
A Skeptical Balance. Interactions between William James and Edmund Husserl towards a phenomenological reassessment of pure experience.

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Abstract

My paper consists in a phenomenological reassessment of William James' pragmatist thought through a comparison between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's philosophies. Namely, I will follow Richard Steven's suggestion (*James and Husserl: The Foundation of Meaning*, Martinus Nijhoff ed., 1974) of a continuity between the first and the second phase of James' work, reading the whole of his production in the perspective of its later outcome in the discovery of a "primal stuff" constituting the domain of "pure experience", and the correlative critique of consciousness as an exclusively functional entity (*Essays in Radical Empiricism; A Pluralistic Universe*).

The first aim of my paper will be to suggest that James' celebrated interest in skepticism could not be considered as built along Humean guidelines and aims; while it rather binds the statement for a general overlooking of the subject-object relation to higher standards of ontological inquiry. In fact, it will be my claim that the determination to reckon with both rational activity's value and validity, and the relevance commonly acknowledged to (outer) reality in everyday experience, could broadly be traced in James' thought. Hence, that such operation builds on a critique of traditional forms of philosophy (*Pragmatism, A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking; Some Problems in Philosophy*) should be rooted in past account's unfaithfulness and inaccuracy in assessing reality, which should rather be intended not as an ideal or synthetic entity, but as defined in its being experienced, along the lines of a criticism similar to the one adopted by Husserl (*The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, part II*), which debunked all empiricism as a form of objectivism. Far from an irrationalist withdrawal of realism, James seems then to work in the direction of a more thorough assessment of it.

The final argument of my presentation will be demonstrating that James' "realist" position, even though not implying metaphysical creed nor the necessary ultimate completion of knowledge, yet does allow for a thorough understanding and accounting for otherness and wonder (besides fear, too, and the whole sphere of emotionality) in their being a relevant part of the human experience.

The first part of my paper will consist in a comparison between James' *The Stream of*

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Consciousness (Principles of Psychology) and Husserl's account of the knowing activity, as divided between immanent and transcendental acts (*Ideas, I, par. 31-50*). This will show how in James, as in Husserl, the acknowledgement of the centrality of consciousness to epistemic activity and object's apprehension finds realistic force in their accounting for their experienced transcendence, dismissing the temptation of reading James' epistemology as a merely subjectivistic or deflatory one.

In the second part of my argument, I will thus show how the Jamesian reassessment of the subject-object relation passes through a double reduction, where the resistance to the yielding to a form of transcendental idealism, of the type Merleau-Ponty reproached to Husserl (*Phenomenology of Perception, Preface*), proves the peculiar and positive epistemic function of James' skepticism. While in fact it operates the valorization of consciousness in object and value constitution processes (*The Stream of Consciousness; Some Problems in Philosophy IV, V, VI; The Meaning of Truth IV*) on the one hand; it roots the subject-object relation to the unity of the "primal stuff" of experience in considering it a functional, and not ontological, difference (*Does Consciousness Exist?, A Pluralistic Universe*) on the other. The second part will firstly help enlighten *The Stream of Consciousness'* notorious elements of interpretive contention and obscurities, namely the duplicity of the stream between selective attention's chains and fringe areas and its innerving tension between the allegedly ineludible personality of consciousness and its minimal description as of "some thought goes on". I will finally show how it is within such a framework that James' later philosophy could be read as an inquiry towards a description of experienced reality as a matter of interacting functional entities, at once demetaphysicized and recognized in all of their relevance. A dimension where relations are therefore influenced but not ultimately grounded by consciousness, which is itself no more than a functional entity within some more radical fact of thought "going on". While an encompassing understanding of this is yet forbidden, the subject's assessment of "the outer" is thus the conception and the encounter of objects that are "its own", though thanks to a decision and out of a freedom that exceeds it as its ground (*Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking, VIII*) and makes them radically "other", too. I will also show how James' radical empiricism points to a direction compatible with Merleau-Ponty's critique of the Husserlian *epoché* and development of his phenomenological outlook (*Phenomenology of Perception, part II, chapter III*).

Such a phenomenological reading of James' thought could help enlighten areas of it which are usually assessed as obscure, insufficient or little systematically consistent, by providing for instance a better enhanced ontological and phenomenological framework to a non-deflatory interpretation of his pragmatic theory of meaning, or a way to consistent understanding of the frequent recurrence of poetry and literature in its later writings and of his moral remarks in general with relation to an opening, through ontological inquiry, of the philosophical enterprise towards practice.

My argument would break the path for a phenomenological, and more thorough, reading of the empiricist notion of "belief", as an anthropological category first, and opened up to its potential link with other philosophical concerns such as the relationship between humanity and animality; death and the quest for the origin; the role of freedom in creation. Most importantly, such a radical empiricist assessment would make "belief" the space, where the theoretical acknowledgement of "a certain blindness" to one's origin corresponds to the unveiling of a practical task in one's being-destined to the world.

Keywords: William James, Edmund Husserl, Consciousness, Pure Experience, Radical Empiricism