

A Paper for the Graduate Student Panel:
"Perspective of Graduate Students on William James and Josiah Royce"

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James on Unsmooth Transitions of Events

1. Introduction: Fluidity and Non-fluidity of Experience

As widely acknowledged, the foremost significance of *radical empiricism* lies in the analysis of immediate experience, where the basic idea is to pay proper attention to the concrete flux or *stream of experience* as opposed to abstracted, fixed, and hardened elements of mind. The transition from traditional representationalism to fluid phenomenalism enabled James to see the experiencing agent from a distinctively new angle. In particular James does not need to 'synthesize' the quasi-chaotic flux of experience in Kantian manner in order to produce the structure of a thinking subject, since the complex subject emerges out of the many streams of experience, just as a composition of forces amounts to a synthetic force or as a multiple of lines crossing each other yields a cluster of intersecting points. Without setting up the objective and subjective as two different beings, therefore, streams upon streams of experience inevitably lead to the *self-organization* of experience in his view.

This picture, however, fails to capture the other side of *radical empiricism*, namely the element of *atomism* involved in his thought. As readers of James may well recall, James is of the opinion that *one* and the *same* experience can enter into numerous contexts in which they play different functional roles. Each comminuted event enjoys its identity and is able to figure "any number of times, by running into as many different mental contexts, just as the same point, lying at their intersection, can be continued into many different lines" (*ERE*, 80). But it is here that some ambiguity may arise. If each such event can be continued into different streams of experience, as he says, would it not be possible for us to think that the *atomistic events* are primary, not the *continuous flow* of experience? In short, which comes first, the *streams*, or the

discrete events at their *intersections*?

Admittedly, James prefers to say that the *streams* should come first, and *then* we can talk about their intersections. But it is in my view quite important to emphasize that James does not want to dispense with the atomistic intersections themselves, which quickly leads us to his *comminuted Identitätsphilosophie*. In radical empiricism, James thus tells us, “the pure experiences” are “in themselves considered, so many little absolutes” (*ERE*, 134), and “inside of the minimal pulses of experience, is realized that very inner complexity which the transcendentalist say only the absolute can genuinely possess” (*PLU*, 284). This is of course not anything too surprising, if we recall that A. N. Whitehead, for instance, inherited from James the very idea that each unit of experience is a *quantum*. The point I want to observe, however, is that while rejecting the Roycean absolute, James retains a *downsized absolutism*, as it were, where the many little absolutes play nontrivial roles in the analysis of experience.

What I wish to do in this paper along this line of thought is the following. First, I will take a brief look at a few passages from James to examine how he describes the *fluidity* and *nonfluidity* of experience at the same time. Based on this I will move on to see how *conscious experience* tends to blindly supervene on lower-level microscopic events in the Jamesean framework. Finally, I will point out the characteristic of James’s pragmatism which follows from this particular analysis, and I will argue that from a Jamesean perspective pragmatism should seek for more inclusive resources for its future development.

2. Main Argument: James on Unsmooth Transitions of Events

As I have mentioned, if we step into the flux of pure experience with

James, we do not merely feel the fluidity of the stream but rather touch hard individual pebbles or rocks, namely the many little absolutes that remain identical in the torrent of feeling

and thought. As James says, they are *absolute*, indicating the metaphysical facet of radical empiricism. Seen from this angle, it becomes clearer that James in fact pursues a very delicate balance between *fluidity* and *non-fluidity* of experience, so that he is able to hold on to his *continuity* thesis of experience, on the one hand, while accounting for the *same* experience appearing *multiplicatively* and/or *repeatedly* in different contexts, on the other. It is true that conscious experience is *felt* more in fluid transitions, but it is also true that for James the discrete substantive elements are never washed away. I think his attentive analysis in this direction is reflected in the following passage as well:

Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected; often, indeed, it seems to be there more emphatically, as if our spurts and sallies forward were the real firing-line of the battle, were like the thin line of flame advancing across the dry autumnal field which the farmer proceeds to burn. In this line we live prospectively as well as retrospectively. (ERE, 87)

At first glance it might seem that for James the 'firing-lines' are more germane to our temporal experience. The passage, however, also suggests that the substantive part, the 'terms connected,' should receive at least equal weight in the analysis of experience, and the subjunctive mood in which James speaks of the 'lines' seems to generate the impression that it is possibly in appearance that the 'lines' are *felt* more real than the terms. Apparently, the firing-line running across the field is not all that is there for James. There are literally innumerable 'terms' that influence and even constitute parts of the firing-lines. It goes without saying that among all such conceivable parts of our complex experience, intricate relations obtain with every possible gradation of intimacy. As a result, the human conscious *self*, which we seem to be aware of as the experiencing subject, turns out to be more like an exceedingly complex group of innumerable units of experience.

