

# 'Willam James on Percepts, Concepts, and the Function of Cognition'

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Central to both James's earlier psychology and his later philosophical views was a recurring distinction between *percepts* and *concepts*. The distinction evolved and remained fundamental to his thinking throughout his career as he sought to come to grips with its fundamental nature and significance. In this chapter, I focus initially on James's early attempt to articulate the distinction in his 1885 article "The Function of Cognition." This will highlight a key problem to which James continued to return throughout his later philosophical work on the nature of our cognition, including in his famous "radical empiricist" metaphysics of "pure experience" around the turn of the century. We shall find that James grappled insightfully but ambivalently with the perceptual and conceptual dimensions of the "knowledge relation" or the "cognitive relation," as he called it—or what, following Franz Brentano, philosophers would later call our object-directed thought or *intentionality* more generally. Some philosophers have once again returned to James's work for crucial insights on this pivotal topic, while others continue to find certain aspects of his account to be problematic. What is beyond dispute is that James's inquiries in this domain were both innovative and of lasting significance.

## Percepts and Concepts in "The Function of Cognition" (1885)

Five years prior to the publication of his monumental two-volume work, *The Principles of Psychology* (1900), James published one of his most important early philosophical articles, "On the Function of Cognition" in the journal *Mind* (1885). Parts and revisions of this article would reappear in the *Principles*, and then two decades later the article would be reprinted, largely unchanged but with some important notes added by James, as Chapter 1 of his 1909 "sequel" to his 1907 *Pragmatism*, entitled *The Meaning of Truth* (MT 1909, 13–32).<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I want to suggest that this probing and insightful but in some respects perplexing early article is important for understanding both the continuities and the development of James's thought on the nature of knowledge and intentionality in general, and in particular on the nature of our most basic perceptual knowings.

In "The Function of Cognition," James made the terminological decision to use the word *feeling* as his general term "to designate generically all states of consciousness considered subjectively, or without respect to their possible function" (MT 1909, 13). Five years later in his *Principles*, James broadened this terminological choice to "feelings and thoughts," and in 1909 James added a

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<sup>1</sup> Page references to "On the Function of Cognition" will be to its 1909 reprinting as chapter one of *The Meaning of Truth* (MT), "The Function of Cognition," but the reader should bear in mind the earlier 1885 date of its initial publication.

sentence to his 1885 text at this point indicating that the reader “may substitute” for “feeling” the term *idea* taken in John Locke’s broad sense, or else “state of consciousness” or “thought” (MT 1909, 13). James’s terminological indecisiveness, I think, in part reflects his hesitation to use any one term (e.g., “feeling”) to cover both percepts and concepts. In his final book, the unfinished and posthumously published *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1911), James explicitly devotes three chapters to exploring various aspects of his key distinction between percepts and concepts. On the terminological question, he there writes:

In what follows I shall freely use synonyms for these two terms [i.e., for “percept” and “concept”]. “Idea,” “thought,” and “intellecion” are synonymous with “concept.” Instead of “percept” I shall often speak of “sensation,” “feeling,” “intuition,” and sometimes of “sensible experience” or of the “immediate flow” of conscious life. Since Hegel’s time what is simply perceived has been called the “immediate,” while the “mediated” is synonymous with what is conceived. (SPP 1911, 48n)

(Hegel’s distinction reflects his own critical reshaping of Kant’s famous distinction between concepts as “mediate” cognitions and (sensory) intuitions as “immediate” or direct cognitions of the objects of our experience). What James is primarily concerned to investigate is this: What is the particular *functioning* of any mental state or state of consciousness such that it amounts to the cognition or intending of some object? The distinction between immediate cognition (feeling, sense perception, intuition) and mediated cognition (thought, conception) eventually emerges from his analysis, through several successive reformulations of an initial thesis that he proposes about the function of cognition as such.

The primary model for a feeling or thought that James begins with in the “Function” paper is what he describes as a certain qualitative mental state or feeling “*q*,” “such as fragrance, pain, hardness” (MT 1909, 14). His concern is to investigate what gives “the feeling of *q*” the cognitive or “self-transcendent function” of referring to some reality other than itself. James’s initial proposal is this: “For the feeling to be cognitive” there must be “*a reality outside of it* to correspond to its intrinsic quality *q*,” and if the “reality *resemble* the feeling’s quality *q*, I say that the feeling may be held by us to be *cognizant of that reality*” (MT 1909, 14, 15). James then develops and revises this initial thesis by considering what amount to four possible objections to it.

The first objection he entertains is reminiscent of one of Berkeley’s fundamental objections to Locke: as James puts it, “How *can* a reality resemble a feeling?” James “evades” this particular objection by remarking that he will leave “it free to anyone to postulate as the reality whatever sort of thing he thinks can resemble a feeling—if not an outward thing, then another feeling like the first one” (MT 1909, 16). In both this and later works, James thus sometimes discusses the relation of cognition as something that obtains between items both of which are mental (for instance, between a concept and a sensory percept). But at other times, he discusses the relation in more realist or “dualist” terms (to use his term for this), as that between a mental state and a physical reality. His present inquiry, however, concerns the relation of cognition itself, not the nature of its relata, whatever they may be.

The first objection thereby evaded, James moves on to consider a second objection to his account of the simple conscious feeling, *q*, and its alleged cognitive functioning via resemblance. This time, the objection is from the side of those “relationist” philosophers, as he calls them—“those who claim to walk in the footprints of Kant and Hegel”—“to whom ‘thought,’ in the sense of a knowledge of relations, is the all in all of mental life; and who hold a merely feeling consciousness to be no better ... than no consciousness at all” (MT 1909, 17). For reasons to be discussed, today we might add to the ranks of these Kantian and Hegelian “relationist” critics those who follow

Wilfrid Sellars, on broadly Peircean, neo-pragmatist or later-Wittgensteinian grounds, in rejecting what Sellars famously characterized as the *myth of the given* (Sellars 1956). This is the myth, very roughly—it comes in different forms (cf. O’Shea 2007, Chap. 5)—that there could be cases of basic or “direct” knowledge or cognition, or more broadly reference or intentionality in general, that do not presuppose that one possesses any *other*, inferentially related knowledge or conceptual abilities that one could call upon in support or justification of that (allegedly presuppositionless) direct or “immediate” cognition.

