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PRAGMATISM AND REALISM

*Hilary Putnam**

Let me begin by asking what will undoubtedly seem to many, if not all of you, a most peculiar question: How did it happen that the first philosopher to present a completely worked out version of direct realism in the entire history of modern philosophy was none other than the American pragmatist, William James?

The peculiarity of this question is expected because James's pragmatism is often thought of (especially by those who have accepted Richard Rorty as their guide to pragmatist ways of thinking) as a species of antirealism. The very fact that James ardently defended a direct realist account of perception will come as a shock to you, assuming that is how you are accustomed to think of pragmatism. And even those of you who are ultimately convinced by my reading of William James, may still want to challenge my claim that James was the first to successfully promulgate a direct realist picture. Had Thomas Reid not already just done that? And wasn't James's good friend and friendly (if occasionally scathing) critic, the great founder of pragmatism itself, Charles Sanders Peirce—also a direct realist years before James was? What a bizarre view of the history of modern philosophy the lecturer seems to have!

Additionally, some may find the question peculiar because it is not evident why one should care. Presumably, the title *Pragmatism and Realism* did not suggest that you were to listen to a dry discussion of the history of philosophy.

I will address this last concern. Although the Putnams, Ruth Anna and myself, are presently writing a book about William James that will provide full textual support for the interpretation I sketch in this lecture, my interests today are not primarily historical ones. What I shall understand by the term "direct realism" today is not a particular metaphysical theory; rather it is our implicit and everyday conviction that in experience we are immediately aware of such common objects as trees and buildings, not to mention other people. I am interested in James's defense of direct realism—of what he called "natural realism," because I see overcoming the traditional picture of perception—a picture according to which our sensations are as much an impassible barrier between ourselves and the objects we perceive as a mode of access to

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them—as absolutely necessary if philosophy is to ever stop “spinning its wheels” in a futile attempt to locate a resting place in the dispute about metaphysical realism and antirealism.¹ Although, in the end, the version of direct realism that I would defend is not James’s, it was his defense of direct realism that led me to appreciate the issue’s fundamental importance.

Let me return to the initial concern: How can a pragmatist also be a realist?

James: Pragmatist and Realist

Let me begin with the admission that there *are* antirealist elements in James’s philosophy (even if he would not have regarded them as such). Although James’s theory of truth is both subtle and complex (so much so that neither his critics nor his extravagant admirers have done it justice), I argue elsewhere² that, at the end of the day, it does commit James to a degree of antirealism about the past (though not exclusively about the past) which is quite unacceptable. As Bertrand Russell aptly recognized, however, it is possible to admire James’s theory of perception without admiring his theory of truth.³ This observation, however, does not really speak to the concern. Given that James had a realist side, how did he reconcile it with a theory of truth that has startlingly antirealist consequences? For two reasons, that too should not really be so great a puzzle. First, no one seems to have a problem recognizing that Peirce was both a realist and a pragmatist (though I would argue that Peirce’s definition of truth as the opinion to which inquiry would converge if indefinitely pursued has the *same* antirealist consequences about the past, etc., as that of James’s theory).⁴ The second reason is that neither James nor Peirce admitted that their theories of truth possessed these antirealist consequences. They were wrong.⁵ If one rejects the facile view that Peirce was a

¹ For a discussion of the importance of overcoming this picture, see Hilary Putnam, *Sense, Nonsense and the Senses: An Inquiry into the Powers of the Human Mind*, 41 J. PHIL. 445 (1994) [hereinafter Putnam, *Sense, Nonsense and the Senses*].

² For a discussion of James’s theory of truth, see A COMPANION TO WILLIAM JAMES, (R.A. Putnam ed., forthcoming 1997).

³ For Russell’s view of James, see HILARY PUTNAM, PRAGMATISM: AN OPEN QUESTION (1995).

⁴ See Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism*, in 95 THE ARISTOTELIAN SOC’Y 291 (1995) [hereinafter Putnam, *Pragmatism*].

⁵ In Peirce’s case however, the story is more complex because Peirce was willing to make empirical assumptions (ones which are, however, incompatible with today’s physics) to guarantee that his theory of truth would not be incompatible with his realism. Given his fallibilism, Peirce might even be happy that his theory has been refuted by a scientific

complete realist while James thought anything could be true provided it was satisfying to believe, then pragmatism can be seen as a rich source of insights that was not free from errors.

My concern today, however, is not with the antirealist side of James's thought—manifested to speak much too quickly and inaccurately in his identification of what is true with what will ultimately be “verified” in his own special sense of the word—but with his realism.

