pluralistic empiricism," and eventually referred to collectively as "radical empiricism."[2] This "system," he admits, is not familiar philosophically in the sense of being neat and tidy – intellectually, aesthetically, and morally "pure"; it is instead, as James says, "gothic." But just as the cathedral of Chartres admits of an integrated logic where dissimilar components buttress and complement one another in a total expressive, functional, and beautiful whole, so too James's radical empiricism must be taken to admit of both a functional and, in some sense, a rational and aesthetic integration. Gaining insight into that pluralistic whole is, above all, the aim of this endeavor.

There are a number of claims that this study seeks to advance. Perhaps the most general, at least from the perspective of James studies, is the

[2] See ibid., pp. 20, 26.

thesis that James's mature philosophical view is most adequately represented by the integrated, radically empiricist, pluralistically panpsychist position indicated most clearly in his last completed major work, *A Pluralistic Universe*. What I seek to demonstrate is that James's integrated view is best understood as beginning with radical empiricism – as traditionally understood from the perspective of the posthumously collected *Essays in Radical Empiricism* – and including pragmatism. More importantly, however, James's world-view must also be taken to incorporate several crucial modifications to these more familiar views: namely, a modified and expanded notion of rationality on a spectrum between intimacy and foreignness, and a moderately panpsychist interpretation of reality that allows for the possibility of superhuman (or "supernatural") entities or activities. On my reading it is probably better to refer to James's overall view as "radical empiricism" rather than "pragmatism," but it is also crucial to take this radical empiricism to include several critical refinements to the views familiar from *Essays in Radical Empiricism*.

To advance the details of this general thesis about what "the centre of his vision" is, in the first four chapters that follow I consider James's writings and manuscripts from the last two decades of his life.[3] This period witnessed the explicit development of his radical empiricism and his pragmatism, as well as the publication of almost all of his works on philosophy and religion. In forwarding my most general argument, I offer an interpretation of James's evolving and mature thought as well as a close reading of a number of his texts and manuscripts from both a systematic and an historical perspective. In particular, I attend to the early development of James's radical empiricism, the involvement of his metaphysical views in his *magnum opus* on religion, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and the interrelationship – even interdependence – between his mature philosophical views and his understanding of and interest in religion. The principal interpretive aim is to comprehend James's philosophical views in greater systematic and historical detail, and to understand in particular how and why his views about religion are so thoroughly involved in his philosophical *Weltanschauung*. After this reconstructive task, in the final chapter I forward the insights gleaned from this rethinking of James into contemporary discussions in philosophy, religion, and theology, focusing

[3] For the "centre of vision" comment, see ibid., p. 44, as well as the letter to Miss S—, 26 May 1900, in William James, *The Letters of William James*, Henry James (ed.), 2 vols. (Boston, Mass.: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), vol. II, p. 355.

in particular on the value of his radical metaphysics of experience for these discourses at the end of the twentieth century.

As Hegel so perceptively observes in the introduction to his *Encyclopaedia Logic*, one of the most difficult problems for a philosophical investigation is the problem of the beginning.[4] Where does one find oneself beginning? Does one begin with enough successfully to proceed toward the goal set out, yet without presuming too much? Taking a cue from James's interest in the "big blooming buzzing confusion" of concrete experience, in chapter 1 my argument begins *in medias res* with a systematic account of James's radical empiricism as articulated (primarily) in the articles of 1904–5 that were published posthumously as *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (edited by R. B. Perry).[5] This beginning is in the middle of things in several ways. Historically, the moment of 1904–5 marks a place somewhere near the center of both the temporal span of my book and the productive public career of James. In terms of content the 1904–5 position also marks a middle point from the perspective of my discussion, since I eventually explore both how James arrives at the view represented at that time and how he subsequently refines and alters it.

The 1904–5 series of essays has several advantages as a point of departure. First, it is the most explicit and detailed metaphysical discussion James ever published. As a result, it is also the most familiar of James's metaphysical reflections to readers of his work. Finally, it also serves as the basis for the mature pluralistically panpsychist view that I seek to explicate and underscore in this book. The 1904–5 presentation of radical empiricism is where most readers do in fact find themselves beginning with James's metaphysical views; fortunately, as a starting point it provides enough material with which to proceed.

