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Between Epistemology and Metaphysics in William James's Philosophy

Abstract

William James's philosophy has been treated as relativistic and sceptical, as a distortion of truth and rationality. In that way a lot of important elements crucial for understanding his philosophy have been overlooked. However, according to James, our cognition is not relativistic, because there is no room in his philosophy for a traditionally understood dichotomy between a knowing subject and a perceived object. We are all plunged into the stream of experience, and it is in it that we can find an overall picture of our world and our reality. We participate in the plurality of phenomena; we are surrounded by the plurality of things. Our world is continuous, and therefore it is continuously in the process of creation. In short, for James, the world is not a subjective construct created by human beings and his epistemology is closely related to his metaphysics to the point at which it is difficult to consider the distinction between the two. To present these crucial aspects of William James's philosophy in the most meticulous way possible, this essay, will try to clear up doubts concerning James's concept of Radical Empiricism, truth, and his understanding of pluralism, as well as the categories of synechism and tychism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

William James's philosophy has come in for criticism. It has been treated as relativistic and sceptical, as a distortion of truth and rationality. In such interpretations, a lot of important elements crucial for understanding his philosophy have been overlooked. Therefore, it is only in a few publications that we find a complete picture of the pragmatic thought of William James. If we are going to reflect on James's philosophy, first and foremost, we have to remember that his epistemology is closely related to metaphysics. We cannot forget about this otherwise we are unable to analyze the pragmatic concept of truth or the question of how our knowledge is created. Moreover, if we do not understand James's concept of reality, the meaning of his thought will be quite different and, ultimately, incompatible with his own perspective.

For James, the world is not a subjective construct created by human beings, even though many interpret it that way. Our cognition is not relativistic, because there is no room here for a traditionally understood dichotomy between a knowing subject and a perceived object. We are all plunged into the stream of experience, and it is in it that we can find an overall picture of our world and our reality. We participate in the plurality of phenomena; we are surrounded by the plurality of things. Our world is continuous, and therefore it is continuously in the process of creation. It is changing its character and, thus we can say that it is unpredictable.

In this essay, I am going to present the most crucial aspects of William James's philosophy in the most meticulous way possible, trying, above all, to clear up doubts concerning his concept of Radical Empiricism, truth, and his understanding of pluralism, as well as the categories of synechism and tychism. All of that is important to see ourselves as part of the process of cognition and part of the universe, to see ourselves as changing with the reality that is also changing around us.

2. RADICAL EMPIRICISM

What lies at the core of James's pragmatism is Radical Empiricism, which concerns the foundation of our experience and which defines our perception of reality and its nature. In *Some Problems of Philosophy*, James writes that we can reach real

nature within the stream of perception². As James acknowledges, “the world’s essentials are all found in the flux (...) of experience”. As Flournoy notes, what is important is that the James’s Radical Empiricism passes from Experience to Reality and reverts from Reality to Experience without any restrictions³. This is possible thanks to the stream of consciousness in experience in which we can find the Jamesian theory of cognition and theory of being⁴. Before we examine how the concept of existence emerges from Radical Empiricism, we should first try to understand how we perceive the world and how our perceptions function.

In *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, James wrote that ‘reality’ means ‘perception’, in which the subject and the object are mixed together⁵. The Reality which we perceive, the one we experience, appears to us in the stream of consciousness as both internal and indivisible. James says that from the outset, there is a kind of unity in our consciousness [stream of consciousness – MK]. It exists between the subject and the object, between that which is conceptual and that which is perceptual. Flournoy explains that “notions, like things, are of a common substance”, which means “they belong to the same element, to experience”⁶. By such explanations, Buczyńska-Garewicz points out that we can see how obscure the “difference between sensory perception and intellectual perception is”⁷. In other words, as Flower and Murphy explain, “the point James is making is that experience is what is given before any categorization at all - before the division of internal-external, subjective-objective, apparent-real, and therefore certainly before phenomenal-physical and the rest”⁸.