According to the Kantian–Hegelian or Sellarsian-pragmatist critics of the idea that any cognition is just “given” immediately or in isolation in the sense just stated, all representation or cognition of an object necessarily takes place within some wider “space of reasons,” some normative network of connections.<sup>2</sup> This wider normative “space” can be inferential and logically structured, or (as Sellars 1981 extended the idea to animal cognition in general) it can be biologically natural and purposive due to evolutionary considerations. The point is that on this view the given occurrence, in order to be any kind of cognition or “knowing” at all, must in virtue of its embedding within such a logical or purposive “space” be evaluable normatively in terms of how it *ought* to function or “operate” (to use James’s term) in relation to objects of the given kind and in relation to one’s other mental states. On this view, words, for example, represent whatever they represent in virtue of how they are normally used in particular situations and inferences, that is, in virtue of shared (but, of course, malleable) norms of usage. Analogously, the active instincts, cognitive states, and organs of animals are what they are in virtue of how they *ought* to function in general, teleologically considered, for the sake of various adaptive ends, whether or not they successfully *do* so function in any particular case. Without this wider normative dimension of “ought-to-be”s or proper functioning, no sense of *misrepresentation* or *malfunctioning*, and hence no sense of successful intentional representation or cognition, would be possible.

Something like the approach just outlined is how we might spell out today what James calls the Kantian–Hegelian “relationist” objection to his opening thesis that a “little feeling” having “its intrinsic quality *q*,” considered in isolation “as an entirely subjective fact,” could nonetheless have “a cognitive function” as long as there exists “*a reality outside of it*” that “*resemble[s]* the feeling’s quality *q*.” In such a case, against the Kantians and Hegelians, James insists, “I say that the feeling may be held by us *to be cognizant of that reality*” (MT 1909, 181).

This important second objection is not really, as we saw James overstate it three paragraphs back on the objectors’ behalf, that a qualitative state of consciousness *q* by itself is “no consciousness at all.” Rather, the real objection is that the feeling or sensory state *q*, considered either just by itself, or merely as resembling or being caused by other states or realities, is insufficient to account for *q*’s being a cognitive state, a state of mind that succeeds in having the function of referring to

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<sup>2</sup> It is crucial to note that Sellars is not rejecting as a myth the idea that there is such a thing as direct or “immediate,” non-inferential perceptual knowledge of physical objects. In fact, his own view of perceptual cognition is just such a view. One key to avoiding the myth, for Sellars, is to see that our non-inferential perceptual responses to objects are directly about those objects, not about any mediating sensory processes that might be involved (and for Sellars the latter *are* importantly involved, but they are recognized as such on theoretical or scientific rather than epistemological grounds). On Sellars’s view, our perceptual “takings,” like Kant’s perceptual cognitions, are *directly about* the objects in terms of which such perceptions are constitutively *conceptualized* (or “proto- conceptualized,” in the case of Sellars 1981 on animal cognition). However, as involving concepts, such perceptual knowings for Sellars will presuppose the acquisition or possession of wider conceptual abilities (the “space of reasons”) in a way that is inconsistent with the sort of immediate, presuppositionless knowledge of “the given” that is assumed in various guises by both traditional empiricists and rationalists.

or being *about* something other than itself. The Kantians, Hegelians, and Sellarsians argue, for example, that cognitive or intentional states—including our non-inferential or “direct” perceptual responses—presuppose the implicit ability to think and infer in terms of concepts (or proto-concepts), however crude.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, “our little supposed feeling,” James admits, “knows *q*, if *q* be a reality, with a very minimum of knowledge. It neither dates nor locates it. It neither classes nor names it. It is, in short ... a most dumb and helpless and useless kind of thing.” It is this sort of characterization that raises the objections of the “relationists” Kant and Hegel, and (later) of the anti-givennist Sellarsians. As James himself asks on behalf of the objectors: if the feeling-state “can say nothing *about* itself or *about* anything else, by what right” can it be said to be cognizant of or refer to any reality other than itself?

At this point in the “Function” article, James now offers what he evidently takes to be an answer to that second objection: “In the innocent looking word ‘about’ lies the solution of this riddle” (MT 2009, 17). The solution that James develops here and repeats in the *Principles* is that “*there are two kinds of knowledge broadly and practically distinguishable*,” namely, “*knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge about*” (PP 1890, 216–218, MT 1909, 17–19; James refers the distinction to Grote 1865, 60). To illustrate knowledge by acquaintance, he writes: “I know the color blue when I see it, and the flavor of a pear when I taste it ... but about the inner nature of these facts or what makes them what they are, I can say nothing at all... I cannot *describe* them, make a blind man guess what blue is like,” and so on (PP 1890, 217).

However, just as James previously overstated what the “relationist” objectors were maintaining when he portrayed them as insisting that the conscious sensation or feeling *q* by itself is *nothing* (“a psychical zero,” MT 2009, 17), whereas what the objectors really maintained was that *q* by itself is not sufficient for an instance of knowledge or intentionality, here, too, James overstates by portraying his objectors as insisting that for anyone to have a minimally adequate perceptual cognition or knowledge of the color blue, they must be able to have knowledge of its “inner nature,” or of “what makes” blue what it is. But what the Kantian, Hegelian, and Sellarsian objectors in fact typically contend is that for anyone to have even the most simple perceptual knowledge of a blue object as such, or to know simply that something is blue—as opposed to someone’s simply undergoing or having a sensation of the kind typically caused by blue objects, as a newborn infant might, for instance—is for one to have at least a minimal competence and (for human beings) a gradually acquired grip on the general sorts of situations in which one can and cannot reliably “tell the colors of things by looking,” as it is put. Or again, our perceptual intentionality on this view arguably requires having standing cognitive resources sufficient to represent or to think of things as having their qualities independently of our perceiving them, and thus also (if only implicitly) as persisting over time, being located somewhere in space, being at least crudely but intelligibly re-identifiable, and so on.

