

'Concepts' and Continuity: Onto-Epistemology in William James

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In this paper I will consider the tension between James's account of 'conceptions' as discrete, fixed and eternal and his prevailing commitment to a view of thought/feeling as a continuous stream. My interest in examining this tension is chiefly motivated by a contention that it can be linked to larger issues about the relationship between epistemology and metaphysics in both James and pragmatist thought in general. Accordingly, the chief goal guiding my account will be to bring these larger questions into clearer focus. While it is neither desirable nor possible that any precise relationship between pragmatist epistemology and metaphysics could or should be finally defined, my paper will work to show that it is nonetheless an intersection which can not be overlooked or discounted.

The attentive reader of William James's *Principles of Psychology* experiences a shock upon reaching Chapter XII 'Conception'. In this chapter James declares that conception is "the function by which we ... identify a numerically distinct and permanent subject of discourse" and that the thoughts "which are its vehicles are called concepts."¹ Such conceptions are for James functions of the mind's ability to 'think the same' and "this sense of sameness is the very keel and backbone of our thinking."² Conceptions as such are marks of the mind's ability to make selections out of the "continuum of felt experience."³ Once such a selection has been made, the corresponding conception marks a static and stable identity. As James puts it, "conceptions form the one class of entities

¹ James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. 1. New York: Dover Publications.1950; p. 461.

² Ibid., p. 459.

³ Ibid., p. 465.

that cannot under any circumstances change.”⁴ Conceptions, as unchangeable and self-identical mental entities, are necessary conditions for the human mind to function in the face of a flow of constantly changing experience. Nevertheless, while particular and individual conceptions are for James strictly speaking immutable, this does not mean that new conceptions can’t arise. Indeed, just insofar as the flow of experience itself is made up of change, the possibility of new conceptions is granted. “New conceptions come from new sensations, new movements, new emotions, new associations, new acts of attention, and new comparisons of old conceptions, and not in other ways.”⁵

James additionally denies that such conceptions of their own accord develop into or entail other conceptions. This strikes one as a very peculiar and un-Jamesian claim. The examples he gives are of the number ‘13’ which James describes as “the utterly changeless conception of thirteen.”⁶ It is not the case for James that this conception alone allows us to understand one of its properties – that of being prime, or of being equal to the sum of $6 + 7$. Rather, each of these additional properties are themselves distinct and separate conceptions that arise out of a comparison of the relations between such distinct and ‘changeless’ conceptions. James thus denies the flexibility of any given concept: “Each conception thus eternally remains what it is, and never can become another.”⁷ James goes so far as to compare the “world of conceptions” to the “stiff and immutable” milieu of “Plato’s Realm of Ideas.”⁸ Insofar as our understanding of what we take to be a particular meaning or word develops or changes over time, then James is going to say that we are technically dealing with a different, and new, conception.

⁴ Ibid., p. 467.

⁵ Ibid., p. 467.

⁶ Ibid., p. 466.

⁷ Ibid., p. 462.

⁸ Ibid., p. 462.

It is clear that James's positing of such discrete and stable fixed mental entities is at odds with the phenomenological descriptions he has given of the continuous nature of thought/feeling. James himself acknowledges this contrast and insists that "the psychology of conception is not the place in which to treat of those of continuity and change."⁹ Moreover, despite his metaphorical allusion to Plato, it's also clear that James need not be positing any special ontological status for these peculiar un-Jamesian mental entities. Instead, he is "speaking of the sense of sameness from the point of view of the mind's structure alone, and not from the point of view of the universe."¹⁰ As such, he is "psychologizing, not philosophizing."¹¹

Nevertheless, despite his efforts to compartmentalize this analysis of conceptions as merely necessary conditions for structural stability in human thought and meaning, it is precisely the ontological status of these peculiar mental entities called 'conceptions' which is most troubling given all that James has previously illuminated. How do such strictly demarcated and self-identical conceptions relate to the 'mental objects' which James speaks of in the 'Stream of Thought' chapter? Even more problematically, how can such conceptions be doing any work in the actual processes and functions of meaning, since James has already committed himself to a holistic account in which "the object of every thought ... is neither more nor less than all that the thought thinks, exactly as thought thinks it, however complicated the matter, and however symbolic the manner of the thinking may be"¹² Moreover, it is hard to place 'conceptions' in terms of James's earlier analysis of the tendencies and directions of thought and his desire to effect a

⁹ Ibid., p. 467.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 459.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 459.