But James goes further. For how does the higher-level complex self interact with or have control over the many little pulsant occasions? It is not obvious that the conscious mind can ever influence such microscopic units of pure experience. For example, if we take some of the many little occasions to be the 'firings' of neurons – following cognitive science today – how would the conscious mind work together with such neurons? James's honest reply is that it is probably a very *human* belief to think that such mutual interactions are possible:

The activity of a nerve-cell must be conceived of as a tendency of exceedingly short reach, an 'impulse' barely spanning the way to the next cell [. . .]. Naïvely we believe, and humanly and dramatically we like to believe, that activities of wider and of narrower span are at work in life together, that both are real, and that the long-span tendencies yoke the others, in their service, encouraging them in the right direction, and damping them when they tend in other ways. But how to represent clearly the *modus operandi* of such steering of small tendencies by large ones is a problem which metaphysical thinkers will have to ruminate upon for many years to come. (*ERE*, 178-179)

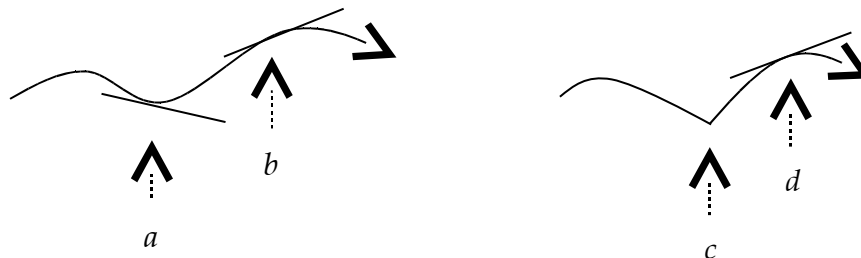
I want to immediately note that such a viewpoint is, first, quite distinct from the Roycean framework, in which the larger 'apperceptive span' of the Absolute eventually guarantees the reality of the units of finite smaller spans, and second, from Peirce's position as well, in which the *whole* is able to call out the *parts* within his theory of final cause. In sharp contrast to such views, James rather stays with the many *pluralistic pulses* themselves, and observes that without a very human belief it is difficult to think that a complex component of mind, such as the conscious self, is able to collaborate with the smaller units.

A similar point is not only explored in the following 'wave-crest' analogy, but also supplemented by an explanation of where such a *human* belief might be rooted:

We live, as it were, upon the front edge of an advancing wave-crest, and our sense of a determinate direction in falling forward is all we cover of the future of our path. It is as if a differential quotient should be conscious and treat itself as an adequate substitute for a traced-out curve. Our experiencing, *inter alia*, is of variations of rate and of direction, and lives in these transitions more than in the journey's end. The experiences of tendency are sufficient to act upon – what more could we have *done* at those moments. . . (ERE, 69)

The wave-crest is, it is reasonably clear in this passage, moving along the surface without controlling its direction of propagation. As James writes, we “fall forward,” and whatever we verify afterward, there is actually very little we can do at each moment of transition. But I think James is trying to say a little more than this. He is of course not saying that the instantaneous rate of change, an analogue of consciousness, is an adequate substitute for the more general change spanning the larger movement. For the differential quotient is insufficient to determine the general figure of the curve. We rather act on faith that the curve, when traced out, *would* bear a definite and intelligible shape, but we never know if the subsequent transitions smoothly follow the general direction foreshadowed by the microscopic rate of change at each given moment.

To see this more closely, let us take a look at the diagrams below. In the first diagram on the left, we can find rates of changes, namely the differential quotients, at every point along the



line, two instances of which are shown by the tangent lines at points *a* and *b*, respectively. The transitions at *a* and *b* are thus soft, and the entire curve, or the course of event, appears smooth, accordingly. But another course of events may well consist of both smooth transitions and abrupt transitions. In the second diagram on the right, the transition is smooth at point *d*, whereas at point *c*, there is no differentiable quotient, precisely because the line is abruptly bent at an arbitrary angle leaving us without a definite sense of directionality. The line is still continuous throughout because there is no gap on it, but at point *c* we cannot tell the direction in which we are going to fall forward.

I think the important issue in such an analysis is to see how James interprets the function of consciousness, which is in my view related to what pragmatism should look like. The remarkable function of consciousness is to file off sharp edges of abrupt changes by trying to interpret events in as much generality as possible. This makes us believe in and act upon the general direction and the rates of change, which, unfortunately, may not exist as in our second example. But we *feel*, as conscious agents, that the course of events has such a general directionality, that the rate of change can be calculated, that reasonableness grows, or in short, that the world should be eventually rational and hence intelligible. But is that true? From the standpoint of James, the view that such general or smooth transitions constitute experience already involves subtle rationalization, from which stems our very 'human' belief. But abrupt transitions might count far more than people would like to believe, which fact seems more or less overlooked by, for example, Peirce or Royce.

3. A Brief Concluding Remark

If such a small Jamesean point sounds trivial, I think we have to link it further to the overall characteristic of his pragmatism. It is in fact not accidental that James collects his

philosophical material from extremely humble resources. The items he gathers include: Temperament instead of insight; feeling in the place of thought; subjective belief, not objective knowledge; particularity of experiences without a fragment of universality; the constantly defective, imperfect finite individual; and a morbid sensitivity forced to live upon the front edge of a wave-crest. Out of such humble resources James' entire theory is generated, and nevertheless, he earnestly seeks for a sign of superhuman life, especially in his later career. His vision is grand, yet I think he modestly humanizes pragmatism in a way that Peirce, Royce, or even Dewey, would (probably) hesitate to do.

By this I hardly mean that such Jamesian items are completely missing in the other versions of pragmatism. Santayana's portrait of Royce tells us that feeling and passion should be emphatically included in our interpretation of Royce. Biographies and letters inform us that Peirce was an extraordinarily emotional pragmatist. Dewey's sense of humanism is probably unparalleled. However, would these pragmatists render the above Jamesian items *central* to pragmatism? My sense of the situation is that even leading pragmatists have (unknowingly) marginalized what James regarded as central to *his* pragmatism. Very briefly, then, I would suggest that a wider range of resources – i.e. resources not confined to what makes life appear smooth, reasonable, and increasingly rational – be included in the resources of pragmatism. There is, I think, something very important in James's analysis of the *unsmooth* transitions of events that form some part of our life.

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