In ordinary life, such conceptual abilities and presuppositions would typically find expression in one’s minimal competence to say, or to think, in the right sorts of circumstances, that “this is blue,” and to be able to respond with minimal competence to doubts that happen to arise (“Blue? In *this* lighting it only *seems* blue.”). Such simple recognitional abilities would not require knowing the “inner nature” of blue, or being able to describe “what makes” blue the color it is. We need not at this point enter further into or pre-judge the ongoing debates concerning the “myth of the given,” in this case in the form of James’s appeal to an alleged knowledge of things by (entirely

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<sup>3</sup> Again, in the case of non-human animals, their cognitive states (e.g., “animal beliefs,” perceptual tracking abilities, instinctual drives) are on some views thought to involve representational functions or “proto-concepts” that play roles analogous to concepts, thanks to their natural biological “proper functioning” due ultimately to time-extended evolutionary processes (cf. O’Shea 2014, §IV).

non-conceptual) “acquaintance,” or by mere sensation or sensory consciousness alone, in order to make the present point that James has not here offered an adequate representation of the anti-givennist and anti-nonconceptual-knowledge-by-acquaintance considerations put forward by “those who claim to walk in the footprints of Kant and Hegel” (MT 2009, 17). In other contexts, as we shall see, James shows himself to be more keenly aware of the serious and complex issues that are at stake in his attempts to make the distinction he is attempting to make.

In introducing the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance with an object, as opposed to (conceptual) knowledge “about” that object, James contends that the former simply *gives* us the object as “the *what*” or the *it*, or *that*, and thus the subject or object about which judgments, predications, and descriptions can be made (MT 1909, 19; PP 1890 217–218). So the first upshot, as James frames it in this 1885 piece, is the thesis that “all qualities of feeling, *so long as there is anything outside of them which they resemble*, are feelings of qualities of existence, and perceptions of outward fact” (MT 1909, 20). However, the further objections that James himself now goes on to consider in the article, in the process of revising that initial crude statement of his thesis (i.e., the thesis as to how a simple “feeling” is able to be “self-transcending” or cognizant of an object), serve to bring out his understanding of the complex problems that are involved in the seemingly obvious distinction between the direct, non-conceptual perceptual “acquaintance” with objects (or at least with “this” or “that”), and our conceptual thinking or knowledge “about” those objects (MT 1909, 20–32).

The third objection James now considers, then, is that a mere feeling or sensation *q* by itself gives no indication of *which* other resembling reality or object, *q*, it is “about” or “intends” or “knows,” in cases in which there is more than one such candidate object. How does the feeling “show us which *q* it points to and knows” (MT 2009, 21)? It does so, James argues, in terms of the “*practical consequences*” that follow upon the feeling’s operations or functions, perhaps initially in terms of further related “feelings” within the mind itself, but most importantly and ultimately in terms of leading to actions or operations that either directly or indirectly affect or “act upon” the particular reality or object *q* in a given *context* (MT 2009, 21–23). James’s general thesis about cognition is thus refined so as to add a further necessary condition: “*The feeling of q knows whatever reality it resembles, and either directly or indirectly operates on. If it resemble without operating, it is a dream; if it operate without resembling, it is an error*” (M 2009, 24).

The last sentence suggests, for example, that if the mental image one has of a dog is not appropriately connected “operationally” by way of past and potential future actions that directly or indirectly affect or are affected by a given real dog, then no matter how much the mental image might in fact “resemble” that dog, it cannot refer to it or be “about” it. And conversely, James here suggests, no sensorial image or feeling-instance, *q*, can by itself succeed in being *about* any reality unless it not only operates upon but resembles that reality. His claim here is, for example, that the mental image of a black poodle is not of such a nature as to be able to perceptually represent, “intend,” or make one directly acquainted with a white husky, no matter how systematically that image might operationally arise from and lead to a given white husky. Although James does not spell it out, the questions that might arise concerning this latter claim are such as to lead naturally to the final objection he considers, and thereby to the role of *concepts* in our knowledge “about” objects.

The fourth and final objection James thus considers is that his thesis, as so far developed, is such that

the only cases to which it applies are *percepts*, and that the whole field of symbolic or conceptual thinking seems to elude its grasp. Where the reality is either a material thing or

act ... I may both mirror it in my mind and operate upon it ... as soon as I perceive it. But there are many cognitions ... which neither mirror nor operate on their realities. (MT 2009, 26–7)

James explains that in “symbolic thought” we “intend” or know “particular realities, without having in our subjective consciousness any mind-stuff that resembles them even in a remote degree. We are instructed about them by language,” where the words “are made intelligible by being referred to some reality that lies beyond the horizon of direct consciousness, and of which I am only aware as of a terminal more existing in a certain direction to which the words might lead but do not lead yet” (MT 2009, 27). Thus in a last revision of his thesis, we come finally to James’s full 1885 distinction between percepts and concepts (or “conceptual feeling,” which basically means “concept” in the following passage given the all-inclusive use that James has given “feeling” in the 1885 article):

*A percept knows whatever reality it directly or indirectly operates on and resembles; a conceptual feeling, or thought, knows a reality, whenever it actually or potentially terminates in a percept that operates on or resembles that reality, or is otherwise connected with it or with its context.* The latter percept may be either sensation or sensorial idea; and when I say the thought must *terminate* in such a percept, I mean that it must ultimately be capable of leading up thereto—by way of practical experience, if the terminal feeling be a sensation; by the way of logical or habitual suggestion, if it be only an image in the mind. (MT 2009, 27–8)

Consider again the mental image that one might have of a dog. This percept, when functioning as the sense perception of (or immediate “acquaintance” with) a given dog, will typically arise directly, as we have seen, in a particular environmental context involving some practical engagement or other with the dog that it resembles or “mirrors,” and to which the percept thereby refers. The same “sensorial idea” or image might also function as a memory of the dog in its context. A *concept* of the dog, on the other hand, is for instance either the same sensorial idea, or more likely a particular use or occurrence of the word dog in speech or thought (e.g., “My dog is in the neighbor’s yard.”), functioning as a “symbolic thought” or sign of the dog “by being referred to some reality that lies beyond the horizon of direct consciousness” (MT 2009, 27). Depending on the context, the word or symbol *dog* so functions in my thinking and in my actions as to “terminate,” for example, in either my memory-idea of having very recently seen my dog in my neighbor’s yard, or in my subsequent verification of this reality by direct sense perception (i.e., by looking and seeing), or in a train of inferential reasoning that leads me from my neighbor’s firm promise to look after the dog, to my forming an image or a thought of my dog as in her yard.