¹² Ibid., p. 276.

“reinstatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life.”¹³ Given that James has insisted on the role of the “fringe” of a given mental ‘object’ in directing our tendencies to move from one substantive perching to another, and moreover given his recognition that the boundaries of any particular mental object are necessarily vague and thus contain a multitude of possible associations, where possibly could the singular discrete entities he later calls ‘concepts’ function in this picture?

One tempting answer to this question is clearly untenable if James is going to maintain any semblance of consistency. That is, while we might be tempted to think of these stable and eternally fixed ‘concepts’ as atomistic simple identities out of which more complex objects of thoughts and meanings are built, this would simply be a version of the Humean associationism which James has taken such pains to expose. Alternatively, and perhaps more agreeably, the presence of such stable ‘concepts’ might function as quasi-Kantian ordering categories, except that for James such ‘concepts’ couldn’t possibly be *a priori*. Instead, they would have to arise out of the processes of mind-environment interactions and selections through the course of experience.

Nevertheless, it’s not clear how the tendency or structural necessity of such fixed ‘concepts’ can be explained by James in terms of experience, at least not *ontologically*. By this I mean that there seems little in experience, at least in the way that James has described it, which could be identified as giving rise to any kind of eternal, stable, or self-identical entity. Rather, it seems more likely to posit the self-identity and stability of conceptions as necessary structures of thought for *epistemic* purposes. As such, ‘concepts’ would not necessarily be phenomenologically experienced in our mental lives at all, but would be posited simply as a means of explaining how it is that we *can* have

¹³ Ibid., p. 254.

the phenomenological experience of relatively consistent or stable meanings. ‘Concepts’ would then seem to be conceptually of a higher or second order which is parasitic upon the actually experienced ‘objects’ of our mental lives. Such actually experienced ‘objects’ would be often ambiguous and vague, and contain a vast array of fringe-like associations and suggestions as opposed to the stable identity of concepts. As such, the context of the analysis in which James’s posits such fixed ‘concepts’ is crucially different from the earlier analysis in the ‘Stream of Thought’. Indeed, the existence of concepts as entities seems to only be necessary insofar as one is engaged in an *epistemic* analysis of the conditions of the possibility of stable meaning.

In the earlier ‘Stream of Thought’ chapter James makes quite a similar *epistemic* point with regard to sameness and identity, though he is not yet utilizing the language of ‘conceptions’ in the strict sense. He writes: “Sameness in a multiplicity of objective appearances is thus the basis of our belief in realities outside of thought.”¹⁴ Here sameness is functioning strategically as a condition of the possibility of thought as a function of knowing an external non-mental world. This strategic point is not made in the service of any final metaphysical argument as to the validity or nature of this world, but is rather an observation advanced as to the conditions of the possibility for our own experience of thought as cognitive – that is, our own experience of thought as a process of cognizing meanings. Sameness thus functions as an epistemic condition of possibility, both in the earlier chapter where James is analyzing our phenomenal experience of thought, and in the later chapter where he is working towards a closer analysis of our experience of conceptual meanings. In the later case, he deems it possible to bracket any

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 272.

question as to the ontological status of the entities he calls conceptions, while simultaneously maintaining the necessity of their presence and existence.

It would seem then that the only way to explain the seeming contradiction between James's emphasis on continuity and his desire to save a discrete and fixed stability for *mental* entities called 'concepts' is to appeal to the context and purpose of the two respective analyses. Continuity would then be advanced in the service of phenomenological description, and discrete concepts would be advanced in the service of epistemic conditions of possibility. Still, the account in the *Principles* is unclear at best, if not outright contradictory, in that James's still calls such 'concepts' mental entities, rather than merely second-order conceptual tools. In highlighting this tension, I'd like to now consider how the conflict between James's desire to identify sensible criteria for a workable epistemology and his phenomenological intuitions about the metaphysical nature of experience are fruitful in understanding the subsequent development of James's more explicit pragmatism. To do this, we will first need to consider how what I take to be James's metaphysical intuitions are at play even in the *Principles*.

