

James, Nonduality, and the Dynamics of Pure Experience

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Introduction

Charlene Seigfried has done as much as anybody to clarify some of the murkier aspects of James's work while demonstrating its continued vitality and relevance to contemporary debates.¹ This is especially so with her magisterial *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (1990) — still, perhaps, the deepest and most comprehensive book-length treatment of James's corpus available. Most of what I know about James I learned from Seigfried, first as her PhD student and later through subsequent returns to this book and her many other publications. I am therefore delighted to be included in a volume honoring her scholarly legacy.

Following Seigfried's lead, in what follows I hope to shed some light on one of these murky areas: James's notion of "pure experience." James develops "pure experience" in his posthumously published *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912). Despite continued interest in his work, however, the idea remains relatively elusive and under-explored. One reason for this is that James's descriptions of pure experience are often rather thin. They are based on public lectures and therefore lack the depth, rigor, and careful development of his best work (Thayer-Bacon 2017). While pure experience has been subsequently integrated into the work of a few thinkers — perhaps most notably by Kitarō Nishida, the founder of the Kyoto School of Japanese philosophy and a towering philosophical figure in his own right (Krueger 2006) — it also greatly vexed James's peers. The notion was widely dismissed by most contemporary commentators. Had he lived to witness this reception, James would have been disappointed. He hoped that his

¹ I am very grateful to the editors of this volume for their helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this chapter.

Forthcoming in *Pragmatist Feminism and the Work of Charlene Haddock Seigfried*, eds. Lee A. McBride III and Erin McKenna. Bloomsbury.

larger program of Radical Empiricism — of which pure experience is a cornerstone — “would serve as a possible ferment of new growths or a nucleus of new crystallization” for developing novel insights into the nature of knowledge, experience, and the self (James 1912/1996, 41).

Given this confusion and lack of clarity – both in James’s time as well as in much current scholarship – about what pure experience is, exactly, and what sort of work it’s supposed to do, I will focus primarily on exegesis. Building on some things Seigfried has already written about the notion, I argue that pure experience is not primarily a metaphysical thesis about the ultimate nature of reality (a common reading of the idea) but instead a phenomenological thesis about the fundamentally nondual way embodied subjects relate to their world. In developing this claim, I will try to add some additional texture and nuance to Seigfried’s reading and clarify what I think are some particularly distinctive and prescient aspects of the idea. Seigfried was one of the first to challenge the common reading of pure experience as advancing primarily a metaphysical thesis and instead argue for its phenomenological significance. For example, in an early important paper, she demonstrates how closely James ties pure experience with embodiment and agency (Seigfried 1976).

Following Seigfried, I will explore some similar connections. But I will also introduce some new themes and interpretations along the way. First, I develop a phenomenological interpretation of James’s general program of radical empiricism that sees both radical empiricism and pure experience as central planks of James’s ongoing critique of intellectualism. Next, I developed a two-pronged reading of pure experience. I argue that the idea can be read as a thesis about (1) the dynamics of *sensorimotor agency* (and relatedly, *habit*), as well as (2) the pervasiveness of *nonconceptual content* in everyday experience. As a result, we may add the

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notion to the lengthy list of theoretical resources in James that can continue to enrich ongoing debates in philosophy of mind and cognitive science.

Radical empiricism and phenomenology

James develops pure experience (PE) as part of his more general program of radical empiricism (RE). He never offers a precise definition of the latter in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912). But he offers more clarity in *The Meaning of Truth* (1912). Here, James says that RE consists of a postulate, a statement of fact, and a conclusion. The postulate is that “the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms of experience”; the fact is that “relations between things, conjunctive as well as disjunctive, are just as much matters of direct particular experience” as are things themselves; and the conclusion is that “the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience” (James 1909b/1979, 6–7).

There is a lot to unpack here. What is important for present purposes is that with his repeated emphasis on *experience*, it seems that James’s RE — including, as we will see, its core thesis of PE — is primarily a phenomenological endeavor.² James is concerned with elucidating fundamental structures of embodiment and experience, and clarifying how these structures reveal the world we practically live in. Seigfried tells us that with RE, James “bracketed metaphysical presuppositions in order to describe the phenomenal conditions of our being in the world” (Seigfried 1972, 79). An important part of this project concerns clarifying how *felt relations* structure these phenomenal conditions.

² The relationship between James and phenomenological thinkers like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty is too complex to discuss in detail here. See Edie (1987), Levine (2018), and Wilshire (1968).

This emphasis on the centrality of felt relations in experience is present throughout James's work. To further clarify the phenomenological orientation of RE, I suggest that this emphasis means several things for James. Felt relations inform (1) the *stream-like* flow of experience, (2) the *structure* of its content, and (3) its *self-directed* character.

