

**Radical Empiricism: a Philosophic Attitude
for Empirical Modelling?**

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Preamble to "A World of Pure Experience"

It is difficult not to notice a curious unrest in the philosophic atmosphere of the time, a loosening of the old landmarks, a softening of oppositions, a mutual borrowing from one another on the part of systems anciently closed, and an interest in new suggestion, however vague, as if the one thing sure were the inadequacy of the extant school-solutions. The dissatisfaction with these seems due for the most part to a feeling that they are too abstract and academic. Life is confused and superabundant, and what the younger generation appears to crave is more of the temperament of life in its philosophy, even though it were at some cost of logical rigor and of formal purity.

James : ERE p39

Content of talk

- Principles vs. Pragmatism
- Brief introduction to Empirical Modelling
- From Traditional to Radical Empiricism
- Pure Experience
- Conclusion

Advertisement

The Interpretation of States: a New Foundation for Computation?

*empirical elements in computation
importance of physical reliability and observability*

Definitive Models for Concurrent Systems

*principles for analysing agent-interaction in a system
intrinsic difficulties in ascribing unambiguous system behaviours*

Empirical Modelling and the Explanation of Behaviour

*empirical modelling as explanatory modelling
explanation as a matter of perspective and pragmatism*

The Semantics of the Semantics of Programs

*development of Brian Smith's critique of logicism
empirical modelling as a non-logicist approach*

An Agent-oriented Framework for Concurrent Engineering

*empirical modelling as a means to construct a virtual prototype
representing / managing agent perspectives in concurrent engineering*

Worlds Before and Beyond Words

*the use of the computer as an instrument
from private interaction with artefacts to interaction with words*

Traditional Empiricism

- empirical knowledge
as private, particular, provisional
- monism: the world as one rather than many
cf. mind / matter
mental / physical
subjective / objective
- closed world: axioms + inferences
reductionist view

extensible closed worlds ≠ open worlds

Issues raised by James

- inferring identities
- expressing personal insight and experience
- admitting agency
and forms of scepticism / non-determinism

Pragmatism:

There is no difference of truth that doesn't make a difference of fact somewhere

[hence must] determine the meaning of differences of opinion with reference to some practical or particular issue

Principle of Pure Experience:

Everything real must be experiencable somewhere, and every kind of thing experienced must somewhere be real

James: ERE p159-60

the "truth" of our mental operations must always be an intra-experiential affair

James: ERE p202

Radical Empiricism as

metaphysical foundation for pragmatism

'philosophic attitude' rather than doctrine (James)

... *dissolving* problems encountered by previous philosophers (Suckiel)

Traditional Empiricism

Three interlocking principles

1) Principle of Economy

enjoins the acceptance of as few basic resources as possible

2) Principle of Atomism

identifies basic *content* of experience solely as discrete sensory particulars

3) Principle of Analysis

legitimate experience can be derived from the basic content only by the application of logical rules

James strengthens the resources available in 2) questioning the Principle of Atomism

rejected trans-empirical (a priori) principles

A2

Radical Empiricism as a Philosophic Attitude

I say 'empiricism', because it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience; and I say 'radical', because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as a hypothesis [and unlike other philosophies, does not] dogmatically affirm monism as something with which all experience has to square.

James: Will to Believe

Since principles are universals, and facts are particulars, perhaps the best way of characterizing the two tendencies is to say that *rationalist* thinking proceeds by going from wholes to parts, whilst *empiricist* thinking proceeds by going from parts to wholes

[In] the empirical view ... as reality is created temporally day by day, concepts ... can never fitly supersede perception

James: A Pluralist Universe

A3

A4

Radical Empiricism consists in:

(1) a postulate

the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience

(2) a statement of fact

the relations between things, conjunctive as well as disjunctive, are just as much matters of experience, neither more nor less so, than the things themselves

(3) a generalized conclusion

the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience. The directly apprehended universe needs, in short, no extraneous trans-empirical connective support, but possesses in its own right a concatenated and continuous structure.

James: The Meaning of Truth

NB **Radical** not to be interpreted as extreme

AS

Types of conjunctive relation

continuous transition is one sort of conjunctive relation

to be a radical empiricist is to hold fast to this conjunctive relation above all others

holding fast:

taking this relation at face value,
neither less nor more

cf. discontinuity experience: [unavoidable] when I seek to make a transition from an experience of my own to one of yours ... have to get on and off again, to pass from the thing lived to another thing only conceived

conjunctions and separations are, at all events, co-ordinate phenomena which, if we take experiences at their face value, must be accounted equally real

James: ERE p49-51

R2

Conjunctive relations

relations are of different degrees of intimacy

The most external relation

common to a universe of discourse

simultaneity and time-interval come next

then space-adjacency and distance

similarity and difference

relations of activity

change, tendency,
resistance, causal order

relation experienced between terms
that form states of mind

The most intimate relation

James: ERE p44-5

R1

James critique of Atomistic Empiricism

linguistic emphasis of atomistic view:

substantive phases of experience take precedence over transitive phases

transitive \Leftrightarrow flight of a bird

substantive \Leftrightarrow perching of a bird

discrete, substantive, elts of experience dominate: give them names to identify + relations of distinctness to separate them

? continuous, conjunctive experience ...

identify

connectives with elts of experience?