Throughout the *Principles*, James repeatedly, even foundationally, insists on the continuity of mental phenomena, that is, the indivisibility of the experience of the stream of thought into separate and discrete parts. This continuity functions in the service of several of his major claims, in particular his eroding of the traditional boundary between thought and feeling. Alongside James's account of all mental phenomena as part of a unified stream, there is an additional emphasis on the presence of flux and change within this stream. Thought/feeling is therefore both "sensibly continuous" as well as "always

changing.”¹⁵ James explicitly declares that one of the consequences of this characteristic, which he takes to be empirically grounded in our own phenomenological experiences, is that “no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before.”¹⁶ This conclusion follows in part from James’s linkage of the phenomenal experience of thought with the temporality of physiological and neural states. For a thought to repeat exactly, it would have to occur with an identical brain state. But, since any given brain state then modifies the subsequent brain states, such an exact and precise reoccurrence is logically impossible. For this reason “it is obvious and palpable that our state of mind is never precisely the same” and that “every thought we have of a given fact is, strictly speaking, unique, and only bears a resemblance of kind with our other thoughts of the same fact.”¹⁷ James concludes this discussion with the declaration that “no two ‘ideas’ are ever exactly the same” and that “a permanently existing ‘idea’ ... is as mythological an entity as the Jack of Spades”.¹⁸ If we take seriously this claim then, it is clear that ‘concepts’ precisely can’t be ‘ideas’, since ‘concepts’ are explicitly defined as permanent and exactly the same.

We should note here the importance of context in framing our understanding of the claim. James is not denying that we can’t or don’t have the experience of sameness, but only denying that this experience can be unproblematically linked to a purely identical body-state. As he puts it, “There is no proof that the same bodily sensation is ever got by us twice. ... *What is got twice is the same OBJECT. We hear the same note over and over*

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 225.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 230.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 233.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 236.

again; we see the same *quality* of green, ...etc.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, it is difficult to maintain such a stark distinction given James’s general desire to overcome traditional mind-body dualism. If mental objects are understood as brain states on one level, then the claim that it is the *same* note or quality that is heard or seen is actually a claim about the external world – hence a metaphysical claim. Alternatively, we might consider it as a claim about the nature of our experience, our experience of sameness in our ‘ideas’ or ‘objects’.

While this seems more the claim that James wants to make, it adds a further component of disjunction between the experience of sameness and the brain state under question. It also raises obvious questions as to the relationship between ‘ideas’ or ‘objects’ and ‘concepts’, since while no two ‘ideas’ are ever the same, ‘concepts’ necessarily must be. Is a ‘concept’ even a mental thing at all? Is it something that can be experienced? In the *Principles*, James most general strategy is to bracket such questions which he takes to be metaphysical as outside of the scope of psychology. These questions would include the ontological status of mental phenomena.

James’s oft repeated distinction between philosophy and metaphysics, on the one hand, and psychology on the other, is tied to a commitment to a privileging of experience over *a priori* principles. As such, the nascent practice of psychology, a practice which James is to some extent inventing, is first and foremost an empirical practice of natural science. The psychologist has as his data: “the thought studied; the thought’s object; and the psychologist’s reality” (184) and it is his work to analyze these phenomena as realities “without troubling himself with the puzzle of how he can report them at all.”²⁰ These “ultimate puzzles” are better left to the philosopher *qua* metaphysician. James thus

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 231.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 184.

proceeds from the mental phenomena as they are experienced and leaves questions as to the ontological nature or certainty of this experience as outside the scope of the current project: "... as psychologists, we need not be metaphysical at all. The phenomena are enough, the passing Thought itself is the only verifiable thinker..."²¹

The metaphysics which James is pointedly *not* doing in the *Principles* would be any which seeks transcendental *a priori* principles without grounding them in observed empirical consequences or results. Therefore:

"A conception, to prevail, must terminate in the world of orderly sensible experience.... What science means by 'verification' is no more than this, that no object of conception shall be believed which sooner or later has not some permanent and vivid object of sensation for its *term*."²²

Given his philosophical context, this method is perhaps best seen as a corrective to the Absolutism and metaphysical excesses of classical German Idealism, as well as that of his colleague, friend and lifelong philosophical interlocutor Josiah Royce.²³ Nevertheless, despite his care to avoid such *a priori* arm-chair philosophizing, James's psychology is built around commitments or intuitions which can't completely be reduced to the empirically verifiable, most pointedly his emphasis on holism and continuity. While these emphases are initially broached descriptively as arising out of phenomenological observations regarding our experience of thought, they frame James's project to such an extent that they ultimately go beyond the empirically verifiable. So, while their origin

²¹ Ibid., p. 346.

