

James on Pure Experience

Joel Krueger

William James's "pure experience"—developed in his posthumously published *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (*ERE*)—greatly vexed his peers. Many simply did not know what to make of it. One reading—which Bertrand Russell adopts when developing his own neutral monism—is to see pure experience as a strong *metaphysical* thesis positing a monistic, all-encompassing “primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed.”¹ But James was at best a halfhearted metaphysician; he ultimately rejects the epistemic possibility of an Archimedean point beyond experience from which we might construct an objective, reality-encompassing system. Moreover, he elsewhere seems to contradict this metaphysical reading when he concedes that “there appears no universal element of which all things are made” (*ERE*, 15).

An alternative reading—consistent with James's lifelong philosophical interest in the body, as well as his commitment to radical empiricism, or the idea that “the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience”²—is to see pure experience as a *phenomenological* thesis. On this reading, pure experience is meant to characterize the fundamental way that minds inhabit and relate to their world: namely, not as a detached Cartesian *cogito* divorced from a world of value-neutral objects, but rather as an embodied *agent* enmeshed in concrete, value-laden “activity situations.” More specifically, “pure experience” refers to the prereflective phenomenological unity of subject and object within the myriad activity situations constitutive of everyday life: gingerly sipping hot coffee, maneuvering our car through traffic, erupting into laughter at a friend's wry comment, intensely 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, and so on. For James, these 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 demands of that particular activity situation. Pure experience is thus situated within “this immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories” (*ERE*, 46). James further insists that no “dualism of being represented and representing resides in the [pure] experience *per se*. . . . Its subjectivity and objectivity are functional attributes solely, realized only when the experience is ‘taken’; i.e., talked-of, twice, considered along with its two differing

contexts respectively, by a new retrospective experience” (*ERE*, 13). If it is a monistic thesis, pure experience is a monism grounded in the embodied dynamics of perception and action.

The philosophical significance of pure experience for James is to remind us that we do not first come to know the world via concepts or reflection—contra the Cartesian *cogito*—but instead within perception and action. 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 continually in-becoming. Additionally, concepts—as universal—pass over the particularity and novelty of things and their relations. But experience itself preserves this multiplicity. James thus urges that “our intelligence cannot wall itself up alive” in logical and conceptual analysis, but must instead “at any cost keep on speaking terms with the universe that engendered it”.³ That universe is a universe of pure experience.

This reading of pure experience aligns James with phenomenological thinkers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who writes similarly 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.”⁴

Notes

- 1 William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 4.
- 2 William James, *The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 6.
- 3 William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 94.
- 4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. A. L. Fisher (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963), 189.