This unity in experience exists here in opposition to the dualistic concept of reality, and as a declaration of the indivisible perception of the world in the stream of thought. McDermott says, “just as there is no ontological dualism within the self, classically known as ‘body and soul’, so there is no ontological dualism between the self and the world”⁹. On the other hand, we cannot separate our perception of

² James W., *Some Problems of Philosophy*, Longman, Green & Co., London 1911, p.113.

³ Flournoy Th., *Filozofia Williama James’a*, Trzaski, Evert i Michalski, Warszawa 1923, p. 45.

⁴ The notions of consciousness and experience are not so different; they drown the field of James’s philosophy. Epistemological and ontological theses are strictly connected with these two notions. Buczyńska-Garewicz H., *James*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 1973, p. 62.

⁵ James W., *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, Longman, Green & Co., London 1912, p. 211-212

⁶ Flournoy Th., *Filozofia...*, p. 45.

⁷ Buczyńska-Garewicz H., *James...*, p. 68.

⁸ Flower E. & Murphy M.G., *A History of Philosophy in America*, Volume II, Capricorn Books, New York 1976, p. 666.

⁹ Mc.Dermott J.J., *A Matapaphysics of Relations: James’ Anticipation of Contemporary Experience*, in: *The Philosophy of William James*, ed. Corti W.R., Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg 1976, p. 95.

perceived objects and perceiving subjects. It would be difficult to define a border between the objectivity of existing objects and subjectively perceiving subjects. We are unable to determine the extent to which our experience contains objective information, and in which part the perceiving subject creates it. As we can see, James is careful in explaining the process of our perception, and by that he draws our attention to the role that a human agent plays in perception: a person who perceives and who takes part in this process, who is not a passive receiver but also a creator.

The holistic view of our perception in the stream of experience is not in opposition to the pluralistic description of the world, which we will elaborate on below. The presence of both in James's philosophy is sometimes interpreted as an anomaly¹⁰. If we confer an existential character on the process of experience, interpreting its nature as monistic, then it sounds like we have indeed discovered an incompatibility¹¹. Such a way of thinking, however, is unfounded. Our perception is holistic, and it does not exist in opposition to pluralism, which is recognized by us as the effect of our conceptualization of experiences by the intellect.

3. TRUTH

Nothing exists in itself: what exists is the experience that we are trying to describe with the use of intellect. The distinction that we make and the perceived plurality of things, events, states and notions appear an intellectual result, a conceptualization of our experiences. Due to that, as Wheeler says, truth and reality are abstract notions which are a result of an intellectual process rooted in experience¹².

After mentioning the notion of truth, what should be now elaborated on is the pragmatic concept of truth and the concept of agreement between our present opinions and new ones which are still in creation. James believes that truth is not a relation between our mind and a reality–archetype. It resides in our minds, and it consists in a relation of assimilation between some objects and processes and others, with “assimilation” being a good word for it¹³. At this point it seems necessary to explain what James understood as an object and process of the mind,

¹⁰ For such an interpretation see: Oliver V.D., *James' Cerebral Dichotomy*, in: *The Philosophy of William James...*, p. 46.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

¹² Wheeler K.M., *Romanticism, Pragmatism and Deconstruction*, Blackwell, Oxford 1993, p. 84.

¹³ James W., *Essays in Radical...*, p. 264.

and what he understood by the relation of assimilation. The answer to the first question is related to the notion of “consciousness.” Consciousness for James is a collection of processes – intellectual, perceptual, and emotional – which take place in the mind. An object in that case is a set of all different kinds of processes. James also gives us an answer to the second question. He explains the relation of assimilation by referring to processes which take place when we add a new opinion to a set of old ones. The process of assimilation takes place when a “new opinion” becomes assimilated with those which already exist. While explaining the process, James uses the words: “the desire of assimilation,” which point to the fact that the psychological sphere and emotional sphere play a role in the process.