²² James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. 2. New York: Dover Publications: 1950: p. 301.

²³ A close attention to the development of Royce's thought should give us some pause in his characterization as an 'Absolute' Idealist. While this characterization is more or less accurate with regard to his earlier work (in, for example, *The World and the Individual*), Royce's development of a metaphysics of community at the very least asks us to shift our understanding of what we might mean by the 'Absolute'. Nevertheless, insofar as James was concerned at the time of the *Principles*, Royce's 'Absolute' Idealism was an established position which he sought to refute.

might satisfy the empiricist desiderata central to James's methodology, it's less certain that the consequences he draws from this origin are as empirically grounded.

As such, we can see hints of the metaphysical positions which James will later develop explicitly even in the purportedly non-metaphysical work of the *Principles*.²⁴ Indeed, even in the *Principles* there is a move from observational claims about the experience of thought to more explicit claims about the continuity of the world and objects of experience. In the chapter on 'Reasoning' James declares that "Every reality has an infinity of aspects or properties. ... When we reach more complex facts, the number of ways in which we may regard them is literally endless."²⁵ This original oneness or 'all at once-ness' functions as the source of the material out of which attention makes its selections. To be sure, James of course does not intend to establish necessary and binding conclusions about the status or nature of this original 'all at once-ness'. To do this would be to practice the traditional 'upper case M'-metaphysics of Transcendentalism and Idealism which James is so keen to avoid. Nevertheless, even if these claims are best understood as advancing metaphysical *intuitions* rather than Absolute truths, they are neither ontologically neutral nor substantively extraneous. In Jamesian terms, they make a difference in the outcomes of his analyses.

The consequences of these metaphysical intuitions are in fact central to a number of the positions which James's develops in the *Principles* and beyond. His commitment to continuity is a chief ally in James's substantive effort to break down the traditional dichotomy between thought and feeling, as well as his insistence on the feeling of relations as mattering in the directions of thought. Without this underlying notion of

²⁴ The later speculative phase of James's work is most clearly demonstrated in the *Essays in Radical Empiricism* and *The Pluralistic Universe*.

²⁵ James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. 2. New York: Dover Publications: 1950: p. 332.

continuity, it would be much easier to dismiss such ‘feeling-relations’ as merely extraneous epiphenomenal add-ons to the ‘real’ work of thought in terms of construing inferential and logical relations.²⁶ Additionally, James’s view of the infinite potentiality of perspectives or selections from the original plenum leads to an emphasis on pluralism and plurality.²⁷ Finally, the view of reality as a continuous plenum underlies James’s analyses of the psychology of attention and discrimination in terms of the ways in which these selective processes out of reality occur. Reasoning and attention involve selections or cuts out of a reality which is *continuous and full*. This continuity is relational and inter-dependent. James’s account thus builds on epistemic analyses of perception to make a point which blurs the boundary between epistemology and metaphysics: “... it is truly said that to know one thing thoroughly would be to know the whole universe. Mediate or immediately, that one thing is related to everything else; and to know *all* about it, all of

²⁶ The centrality and importance of this continuity claim for James’s philosophy of mind is confirmed by contemporary philosophers of mind who oppose it. In particular, Galen Strawson has argued that the introspection which serves as the source of James’s claim of mental continuity does not match his own experience of consciousness, and instead asserts that “When I am alone and thinking, I find that my fundamental experience of consciousness is one of *repeated returns into consciousness from a state of complete if momentary unconsciousness*. . . . The situation is best described, it seems to me, by saying that consciousness is continually restarting. There isn’t a basic substrate (as it were) of continuous consciousness. . . .” (Cited from Natsoulas, Thomas, “On the Temporal Continuity of Human Consciousness: Is James’s Firsthand Description, After All, ‘Inept’?”, *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, Vol. 27, Issue 2, 2006: 121-147: p. 123.; The Strawson article Natsoulas cites is: Strawson, G. “The Self”, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 4, 1997.)