But how exactly do words, images, and other symbols function so as to have these referential and classificatory capacities? In the next section, I will briefly clarify what I take to be James’s important and innovative views on the cognitive role or “function” of concepts in our experience of objects, properties, and kinds. I will then turn in the concluding section to some critical reflections on James’s contrast between percepts and concepts, both as it has arisen earlier in this chapter and also pointing ahead to James’s later philosophical treatments of the distinction.

## James on the Nature and Functioning of Concepts in Human Cognition

When James focuses on explaining the nature of *conceptual* cognition in his various works throughout his career (e.g., in PP 1890, Chaps. IX and XII; P Lec. V; or SPP Chaps. IV–VI), he offers an account in terms of which concepts, as embodied or realized in words or in various other

mental and physical media, serve to abstract and “substitute for” various particular aspects of the perceptual “flux,” by functioning as “signs” of further realities also exhibiting that “same” aspect. That is, as a result of naturally and socially acquired habits of association and action, such words or other experienced items function as symbols or “substitute” in our thinking by exhibiting, as James variously puts it, a “felt tendency” to “lead to” further instances of that aspect or kind in other experienced particulars within the ongoing “stream” or flux of experience. The flux or “chaos” of our immediate sensory experience, as James ubiquitously describes it throughout his works, is itself continuously changing. Although in ordinary life we are primarily aware of the relatively stable objects for which we have concepts and which we can thus re-identify or meet again as the “same” thing or quality, James argues that the actual chaotic or flux-like nature of all our immediate sensory experience can be known indirectly to be such a flux by scientific experiments and by philosophical arguments, as well as more directly by careful phenomenology.<sup>4</sup> The *sameness* of the various objects, qualities, and kinds that we thus re-experience and re-identify over time (tables, colors, molecules, people, et al.) is itself strictly correlative to—both partly a product of, and partly revealed by—the activity of conceptualization itself. All of the various “worlds” or aspects of reality in which we take any practical or theoretical interest—the worlds of mathematics, ethics, common sense, theoretical physics, and so on—are the objects and products of our conceptual thinking in this sense.

By using the phrase “objects *and products*” of our concepts, I am attempting to capture a delicate balancing act of James’s own with respect to fundamental questions concerning the objectivity or mind-independence of empirical reality. On the one hand, there is James’s professed *epistemological realism* or “dualism,” that is, his view that the empirical objects of the physical world exist as they are independently of our knowledge of them. This is what James assumes from the perspective of both his psychology and his famous pragmatism, while leaving various further metaphysical questions open as important philosophical domains of inquiry and hypothesis (e.g., MT 2009, 9, 102–106, 115, 144–145). His own “radical empiricist” metaphysics is intended to be consistent with this epistemological realism, too, as we shall see in the final section.

On the other hand, we have James’s interest-based, teleological view of the nature of all cognition or mentality, which stresses that our ever-present practice of conceptualizing the flux of experience into objects, qualities, and kinds is fundamentally designed to suit our “purpose, that of naming the thing” to serve our particular interests (including our more “theoretical” interests in prediction and in systematicity); while meanwhile “the reality overflows these purposes at every pore.” Our conceptual classifications, according to James, consequently “characterize us more than they characterize the thing,” but “we are so stuck in our prejudices” that we take the kinds that our concepts thus sort out in order to suit our interests as if they were the real “essences” of the realities thereby known. We take it, for example, that to conceive ordinary objects according to their common kinds is “the only true way,” but in fact, James contends, those ways “are no truer ways of conceiving them than any others; they are only more important ways, more frequently serviceable ways” (PP 1890, 961–962). James’s pragmatism stresses these aspects of his thinking.

But again, in this very same context, James explains this purpose-relative conception of our concepts of objects in terms that are consistent with epistemological realism. For example, he indicates that while in principle “this world might be a world in which all things differed,” or “a world in which no concrete thing remained of the same kind long, but all objects were in a flux,”

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the various considerations that James adduces at PP 1890, 224–230 in defence of his thesis that “*Thought*,” understood in James’s experiential sense (i.e., as the “stream of consciousness”), “*is in Constant Change*.”

the fact is that “our world is no such world,” but rather one in which the world’s kinds themselves have proven by ongoing experience (so far) to be suited to our conceptualization:

[Ours] is a very peculiar world, and plays right into logic’s hands. Some of the things, at least, which it contains are of the same kind as other things; some of them remain always of the kind of which they once were.... *Which* things these latter things are we learn by experience in the strict sense of the word. (1890, 1246–1247; cf. 961–962)

A “conceptual scheme is a sort of sieve in which we try to gather up the world’s contents,” says James (PP 1890, 455). What James thus takes his teleological view of cognition to imply is neither anti-realism (as we would put it today) nor relativism, but rather a pluralism of conceptual schemes that is nonetheless supposed to be consistent with realism.

In this regard, it should be noted that James argues in strong and explicit terms (e.g., in *Pragmatism* 1907, Lec. V) that there are multiple, even *conflicting* or contradictory conceptual schemes each of which nonetheless successfully reveals different aspects of reality in their different vocabularies and by differing standards, with no likelihood and no demonstrable requirement, for James, that these plural, reality-revealing schemes must in the end be reducible to one, final, all-inclusive conceptual framework. For James, as he puts it, “the only real truth about the world, apart from particular purposes, is the *total* truth” (PP 1890, 961–962n). That is, the overall truth would be the sum of all the various particular, purposive schemes and experiences that will have proven their worth within the totality of human experience on the whole and in the long run, without any justifiable requirement (“intellectualist” philosophers notwithstanding) that there must in the end be a single, over-arching and unifying logical systematization of reality in terms of concepts. I will not pause on this occasion to explore further or to assess James’s uniquely pluralist realism, though I have examined the internal tensions in this pluralist view of “the *total* truth” elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> As should become clear, however, it is James’s complex but elusive distinction between percepts and concepts that lies at the very heart of his metaphysical pluralism.