James's efforts to work out a satisfactory form of realism began with what can be seen as a turn from psychology to philosophy, were it not misleading to speak of a “turn” in the case of a thinker who had published essays on philosophical topics beginning in the 1870s. Nevertheless, James did not begin to devise his own systematic metaphysical view until the 1890s. Indeed, in his monumental work, *The Principles of Psychology* (although he voiced philosophical opinions on a wide range of subjects), his official stance was that he was bound as a psychologist to assume the working philosophy of the experimental psychologist, which he took at that time to be a form of dualism coupled with a belief in psychophysical parallelism. The position of *The Principles of Psychology*, as far as metaphysics is concerned, is that while this working philosophy is doubtless inadequate, its inadequacy need not trouble the psychologist *qua* psychologist.⁶ James reversed himself, however, in the Epilogue to *Psychology: Briefer Course* and again in a lecture given to the American Psychological Association, when he declared that good psychology requires a more coherent metaphysical stance than we presently possess, and in his 1895-96 seminar on “the Feelings,” when he began to devise the views that he would later present to the world as *Essays in Radical Empiricism*.⁷ (By the way, the discovery that James had worked out the essence of his “radical

discovery. The discovery in question—by Stephen Hawking—is the discovery that there is such a thing as the irretrievable destruction of information. This refutes Peirce's claim that we are entitled to believe that scientific investigation could discover the answer to any factual question if sufficiently continued, and that claim is necessary to Peirce's defense of the realistic character of his notion of truth.

⁶ James writes, in the preface to *Principles of Psychology*, that:

This book, assuming that thoughts and feelings exist and are vehicles of knowledge, thereupon contends that psychology when she has ascertained the empirical correlation of the various sorts of thought or feeling with definite conditions of the brain, can go no farther—can go no farther, that is, as a natural science.

If she goes farther she becomes *metaphysical*.

WILLIAMS JAMES, *Preface to Volume One* of *THE PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGY* 6 (1981) (emphasis added).

⁷ This address, *The Knowing of Things Together*, was published in *The Psychological Review* in March 1895, reprinted in WILLIAM JAMES, *ESSAYS IN PHILOSOPHY* 71-89 (1962).

empiricism" as early as 1895-96 is due to a young scholar at Harvard named David Lamberth, on whose research I am relying in this paragraph.⁸)

The fundamental idea of James's new metaphysics is the radical rejection of the subject/object split. This rejection seems to have been provoked first of all by James's attention to the phenomenology of perception. "Phenomenology" has been used by different philosophers to stand for very different projects. What unifies those projects is that they reject the picture of experience in classical associationist psychology as a false description dictated by a received philosophical view (originally, the view of British empiricism), that was imposed willy-nilly on a very complex set of phenomena, and that they all aim to replace this imposed picture with an accurate and philosophically useful description of the actual character of experience. In this sense, one may say that in *The Principles of Psychology*, James was already doing "phenomenology"—indeed we know that Husserl was inspired by that book.⁹ Now, the received empiricist psychology, coupled with mind/matter dualism (as in the working philosophy of *The Principles of Psychology*), leads to the following picture of perception: (1) in perception we receive "impressions" which are immaterial, totally different—and separated by a metaphysical gulf in fact—from all the material objects we normally claim to perceive; and (2) from the character of our internal mental impressions we infer how things are in the external physical world.

Nothing, however, could be farther from the way perception seems to be, or farther from the "phenomenology" of perception. Phenomenologically, we seem ourselves to be perceiving tables and chairs (or cabbages and kings), not immaterial intermediaries. What we see in James's first attempts to work out his new metaphysics¹⁰ is the conviction that the phenomenology of perception is the best guide to a correct ontology. In effect, James has entertained the heretical thought: What if all the philosophers are wrong and the way it seems to be is the way it is?

⁸ David D. Lamberth, *James's Varieties Reconsidered: Radical Empiricism, the Extra-Marginal and Conversion*, 15 AM. J. THEO. & PHIL. 257 (1994); DAVID D. LAMBERTH, *METAPHYSICS, EXPERIENCE AND RELIGION IN WILLIAM JAMES'S THOUGHT* (forthcoming 1997) (provides a detailed periodization of the development of James's metaphysics).

⁹ Cf. BRUCE WILSHIRE, *WILLIAM JAMES AND PHENOMENOLOGY: A STUDY OF "THE PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGY"* (1968).

¹⁰ I am referring again to the Epilogue in WILLIAM JAMES, *PSYCHOLOGY: BRIEFER COURSE 395* (1984), and to William James, *Notes for Philosophy 20b: Psychological Seminary—The Feelings*, in WILLIAM JAMES, *MANUSCRIPT LECTURES 212-29* (1988) [hereinafter *MANUSCRIPT LECTURES*].

In addition to denying that the immediate objects of our perceptions are immaterial "sensations" or "impressions," James further denies that we are aware of a substantial self (or as he puts it, a substantial "consciousness").¹¹ In James's own terminology, *Notes for Philosophy 20b: Psychological Seminary—The Feelings*, what is given is a "field" of objects which only upon reflection appear either as perceivable "external" objects, or (when we engage in an alternate mode of reflection) as "sensations" or affectations of our own subjectivity. The datum, the phenomenon, the pure experience,¹² in itself "has no such inner duplicity," James writes.¹³ Here too, James regards the phenomenology as the best guide to an ontology. Reality in itself does not consist of two radically different sorts of things—subjects and objects—with a problematic relation. Rather, it consists of the data—the phenomena—and it is just that these can be thought about in different ways.