[Suppose that each word names some discriminable item. Then] by this rule, every conjunction and preposition in human speech is meaningless. The truth is that neither elements of fact nor meanings of words are separable as our words are.

James: Some Problems of Philosophy

R3

"Green more than anyone realised that knowledge *about* things was knowledge of their relations; but nothing could persuade him that our sensational life could contain any relational element. He followed the strict intellectualist method with sensations. What they were not expressly defined as including they must exclude."

from James: *A Pluralist Universe*

Bird: "Though the aim of empiricists was to identify the humblest, most basic, particular elements of the content of our experience they were driven in this way to deploy resources which were of a highly abstract, theoretical kind."

"[through atomism] our thought is composed of separate independent parts and is not a sensibly continuous stream ... [this] entirely misrepresents the natural appearances."

from James: *Principles of Philosophy*

B4

On Consciousness

[One philosophical position] supposes that consciousness is one element, moment, factor - call it what you like - of an experience of essentially dualistic inner constitution, from which, if you abstract the content, the consciousness will remain revealed to its own eye.

... the usual view is that by mental subtraction we can separate the two factors of experience ... - not isolating them entirely, but distinguishing them enough to know that they are two.

Experience, I believe, has no such inner duplicity; and the separation of it into consciousness and content comes, not by way of subtraction, but by way of addition - the addition, to a given concrete piece of it, of other sets of experiences, in connection with which severally its use or function may be of two different kinds.

James: ERE p8-9

C1

[For the Radical Empiricist] A positively conjunctive transition involves neither chasm nor leap.

... [but for the Transcendentalist] The barest start and sally forwards, the barest tendency to leave the instant, involves the chasm and the leap. Conjunctive transitions are the most superficial of appearances, illusions of our sensibility which philosophical reflection pulverises at a touch. Conception is our only trustworthy instrument, conception and the Absolute working hand in hand. Conception disintegrates experience utterly, but its disjunctions are easily overcome again when the Absolute takes up the task.

James: ERE p70

subjectivity and objectivity are affairs not of what an experience is aboriginally made of, but of its classification.

James: ERE p141

RC

The World of Pure Experience

Taken as it does appear, our universe is to a large extent chaotic. No one single type of connection runs through all the experiences that compose it. space-relations fail to connect minds ... Causes and purposes obtain only among special series of facts. The self-relation seems extremely limited and does not link two different selves together. On the face of it, if you should liken the universe of absolute idealism to an aquarium, a crystal globe in which goldfish are swimming, you would have to compare the empiricist universe to something more like one of those dried human heads with which the Dyaks of Borneo deck their lodges. The skull forms a solid nucleus; but innumerable feathers, leaves, strings, beads, and loose appendages of every description float and dangle from it, and, save that they terminate in it, seem to have nothing to do with one other. Even so my experiences and yours float and dangle, terminating, it is true, in a nucleus of common perception, but for the most part out of sight and irrelevant and unimaginable to one another.

James: ERE p46-7

C2

An ultra-rationalist view of experience

Our intelligence is primarily practical ... but, for philosophers, the practical need is simply Truth. Truth, moreover, must be assumed 'consistent'. Immediate experience has to be broken into subjects and qualities, terms and relations, to be understood as truth at all. Yet when so broken it is less consistent than ever. Taken raw, it is all undistinguished. Intellectualized, it is all distinction without oneness. ... **How** can the diversity exist in harmony with the oneness?

... mere experience ... furnishes no consistent view. [The direct products of experience] I find that my intellect rejects because they contradict themselves. They offer a complex of diversities conjoined in a way which it feels is not its way and which it can not repeat as its own ... For to be satisfied, my intellect must understand, and it can not understand a congeries [ie an aggregate] in the lump.

F H Bradley: Appearance and Reality

James' counter-view

To be 'conscious' means not simply to be, but to be reported, known, to have awareness of one's being added to that being ... The difficulty of understanding what happens here is .. not a logical difficulty: there is no contradiction involved. It is an ontological difficulty rather. Experiences come on an enormous scale, and if we take them all together, they come in a chaos of incommensurable relations that we can not straighten out. We have to abstract different groups of them, and handle these separately if we are to talk of them at all. But how the experiences ever *get themselves made*, or *why* their characters and relations are just such as appear, we can not begin to understand.