As far as the nature of our specifically *conceptual* intentionality is concerned, James’s discussions throughout his works exhibit two primary ways he has of describing the various mental and physical cognitive relations that obtain between the embodied concepts, symbols, or signs that constitute our conceptual thinking, on the one hand, and the corresponding objects or ideal realities they are “about,” on the other. He describes them as *feelings of relation*, and thus in terms of various phenomenologically accessible *felt tendencies* (or “directions,” “fringes,” or “halos”) in our thinking. And he also describes them in terms of the behavioral and associational *functions* (or “leadings-to,” “operations,” or “experienceable workings”) that have as their end or purpose actually “terminating” in a percept or image of that object or reality. James does not distinguish sharply between these two ways of attempting to describe the relation of intentionality or cognition, that is, in terms of a *feeling* of “direction” or in terms of functional “leadings” to the

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<sup>5</sup> For my elaboration and assessment of James’s conceptual scheme pluralism, see O’Shea 2000. In what I have said here I take myself to agree in large part with Steven Levine’s recent discussion of this issue in Levine 2013 (e.g., 125–128), and in particular with his account of how James can intelligibly hold that “while knowers partially create the reality that they come to know, they are nonetheless constrained by this reality in coming to know it” (2013, 125; Klein 2015, 163–164, also raises this problematic issue). However, I am not as convinced as Levine seems to be that James’s views on pluralism and on the matters I am discussing in this chapter are unproblematic as far as the “myth of the given” is concerned, for reasons to be noted briefly in the next section (and in O’Shea 2000 and 2014). See Levine 2013, 128–130 for his contention that James does not fall afoul of that myth.



object. But whatever problems or challenges there might be for James's account in this respect,<sup>6</sup> his investigations arguably have the merit of attempting to explain substantively what such a relation of knowledge or intentionality might actually consist in, or pragmatically be "known-as" (to use a favorite phrase of James's), as opposed to having recourse to an "*actus purus* of Thought, Intellect, or Reason, all written with capitals" (PP 1890, 238). Later in his 1904 "radical empiricist" article, "A World of Pure Experience," James nicely sums up his view of the nature and importance of our conceptual cognitions 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 1904, 31)

In this way we see that James, both early and late in his career, sought to explain our conceptual cognition functionally or operationally in a way that was intended to rely only upon entirely non-mysterious psychological (associational, inferential) and physical causal relations. In such practical terms, James thus attempted to describe the seemingly mysterious capacity by which our particular ideas and words, so to speak, "reach out" or "mentally point" or "transcend" themselves in our thought and knowledge of distant objects existing beyond our immediate perceptual consciousness. James offered this in a way that was, for example, explicitly designed to eschew the posit of a special mode of "intentional inexistence" for the objects or contents of our thoughts and other mental or "intentional acts." The latter was a conception of our mentality having deep roots in medieval and Cartesian philosophy, a conception of which James was well aware from his reading of Brentano, and one which has subsequently exerted a powerful influence in both phenomenology and analytic philosophy.<sup>7</sup> While as noted earlier there are indeed aspects of James's thought that have important affinities with later phenomenological thinkers, I believe that in relation to his views on the nature and functioning of our thought and cognition James was attempting to stake out different ground.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I have offered my own analysis of the tensions in James's views on intentionality in O'Shea 2014; and for further helpful and sympathetic investigations of James's views in this area, see especially Jackman 1998. See also Steven Levine's chapter in this volume for the important phenomenological aspects of James's approach to human cognition and action.

<sup>7</sup> As James puts it as only he can (here referring to our present knowledge of the distant tigers in India): "A great mystery is usually made of this peculiar presence in absence; and the scholastic philosophy, which is only common sense grown pedantic, would explain it as a peculiar kind of existence, called *intentional inexistence*, of the tigers in our mind. At the very least, people would say that what we mean by knowing the tigers is mentally *pointing* towards them as we sit here" (MT 1909, 33–34). This passage is from James's "The Tigers in India," which is itself an excerpt from his 1895 "The Knowing of Things Together" published in the *Psychological Review*, which was then published in full in James *EPb* (1895, 71–89). More on the latter article in the next section. As far as the term "*intentional inexistence*" is concerned, it had been used by Brentano in his *Psychologie* of 1874 (Brentano 1973, 88–89), a work that James cites favorably in his own *Principles of Psychology*, but not in relation to the notion of intentional inexistence.

<sup>8</sup> For further thoughts on the significance of James's account of intentionality from this broad perspective, including his rejection of "intentional existence" and his attempt to offer a new alternative in broadly functional and causal terms, see for example Banks 2014 and O'Shea 2014. Banks attempts to reconstruct and defend James's account of "pure experience" as a *neutral monism* with strong affinities to those of Ernst Mach and Bertrand Russell, whereas I stress the kinship of James's views with a line of broadly functionalist and inferentialist thinking that stretches from Kant, Peirce, and C. I. Lewis to the later Wittgenstein and Sellars.

However, despite his firm recognition of the importance and indispensability for us of our conceptual thinking, James also argues in different ways across his corpus, both as a scientific psychologist and as a metaphysical philosopher, that our conceptual thinking and our language not only omit, but also falsify and mislead us about certain fundamental truths concerning both mind and reality. In such cases, or at such a level, “language works against our perception of the truth” (PP 1890, 234); or as James puts it in his last work, *Some Problems of Philosophy*: “concepts are secondary formations, inadequate and only ministerial; ... they falsify as well as omit, and make the flux impossible to understand” (SPP 1911, 45). And yet he also stresses that it is by means of our conceptualized “whats” that “we apperceive all our *thises* [i.e., percepts]”: “Percepts and concepts interpenetrate ... Neither, taken alone, knows reality in its completeness. We need them both, as we need both our legs to walk with” (SPP 1911, 34).

In the final section, I want to reflect on some of the issues that have arisen in both of the earlier sections concerning James’s account of the complex interaction between our concepts and our percepts in our cognitive relationship to the world.

### Some Reflections on James on the “Interpenetration” of Percepts and Concepts

As we have seen, James holds that there “are two ways of knowing things, knowing them immediately or intuitively” in our percepts, “and knowing them conceptually or representatively” by means of some “outer chain of physical or mental intermediaries connecting thought and thing. *To know an object [conceptually] is to lead to it through a context which the world supplies,*” or *would* supply (MT 2009, 33, 34–35).<sup>9</sup> In the first section we saw James in 1885 begin with an isolated quality-feeling or percept, *q*, and then consider, in light of a series of objections, what is involved in our taking *q* to be cognizant of or to “intend” some other reality. James went on to refine and modify his basic percept/concept distinction in his later works, as we have already seen.<sup>10</sup> But I think that certain pivotal issues anticipated earlier in the first section continued to present challenges for James, as indeed they continue to present challenges for us today; and these issues continued to rise to the surface in James’s later philosophical works, despite important changes in his view.