As mentioned previously, James is describing the phenomenology of perception; but he is also doing more than that. By suggesting that we can take that phenomenology seriously in a way that philosophers have long thought we could not, he is proposing that we return to a standpoint close to what he calls the "natural realism" of the common man.

¹¹ James's denial of a substantial "consciousness" is, of course, not a denial that we are conscious! Although this charge is occasionally brought against James, it seems to depend on the idea that one cannot believe that we are conscious unless there is a thing which is our "consciousness," or at least a substantial self (or at least a transcendental ego, such as Kant's famous "I think"). What James was denying was the need for any of these metaphysical items, not the fact that Jones is conscious of the purring of the cat, or whatever. James's denial that we are aware of any such item is, of course, a denial that Kant—who did not think we experience the transcendental self—would have agreed with, as, for quite different reasons, would Hume.

¹² A term James took from Avenarius, by the way, although he later seems to have quite forgotten this debt, since he spoke in quite scornful tones of that thinker's unreadability! This was pointed out to me by David Lamberth. To my knowledge, Ignas K. Skrupskelis was the first person to suggest this in his introduction to *MANUSCRIPT LECTURES*, *supra* note 10.

¹³ Although the sentence: "*Experience . . . has no such inner duplicity . . .*" comes from *Does 'Consciousness' Exist?*, reprinted in WILLIAM JAMES, *ESSAYS IN RADICAL EMPIRICISM* 3, 6 (1976) [hereinafter JAMES, *ESSAYS IN RADICAL EMPIRICISM*], the thought is already present in James's *Notes for Philosophy 20b: Psychological Seminary—The Feelings*, *supra* note 10. See *id.* at 228 ("But nothing postulated whose whatness is not of some *nature* given in fields, that is not of field stuff, datum-stuff, experience stuff, 'content.' No pure ego, for example, and no material substance. This *is* the hypothesis that we are trying to work out.") (footnote omitted).

A Historical Digression

In trying to defend "natural realism" (even if with some philosophical additions and revisions), James, though probably unbeknownst to him, possessed an Aristotelian way of thinking about perception—a way of thinking that was dominant in the later middle ages. Aristotle held that in perception, the very form of the object perceived is in the mind. To be sure, there are difficulties with this view.¹⁴ Some of those difficulties are with the essentialism involved in the Aristotelian notion of "form," and those difficulties become serious when we hold that the form of the object is also in the mind when we merely think about the object, as well as when we perceive it. It does seem that in conception, the form Aristotle speaks of is what he regards as the "essence," and I find serious difficulties with the idea that we can only think about things whose "essence" is known. It has been suggested to me by Gisela Striker, however, that in the case of perception, it is unlikely that Aristotle has so demanding a notion of form in mind. It is plausible that the form that we receive in perception is simply the sensible form—the color, shape, texture, sound or whatever.¹⁵ Reading Aristotle in this way, it would seem that what he is saying is simply that in perception we are aware of the sensible properties of external things—their shape and/or color, etc.

It may be, of course, that Aristotle also thought that his talk of the same thing (the form) being in two places at once (in the object perceived and in the mind) explained how such direct awareness of sensible properties of external things is possible; if so, he was mistaken as the explanation is empty. (It is also possible, as indeed the rather strange prose of *De Anima* at this point suggests might be the case, that he is simply using a figure of speech to say that we are directly aware of properties of external things, as today the figure of speech that something is "in my mind" is used.) Whatever Aristotle may have intended, and whether part of what he intended must be rejected as unhelpful, he at least believed that we do have an awareness of the sensible properties of "external" things, and that this is not to be cashed out as meaning that we merely have "images" or "representations" of those things before our minds (as holds the view that has been dominant ever since Descartes). Furthermore, Aristotle's ideas were faithfully supported by Aquinas.

¹⁴ Cf. HILARY PUTNAM, *Aristotle after Wittgenstein*, reprinted in WORDS AND LIFE 62 (James Conant ed., 1994) [hereinafter PUTNAM, WORDS AND LIFE].

¹⁵ I did not consider the possibility of this reading in *Aristotle after Wittgenstein*, and if I had I would have been more charitable to the Aristotelian view. See *id.*

Aristotle was aware that perception requires many things—in the case of sight, the form must somehow be transmitted through the air to the eyes, and there must be physical modifications in the eyes¹⁶ and (perhaps) in the cognitive organ (which Aristotle understood to be the heart and blood stream) before the form can be in our psyche. Perception is supervenient on physical processes. That is not, however, an obstacle to thinking that what *results* from all these transactions between the organism and the environment is the perception of the way something *is*, and not only in the Pickwickian sense of the presence of a “representation” which in some mysterious way refers to the way something is.

By Descartes’s time, however, Scholasticism and Aristotelianism were in ill repute, and the old notion of a “substantial form” smacked of a metaphysics that was no longer acceptable. As is usually the case in philosophy, the baby was tossed out with the bathwater, and the representational theory of perception that continues to dominate philosophy and psychology (and, today one can add “cognitive science” as well) came to be the only possible view. To be a direct realist was to be a “naive realist,” and being naive is, of course, bad. It is against the background of the consensus that has endured for centuries, that “naive realism” had been refuted once and for all, that James’s amazing philosophical radicalism has to be appreciated.

