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Conjunction, Disjunction, Gift

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Pragmatism is often understood to err on the side of the objective. Its dictum that something is "true because it is useful" (James 1978, 98) is easily caricatured as a philosophical apotheosis of American instrumentalism. Objects, it would seem, figure in the world according to their ends: their potential to perform utilitarian functions. The world is a boundless collection of exploitable resources through which the rugged individual moves at will: user in a used world. The extreme objectivism of assuming that the world is a pre-constituted collection of objects defined by their functional "cash-value" (James 1978, 32, 169) swings seamlessly into the frontier subjectivism of the purposive human actor partaking freely of its resources. As a result, pragmatism will just as often be understood as erring on the side of the subjective. Concepts such as William James' "pure experience" seem to confirm the objectivism even in their apparent appeals to an ineffable subjective essence. Without the mooring in utility, the subject would be swept away in the "stream."

As James takes pains to suggest in the preface to *The Meaning of Truth*, it is necessary to understand pragmatism in the context of the allied theory of radical empiricism in order to appreciate its force. *Essays in Radical Empiricism* seems at first to confirm the

emphasis on end-objects. “What knowing actually and practically amounts to [is a] leading-towards, namely a terminating-in percepts” (James 1996a, 25). A “leading-towards,” however, is already much more open-ended than a “use,” as is a “percept” in comparison to a functional object. That a radical empiricism will not in fact be either a subjectivism or an objectivism is immediately announced in James’ specifications that the terminating occurs “through a series of transitional experiences which the world supplies” but that neither the experience nor the percept arrived at are to be understood in terms of a subjectively contained consciousness (James 1996a, 25). What is radical about radical empiricism is that there are not on the one hand objective transitions-leading-to-functional-ends in the world, and on the other experiences-and-percepts corresponding to them in the subject. Classically, objects and their associated operations are in the world while percepts registering them are in the subject. What James is saying, by contrast, is that *both are in the transition*. Things and their experience are together in transition. There is no oscillation in the theory between extremes of objectivism and subjectivism, because the object and subject fall on the same side of a shared movement. The question is *what distinction their movement makes*, according to which they fall on the same side. The answer will be surprising to those who equate pragmatism with instrumentalism.

James uses the simple example of describing a building to a sceptical friend (James 1996a, 54-56). There is nothing you can say that can verify your description. There is no sure way for your friend to know that you’re not being inaccurate or deceitful unless you walk together to the building and you point out convergences between what you had said and what you both are now experiencing. The truth of the experience is the fulfilled

expectation. So far, it's all pretty pedestrian. But for James the demonstrative pointing-out is less an external referencing of an object by a subject than an indexing of two subjects to the same phase in the "ambulatory" movement. The demonstrative puts the subjects in sync, as two poles of the same fulfillment. It is less indicative of an object than performative of a sharing. The object does not figure "in itself." It figures differentially, as approached from disjunct perspectives (scepticism and the desire to convince) linked in a moving-toward. The object figures again as bringing those subjective poles of the movement into phase. Their difference of approach is resolved in the collective ability to point and say "that's it!" The demonstrative exclamation marks the operative inclusion of the object in the movement, as a trigger of its components' entering into phase. The "object" is an exclamation point of joint experience.[1] In that punctuating role, it is "taken up" by the movement. The object, along with the concerned "subjects," figure as differential poles integrating into a unity of movement. The unity lasts as long as its demonstrative performance. It is an event: a rolling of subjective and objective components into a mutual participation co-defining the same dynamic.

In the aftermath of the event, the unity resolves back into differentials, and the movement continues, relatively de-defined again: it is possible that disagreement will arise later on about what was demonstrated at that point. The movement may then retrace its steps, to repeat the demonstration, exclaiming a different integration, and a redefinition. The object is taken up by the movement again, but in a new capacity, as an object no longer only of scepticism but of dispute. Whether the object is strictly the "same" as taken up differentially by the movement the second time as it was the first is not a question of concern to pragmatism. What

is of interest is that unfolding differentials phase in and out of integrating events in which they figure as dynamically interlinked poles: that there is a punctuated oneness in a manyness ongoing.