First, James famously argues that experience (i.e., consciousness) is not “chopped up in bits” but instead flows steam-like “without breach, crack, or division” (James 1890, 1:237; 240). A felt sense of *continuity* from one moment or aspect of experience to the next is an essential part of its character. James illustrates this point with the example of hearing thunder: “What we hear when the thunder crashes is not thunder *pure*, but thunder-breaking-upon-silence-and-contrasting-with-it” (ibid, p.240).

This example also highlights the second way felt relations shape experience. James is critical of the tendency in philosophy and psychology to reduce our experience of contextual wholes to discrete bits (objects, events, qualities, sensations, etc.), and to characterize these discrete bits as “objects of knowledge” that are known through judgement or concepts (Johnson 2014, 42). Instead, James insists that experience is, from the start, present with its distinctive phenomenal richness and structural complexity: “No one has ever had a simple sensation by itself” (James 1890, 1:224). Ordinary experience appears to us as “a teeming multiplicity of objects and relations” (ibid, p.224). Within the stream-like character of experience, we perceive and interact with people, things, and spaces as *interconnected wholes* – we don't experience a red quale but rather an *overripe-but-still-edible Gala apple, purchased last week at our local market, sitting in bowl in the kitchen with other fruit* – before selectively tending to their individual properties or qualities.

Third, we not only experience relations *between* people, things, and spaces (e.g., the bouquet of purple lilies on the wooden table, lit from behind by sunlight streaming through an open window; the unity of an unfolding melody or thunder emerging from, and contrasting with, silence). Additionally, part of the character of our experience comes from *our* relation to these things. Experience is thus Janus-faced. In addition, this self-directed element of experience means that subjects play an active role in shaping the content — the *meaning* — of their experiences. The sight of purple lilies, a favorite of my beloved dead grandmother, prompts a wave of nostalgic associations and memories; upon hearing the chorus from a favorite song, I am transported to my first high school dance with its attendant nervousness and anticipation. For James, the lesson of examples like these is that both the structure and character of experience is established by the presence of felt relations (e.g., specific interests, associations, memories, anticipations, etc.) that subjects bring to their encounter with the world. These relations ensure that experience is constituted for us not merely as something known but as something felt and encountered in all its cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions (Johnson 2014, 43). RE and PE attempt to account for this process and therefore ought to be interpreted in this phenomenological light.

Another line of support for a phenomenological reading of RE — and one crucial for understanding the significance of PE — can be found by remembering that throughout his work, James maintains a consistent emphasis on the primacy of agency and embodiment.³ A key objective of his project is to elaborate a description of human beings as active participants in the construction of a shared world (Seigfried 1990, 76). Clarifying the way our *agency* structures our way of bodily being in the world and our experiencing of the world, James insists, is key to

³ For some of the same reasons I consider here, Leary (2018) says that James develops a “proto-phenomenological” account of the embodied mind (55).

understanding the subsequent categorizations, conceptualizations, and other intellectual ways of organizing the world that are founded upon these embodied structures and which emerge through the dynamics of our practical engagement with the people and things around us. These intellectual structures reflect the concerns of human beings that shape, and are shaped by, the world they inhabit. Nevertheless, *doing* precedes *thinking*, both developmentally and (quite often) experientially.

This methodological focus on the primacy of embodiment and agency — “concrete analysis” as James terms it — is at the heart of RE. He writes that “concreteness as radical as ours is not so obvious. The whole originality of pragmatism, the whole point of it, is its use of the concrete way of thinking” (James 1909b/1979, 115–116). In light of these considerations, Seigfried (1990, 76) affirms that the concrete analysis James develops with RE can be seen as phenomenological for several reasons. First, it rests on the idea that philosophical analysis should begin by identifying facts of experience, which are structures of our interactive appropriation of the world (i.e., the manner by which subjects actively create their world of experience). Second, experience for James deals with what is perceptually given to the subject, independent of questions about accuracy or veridicality. Third, James ties the success of his project to the possibility of describing, without presuppositions, the pre-reflective moment of experience. All three of these presuppositions are compatible with the outlook and objectives of phenomenology.

In sum, James’s RE can therefore be designated “a hermeneutical, radically empiricistic, pragmatic phenomenology” (Seigfried 1990, 77). This phenomenological orientation should lead philosophy to “seek a return from a life in concepts to a thicker life of intuition, empathy and

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activity” (Goodman 2004, 144). The phenomenological origin of this “thicker” life for James is PE. I turn to a more focused consideration of this idea now.