The Importance of the Issue

Before I describe James’s version of direct realism, I wish to comment further about the importance of the issue. One reason I feel I must do this, is that after being at the center of philosophical attention in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the philosophy of perception receded from view (and almost disappeared from serious attention after the death of J.L. Austin in 1960). Indeed, of the great figures in Anglo-American philosophy, only Peter Strawson maintained a steady, if intermittent, interest in the

¹⁶ This has been challenged by Myles Burnyeat. For Burnyeat’s paper and a reply defending the interpretation given here, see *ESSAYS ON ARISTOTLE’S DE ANIMA* (MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM & AMÉLIE O. RORTY EDS., 1992). VICTOR CASTON HAS POINTED TO PASSAGES IN ARISTOTLE’S BIOLOGICAL WRITINGS IN WHICH ARISTOTLE SPECULATES THAT COGNITION MAY INVOLVE BUILDING OF A KIND OF REPRESENTATION IN THE BLOOD STREAM! SUCH REPRESENTATIONS ARE NOT, OF COURSE, IN OUR PSYCHE, AND ARE NOT IDENTICAL WITH THE PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE; STILL THE FACT THAT ARISTOTLE HIMSELF WAS WILLING TO SPECULATE IN THIS WAY SHOWS THAT AN “ARISTOTELIAN” VIEW NEED NOT BE HOSTILE TO THE IDEA THAT SUBPERSONAL PROCESSES OF A MODEL BUILDING KIND HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN THE ETIOLOGY OF PERCEPTION. (ARISTOTLE AS THE FATHER OF COGNITIVE SCIENCE?)

topic. A second and less sociological reason is that one aspect of the traditional picture of perception has now been given up, and this may give the illusion that the picture is no longer as problematic as it once was.

When I described the traditional picture, I mentioned two elements: in perception we receive "impressions" that are immaterial, totally different—separated by a metaphysical gulf—in fact from all the material objects we normally claim to perceive; and from the character of our internal mental impressions we infer how things are in the external physical world. Today, however, a majority of philosophers appear to be hard-core materialists (even if they prefer the more innocuous label of a "naturalist"), and these philosophers would say that our "impressions" are little more than brain events or processes. These philosophers would say that the representational theory of perception no longer requires us to posit a "metaphysical gulf" between impressions and external objects.

In fact however, the new view is at least as problematical as the old one. Philosophers who advocate the new view concede that we are not aware of our "sensations" as brain processes. We are aware of the blue of the sky as a color extended over an area, not as a cortical process. The claim advanced by Donald Davidson and others that the experience is "identical" with a cortical event trades on a notion of "identity" that seems to me entirely meaningless. (Davidson has admitted, under the pressure of criticism from W.V. Quine, that the criterion he originally offered for what he calls "token identity of events of different types" was fatally flawed.¹⁷) Moreover, even if we were to concede that our sense impressions are brain processes—that is, even if we suppose that the notion of "identity" can be made sense of in this context (though we know not how!)—the picture remains one in which our cognitive processes extend no further than an "interface" between us and the external objects (an interface consisting now of cortical processes rather than processes in a mental substance). The objects of perception, those cabbages and cabinet ministers, impinge on our mind/brains only causally, not cognitively.

This feature of the current materialist version of the representational theory of perception, the feature that the picture of cognition provided by that picture is in the end a purely causal and not a normative one, has been used by Richard Rorty to argue against the idea that we can think of reference as a relation to objects in

¹⁷ For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Putnam, *Sense, Nonsense and the Senses*, *supra* note 1, at 477-83.

the world. "We are connected to the world causally, not semantically," I have heard Rorty say more than once.¹⁸

With these remarks, Rorty builds on an argument against the "given" used by Wilfrid Sellars. Sellars assumed what I have called the picture of our impressions (our "raw feels," in his terminology) as an "interface" between us and the world (although he does not seem to have been willing to identify them with brain events). Sellars further observed that any given impression-report, (e.g., "I am experiencing E now"), must have a multitude of causes, and that there is nothing in any one of those causes, *qua* causes, to single it out as "the appropriate" cause of my verbal response or my verbalized thought. Even if my verbal report (or my thought) is in part caused by the very quality of the raw feel I am trying to describe, it may still be a misreport—my report cannot causally depend only on the quality of my "raw feel." If it is to be a report in a language with stable meanings, it must also depend on my prior linguistic conditioning, on attention, and on "set," etc. Like Rorty, Sellars thought that to postulate a semantic relation between linguistic items and nonlinguistic objects which determines when I am successfully "referring," is to postulate a mystery relation.