Once the emphasis is placed on the transitional-definitional nature of the "terminus," it is clear that the identity of the event's components cannot predate their integration. What the object will have been, what precisely will have been the role of the subjects, is clear only in retrospect, after each integration — by which time they are already in transit to another "terminus" – already all over again in the making. James will go so far as to say that what constitutes a subject and what constitutes an object varies. A component that was a subject at one terminus may be taken up as an object in the next, or function as both at the same time (James 1996a, 15). This is obvious when you remember that as a perceiver you are always perceivable by another, in whose experience you figure as an object. Or that an object may be re-taken up as a memory, crossing from objective to subjective status (James 1996a, 61).

Subject and object are given *operative* definitions by pragmatism. They are not placed in any kind of metaphysical contradiction or opposition. They are defined additively (James 1996a, 9), according to their multiple takings-up in events, in a continuing movement of integration and decoupling, phasing and dephasing, whose dynamic takes precedence over their always-provisional identities. Subject and object are grasped directly as variations — not only of themselves, but of each other. Their open-ended ability to cross over into each other is the very "stuff" of the world; as it is of experience. The phrase "the world of experience" is a redundancy.

These Jamesian moves already undermine any equation of pragmatism with a "naïve" instrumentalism, turning it decisively

toward a philosophy of the world's continuing self- invention. This turn to a creative philosophy allies pragmatism with Bergson and Whitehead, more than to any other currents.[2] In several places, James makes the turn even more sharply. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, he writes, the ideas we hold true are "unterminated perceptually," and "*to continue* ... is the substitute for knowing in the completed sense" (James 1996a, 69). A usefully terminated experience in which the identity of the components in play definitively crystallize into a clearly objective or subjective role even for an exclamatory moment is the exception. The world usually only brinks on definitive self-punctuations.

> Ether-waves and your anger, for example, are things in which my thoughts will never perceptually terminate, but my concepts of them lead me to their very brink, to the chromatic fringes and to the hurtful words and deeds which are their really next effects. (James 1996a, 73)

The trigger-object is rarely arrived at as a terminus. The world (experience) normally contents itself with brinking on "really next effects." A "terminus" is like a basin of attraction that draws you toward it, as by a gravitational pull, but no sooner spins you off, as by a centrifugal force. The world doesn't stop at your anger. An angry word or deed snow-balls into an unfolding drama sweeping you and all around you along. You are always really living in a centrifugal hurtle to a next effect.

> 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 experience ... is of variations of rate and of

> direction, and lives in those transitions more than in the journey's end. (James 1996a, 69)

Rather than arriving at end-objects, or fulfilling objective ends, we are carried by wave-like tendencies, in a roll-over of experiences perpetually substituting one another. "We live forwards," but since we have always already rolled on, "we understand backwards" (James 1996a, 238): *participation precedes cognition*. This is the sense of James' famous saying that we don't run because we are afraid. We are afraid because we run.

Since we are always at the brink, we are too busy rolling-on to doubt the running reality. The question of the truth or falsehood of the crests and troughs through which we pass — whether they are "merely" (subtractively) subjective, mere appearances or illusions — doesn't even arise.

> These [transitional] termini ... are self-supporting. They are not 'true' of anything else, they simply *are*, are *real*. They 'lean on nothing' ... Rather, does the whole fabric of experience lean on them. (James 1996a, 202)

In the end (or more precisely, in the never-ending) the pragmatic truth is not fundamentally defined by a functional fit between a will and a way, or a propositional correspondence between subjective perceptions and a self-same object. Rather, it has to do with a "self-supporting" of experience brinking, on a roll to really-next-effects. What we experience is less our objects' confirmed definitions, or our own subjectivty, than their going-on together — their shared momentum. Being swept up by the world constitutes a *lived belief* in it: an immediate, moving, embodied, participatory belief.[3] Belief is not propositional ("that is [what it is]"). It is the undoubtable rush of fear, anger, or expectation

whose object has already zoomed past before it is fully defined ("so that was it!"). "Definitely felt transitions … are all that knowing can possibly contain or signify" (James 1996a, 56). Riding the wave, we are in "a *that* which is not yet any definite *what*, tho' ready to be all sorts of whats; full of both oneness and manyness, but in respects that don't appear" (James 1996a, 93-94). This, James writes,