The place of pure experience

Within this background in place, we can now see why PE is not what many commentators have taken it to be: a metaphysical thesis about the ultimate nature of reality (as we’ll see, Seigfried is an exception to this reading). Unfortunately, James is responsible for some of this confusion. At the start of “Does ‘Consciousness Exist?’”, he introduces PE this way:

My thesis is that if we start with the supposition that there is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff ‘pure experience’; then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter. The relation itself is a part of pure experience; one of its ‘terms’ becomes the subject or bearer of the knowledge, the knower, the other becomes the object known (James 1912/1996, 4).

Many commentators have quite reasonably read James as offering a strong metaphysical thesis about “a stuff of which everything is composed.” For example, Bertrand Russell develops his neutral monism — the view that reality is ultimately of one kind, whose intrinsic nature is neither mental nor physical but a “neutral” other — via a direct critical engagement with James. More recent commentators continue to speak of PE in primarily metaphysical terms (see, e.g., Cooper (2002), Goodman (2017), and Lamberth (199)).⁴ However, as we have already seen,

⁴ For a reading of James’s PE more in line with what I develop here, see Pred (2005).

there are reasons to think that James's intentions are more phenomenological than overtly metaphysical.

To bring the phenomenological orientation of PE into sharper relief, note what James says later in this same essay after he has introduced some general features of both RE and PE. He concludes by responding to several objections. One imagined interlocutor makes the following demand: "Say what [PE] consists of — for it must consist of something — or be willing to give it up!" (James 1912/1996, 26). James's reply here is instructive. He notes that his earlier discussion of "a stuff of pure experience" was used for "fluency's sake" (ibid, 26). However, he now intends to be more careful with his language:

I have now to say that there is no general stuff of which experience at large is made. There are as many stuffs as there are 'natures' in the things experienced. If you ask what any one bit of pure experience is made of, the answer is always the same: "It is made of that, of just what appears, of space, of intensity, of flatness, brownness, heaviness, or what not" (ibid, 26-27).

He concludes: "Experience is only a collective name for all these sensible natures, and save for time and space (and, if you like, for 'being') there appears no universal element of which all things are made" (ibid, 27).

Several things are worth noting here. First, the fact that James takes the time to respond to this objection indicates how concerned he was that PE not be seen primarily as a kind of Russellian-type "general stuff." Rather than one stuff, James insists that there "as many stuffs as there are 'natures' in the things experienced" (ibid, 27).

Second and more substantively, what James wants to do with PE can be further clarified by looking at a remark from "The Place of Affectional Facts in a World of Pure Experience,"

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included in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Here, James makes his anti-dualist intentions clear. He says that his central thesis with PE is “that subjectivity and objectivity are affairs not of what an experience is aboriginally made of, but of its classification” (ibid, 141). It is conceptual analysis that retrospectively divides and discriminates — *classifies* — experience into discrete aspects such as subjects and objects. Experientially speaking, however, these conceptual designations and distinctions are not absolute. This is because the dualism established by reflexive (i.e., conceptual and linguistic) consciousness reflect a stance removed from the unified flow and dynamism — the felt relations — that characterize the stream of experience. Within PE, things are felt to have many “natures” as they can potentially be experienced as having. Thunder, for example, can be experienced as a strange and frightening sound; a welcome sign of much-needed rain; the presence of an unstable atmosphere; the expression of an angry god; an aesthetic object inviting poetic reflection or incorporation into a field recording for music-making — or even all of these things simultaneously.

For James, then, this intrinsically relational character of (pure) experience sits in tension with conceptual and linguistic descriptions *of* experience, which always look to antecedently fix an “inner/outer”, “mental/physical”, “this/that” framework on an item or state of affairs. James insists that these are distinctions fixed only in retrospection. The key point is that distinctions established retrospectively are a conceptual dualism that does not reflect a deeper inner dualism of substance (Taylor and Wozniak 1996, xvi). Within the dynamics and temporal flow of PE, there are simply embodied subjects skillfully engaging with and responding to their world.

Pure experience, agency, and habit

So, what *is* PE, exactly? And what is the *point* of it? In short, PE for James is a rejection of both ontological and epistemological dualism. Its positive contribution is to offer a phenomenologically motivated account of the fundamentally nondual way embodied and situated minds skillfully engage with their world.⁵ The point of it is to challenge “intellectualist” approaches, as James refers to them, which see experience primarily as a form of knowing — that is, as something that happens within an individual’s head, and which relies upon some sort of post-perceptual cognitive mechanism (e.g., judgements, concepts, etc.) for its meaning, coherence, and character. Accordingly, I will now argue that we can understand PE in at least two ways: as a thesis about (sensorimotor) *agency*, and as a thesis about (nonconceptual) *content*.