Rorty generalized Sellars's argument (once accepted it invites immediate generalization), and concluded that if we are connected to the world "causally but not semantically" (a fair summary of Sellars's view), then our words have no determinate real counterparts. Sellars attempted to avoid going as far as Rorty did when he postulated a holistic relation between our conceptual schemes and reality that he called "picturing"; postulating further in Peircean fashion, that with the progress of science our schemes come to "picture" the world more and more accurately. Rorty however, rejects Sellarsian "picturing" on the grounds that it is as occult a relation as reference allegedly is.

Rorty and Sellars are right in saying that any given event can be traced to a multitude of different causes. As William James wrote in a different context:

Not a sparrow falls to the ground but some of the remote conditions of his fall are to be found in the milky way, or in our federal constitution, or in the early history of Europe. That is to say, alter the milky way, alter the [facts of our] federal constitution, alter the facts of our barbarian ancestry, and the universe would so far be a different universe from what it now is. One

¹⁸ This paragraph and the four that follow are adapted from HILARY PUTNAM, *Realism without Absolutes*, reprinted in PUTNAM, *WORDS AND LIFE*, *supra* note 14, at 279, 285.

fact involved in the difference might be that the particular little street-boy who threw the stone which brought down the sparrow might not find himself opposite the sparrow at that particular moment; or, finding himself there, he might not be in that particular serene and disengaged mood of mind which expressed itself in throwing the stone. But, true as all this is, it would be very foolish for anyone who was inquiring the cause of the sparrow's fall to overlook the boy as too personal, proximate, and so to speak anthropomorphic an agent, and to say that the true cause [of the sparrow's fall] is the federal constitution, the westward migration of the Celtic race, or the structure of the milky way. If we proceeded on that method, we might say with perfect legitimacy that a friend of ours, who slipped on the ice upon his door-step and cracked his skull, some months after dining with thirteen at the table, died because of that ominous feast.¹⁹

Yet to conclude (from the fact that there is a great difference between asking for the referent of a term and asking for the causes of a particular "tokening" of that term) that we must abandon the idea that there is a relation of reference that holds between some of our terms and objects in the world, is to engage in a gesture of repudiation with respect to our conception of ourselves as thinkers in a world that is so sweeping as, in the end, to invite the suspicion that it is simply an empty pose. In this suspicion, I am naturally joined by metaphysical realists. Metaphysical realists, of course, deplore the rejection by both Rorty and Sellars of the very idea of semantical words-world relations. If, however, (as most of the contemporary ones do) they also wish to endorse a "bald" version of naturalism,²⁰ they cannot simply posit a semantical words-world relation; they must also show that it can be reduced to non-semantical relations and facts—to posit irreducible semantic relations is no better from their point of view than to posit immaterial sense data. Attempts to reduce semantic relations to non-semantic ones have been utter failures—to the point that we presently have no idea what such a reduction could conceivably look like.²¹

It was in this philosophical climate that I advanced my own attempt at a "middle way" between antirealism and metaphysical

¹⁹ WILLIAM JAMES, *Great Men and Their Environment*, in *THE WILL TO BELIEVE AND OTHER ESSAYS IN POPULAR PHILOSOPHY AND HUMAN IMMORTALITY* 216, 216-17 (photo. reprint 1960) (1898).

²⁰ I owe the term "bald naturalism" to JOHN McDOWELL, *MIND AND WORLD* (1994).

²¹ For a critical examination of such attempts, see HILARY PUTNAM, *RENEWING PHILOSOPHY* (1992) [hereinafter PUTNAM, *RENEWING PHILOSOPHY*].

realism (my so-called “internal realism”²²) in the 1970s and 1980s. While I still defend some of the ideas that were involved in those attempts (in particular the denial that reality dictates one unique description is as central to my thinking as it ever was), it is now clear that that attempt too was fatally flawed by its allegiance to the traditional conception of our sensations as an “interface” between us and the world. Thus, I can understand from my own experience how, even if we did not very much discuss the philosophy of perception in the 1970s and 1980s, we were—and too many of us remain—the inheritors of a Cartesian (or Cartesian *cum* materialist) picture of perception, a picture that had become all the more coercive for *not* being critically discussed in the way it was at the time Russell wrote *The Analysis of Mind*—a book that, for all its retention of parts of the traditional picture, is extremely aware of the difficulties to which that picture leads, as most of today’s philosophers are not.

Another (shorter) Historical Digression

Even if you are now convinced (I trust) that it is important to overcome the representational theory of perception, the picture of our sensations as “between” us and those “external objects,” there is still the question as to our historical accuracy in giving James and not Thomas Reid the credit for being the first modern philosopher to revive direct realism. It is true that Thomas Reid thoroughly understood the disastrous consequences of the representational theory, and that (both in the *Inquiry* and in the *Intellectual Powers*) he called—indeed, he vigorously polemicized—for a return to a direct realism.²³ My reason for not ultimately counting Reid as a successful advocate of the direct realist cause, is that he retains the idea that sensations are nonconceptual and internal “signs” (as opposed to *sensings* of what is *there*) as an essential part of his epistemology and ontology. For example, Reid writes:

[In perception] there is something which may be called the sign, and something which is signified to us . . . by that sign Thus when I grasp an ivory ball in my hand, I have a certain sensation of touch. Although this has no similitude to anything material, yet, by the laws of my constitution, it is immediately followed by

²² A name which I now find to have been an unhappy one, for the reasons given in Putnam, *Sense, Nonsense and the Senses*, *supra* note 1, at 461-63.