Common to James’s various accounts of our cognition or “knowings” of objects, we have, on the one hand, the demand for immediacy or directness in our perceptual cognition of reality; and on the other hand, in relation to both perception and conceptual thinking, we have James’s innovative and detailed attempts to account for what he calls the *cognitive relation* between our conscious mental states and the objects known (whether the latter be interpreted as another mental state, or, as I will assume for ease of exposition, a physical object). It is in his ongoing attempts to account for our

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<sup>9</sup> James of course recognizes that most of our conceptual thinkings “intend” or refer to their non-present objects—for example, to the tigers existing in India—without *actually* leading us up to them, and are supported rather by our counterfactual readiness to act and infer in appropriate ways: supported, for example, by our “rejection of a jaguar, if that beast were shown us as a tiger,” or by “our ability to utter all sorts of propositions which don’t contradict other propositions that are true of the real tigers” (MT 2009, 34).

<sup>10</sup> In reprinting “On the Function of Cognition” article twenty-four years later for *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), James added a “Note” listing six assertions that he has continued to hold, but also identifying four “defects” in the earlier account (MT 1909, 32).

percepts as immediate cognitions of reality that I think James struggled to find a satisfactory view, though with insight and fully aware of the difficulties involved.

In the early “Function” article, we saw James object to the views of the “relationist” Kantian and Hegelian philosophers. What he objected to in particular is “this everlasting slip, slip, slip, of direct acquaintance into [conceptual] knowledge-*about*, until at last nothing is left about which the knowledge can be supposed to obtain,” in which case “does not all ‘significance’ depart from the situation?” (MT 1909, 19). The problem raised by the Kantians, Hegelians, and Sellarsians, however, is that when one attempts to strip away all of the conceptual or proto-conceptual thinkings about what one is immediately experiencing in perception, it is—not surprisingly—unclear what one is left with. In the “Function” article, James attempted to strip all the way back, suggesting that a given intrinsic feeling-quality, *q*, only *accidentally* stands in a cognitive relation to any “resembling” external reality to which it is related. As far as the feeling *q* is concerned, the “self-transcendent function of cognition,” in relation to some other resembling reality *q* that it knows, “is accidental ... and falls outside of its being” (MT 2009, 20). As we saw, this leads James to consider the various “*practical consequences*” (MT 2009, 22), including conceptual “leadings” to the (thereby signified or “represented”) object, *q*, that in practice show us *which* object we are knowing, and tell us (so to speak) *what* it is.

However, *before* he thus adds the functional dimensions of operative action and conceptual representation, James still seemed to want the isolated qualitative feeling *q* itself to be in some sense intrinsically directed:

A feeling feels as a gun shoots. If there be nothing to be felt or hit, they discharge themselves *ins blaue hinein* [i.e., “into the blue”]. If, however, something starts up opposite them, they no longer simply shoot or feel, they hit and know. (MT 2009, 20)

But by James’s own reckoning two pages later, as we saw, the only way to have a feeling *q* that is about anything in particular is to bring in the “functional” (or “relational”) dimensions of practice and conceptual signification that constitute the feeling as a feeling about the given thing or kind: “as a matter of fact, every actual feeling does show us, quite as flagrantly as the gun, which *q* it points to; and practically in concrete cases the matter is decided by” the practical “leadings to” the object, by means of the “definitely experienceable workings” that James then goes on to describe (MT 2009, 22, 23). The idea that the isolated feeling *q* first—that is, by its own nature or considered by itself —“feels as a gun shoots,” and only needs to then find some objects to determine which sorts of things the feeling *feels about* (or shoots at), should be incoherent by James’s own reckoning in the rest of the “Function” article. For as we saw earlier, James immediately goes on to draw out the need for “practical consequences” and conceptual determination if intentional reference to any particular objects is to be possible in the first place. But as far as the cognition of any reality is concerned, the latter requirement on intentional reference of practical and conceptual determination is effectively to concede to the Kantian–Sellarsian “relationists” their “slip, slip, slip of direct acquaintance into knowledge-*about*,” that is, into conceptual-pragmatic “leadings” to the particular kind of object that is thus “felt” or perceived (or “shot”).

Let us suppose for the sake of argument the correctness of something similar to James’s account of conceptual representation (or “knowing in absence”) as discussed in the previous section, that is, as a systematic functional “leading to” the object. On this Jamesian functionalist view, in conceptual or “representative knowledge there is no special inner mystery, but only an outer chain of physical or mental intermediaries”—reflected systematically, for instance, in our standing logical and causal inferences, and in our actions and reactions—“connecting thought and thing. *To know an object is here to lead to it through a context which the world supplies*” (EPh 1895, 74; in MT 2009,

34). In the case of percepts, that is, the direct perceptual knowledge of some reality (“knowing in presence”), the difficulty confronting James is to explain, without introducing any mysterious “intentional *inexistence*” of the object “in” the mind, both (a) the “*cognitive relation*” between the knowing mental state and the object known, and (b) the *immediacy* or un-mediated nature of such direct “acquaintance” with the object in perception. So far, I have suggested that in the 1885 “Function” article James fails to give an intelligible account of direct perceptual cognition, except to the extent that he in effect brings conceptual representation into the story, which thus appears to concede to the Kantians, Hegelians, and Sellarsians that sensory intuitions without concepts are blind (cf. Kant 1787/1997, A51/B75).

The latter philosophers hold that concepts (or proto-concepts) are already involved in constituting anything that can properly amount to the cognition of an object in direct perceptual experience. As noted in the first section, the key for such “relationist” philosophers is to understand how our conceptualized perceptions are in one sense unmediated—they are non-inferential, directly evoked by the object as qualitatively experienced—and yet also the same mental state is conceptually mediated, as reflected in the “space” of inferences that constitutes such conceptual content. I’ll put my cards on the table: I think these philosophers are correct, and that James ought to have taken his own view that “concepts and percepts interpenetrate” the further step just outlined, as indeed his own writings sometimes suggest. In this I follow the Kantians, Hegelians, and Sellarsians (and I think, Peirce, Wittgenstein, and many neo-pragmatists, too) in rejecting the Myth of the Given, which I think can be done without sacrificing either the richness or the cognitive functioning of our qualitative experiences.