To begin with the former, PE for James is, as we have seen, primarily a phenomenological thesis. It characterizes the fundamental way minds relate to their world: not as detached Cartesian cogitos divorced from a world of value-neutral objects but rather as embodied agents continually enmeshed within meaningful “activity situations”, as James refers to them (James 1912/1996, 163). To be an embodied agent in the world is not just to be *situated* in an environment. It is also to be continually *involved* with that environment.

These observations may seem obvious when we consider how much of our everyday life is spent doing things like typing, checking our phone, walking to our next meeting, putting on music, talking to friends, playing with our children, driving, preparing meals, or scrolling through post-dinner TV options. However, even the experience of doing nothing (e.g., lying down on the bed with our eyes closed) is still a way of actively taking up and maintaining a particular relation to the world. This is because each moment of experience — even when sitting still — has retrospective and prospective qualities, hence its stream-like character. As James puts

⁵ This emphasis on the nondual relation between self and world within PE is what led Kitarō Nishida to incorporate the notion into his own Zen-Buddhist inspired thinking (Dilworth 1969; Krueger 2006, 2008).

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it, the present moment has *duration*: it is “a saddle-back, with a certain breadth of its own on which we sit perched, and from which we look in two directions in time” (James 1890, 1:609). Therefore, just like other activities, the experience of lying on our bed with our eyes closed always unfolds against a backdrop of *felt relations* — prior actions, decisions, and contexts, as well as anticipated possibilities and outcomes — that have led to this moment, will follow from it, and which collectively give this experience its distinctive phenomenal texture. Compare, for example, the exquisite relief of collapsing into bed for a moment of peace while the children (finally!) nap versus the fraught collapse that follows a fight with one’s partner, who has now stormed off to another part of the house in anger. These collapsing-into-bed-and-lying-still experiences share the same external form. Nevertheless, they are individuated by their context and temporally-extended profile. Moreover, from this broader perspective, it is clear that despite initial appearances, both are *activities* — different ways of dealing with our world. Accordingly, for James, “[t]he sense of activity is thus in the broadest and vaguest way synonymous with the sense of ‘life’” (James 1912/1996, 161). We find the origin of this sense of life within the temporal and agential dynamics of PE.

Habit and nonduality

While PE is a thesis about the fundamentally embodied and situated nature of our sensorimotor agency, James has an even more specific idea in mind. PE characterizes the *prereflective phenomenological unity* of subject and object within the activity situations that make up everyday life: collapsing into bed while the children nap; gingerly sipping hot coffee; deftly stepping aside in the hallway to avoid bumping into a colleague; brushing our teeth; maneuvering our car through traffic; erupting into laughter at a friend’s wry comment; intensely

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practicing our guitar scales; lunging for the bumped wine bottle as it teeters off the table; gently stroking an infant's forehead as we sing a quiet lullaby, etc. For James, these everyday experiences are "pure" in that, as we enact them, dualistic distinctions such as subject-object or mental-physical are not operative. There is simply *experience-in-action*: an immediate encounter with, and creative responsiveness to, the changing demands of that particular activity situation.

Another way of understanding James here is to see him as advocating an idea subsequently developed even further by Dewey: the primacy of *knowing-how* over *knowing-that*. Again, James is concerned with clarifying the phenomenal conditions of our practical being in the world. His target, once more, is the family of views that see our primary way of engaging with the world as modes of intellectual knowing, as relying upon judgments or concepts (more on this below).⁶ Instead, James observes that most of our everyday experiences rest on a bedrock of embodied *habits*: patterns of skilled, practical know-how that help us negotiate the various environments in our lifeworld. For James, habits are the foundation of human existence. He writes: "All our life, so far as it has definite form, is but a mass of habits — practical, emotional, and intellectual — systematically organized for our weal or woe, and bearing us irresistibly toward our destiny, whatever the latter may be" (James 1983, 47). Habits can be simple or complex. They can range from the idiosyncratic way we brush our teeth each night, hold a coffee mug, rub our hands together when we're nervous, or reflexively push our hair out of our eyes when it's getting too long, all the way to the complex suite of strategies and behaviors we use to up-regulate our dimming mood during the dark winter months, deepen our religious practices,

⁶ This critique also becomes a cornerstone of Dewey's work. Dewey describes the intellectualist mistake of regarding all experience as a mode of knowing this way: "By "intellectualism" as an indictment is meant the theory that all experience is a mode of knowing, and that all subject-matter, all nature, is, in principle, to be reduced and transformed till it is defined in terms identical with the characteristics presented by refined objects of science as such. The assumption of "intellectualism" goes contrary to the facts of what is primarily experienced. For things are objects to be treated, used, acted upon and with, enjoyed and endured, even before they are things to be known. They are things had before they are things cognized" (Dewey 1958, 21).

maintain a healthy relationship with our partner, connect with our children, or write a research paper.