²³ See John J. Haldane, *Reid, Scholasticism and Current Philosophy of Mind*, in *THE PHILOSOPHY OF THOMAS REID* 285 (Melvin Delgarno & Eric Matthews eds., 1989).

a conception and belief that there is in my hand a hard smooth body of a spherical character.²⁴

This differs from the standard Cartesian account only in adding that, owing to "the laws of my constitution," I am able to form a "conception" of the object itself from this sensation even though it "has no similitude to anything material." This power, however, necessarily appears to be something mysterious in Reid's account, since the mind has as "input" something different in *kind* from what it forms conceptions and beliefs about. Similar remarks apply to Peirce's defense of direct realism—indeed, Peirce cites Reid as the one who got it right.²⁵

James's Radical Empiricism

James's name for this area of his philosophy is "radical empiricism"; James does not, however, use the term "direct realism," but the much better term "natural realism" appears a number of times in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism*,²⁶ and he repeatedly insists that radical empiricism is close to natural realism, or revives it, or shows that it can be maintained. We have already provided an answer to the puzzle as to how a pragmatist came to revive natural realism; it was James's typically pragmatist insistence that we take seriously the way in which we think about—and have to think about—perceptual experience in the course of living our lives that virtually forced natural realism upon him.²⁷ And James is certainly correct that in the course of living our lives, we have to think of ourselves as living in what he calls "a common world," that each of us must think that she is aware of the other's body and not simply a representation of it, and we all have to think that we are aware of many of the same objects. It is true that in elaborating a philosophy which took this idea as correct, James was led to some elaborate metaphysical construction which I do not presently have time to discuss. For that reason, towards the end of the this lecture I shall speak to the further question: To what extent can we preserve natural realism without accepting all of James's metaphysics of radical

²⁴ THOMAS REID, *ESSAYS ON THE INTELLECTUAL POWERS OF MAN* 332 (James Walker ed., 1850).

²⁵ Cf. 5 *COLLECTED PAPERS OF CHARLES SANDERS PIERCE* 5.56, 5.444, 5.539, 6.95 (Charles Hartshorne & Paul Weiss eds., 1934).

²⁶ "Natural realism" is a much better term because, as pointed out in J.L. AUSTIN, *SENSE AND SENSIBILIA* (1963), there is a great deal that is problematic with the traditional epistemologist's use of "direct" and "indirect."

²⁷ It is for the same reason that Dewey followed James in this, and that Peirce earlier sought—even if, in my view, unsuccessfully—a return to direct realism.

empiricism? I shall further suggest that we can find resources for doing this in the writings of J.L. Austin.²⁸ Even if, however, James's way was not the only way, or even the best way to defend natural realism, the fact remains that it was the first way to be proposed after the fateful Cartesian turn in modern philosophy.²⁹

James's way involved what Russell (not James himself, for whom the term "monist" was anathema) described as a "neutral monist" ontology. In such an ontology, the properties and relations we experience are the stuff of the universe; there is no non-experiential "substratum" (this is an idea of James's with which Russell was sympathetic), and these experienced or experienceable properties and relations (James is unfortunately a little vague at this crucial point) make up both minds and material objects. Moreover, minds and material objects, in a sense "overlap"; the very thing I experience as a sensation of red is, in another context, also what I refer to as "a patch of color on the wall." Illusions do not prove that we never "directly experience" external objects; in James's radical empiricist metaphysics, what the phenomena of illusions go to show is that not every bit of pure experience has the status of being a part of a "real" object, not that none do.

Of course, there is the obvious objection that the skeptical epistemological problem has not been "solved." In James's account, there is no absolutely certain way to know when we are subject to an illusion and when we are not. But James would reply that the problem is even worse for the traditional theory. As James puts it for the Berkleyan school:

Our lives are a congeries of solipsisms, out of which in strict logic only a God could compose a universe even of discourse.

. . . .

. . . If the body you actuate be not the very body that I see there, but some duplicate body of your own with which that has nothing to do, we belong to different universes, you and I, and for me to speak of you is folly.³⁰

In short, James argues that several minds, each acquainted only with its own private objects, could not arrive by any process of inference at knowledge or even thought of one another.

²⁸ For a fuller account, compare Putnam, *Sense, Nonsense and the Senses*, *supra* note 1.

²⁹ Charles Taylor has objected that I am leaving Hegel out of account here. Even if Hegel can be seen as a kind of direct realist (which is problematic), he seems to have had no influence on James in this respect.

³⁰ JAMES, *ESSAYS IN RADICAL EMPIRICISM*, *supra* note 13, at 37-38.