In my discussion in chapter 1, I differentiate James's radical empiricism into seven doctrines or components, unfolding in a systematic manner the content of the accounts and explicating in some detail the interrelationship among them. These are: (1) the methodological thesis of radical empiricism tying philosophy to the experienceable; (2) the factual thesis that relations are themselves part of experience; (3) the metaphysical thesis of pure experience; (4) the functional doctrine of direct acquaintance (immediate knowing); (5) the functional account of

[4] G. W. F. Hegel, *Logic*, William Wallace (tr.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), §1.

[5] James also calls immediate experience "much-at-onceness." See William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, *The Works of William James*, Frederick Burkhardt and Fredson Bowers (eds.) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 32.

knowledge about (conceptual knowing); (6) the pragmatic conception of truth; and (7) the thesis of pluralistic panpsychism. Chapter 1 is the most philosophically complex of the book, and thus is rather challenging as a beginning for the reader. Since the goal is to gain insight into James's rather unfamiliar philosophical view of the world, becoming accustomed to his terminology and ideas is of critical importance. The analysis of chapter 1 thus facilitates the following chapters' discussions of the development of James's views and the possibilities and problems such a view encounters.

With the systematic account in place, in chapter 2 I turn back to the 1890s to consider the historical development of James's radically empiricist way of thinking. Beginning with the conclusions to the 1890 *Principles of Psychology*, I first trace James's shift in interest from psychology as a natural science to philosophy in general and metaphysics in particular. Through a close analysis of texts and manuscripts from 1895, I demonstrate that James embraced the majority of the distinctive components of radical empiricism by that year as he began to explore the possibility of a formally monistic metaphysics that sets aside mind/body dualism. Further, I consider in some detail the apparent origins of James's thesis of "pure experience," which is central to radical empiricism, tracing and assessing its overt connections to the work of Richard Avenarius. Finally, I explore James's "field theory of consciousness," which appears prominently in his 1901–2 Gifford Lectures and is usually associated exclusively with the dualism of his psychology. I argue that this theory is, in fact, also central to James's formally monistic interests, and is intimately related to the central philsophical ideas of radical empiricism espoused in 1895–6.

Chapter 3 is principally concerned with the most successful of James's published works, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, comprising his Gifford Lectures from 1901–2. In contrast to the familiar, psychological reading of *Varieties*, on which philosophical questions about religion are merely circumscribed if not also overshadowed by James's empirical investigations and classifications, I offer an overtly philosophical reading of the text. The chapter begins with an historical reconstruction of James's experience of writing his Giffords, considering his unfulfilled plans and manuscripts for the lectures with an eye toward his intentions for the philosophical course that was never actually written. Following that is the philosophical reading of the lectures, which attends in particular to the aspects of James's view of religion that are consistent with and even dependent on radical empiricism and its thesis of

pure experience (shown in chapter 2 to have preceded *Varieties* in formulation). Finding that James does in fact construct his model of religious experience (conversion and mystical experience in particular) in line with the radically empiricist "field theory" of consciousness from 1895, this philosophical reading elucidates James's rather puzzling text on religious experience. Furthermore, it offers a more thorough, philosophical understanding of James's view of religion, and specifies more clearly the relationship of his self-styled "piecemeal supernaturalism" to his broader, philosophical project.

In chapter 4, after briefly charting the course of James's work since *Varieties*, I turn to his 1908 Hibbert Lectures on "The Present Situation in Philosophy," both to explicate the critical refinements to his 1904–5 statement of radical empiricism and to explore in greater detail the interconnections of his mature philosophical view with his understanding of religion. At once a commentary on the text of *A Pluralistic Universe* and a systematic analysis of James's refined radical empiricism (also called "a pluralistic panpsychic view of the universe"), this discussion has several purposes. First, it illuminates his understanding of the practice and goals of philosophy and explicates his inclusive, pluralistic conception of rationality, paying particular attention to his proposal to understand rationality in terms of "intimacy." Second, the treatment considers in detail James's philosophical and temperamental reasons for preferring a pluralistic, empiricist view of the world to the rationalistic option presented by absolute idealism. Finally, the analysis demonstrates and clarifies James's engagement of a form of panpsychism, relating his endorsement of a pluralistically panpsychic version of radical empiricism to his interpretation of religious experience presented but not fully explained in *Varieties*. The outcome for the reader is a greater familiarity with and appreciation of James's complete *Weltanschauung* in a more systematic and in-depth manner, as well as a detailed recognition of the central involvement of his views on religion with his philosophical program.