Other pragmatists disagree.<sup>11</sup> Many philosophers both past and present, and from many different philosophical perspectives, would argue that we ought to follow James’s own primary tendencies on this matter of “immediate knowledge,” rather than follow “the relationists” with their “slip, slip, slip, of direct acquaintance into knowledge-about.” As usual, James himself went on to pursue several lines of thinking on the matter that succeeded in anticipating some of the most influential views about immediate perceptual knowledge held by later philosophers. Here I can only add just a few brief hints as to what lay ahead in James’s own rich philosophical work after 1890, adding a few critical reservations.

James’s 1895 article, “The Knowing of Things Together” (cf. footnote 7 in this chapter) represented an important transitional stage in his thinking. In particular, it represented a step toward James’s later “radical empiricist” metaphysics of “pure experience” (cf. Klein 2015), which eventually came to be characterized as a “neutral monism” stretching from Ernst Mach, through James, to Bertrand Russell and beyond.<sup>12</sup> In that article, James indicates that he was mistaken to

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<sup>11</sup> See Scott Aikin 2009 for a vigorous and helpful presentation and defense of arguments that can be marshalled *against* the idea that pragmatists are in danger of falling victim to the alleged “Myth of the Given.” Aikin concludes: “It seems clear that pragmatism’s anti-foundationalism needn’t itself entail a rejection of the doctrine of the Given, as the doctrine is clearly implicated in inquiry as pragmatists consider it. The Given ain’t a myth, and that’s not just something that pragmatists can live with, it’s something they *must*” (Aikin 2009, 25). For a contrasting view, I provide a sympathetic account of Sellars’s attack on the Given—both what I call the “epistemic given” and the more basic “categorical given” (or the cognitive given)—in O’Shea 2007, Chap. 5.

<sup>12</sup> “Neutral” insofar as the fundamental elements of the system—“pure experiences” for James, “sensations” or “percepts” for Mach and Russell—are held to be themselves neither mental or physical, but to serve as the neutral, immediately given data of experience out of which the domains of the mental and the physical are constructed (roughly, according to the laws of psychology and physics, respectively). Strictly speaking, in the 1895 article, James places his view within “the idealistic philosophy ... that began

hold as he did in his *Principles of Psychology* that the science of psychology can and should refrain from introducing any metaphysical views concerning “the knowledge relation.” In particular, he now introduces the idea, key to his later doctrine of pure experience, that *to know immediately or intuitively is for mental content and object to be numerically identical*. Thus in the following passage James asks us to consider “the case of immediate or intuitive acquaintance with an object,” and to “let the object be the white paper before our eyes”:

[I]f our own private vision of the paper be considered, ... then the paper seen and the seeing of it are only two names for one indivisible fact which, properly named, is the datum, the phenomenon, or the experience. The paper is in the mind and the mind is around the paper, because paper and mind are only two names that are given later to the one experience, when, taken in a larger world of which it forms a part, its connections are traced in different directions. [W]’s footnote: “What is meant by this is that ‘the experience’ can be referred to either of two great associative systems, that of the experiencer’s mental history, or that of the experienced facts of the world. Of both of these systems it forms part.”] *To know immediately, then, or intuitively, is for mental content and object to be identical*. (EPh 1895, 74–75; MT 1909, 36)

But what does *that* mean? It turns out not to be easy to say.

For if we consider this immediate phenomenon, datum, or (pure) experience to be the experience of a table (a physical object) “before our eyes,” as James put it—as surely we do throughout the “natural realism” of ordinary life—then once again we are already considering the experience as conceptualized within some wider inferential or “associative” context of spatio-temporal and causal relations. And similar questions arise in relation to James’s further remarks in this context, that is, if we consider these “ultimate data” of experience as falling within one’s own psychological history; or if we consider “someone else’s experience” of the same object; or if we consider the “hidden molecules” that make up the objects we experience. James stresses that all of these are instances of conceptualized knowledge, in which “the things known” are “absent experiences,” “a case of [non-present] tigers in India again,” not a case of our “states of immediate acquaintance” or “ultimate data” themselves (EPh 1895, 75; MT 35).

James both here and in his later *Essays in Radical Empiricism* accordingly tends to describe these immediate, neutral, pure experiences in terms that simply express various *intrinsic quality-contents*, as we might characterize them. For example, what we have immediate acquaintance with or direct perception of is not the physical white paper itself, it seems, but “the whiteness, smoothness, or squareness of this paper” (EPh 1895, 75; MT 1909, 35), out of which either my perceiving of the

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with Berkeley,” holding that “things have no other nature than thoughts have, and we know of no things that are not given to somebody’s experience” (EPh 1895, 72). Later, in “A World of Pure Experience,” however, it is for James “impossible to subscribe to the idealism of the English school. Radical empiricism has, in fact, more affinities with natural realism than with the views of Berkeley or of Mill” (ERE 1904, 37). For a recent historical overview, reconstruction, and defense of neutral monism, see Banks 2014. For a sympathetic treatment of James’s neutral monism from a Deweyan and cognitive scientific perspective, see Rockwell 2013, and in relation to recent radical embodied cognitive science, see Silberstein and Chemero 2015. For an overview of both traditional (Mach, James, Russell) and more recent neutral monist views, see Stubenberg 2016. An extended treatment of James’s metaphysics of pure experience with a view to how it relates to the vital role in his philosophy of social and religious ideas is provided in Lamberth 1999. The collection of papers in Alter and Nagasawa 2015 shows what a live contender “neutral monism” has once again become in recent debates in metaphysics and the philosophy of mind, some versions of which might help to illuminate James’s own radical empiricism.

physical paper, or the physical paper-object itself, are functionally built up and conceptually represented despite their “absence” to my strictly “present” conscious “datum.” But then what is this strictly present datum, this “presentation, the experience, the *that* in short (for until we have decided [i.e., conceptually] *what* it is it must be a mere *that*)” (ERE 1904, 8)? And is *it* (or is the *that*) somehow, as James indicates, itself “subjective and objective both at once” (ERE 1904, 7); or is it perhaps, in its own actuality, neither, as James sometimes also indicates: “That pen, virtually both objective and subjective, is at its own moment actually and intrinsically neither” (ERE 1905, 64)? I can subsequently functionally classify (e.g., conceptually represent) a given pure quality-datum *as mine*, that is, as taking place in my consciousness, or you can classify it as in *yours*, if it is felt or represented by you *as yours*: “But it is felt as neither *by itself*, but only when ‘owned’ by our two several remembering experiences, just as one undivided estate is owned by several heirs” (ERE 1905, 66). By themselves the quality-contents or pure experiences are like the original isolated feeling, *q*, with which James started in the 1885 “On the Function of Cognition” article, only now *q* “*by itself*” is not assumed to belong to any state of consciousness per se.