The advantage of pragmatism over traditional “foundationalist” epistemology, in James’s view, is that the way in which pragmatist philosophers answer skeptical doubts is the way in which doubts are answered in practice, by appealing to tests that in fact work in our lives. If I think that what I see may be an illusion, I can try to touch it, or look at it from a different position, or ask other people to take a look. There are not, in James’s view, two sets of criteria for being “real”—commonsense criteria and philosophical criteria.

With so much, Russell was able to agree in *The Analysis of Mind*. In a chapter of that work dealing with sensations and images (chapter eight), Russell heartily endorses James’s view that “the dualism of mind and matter cannot be allowed as metaphysically valid,” writing, “[o]n this subject we may again quote William James. He points out that when we say we merely ‘imagine’ things, there are no such effects as would ensue if the things were what we call ‘real.’”³¹ It is at this point Russell quotes James at length and then restates the point in his own terminology: the difference between so-called ‘mental’ phenomena and ‘physical’ phenomena is a difference in the causal laws obeyed, not a fundamental dualism.

But there is an important aspect of what James calls “natural realism” with which Russell was unable to agree (although it is not clear that he realized that this was a point of disagreement). For immediately after this, Russell proceeds to give precisely the description of experience that James had previously rebelled against in *The Principles of Psychology*: experience consists of color patches, etc., and we think we see tables and chairs because we make “inferences” of various kinds!³² Evidently Russell is willing to follow James about color patches (“the sensation that we have when we see a patch of colour simply *is* that patch of colour, an actual constituent of the physical world,”³³) but not about tables and chairs.

Here is an example (my own rather than his), of what bothers Russell: while it is true that we normally see tables and chairs as just that, very often we do not see the side away from us; yet seeing something as a chair is seeing it as something which has an unseen side, and one of a certain kind. Because that knowledge, the knowledge of the unseen side, cannot be perceptual (this seems

³¹ BERTRAND RUSSELL, *THE ANALYSIS OF MIND* 137 (1921).

³² *Id.* at 140.

³³ *Id.* at 142.

evident to Russell) it must be inferred.³⁴ We can only find what is really given in sensation by stripping away all “mnemic” (i.e., conceptual) contributions. But James’s view is that if there is an original nonconceptual element in perception, we are unable to get back to it (or can get to it only in free reverie—precisely when we are not cognizing!). The question, how much of what we perceive is “given” and how much is “added,” is, he says in one place, like the question: Does a man walk more essentially on his left leg or his right?³⁵ Although James was not willing to go as far as Kant and treat perception as a passive exercise of the same conceptual powers that are exercised in judgment,³⁶ the practical effect of this part of his doctrine is the same. What we perceive, insofar as the perception is available to us as a source of knowledge, is a sort of fusion of sensation and conception. Given his constant emphasis on the richness and variety of what is given in experience, he could never accept the view that all we really see are color patches! The Russell of *The Analysis of Mind* was strongly influenced by James, but only so far: his direct realism stopped with the color patches. James’s natural realism is full bodied.

James’s Excesses

While I admire this full bodied natural realism, I indicated earlier that James’s “radical empiricism” contains elements that I find excessively metaphysical. One such element is James’s restriction of what there is to “pure experience”; however we understand that puzzling notion, this appears to be too restrictive. Although James does at times try to allow not only what is perceptually experienced, but even what is conceived as “pure experience,” this strain in his thought is never worked out, and is, indeed, in conflict with his own account of conceptual thinking.³⁷ For James, the world is the experienceable world; since James has an admirable reluctance to rule out any kind of talk that does real work in our lives, he is forced to reinterpret talk of unobservables in physics, of counterfactual connections, and of mathematical talk, etc., in ways that are unconvincing and ultimately unsuccessful.

³⁴ In the Notes for the seminar on “the Feelings,” James insists that this “pointing” to something more is part of what he calls the “content” of the “datum”; this is the exact opposite of Russell’s view.

³⁵ WILLIAM JAMES, *THE MEANING OF TRUTH* 120 (1975).

³⁶ For a recent discussion of the importance of this insight of Kant’s, see McDOWELL, *supra* note 20.

³⁷ For a criticism of that account, see Putnam, *Pragmatism*, *supra* note 4.

In another respect, however, James's ontology is not restrictive enough. To explain what is meant by this, I shall close by bringing in the great British philosopher J.L. Austin, a second figure in the history of natural realism's revival. I have ventured a hypothesis as to the origin of James's defense of natural realism. I do not know, however, the aetiology of Austin's rejection of the whole idea of sense data as private representations of an external reality, except that that rejection may have come very early in Austin's life.³⁸ In any case, he is very likely to have been acquainted at least with Russell's account of James's views in *The Analysis of Mind*.