The key idea here — and the heart of PE — is that Jamesian habits are the locus of his anti-dualism. This is because in habits, traditionally oppositional categories such as past and future, stimulus and response, mind and body, individual and social, come together. According to James, habits do away with these dualisms because they are, in effect, a *contentless mechanism* (Schoenbach 2017, 279); they are everywhere, an inextricable aspect of nearly everything we think, feel, and do. As we enact them, these dualisms are generally not operative. Again, there is simply a creative responsiveness to the demands of the activity situation in which they unfold. Habit, James tells us, “diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed” — and via this diminishment, weakens or dissolves the felt dualisms that are present in other more reflective or non-habitual areas of our life (James 1890, 1:114). He argues elsewhere that the experiential network of habitual actions at the ground of PE “has no such inner duplicity; and the separation of it into consciousness and content comes, not by way of subtraction, but by way of [retrospective] addition” (James 1912/1996, 9).

To be clear, James does not think that acting in a habitual way means that we are necessarily switching off and acting unconsciously. Habits are *experienced*; they have a phenomenal character. However, for James, the experiential mechanisms that organize and animate habits are not dualism-establishing processes such as attention, planning, reflection, or counterfactual thinking but rather the *felt relations* constitutive of our sensorimotor agency. Since these relations are Janus-faced, they integrate self and world within their nondual dynamic. Within habitual action “the distinction between phenomena and noumena ultimately collapses into a single world of experience” (Seigfried 1990, 356).

So, on one hand, Jamesian habits include a felt *self-directed* sense of the inner coherence of our bodily movements as they unfold in time: “In action grown habitual, what instigates each new muscular contraction to take place in its appointed order is not a thought or a perception, but the *sensation occasioned by the muscular contraction just finished*” (ibid, 115). However, on the other hand, Jamesian habits are also *world-directed*. They include an ongoing feeling of how these movements are both responsive to, and guided by, salient features of our environment that shape their developmental trajectory over multiple timescales: “We must not forget, namely, in talking of the ultimate character of our activity-experiences, that each of them is but a portion of a wide world, one link in the vast chain of processes of experience out of which history is made” (James 1912/1996, 172). Within the interactive dynamics of PE, these two aspects are experientially integrated.

In this way, then, James urges that we should “acquire a habit, in discussing activity-experiences, of defining them by their relation to something more” (ibid, 173). This felt sense of “something more” is a subtle-but-pervasive feeling of anticipation and further interactive possibilities perpetually laid out before us. Generally speaking, these possibilities are present to us not as explicit objects of reflection (although they can be) but as things *felt*: “We have the most extremely delicate foreshadowing of the sensory effects” that our movements, both possible and actual, have in perceptually revealing the world to us (James 1890, 2:501). Most of our life consists of habitually navigating, manipulating, probing, and exploring shifting environments that afford multiple forms of interactive engagement. We learn about our world and ourselves through practical action. “Knowledge of sensible realities”, James tells us, “comes to life inside the tissue of experience. It is made; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time (James 1912/1996, 57).

To make these ideas more concrete, consider an example: when I get into my car, late for work, start it up and begin driving — all while taking a call on my mobile phone and trying to slither out of my bulky overcoat — I am fluidly engaging with, and responding to, features of my environment in a flexible and skillful way. I am drawing upon years of habit to negotiate the changing dynamics of this complex activity situation. James insists that to speak of an autonomous subject over against a world of objects here artificially severs the broader practical-holistic structure of that (pure) experience *as a whole, in its unfolding*. My acting body, the mobile phone I am speaking into and the person I am talking to, the coat I am struggling out of, the road I am maneuvering down, the town I am driving through, etc. are all elements of its unified structure. Each part is relationally integrated with the others within my ongoing experience. As long as things go smoothly in that context, I am not aware of any substantial divisions between these elements. When the felt anticipations I have in that context are fulfilled — the car continues to respond appropriately to steering adjustments; my mobile phone conveys my conversation-partner’s voice; my seatbelt stays fastened when I click it into place; the seat back remains firm despite my postural adjustments — the flow of the experience remains fluid and unbroken.

However, say I habitually reach down to turn on my stereo while still focusing on the road in front of me, only to find that it will not turn on. I press the power button several times but nothing happens. At that moment of an unfulfilled sensorimotor anticipation, the phenomenological structure of that pure experience abruptly changes. I am suddenly hyper-aware of my dead stereo — I attentionally “select” it, to use Jamesian terminology — and in so doing, am jolted out of the smooth, functionally integrated relationship I previously had with that

total activity-situation.⁷ I am surprised and therefore must recalibrate my actions and anticipations: “Surprise can only come from getting a sensation which differs from the one we expect. But the truth is when we know the objects well, the very slightest difference from the expected weight will surprise us, or at least attract our notice” (James 1890, 1:502).