In the light of the above, we can say that truth is a process of assimilation of new experiences and ideas that shape our consciousness. Due to this, the response to the question “what does truth mean?” should refer to the psychological process of treating something as true. It is in this context that James has acknowledged the human role in the process of cognition. Putnam rightly adds: “There is no “totality of observational facts” fixed in advance to be described; what is there even at the level of observational fact, will depend partly on what cultures we create, and that means what languages we create”¹⁴. As James puts it, “I, for my part, cannot escape the consideration, forced upon me at every turn, that the knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foothold anywhere, and passively reflecting an order that he comes upon and finds simply existing. The knower is an actor, and coefficient of the truth on one hand, while on the other, he registers the truth which he helps to create”¹⁵.

Pure perception and whatever it is that logic can do are not only events, but things that create our opinions and judgments¹⁶. Each opinion or judgment, when it becomes combined, assimilated with previous ones, becomes a true element of this or that set of judgments. The truth of the judgment and of the thought is not an intrinsic property here: truth only happens to thoughts; thoughts become true because of circumstances¹⁷. What is very important here are the circumstances in which we have to measure and verify our thoughts. The truth-value of each thought appears in the process of verification. An idea is true as long as it is conceived of as expedient to our life. That which is true is that which is expedient. Putnam explains: “It is precisely the fact that James’s emphasis on what he calls

¹⁴ Putnam H., *Pragmatism...*, p. 17.

¹⁵ James W., *Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence...*, p.21

¹⁶ James W., *The Will to Believe and other Essays*, Longman, Green & Co., London 1912, p. 11.

¹⁷ James W., *Pragmatism and Four Essays*, Longman, Green & Co., London 1912, p.133

the “plasticity” of truth, on our role as “coefficients of the truth on the one side”, is balanced by the insistence that we share and perceive a common world, by the instance that “we register the truth which we help to create”, which distances him from all forms of scepticism”¹⁸.

4. PLURALISM

As I have mentioned, our experience is defined by our intellect. The description and testing of the reality described, using elements existing in it and the way they are, have – as it has been said above – a pluralistic character. Reality in the philosophy of William James is, however, also tychistic and synechistic.

James treats the pluralistic concept of reality as opposed to idealistic monism, determinism, and the constraining powers of the world. James perceives unity as constancy and immutability. For James, unity is a term which characterizes a world in which everything is planned, defined and settled. This stands in opposition to the plurality of elements, variety, creativity, spontaneity, and chance, which James has experienced in the world.

Plurality concerns the nature of reality as grasped within perception. We perceive reality as pluralistic. The world is composed of perceiving subjects participating in it and a variety of their rich experiences. This, however, does not form the basis for concluding that James is in favor of relativism. According to James, we have a lot of individual experiences, specific only to us, but in all of them we perceive the same real, existing world. In *Pluralistic Universe*, James wrote that we are all elements of the universe¹⁹; we do not constitute it, we are only one of its components. The plurality of perceiving subjects does not imply the plurality of perceived worlds. Our experience embraces objects, people, the consciousness of others, our thoughts and impressions, time and space, feelings, emotions, and memories. In the world, we are surrounded by the plurality of events, things and people. All these elements and agents of experience create our field of consciousness. James believes that in this experience in the stream of consciousness, we can find the foundation of reality, and according to his concept of Radical Empiricism, we perceive reality as existing objectively. At this point, Flower and Murphy add that “as is evident from the discussion of Radical Empiricism, a first

¹⁸ Putnam H., *Pragmatism...*, p. 20.

¹⁹ James W., *A Pluralistic Universe*, Longnan, Green & Co., London 1909, p.11.

requirement is that reality, objectivity, and the relation of knowing must all lie within experience”²⁰.

According to the above explanation, we can see that we should understand objectivity in a different way. Perhaps, we could call it “objectivity for us” in the stream of experience. Myers says, “the stream of consciousness is seen as a model of what things are really like,”²¹ and we should add here – for us. James, as Miller adds, “believed the world as experienced is real”²², and that there is “nothing special or subjective about what is experienced in the present, because both the present and experience are phases of nature”²³.