It was, by the way, through reflecting on Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia*, as I did repeatedly starting in the 1970s, that I first began to take direct realism seriously. Although my views are now closer to Austin's than to James's, I must admit that I was not at first convinced by Austin.³⁹ Only after I began to teach courses on the philosophy of William James, and to focus on his *Radical Empiricism*, did I begin to see that the endless pattern of recoil in modern philosophy (from extravagant versions of realism to equally extravagant versions of antirealism and back again) can never be brought to rest unless we challenge the picture of the mind, and particularly the picture of perception, that makes it seem impossible to take our ordinary talk of perceiving and thinking about objects seriously unless one reinterprets it in terms of a representational theory of the mind. Understanding how that theory fails to provide the desired "foundation" for our ordinary talk (since it is just as much a mystery, in the end, how the supposed "mental representations" can refer to objects as it is how our ordinary talk can do so!) makes it seem Rortian nihilism must be the only option that remains (although that too, I would argue, is only

³⁸ In 1936 (Austin was born in 1911), Austin and Isaiah Berlin held a class on Lewis's book, CLARENCE I. LEWIS, *MIND AND THE WORLD-ORDER: OUTLINE OF A THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE* (1929), in which Austin characterized Lewis's doctrine of qualia—specific, sensible characteristics—as “complete nonsense.” Cf. ISAIAH BERLIN, *PERSONAL IMPRESSIONS* 107 (Henry Hardy ed., 1981). Unfortunately, Berlin does not give Austin's grounds, and so one cannot tell whether this means that Austin already held the views that he was to defend in *Sense and Sensibilia*, *supra* note 26.

³⁹ In HILARY PUTNAM, *Models and Reality*, reprinted in 3 *REALISM AND REASON: PHILOSOPHICAL PAPERS* 1 (1983), I explicitly rejected Austin's views. It now seems to me that this rejection led me directly into a cul-de-sac with respect to the realism/antirealism issue. For an explanation of this remark, see Putnam, *Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses*, *supra* note 1.

the illusion of an option, a *fata morgana* which disappears the moment one tries to embrace it).⁴⁰

The most striking feature of the view put forward in *Sense and Sensibilia*, at least on a first reading, is the rejection of something that the tradition takes as self-evident: namely, that even non-veridical experience must be analyzed on a perceiver-percipient model. If I dream, or am subject to the illusion, or even hallucinate that I see a building, I really do perceive something on the traditional view—it is just that what I perceive is not a physical something but a “mental” something. James (and Russell when he was following James), retained just this feature of the traditional view. To be sure, they denied that such mental somethings are made of a different “stuff” from the physical things (this denial was a consequence of their different versions of “neutral monist” metaphysics); but they accepted the perceiver-percipient model. But on Austin’s still more radical approach, when, for example, I dream that I see a building, I do not perceive *anything*—I only seem to perceive something. With one stroke, Austin banishes the last vestige of the tradition’s “sense data.” (Well, not entirely, you may object—we still feel pains, for example, and a pain is not a physical object. That is true, but Austin’s point is that the tradition regards feeling a pain and seeing a table as essentially similar—in both cases I have “sensations”; and it is the use of the notion of a “sensation” in connection with perceptual experiences, be they “veridical” or “non-veridical,” that Austin regards as complete nonsense.)

I am almost at the end of my time, and to even sketch Austin’s view would require a lecture as long as this one has been. I will only mention one obvious objection to Austin’s account (the one that bothered me for a long time): if we give up the idea that there is a mental object in the case of non-veridical experience, how are we to explain the similarity between the non-veridical experience and a corresponding perception? To be sure, Austin’s account does not prevent us from saying that how an experience seems, depends on our neural state in such-and-such ways; these causal dependencies are matters of scientific fact. But do we not want to say more than that? Do we not want to say that there is something identical, a “common factor,” present in the two experiences? Austin’s view, which I have come to share, is that one has here only the illusion of

⁴⁰ For a discussion of Rorty’s position, see PUTNAM, *RENEWING PHILOSOPHY*, *supra* note 21; see also HILARY PUTNAM, *Realism Without Absolutes and the Question of Realism*, in PUTNAM, *WORDS AND LIFE*, *supra* note 14, at 279-94, 295-314.

an explanation. Further inquiry into that question will have to be in the discussion period.⁴¹

I will say, however, that Austin's strategy was not available to James; James's whole metaphysical outlook is that everything that seems to be present in experience is, in some sense, there—is, as James sometimes puts it, a "bit" of pure experience. To go from James's bold presentation of his metaphysics of radical empiricism to Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia*, is to go from a bold metaphysical construction with deep roots in traditional empiricist metaphysics (roots which James repeatedly acknowledged, even as he tried to correct what he saw as the errors of that empiricism), to a bitingly cold attempt to achieve a certain kind of clarity. To some, this will seem a loss. But at the end of the day, it is, I believe, a gain; and it even preserves, I believe, the genuine moment of insight in James's ambitious metaphysical project, which was James's realization that our ordinary ways of talking and thinking about our perceptual experiences should be taken seriously in philosophy. In taking so seriously our common sense picture of ourselves as having access to a common world—taking that picture so seriously because it, and the actions that are interwoven with it and give it content, are essential to our lives together, not just as knowers but as moral agents—William James was, in the best sense, both a "pragmatist" and a "realist."

⁴¹ This question is addressed in Putnam, *Sense, Nonsense and the Senses*, *supra* note 1, at 473-83.