Much ingenuity was subsequently applied by Russell and other philosophers in attempting to explain both (a) how the “neutral datum” should itself be characterized or understood, and (b) how we are to “construct” out of the “neutral” or “pure” basis the shared worlds of psychology, common sense, physics, and other minds. Sometimes neutral monism in various thinkers (and, at times, in James) has seemed clearly to slide into a form of phenomenalism, with actual and possible sensations or perhaps “sense-data” serving as the basis for the constructions of the various ordinary and scientific worlds. At other times, however, philosophers have continued to attempt to read James’s account of pure experience as a direct perceptual realism or “natural realism” (see, e.g., Putnam 1990).<sup>13</sup> It will be worth concluding with a brief look at Banks’s (2014) helpful attempt to reconstruct and defend the neutral monism or “Realistic Empiricism” that he finds in Mach, James, and Russell, a metaphysics that on Banks’s account is a physical realism as well.

James himself is clear on the goal: “To be radical, an empiricism must [not] admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced” (ERE 1904, 22). But again, when one looks to the details of the sympathetic reconstructions of James’s neutral pure experiences interpreted as a form of direct realism, puzzles continue to arise. For example, when Banks in his substantial chapter on “William James’s Direct Realism: A Reconstruction” explains in neutral monist terms how “James thinks that when I am actually in the room, I perceive the room and the book themselves as they really exist, and not indirectly through intermediary images or ideas,” Banks inevitably appeals to a “neutral bit of pure experience [which] can be taken as real merely by taking it to be the complex of colored blobs, squiggles, and flashes that it is.” And “taken in itself like this, it is neither a physical object, nor is it a sensation. *It is just exactly the neutral collection of blobs and flashes it seems to be*” (Banks 2014, 92; italics added). But in response to this, the “relationist,” anti-Givennist philosophers will object (or ought to object) that when one sees a room full of books, nothing visually “seems” to one to be, or directly visually presents itself as, a “collection of blobs, squiggles, and flashes,” whether “neutral” or otherwise.

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<sup>13</sup> Putnam 1990, 249–250, as well as Lamberth 1999, rightly stress the importance of the fact that by the time of his later radical empiricism James now recognizes non-perceived but (presently) merely *conceived* objects, properties, universals, and kinds, as “a co-ordinate realm of reality,” that is, as “pure experiences” along with the domain of our percepts (ERE 1904, 9–14; SPP 1911, 32–36, 40–41, 55–58; PU 1909, 122; MT 1909, 32 “Note”). But I cannot see that this helps with the particular issues I have raised. Putnam himself concedes in relation to this particular aspect of James’s metaphysics of pure experience that a “metaphysics in which reality consists of intentional objects which are ‘natures’ of bits of ‘pure experience’ is, I confess, too rich for my battered digestive system” (1990, 250). (Putnam’s digestive system was subject to frequent changes over time, however.)

There are of course classical phenomenalist and sense-datum accounts that encourage precisely that slide, but for good reason that is not supposed to be Banks' directly realist James. Neither does careful phenomenology reveal the squiggles, flashes, and blobs. It is, of course, open to a scientific *theory* of perception to hypothesize that in our ordinary perspectival perception of a room full of books, various non-conceptual arrays of sensory "information" are involved in the process, and which help to explain how the books *do* appear to us as they do in the given situation. (This was in fact Sellars's own move, for instance, in his explanatory postulation of qualitatively rich non-conceptual sensory representations, while firmly rejecting the myth of the sensory-epistemic Given.) But I can see no plausible way of attempting to scrape away from my direct experience of the room the concepts (or proto-conceptual "animal" representations) of books, room, and so on, which are what make it possible for there even to seem to me to be those objects in the relevant sense in the first place, and which represent or present the objects that I *do* directly perceive in the experience. "A bunch of blobs and flashes, even if they look exactly like Memorial Hall ..." (Banks 2014, 93)—here I want to say that we are already inevitably on the slide to implausible phenomenalist or quasi-phenomenalist dead-ends, however much Banks and (in his better aspects) James wanted to avoid them.

The better route, I suggest, would be to give up the quixotic quest for the impossibly "neutral" immediate given, and to follow the more pragmatic-functional side of James into a more thorough embrace of his own views on the ubiquitous "interpenetration" of concepts and percepts. However, in his final book published during his lifetime, *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), James heroically dug in further and not only granted but prioritized and celebrated the ineffability of our immediate non-conceptual intuitions of reality, which he there argues provide the deepest of metaphysical insights into the nature of things. But even if we cannot follow James cheerfully into that particular ineffable region of his thinking,<sup>14</sup> I hope it has been clear throughout that James's innovative and evolving views on the nature of our perceptual and conceptual cognitions represented an exceptionally fertile source of enduring insights.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. O'Shea 2000, 2014. But see Jackman 1999 for a clear and sympathetic account of James's so-called rejection of logic in *A Pluralistic Universe*. And see Levine 2013: 123– 124 for an equally clear and helpful defense of James against my charge (e.g., in O'Shea 2000) that James in these later views falls afoul of the Myth of the Given. I am not convinced, however, and James's views in PU and earlier works on ineffable metaphysical intuitions still strike me as a paradigm case of one form of the Myth, roughly the givennist idea that something can allegedly be *immediately reality-revealing* without it or its object being available for effable conceptualization. Unfortunately, I must leave an adequate response to Levine's defense to another occasion.

<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Alex Klein, Steven Levine, and Tony Chemero for their comments and suggestions.

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