For James, the key anti-dualist point is that the act of focusing on the broken stereo introduces a dualistic structure that is not there within the original experience, prior to this global breakdown. The dead stereo no longer responds as expected to my habitual ways of interacting with it; it suddenly demands my attention in a way that foregrounds it within my field of attention and, in so doing, abstracts it away from its prior integration within the larger relational context of this activity-situation. In this way, I am suddenly aware of myself as a subject over against an object (i.e., the dead stereo), as something functionally distinct from me that now must be dealt with and accounted for. When we are surprised by unfulfilled sensorimotor anticipations, the fluidity — and for James, the *nonduality* — of our originally pure experience is disrupted.

For James, examples such as these are illustrative in that they characterize the fundamentally practical, habit-driven — and crucially, *nondual* — way that we inhabit and experience our lifeworld. However, one might worry here that habits reflect a very fixed side of human existence. They seem to epitomize stability and predictability (e.g., getting into the same car, driving the same way to work, listening to the same talk radio station every morning for months and years) — qualities that seem fundamentally at odds with a characteristic pragmatic

⁷ For James, consciousness is a “selecting agency” that “is always interested more in one part of its object than in another, and welcomes and rejects, or chooses, all the while it thinks” (James 1890, 2:284). As a selecting agency, consciousness can pick out certain features of PE in a way that introduces retrospective dichotomies (subject-object; self-other; conceptual and linguistic discriminations, etc.) originally collapsed within the dynamics and flow of PE. In this way, PE, in its originally nondual state, provides the material for consciousness-as-a-selecting-agency to do its work and establish dualistic distinctions and structures (Heft 2001, 27).

emphasis on creativity, improvisation, and spontaneity. Indeed, habits can reflect these qualities. Much of our life runs along relatively fixed rails. However, as James (and Dewey after him) note, habits also determine how we behave in unexpected situations. Habits govern the split-second reactions and decisions we often have to make in everyday life, including in times of crisis (Schoenbach 2012, 27). The better established a paramedic's habitual skill-set, for example, the more swiftly and effectively they can respond to the immediate medical needs of a car accident victim. In light of these potential concerns, James reminds us that habits are not fixed. Rather, they are plastic and adaptable; they allow us to negotiate contexts demanding everyday acts of improvisation, from cooking or making small talk to playing sports, making music, or recalibrating one's life following the death of a partner (Krueger and Salice forthcoming). New habits, James says, "*can* be launched...on condition of there being new stimuli and new excitements. Now life abounds in these, and sometimes they are such critical and revolutionary experiences that they change a man's whole scale of values and system of ideas" (James 1983, 76–77).

In sum, for James, PE — understood as a thesis about sensorimotor agency (and relatedly, *habit*) — is James's attempt to characterize the originally nondual way embodied subjects relate to their lifeworld. In patterns of everyday habitual action, animate bodies engage with their environment in a smooth and responsive manner via the continual unfolding of sensorimotor feedback loops integrating self and activity-situation. Accordingly, PE is not put forward as a thesis about the inner nature of ultimate reality. Instead, James situates it within "this immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories" (James 1912/1996, 46). If it is a monistic thesis, PE is a phenomenological monism grounded in the embodied dynamics of our sensorimotor agency —

again, “not a pervasive ‘stuff’ of which things are made, but a way of referring to the many perceptual experiences we have” as we habitually negotiate our lifeworld (Seigfried 1990, 241).

Pure experience and nonconceptual content

A second way of understanding PE, I suggest, is to read it as a thesis about the *content* of experience — specifically, the pervasiveness of *nonconceptual* content within everyday habitual experience. As we have seen, with his emphasis on the primacy of sensorimotor agency and embodied know-how, James is critical of intellectualist approaches that see conceptual or propositional thought as the primitive — and thus irreducible — interface between self and world. Again, on this intellectualist line, all experience is a mode of knowing and necessarily involves concepts or judgements.

Against this view, James not only argues for the primacy of embodied know-how. He also uses his formulation of PE to argue that the content of experience often outstrips our ability to articulate it using concepts and language. In other words, many of our experiences have a rich phenomenal character that is too fine-grained and sensuously detailed to lend itself to an exhaustive conceptual analysis. Our experience is thus “pure” in that a bit of the world is immediately present to us *as being* a certain way — that is, with an organizational structure, salience, and character — independent of the concepts we possess *about* that bit of the world. James tells us that PE “is the name I give to the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories...a *that*, which is not yet any definite *what*, tho’ ready to be all sorts of whats...Pure experience in this state is but another name for feeling or sensation” (James 1912/1996, 94).