The conclusion to be drawn seems obvious: James wants to reject the dualism of the subject and the object. Nonetheless, we have to remember that James considers himself a realist. He has no doubt about the existence of human consciousness in itself and the world. However, he defines the reality of objects, called material, in a different way to the classical view²⁴. With respect to the concept of reality in James’s philosophy, we can say that reality is defined by the field of our consciousness. We are all plunged into the stream of experience (James’s holistic perspective is to be applied here again). It seems plausible to say that what we perceive in experience we treat as real. Asking how much comes from the world and how much comes from us will again make us think about the world in dualistic terms. We can ask this question, but it is not possible to find an answer because we are all part of the process as one of its elements which cannot be separated from the world with precision.

5. SYNECHISM AND TYCHISM

The world is plural, but it is also synechistic and tychistic. In other words, James describes the world as continuous and accidental. These are objective elements of our reality. In James’s philosophy, they exist in opposition to determinism and mechanicism. They describe a changing world, a world of chance and an indefinable, disordered, and fluid life. Within such a perspective, the universe is

²⁰ Flower E. & Murphey M.G., *A History...*, p. 676.

²¹ Myers G.E., *Myers G.E., William James: His Thought and Life*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1986, p. 327.

²² Miller D.L., *William James and the Specious Present*, in: *The Philosophy of William James...*, p. 53.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 54.

²⁴ Flournoy Th., *Filozofia...*, p. 66.

a continuous process in which situations are constantly changing into one another. Reality is all the time in the process of creation²⁵. In our experience of the world, there is nothing constant; “what really exists is not things made but things in the making”²⁶. Every moment of our direct perception is at the same time a moment of creation, attesting to the continuity of existence²⁷. What we are faced with is “an open universe, with nothing settled, everything in question”²⁸.

What also exists in the world is chance, but this does not mean that for us the world is but a big question mark²⁹. What we can potentially say about the world is determined by what will appear in the stream of experience and how it will be described or interpreted. We should be careful here and understand that we can make mistakes and that our knowledge is fallible. In other words, our world is not a question mark; rather, we just need to understand our cognitive capabilities. Putnam says: “fallibilism does not require us to doubt *everything*, it only requires us to be prepared to doubt *anything* – if good reason to do so arises! The fact that perception is *sometimes* erroneous does not show that even *non*-erroneous perception is really perception of ‘appearances’. And it may also help if we realize that access to a common reality does not require access to something *preconceptual*. It requires, rather, that we be able to form shared concepts”³⁰.

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, in James's philosophy, everything is connected with the stream of consciousness. The word “stream” reveals much of the Jamesian intention. As the stream changes, and is a fluid and unfinished creation, so are our reality and the world, given to us in the stream of consciousness. We cannot describe the stream completely, because in each situation it is different and, accordingly, we cannot provide an ultimate description of our experience of the “Universe”. No rational way of thinking is to make us able to describe our experience in a finalized way, as it will always fail to grasp a great deal. When we describe something, we are

²⁵ Wheeler K.M., *Romanticism...*, p. 87.

²⁶ Sentence from: James W., *A Pluralistic Universe*, in: Miller D.L., *William James and the Specious Present*, in: *The Philosophy of William James...*, p.54.

²⁷ Flournoy Th., *Filozofia...*, p. 43.

²⁸ Ames V.M., *William James and the Open Universe*, in: *The Philosophy of William James...*, p. 17.

²⁹ Such an interpretation: *Ibidem*, p. 17.

³⁰ Putnam H., *Pragmatism...*, p. 21.

already opposing what we can call “the object of our perception”. In such a situation, we cannot really describe the reality which we perceive, because we are excluding ourselves from it. We become separated from it, and perception is impossible: all we can do is create our own rational constructions. For James, perception is possible only in the stream of experience, in a changing process that we can participate in. It is only in the stream of experience, in the stream of consciousness, that we can perceive other human beings and the nature of reality. And these are precisely the ideas that are central to James’s philosophy, which shows how his epistemological thought is closely connected with his metaphysics to the point at which it is difficult to consider the distinction between the two.

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