James: ERE p132-3

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On Knowledge

Knowledge of sensible realities ... comes to life inside the tissue of experience. It is *made*; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time. Whenever certain intermediaries are given, such that, as they develop towards their terminus, there is experience from point to point of one direction followed, and finally of one process fulfilled, the result is that their starting-point thereby becomes a knower and their terminus an object meant or known. That is all that knowing can be known-as, that is the whole of its nature, put into experiential terms.

The towering importance for human life of this kind of knowing lies in the fact that an experience that knows another can figure as its *representative*, not an 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.

James: ERE p56,61

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Experience as directly lived

[Bode seemingly] performs on all these conjunctive relations the usual rationalistic act of substitution - he takes them not as they are given in their first intention, as parts constitutive of experience's living flow, but only as they appear in retrospect, each fixed as a determinate object of conception, static, therefore, and contained within itself.

We live forwards, but we understand backwards

Kierkegaard

Understanding backwards is, it must be confessed, a very frequent weakness of philosophers, both of the rationalistic and of the ordinary empiricist type. Radical empiricism alone insists on understanding forwards also, and refuses to substitute static concepts of the understanding for the transitions in our moving life. A logic similar to that which my critic seems to employ here should, it seems to me, forbid him to say that our present is, while present, directed towards our future, or that any physical movement can have direction until its goal is actually reached.

James: ERE p238-9

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D2: Agent-oriented analysis

... the healthy thing for philosophy is to leave off grubbing underground for what effects effectuation, or what makes actions act, and to try to solve the concrete questions of *where effectuation in this world is located* [identification of agency], *of which things are the true causal agents there* [attribution to agents], and *of what the more remote effects consist* [interpretation in state-based terms].

If we could know what causation really and transcendently is in itself, the only use of the knowledge would be to help is to recognize an actual cause when we had one, and so to track the future course of operations more intelligently out. The mere abstract inquiry into causation's hidden nature is not more sublime than any other inquiry equally abstract.

James: ERE p185-6.

cf. I am perfectly willing to admit any number of noumenal [unknowable] beings or events into philosophy if only their pragmatic value can be shown.

James: ERE p242

D2

Graham Bird, Philosophy, Manchester (1986)

" We are left ... with a puzzle about the role or sense of 'pure experience'. It is evidently of great importance in James's account, and yet also totally inarticulate. ... [cf.] Wittgenstein 'a nothing would do as well as something about which nothing can be said'. For James's pure experience has to be such that nothing can be said about it, if it is to fulfil the role for which it is cast. ... James refers to the 'speechlessness' of sensations and criticises Green for not simply accepting this.

.... Without some ability to characterise the experiences we have no means of determining their identity, and even no clear means of assessing James's central claim that we are presented with conjunctive relations in experience as well as atomic sensations. Despite these problems James does offer characterisations of such conjunctive relations and the pure experiences which involves them. But in order to characterise them in ordinary terms James plainly needs some device like the 'bracketing' of phenomenology, or a non-committal set of phenomenological descriptions, which could give sense to the idea of a neutral terminology.

Activity from Agency

The *real* facts of activity: three principal types

- vehicle of real activity is a consciousness of wider time-span than ours
- "ideas" struggling with one another are the agents, and prevalence of one set of them is the action [cf. Society of Mind]
- nerve-cells are the agents, & the resultant motor discharges are the acts achieved

How to arbitrate between alternative interpretations?

What is the real activity?

= What will be the actual results?

humanly and dramatically, we like to believe that activities of both wider and of narrower span are at work ...

no philosophic knowledge of the general nature and constitution of tendencies, or of the relation of larger to smaller ones, can help us to predict which of all the various competing tendencies that interest us in this universe are likeliest to prevail

James ERE: P175, 178-80

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James' Perspective on Radical Empiricism

These are the main features of a philosophy of pure experience. It has innumerable other aspects and arouses innumerable questions, but the points I have touched on seem enough to make an entering wedge. In my own mind such a philosophy harmonizes best with [many other philosophical outlooks*]. I can not, however, be sure that all these doctrines are its necessary and indispensable allies. It presents so many points of difference, both from the common sense and from the idealism that have made our philosophic language, that it is almost as difficult to state as it is to think it out clearly, and if it is ever to grow into a respectable system, it will have to be built up by the contributions of many co-operating minds.

James : ERE p90-91

- * Other philosophical doctrines listed are
- radical pluralism
 - novelty and indeterminism
 - moralism and theism
 - humanism

Conclusion

- close parallels between James and EM scripts to represent conjunctive relations: identity, consciousness, cognitive
- pure experience demands non-linguistic representation
- Empirical Modelling for constructing appropriate computer-based artefacts