Chapter 5 turns from James's own historical period to the contemporary setting, seeking to bridge this reconsideration of James with contemporary debates in philosophy, religion, and theology. In the first section of the final chapter I revisit the question of pragmatism and truth, situating my understanding of James in contemporary neopragmatic debates on realism and antirealism in particular, and clarifying my interpretation of James on the relativity of truth. This portion therefore fills out the brief treatment of truth in chapter 1, and clarifies

my reading of the truth question in relation to James's mature view. The second half of the chapter takes a broader and thus more suggestive perspective, seeking to anticipate the contributions that reconsidering a Jamesian metaphysics of experience might make to three contemporary fields in the academy: philosophy, the philosophy of religion, and theology. With respect to philosophy in general, I argue that James's turn to minimalistic metaphysical reflection based on radical empiricism's notion of experience could both reorient our contemporary conception of the tasks of philosophy and contribute to and fruitfully alter some of the terms of debates in epistemology, philosophy of mind, and metaphysics in particular. Turning to the philosophy of religion, I consider the value of James's radical empiricism for discussions of religious experience, arguing that his experiential turn provides a middle way between contemporary apologetic and skeptical projects regarding experience as a basis for religious belief. I also evaluate the prospects for changing the debate as it is currently cast between theistic, often naive, realist positions and those of more hermeneutically sophisticated, but ultimately reductive, naturalisms. Finally, with respect to theology I argue that James's social rendering of reality and the divine critically reinvigorates the possibilities for developing a viable spiritualistic yet empirically minded world-view. The advantage of James's view, I contend, is that it is capable theoretically of comprehending the deep, systemic insights into social processes such as those advanced in contemporary studies of gender, race, ethnicity, and class, while at the same time correlating them critically to the more intimate religious and moral interests by which we as human beings are animated. Critical metaphysical thinking, on this reading, is cast as a theological, moral, and fundamentally spiritualistic exercise, whether about knowledge, reality, society, or the relations among human beings and the divine.

CHAPTER 1

James's radically empiricist "Weltanschauung"

Although William James is best known today for his association with American pragmatism, in the later and most prolific years of his life he was more apt to characterize his central philosophical interest as the advancement of "radical empiricism," a metaphysical *Weltanschauung* of his own invention. In the 1909 preface to *The Meaning of Truth*, James appealed to radical empiricism as the principal justification for his continued concern with the maelstrom of pragmatist and anti-pragmatist warfare, writing:

> I am interested in another doctrine in philosophy to which I give the name of radical empiricism, and it seems to me that the establishment of the pragmatist theory of truth is a step of first-rate importance in making radical empiricism prevail.[1]

Although numerous works have taken radical empiricism seriously since James's death, little attention has been devoted to the development of the view in his work prior to the flurry of articles that introduced radical empiricism to James's philosophical contemporaries in 1904–5.[2]

In chapter 2 I seek to redress that oversight, detailing James's turn from psychology to metaphysics in the early 1890s and demonstrating that the bulk of James's metaphysical ideas date, in significantly developed form, from as early as 1895. Before moving to that historical account, in this chapter I offer a relatively brief, systematic analysis of James's radical empiricism in order to provide a basis for the discussions

[1] William James, *The Meaning of Truth*, *The Works of William James*, Frederick Burkhardt and Fredson Bowers (eds.) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 6.

[2] Ignas Skrupskelis's introduction to William James, *Manuscript Lectures*, *The Works of William James*, Frederick Burkhardt and Fredson Bowers (eds.) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. lxiii, and John McDermott's introduction to William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, *The Works of William James*, Frederick Burkhardt and Fredson Bowers (eds.) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. xxi–xxv, are both exceptions to this claim. However, each of these treatments only suggests what should be considered in taking up the genesis of James's radical empiricism, rather than making much headway on the project.

of the rest of the book. My analysis in this chapter is based predominantly on the articles of 1904–5. Although certain important details of James's conceptions change or are developed before his death (a fact frequently overlooked, which is in part the subject of chapter 4), the 1904–5 presentation is both the most familiar and the most detailed discussion of the view that James published. It is thus a reasonable benchmark for the purposes of establishing my claims about the earlier development of his metaphysical ideas, as well as a solid basis for exploring later changes in his views. Notwithstanding the fact that historical development is not the subject of this chapter, I begin with a brief consideration of several of James's explicit promises to develop a radically empiricist metaphysics prior to 1904 to set the view in context.