> is what I call pure experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality, a simple *that*. (James 1996a, 23)
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> It is only when our ideas [our expectation of perceiving something] has actually terminated in the percept that we know 'for certain' that from the beginning it was truly cognitive of *that*. We were *virtual* knowers before we were certified to have been its actual knowers, by the percept's retroactive validating power. (James 1996a, 68)

The surprise answer to the question of what distinction subjects' and objects' shared movement makes is: *virtual-actual*. "As yet" (on the crest) subject and object are undetermined. They are only virtually subject or object. Actually, they are what they will have been. The subject and the object fall into definition on the same side of the actual- virtual distinction: the actual side. That is, they fall in retroactively (in the trough). Their actual definition is a kind of experiential doppler effect immediately registering their already having passed, in the momentary calm before the next wave rolls up. Subjects and objects are not pre-constituted foundations for purposive movement yielding useful effects. They *are* effects: movement-effects, directly registered passings-on that are also phasings-out.

How can James turn subjects and objects into phasings or effects and also say that we have an immediate, undoubtable, belief in the world? Because even if you do not have a founding relation between a subject and an object, you still have an effective, if passing, relation of experience to itself. "Thoughts are made of the same stuff things are" (James 1996a, 37). "The starting point *becomes* a knower and the terminus an object meant or known" (James 1996a, 57; emphasis added). "The first experience knows the last one" (James 1996a, 58) retrospectively. Thought and thing, subject and object, are not separate entities or substances. They are irreducibly temporal *modes of relation of experience to itself*. The wave-crest is an interference pattern between the forward momentum, or prospective tending, rolling on from its starting point in a last terminus toward an already anticipated end-object, and the backwash of the really-next-effect by virtue of which the starting point retroactively becomes a knowing subject. In experience, what goes along comes around. The world rolls in on itself, over its own expectations of reaching an end. It "snow-balls," start to terminus. The world is "self-supporting" in the sense that it feeds on its own momentum, folding its movement around on itself, always "additively," the end of every roll a return to the beginning, only more so: further on, spinning off virtual subjects and objects, like flakes in its actual wake. Everything in the world of experience is contained in this self-augmenting movement. There is no metaphysical opposition or contradiction, only the productive paradox of a self-contained becoming. A becoming-more and -many through the same momentum: many-more one-ward.

This brings us to James' pivotal definition of what constitutes a radical empiricism, and when coupled with pragmatism precludes it being an instrumentalism: *the primacy of relation*. The world

revolves around its momentous relation to itself. Relations, James insists, are as real as the terms in relation (subjects, objects, sense-data). And relations are themselves experienced.

> The relations that connect experience must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system. (James 1996a, 42)
> The parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves part of experience. The directly apprehended universe needs, in short, no extraneous trans-empirical connective support, but possesses in its own right a concatenated or continuous structure. (James 1978, 173)

An example: giving. Our common-sense way of thinking about a relation like giving would be to analyze it into its terms, or decompose it into parts, then put it all back together again. In this case, you decompose the giving into a giver (A), a gift (B), and a recipient (C). In theory, you should be able to reconnect A to B (giver to gift) and B to C (gift to recipient) and get the giving again. But what you actually get is two successive holdings: A holding B, then C holding B, with nothing to hold the holdings together. What holds the holdings together isn't in the terms, or their part-to-part connections. What holds the holdings together is a oneness-in-manyness of a moving on. It is what runs through the parts and their holdings, without itself being held; what is unmissably experienced without being seen. *That* — the relation — is not in the giver. Nor is it in the gift. Nor the recipient. It is what runs through them all, holding them together in the same dynamic. It is integrally many things: "concatenated and continuous." It is whatever tendency impells or compells the giving. It is the desire to please another, or to bind another to

oneself. It is is an obligation, which obliges in return. For a giving is never solitary. It calls for more. It is serial, ongoing. It is in the conventions that define the timing and sequence, what gift is desirable or appropriate when. It is also in the sensual qualities of the gift (unromantically, its "sense-data"). It is the fragrance or the sparkle. It is all of these things, folded into and around each other to form an experiential envelope, "full of oneness and manyness in respects that don't appear" — incorporeal medium holding the gift up for the giving, and holding the successive holdings to the same event. Holding-up/holding-together, integral unseen medium of suspension: *that* does it.