For example, although humans can visually discriminate, at least on some estimates, around ten million colors, no one has that many corresponding color concepts. To perceive a color for which we lack a corresponding concept is an example of experience with *experiential* content (a *that*) lacking *conceptual* content (a *what*). Similarly, we can find a melody or subtle textures in a piece of music deeply moving without having the technical training in music composition and theory — and hence the requisite concepts and language — to say why this is so. Nonetheless, our perceptual and affective experience of this passage is no less phenomenally rich. We can acquire rich *practical* forms of musical understanding — develop the sensorimotor skills, the embodied know-how, needed for “deep listening” (Krueger 2009) — by perceptually exploring its structure, texture, melodic and rhythmic development, etc., in a sensitive and careful way, all while lacking music-theoretic concepts.⁸

With PE, James insists that there is a richness and meaning to our experience of reality-in-becoming that presents itself independently of concepts and logic. More precisely, James argues that concepts are inadequate insofar as they cannot capture the temporal *flux* and *particularity* of reality-in-becoming (Goodman 2004) — relational qualities that are experientially present within the dynamic flow of PE. This sentiment moves James to write the following passage, which (predictably) upset many of his contemporary commentators:

I have finally found myself compelled to give up the logic, fairly, squarely, and irrevocably. It has an imperishable use in human life, but that use is not to make us theoretically acquainted with the essential nature of reality. Reality, life, expedience,

⁸ There is empirical support for this idea. Bigand and Poulin-Charronnat (2006) surveyed multiple studies indicating that musically untrained listeners respond similarly to musically trained listeners in cognitive and emotional tasks related to careful music listening — strongly suggesting that “that intensive musical training is not required to respond to music in a sophisticated way” (119).

concreteness, immediacy, use what words you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it (James 1909/1977, 96–97).

To understand James here, it is important to first note that he does not dismiss the instrumental value of concepts (something a number of his critics failed to see). James is certainly not suggesting that we disregard the formal truths of logic altogether. Rather, his insistence that concepts and logic can be “given up” is a recognition that the problem is not with concepts and logical truths *per se*, but rather with the way philosophers — specifically, those endorsing an intellectualist view — relate to conceptual and logical analysis.

By arguing that experience is originally “pure” in his technical sense, James wants to remind us that concepts are merely organizational tools, “map[s] which the mind frames out” (James 1909a/1979, 43). They are useful in that they help us to provisionally organize and cope with the world we encounter within PE. Concepts — as “teleological weapons of the mind” (James 1890, 2:335) — are retrospective reconstructions of the portion of reality that demands our attention at any given moment. In this way, they have a clear instrumental value. However, they do not capture the essence of that which they purport to describe. There is always another relational aspect under which a thing can present itself, another way a *that* within PE can be experienced, investigated, categorized, and shared — and, in this way, constituted within our experience as a distinct *what*. He insists that, from the perspective of PE, “[t]here is no property ABSOLUTELY essential to any one thing” (James 1890, 2:333). Concepts instead pick out whatever properties of a thing that “is so important for my interests that in comparison with it I may neglect the rest” (*ibid*, 335). Accordingly, concepts “characterize us more than they characterize the thing” (*ibid*, 334).

Moreover, concepts are always retrospective reconstructions of the world gone by; they pass over the dynamics and temporal flux of reality-in-becoming. This is especially so with the concepts we apply to first-person experience: “a feeling, to be named, judged, or perceived, must be already past” (quoted in Meyers 1986, 65). This is because (quoting Kierkegaard) “we live forward, but we understand backwards” (James 1912/1996, 238). Conceptual analysis is, for James, a kind of backward living. And a propensity for relying too heavily on an “understanding backwards is, it must be confessed, a very frequent weakness of philosophers” (ibid, 238). However, by situating his analysis within the dynamism and relational stream of PE, James says that “radical empiricism alone insists on understanding forwards also, and refuses to substitute static concepts of the understanding for transitions in our moving life” (ibid, 238).

According to James, philosophical confusions arise when we think that structures of our conceptual “maps” provide an isomorphic blueprint of the inner structure of reality itself. This is the heart of the intellectualist’s error. For, as long as we recognize the instrumental utility of concepts — which includes their inability to give us the reality and momentum of a life as experienced — we can use them effectively. Nevertheless, James insists that when logic and concepts — a “static incomplete abstraction” (James 1909/1977, 94) of a more dynamic reality-in-becoming — are taken to be a literal reflection of reality, our intelligence becomes distorted. In other words, conceptual models become “distortive if understood as a complete or totally accurate expression of the fullness of experience” (Seigfried and Seigfried 1995, 149). The “static incomplete abstraction” is mistaken for the real — we take the mapped for the map — and the vibrancy of experience is crystallized into fixed categories that fail to do justice to its dynamism and felt richness. James drives this point home when he insists that when we return “into the stream of sensible presentation [within PE]”, we find that “nouns and adjectives, and

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thats and abstract whats, grow confluent again, and the word ‘is’ names all these experiences of conjunction” (1912/1996, 117).