RADICAL EMPIRICISM: A PHILOSOPHY OF PURE EXPERIENCE

James's interest in producing a systematic metaphysics was no secret among his contemporaries. In fact, in 1903 F. C. S. Schiller, in the preface to his *Humanism*, cast himself as the baptist to James's messiah:

> It seemed therefore not impolitic, and even imperative, to keep up the agitation for a more hopeful and *humaner* view of metaphysics, and at the same time to herald the coming of what will doubtless be an epochmaking work, viz. William James's promised *Metaphysics*.[3]

Schiller was to be disappointed at least in one sense, for although James held out the hope of writing a fully systematic work for the last ten years of his life, he never managed to produce such a text.[4] Schiller and his contemporaries could not have been too dismayed, however, for within a year of Schiller's trumpet call, James made quite a splash in the pages of *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* with his bombastic metaphysical query, "Does Consciousness Exist?"

Surprisingly, James's highly rhetorical introduction of his metaphysical ideas does not even mention the term "radical empiricism." Instead, the operative conception in the article is James's thesis of pure experience,

[3] F. C. S. Schiller, *Humanism*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1912), p. xiii.

[4] James's first clear intimations about such a work appear in the remains of and comments concerning his plan for his Gifford Lectures. See the letter from James to Frances R. Morse, 23 December 1899, *Letters of William James*, vol. 11, p. 112. James had also clearly intimated such plans to Schiller, as indicated by his comment after *Varieties* was out that "The Gifford Lectures are all facts and no philosophy." See James to F. C. S. Schiller, 20 April 1902, *Letters of William James*, vol. 11, p. 165. Chapter 3 provides a more complete discussion of the conception and history of James's Gifford Lectures.

his alternative to what he takes to be a (if not the) crucial mistake in various empiricisms and philosophies of the absolute – the presupposition of both the "substantiality" of consciousness and the fundamental duality of subject and object, mind and matter. In the next issue of the *Journal*, dated only twenty-eight days later, James published the sequel, "A World of Pure Experience," in which, notwithstanding the title, he bestowed the name "radical empiricism" on his *Weltanschauung* as a whole.[5]

James's appellation "radical empiricism" in this second article is not, in fact, completely novel, although the specificity he gives it is. "Radical empiricism" first appeared in print in the 1896 preface to *The Will to Believe*, as a characterization of James's "philosophical attitude":

> Were I obliged to give a short name to the attitude in question, I should call it that of *radical empiricism*, in spite of the fact that such brief nicknames are nowhere more misleading than in philosophy. I say "empiricism," because it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience; and I say "radical," because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as an hypothesis, and, unlike so much of the half-way empiricism that is current under the name of positivism or agnosticism or scientific naturalism, it does not dogmatically affirm monism as something with which all experience has got to square.[6]

From the perspective of the articles of 1904–5, one could recognize quite a bit of the metaphysics of radical empiricism in this quotation, especially in its focus on the "course of future experience." However, from the vantage of the text itself, the most salient feature of James's attitude of radical empiricism is its methodological bent. In this passage James allies himself not just with philosophical empiricism generally, but with the methodological empiricism of modern science in which rational conclusions are both seen as hypotheses and put to the test experimentally, ever subject to eventual falsification.

The second interesting point in this quotation is that James applies his methodology not only to matters of fact, that is, to conclusions and ideas about things that could obviously be met with in the course of experience, but also to broader, more fundamental organizing questions or meta-ideas, such as the presupposition of monism or pluralism. Previous philosophical empiricisms viewed these meta-ideas as prior to (transcendent of) experience, and therefore subject only to rational

[5] James, "A World of Pure Experience," *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, p. 22.
[6] William James, *The Will to Believe*, *The Works of William James*, Frederick Burkhardt and Fredson Bowers (eds.) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 5.