The suspension-event is an incorporeal envelope of *sociality*. The gift relation is not fully personal nor objective. It is immediately social — in a way singularly independent from the particular nature of the terms in social relation. The giver or recipient may be male or female, young or old, or what not. The gift may be flowers or diamonds, or what not. The *that* holding the holdings together is a multiplicity of *what-nots,* a ready-to-be-all-kinds. The relation is a suspension of the particular definitions of the terms in relation. If it is as real as they are, its reality is of a different order: an implicate order, of ready-to-be-things folded eventfully into each other. If the implicate order is of the order of an event, like every event really-next-effects will unfold from its happening: to be continued.

Again, "really-next-effect" means "transition takes precedence." The gift is defined as the object of the giving by the event of the offer's passing unbroken into an acceptance. Reciprocally, the giver and the recipient are defined as the subjects of the giving by the object's eventfully having passed. The radically empirical point is that the all-around lived medium, or experienced envelope of relation, is a ready-to-be (virtual) coexistence of terms held in a nondecomposable unity of movement that determines what they

will have been in passing. That translates into the conceptual rule of thumb that the terms in relation belong to a different order than their relation. Terms in relation, parts of the whole, serially unfold over the course of events. But they do so by virtue of an infolding, or implicate, order holding them, wholing them, in the same event. *The logic of coexistence is different from the logic of separation. The logic of belonging is different from the logic of being a part.*

This means that in order to get the whole picture (including the real, suspended ways it doesn't appear) you have to operate with both logics simultaneously: the conjunctive and the disjunctive. "Radical empiricism is fair to both the unity and the disconnection" (James 1996a, 47). It translates metaphysical issues of truth and illusion, subject-object correspondence, into issues of *continuity* and *discontinuity*.

These are basically pragmatic issues: when and how to make a break, and in making a break, make an encompassing connection, and to what really-next-effect. (You can never take back a gift. It incorporeally binds you to another, and in so doing irreversibly cuts into your having been apart.)

Together, radical empiricism and the pragmatic theory of truth lead to an odd constructivism, in which experience is at the same time self-standing and self-contained, and always to be invented, according to passing logics of cut and connection. For it is always only in passing that things prove useful: as provisionally as ether-waves, as ephemerally as your anger, as corruptibly as a gift. Things' only a priori function is of *becoming*.

Approaching things this way saves you fussing over the cognitive status of your experience. Disbelieving, are you? Feeling a tad

illusionary? Don't worry. Everything is as real as its next-effect. Just concentrate on the cut-and-connection that will make a next-effect really felt. In any such event, as you always are, you are already redundantly implicated in the world of experience.

You do not run purposively through the world because you believe in it. The world, surprisingly, already runs you through. And that, really felt, *is* your belief in it. Virtual participation, really, brinking on truly, precedes actual cognition. This is what James means when he says "we live on *speculative* investments" (James 1996a, 88; emphasis added). We find ourselves "invested" in the world's running through our lives because at every conscious moment our participation in it has just come to us newly enacted, already and again, defying disbelief with the unrefusable feeling of a life's momentum. The "speculation" is the thinking-feeling of our active implication in the ever-rolling-on in the world to really-next-effects.

Cut-and-connection to make felt an effect: a definition of *art*. Pragmatism, as augmented by radical empiricism's virtual-friendly relationism, ends up allying not with instrumentalism or any vulgar functionalism, but with art (living art, arts of life). It has less to do with end-use than transitional expression: creative philosophy. The truth is not "out there." It is in the making.

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[1] Deleuze (1994, 245, 251-53) would call the object under this aspect the sign of a "remarkable point" in course of a "dramatization."

[2] For an excellent study of James' philosophy consonant with this perspective (and to which this account owes much) see David Lapoujade (1997).

[3] This concept of belief as eventful, participatory immersion in the world's ongoing is shared by Gilles Deleuze, who calls it "belief in this world": "If you believe in the world you precipitate events, however inconspicuous, that elude control, you engender new space-times, however small their surface or volume" (1995, 176). See also Deleuze 1989, 172-73.