James has another critique of concepts worth briefly considering. Not only does he argue that concepts fail to capture the phenomenal richness and temporal flux of the world as experienced. Additionally, they fail to capture the *particularity* of experience, including objects of experience (Goodman 2004). This deficiency lies with the fact that, as universal, concepts deal with static generalizations and not living change and novelty. Therefore, no amount of conceptual description can pick out every aspect, every singular nuance and shading, of a particular thing — every possible way a *that* may be experientially constituted as a *what*. At a certain point, conceptual description runs dry and we must allow the thing to speak itself simply by presenting itself within PE. James tells us:

...novelty finds no representation in the conceptual method, for concepts are abstracted from experience already seen or given, and he who uses them to divine the new can never do so but in ready-made and ancient terms...Properly speaking, concepts are post-mortem preparations; and when we use them to define the universe prospectively we ought to realize that they can give only a bare abstract outline or approximate sketch, in the filling out of which perception must be invoked (James 1909a/1979, 54).

According to James, then, concepts are inadequate for understanding experience for (at least) two reasons. First, they can never account for the richness and temporal flux of our experience of the world-in-becoming. Experience speaks a rich and subtle phenomenal language; it is structured by felt relations and a dynamic character that exceeds the limited lexicon of our conceptual frameworks. Secondly, concepts — as universal — pass over the particularity and novelty of individual things and relations. Once more, however, our bodily-perceptual

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experience is attuned to this novelty and thus must “fill out” the gaps in our conceptual analysis.

Putnam (1990) puts the point here well: “James wants to remind us that even though the rationalistic way of thinking has its place...once it becomes one’s only way of thinking, one is bound to lose the world for a beautiful model (236). Given this view of concepts, James urges that “our intelligence cannot wall itself up alive” in logic and conceptual analysis but must instead “at any cost keep on speaking terms with the universe that engendered it” (James 1909/1977, 94). This universe is the universe of PE.

Final thoughts

In this chapter, I have developed a reading of James’s notion of “pure experience” — still a somewhat mysterious and under-explored aspect of his work. I have argued that it is not primarily a metaphysical thesis about the ultimate nature of reality (as it is often taken to be), but rather a phenomenological thesis about the fundamentally nondual way embodied and situated minds relate to their world. First, I developed a phenomenological interpretation of James’s more general program of RE that sees both RE and PE as central planks of James’s ongoing critique of intellectualism. Next, I developed a two-pronged reading of PE. I argued that PE can be read as a thesis about (1) the dynamics of *sensorimotor agency* (and relatedly, *habit*), and (2) the pervasiveness of *nonconceptual content* in everyday experience.

Ultimately, the philosophical significance of pure experience for James is to remind us that we do not first encounter and come to know the world via concepts or reflection — contra the Cartesian *cogito* — but instead within the temporally-extended dynamics of perception and action. As we have seen, James argues that concepts only give us a static and incomplete picture of the world; unlike experience, they cannot capture the richness and dynamism of a world

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continually in-becoming. Additionally, concepts — as universal — pass over the particularity and novelty of things and their relations. However, experience itself preserves this rich multiplicity. James therefore urges that philosophy remain rooted in the nondual dynamics of everyday experience. Despite the sometimes-confusing way he formulates this idea — and the relative thinness of his descriptions of it in *Essays in Radical Empiricism* — PE remains an important final part of James’s life-long intellectual project of remaining faithful to the character and textures of our conscious life.

An exegetical take-away is that this reading of PE aligns James with phenomenological thinkers like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. For example, in developing his own anti-dualism, Merleau-Ponty similarly writes that embodied subjects originally emerge not from acts of reflective cognition but in “a universe of experience, in a milieu which is neutral with regard to the substantial distinctions between the organism, thought and extension” (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 189). Phenomenologists have enjoyed renewed attention in various circles in recent years, particularly from those working on embodied approaches to cognition in philosophy and cognitive science. With a few exceptions, pragmatists like James, Dewey, and Mead have not received the same level of attention. Even when James is mentioned, most of the focus tends to be on his *Principles of Psychology*. However, his later work remains a rich source of phenomenological descriptions, concepts, and arguments that anticipated — and can still supplement and enrich — ongoing debates. Thankfully, we have Seigfried’s enduring work to help guide us in this endeavor.

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