Strawson’s insistence that James has described the experience of consciousness wrong is of note precisely because of the degree to which this description frames the subsequent analyses. If consciousness itself is not continuous, then perhaps neither is reality. If consciousness is built up of out of a series of discrete moments, then perhaps reality is also built up from discrete particles.

²⁷ This perspectival pluralism is thus integral to the development of both James’s pragmatic method, with its emphasis on relevance as shaped by purpose and context, as well as his moral philosophy, again with its emphasis on situated understandings rather than absolute eternal codes. His account of the difference in values that arise from different situated positions is perhaps illustrated most aptly (and famously) in ‘On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings’ where James recalls his experience of traveling in the Appalachian mountains and seeing “unmitigated squalor” where the local residents saw “a very paean of duty, struggle, and success” (See ‘On A Certain Blindness in Human Beings’ in James, William, and John J. McDermott. *The Writings of William James, a Comprehensive Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1977: p. 630-1).

its relations need be known.”²⁸ James makes this point again in the final chapter of the *Principles*: “The reality exists as a plenum. All its parts are contemporaneous, each is as real as any other, and each is as essential for making the whole just what it is and nothing else.”²⁹

Here, we can note how this metaphysical vision or intuition bears a non-superficial relationship to the development of central points in James’s pragmatism. Consider the following famous claim in “What Pragmatism Means”:

“There can *be* no difference anywhere that doesn’t *make* a difference elsewhere – no difference in abstract truth that doesn’t express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact...”³⁰

This passage is most typically read as deflationary in intent, that is, as a means of exposing grand metaphysical claims in philosophy as meaningless insofar as they fail to make a concrete difference. Without denying this reading, we can also note that the passage bears a non-trivial relationship to James’s own metaphysical commitment to continuity and holism. Indeed, the earlier passage in the *Principles* about the contemporaneousness of all the ‘parts’ of reality itself entails the idea that there can *be* no difference anywhere which doesn’t make a difference elsewhere, *precisely because reality is understood as a related plenum of continuity and not a series of discrete and singularly bounded atomistic individuals*. The later passage in “What Pragmatism Means” is therefore as much a consequence of James’s inter-relational and holistic vision of reality as it is a tool for pragmatic navigation.

²⁸ James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. 2. New York: Dover Publications: 1950: p. 332.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 634.

³⁰ “What Pragmatism Means” in James, William, and John J. McDermott. *The Writings of William James, a Comprehensive Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1977: p. 379.

By the time James has turned to entertaining metaphysical speculation in the *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, the relationship between his metaphysics of continuity and holism and his epistemology of pragmatic transitions and navigations is now explicitly theorized. The function of knowing is to guide us through the ‘transitions’ of life. Knowing is understood on this navigational or orientational model because in the world of ‘pure experience’ “transitions and arrivals (or terminations) are the only events that happen.”³¹ The epistemological analysis of the ‘knowing’ function is thus predicated upon the metaphysical assertion that ‘transitions and arrivals’ are the chief stuff of pure experience, that is, of reality. This analysis of knowing in terms of its role in guiding the direction of thought is also crucially predicated upon James’s underlying continuity. Indeed, he now extends this continuity to apply to the continuity between guiding concepts and sensational percepts: “Percepts and concepts interpenetrate and melt together, impregnate and fertilize each other.”³²

Such a view suggests that James has discarded the extremity of his earlier definition of concepts as eternal and fixed. While conceptions are still understood as markings or selections which emerge out of the “aboriginal sensible muchness”, the examples he now uses are of actual physical entities (rather than abstractions like numbers or triangles) such as ‘constellations’, ‘beach’, ‘sea’ and ‘cliff’.³³ In a notable departure from his claim in the *Principles*, James now speaks of the “functional value” of a concept in terms of the way in which it guides inferences and “steer[s] us practically.”³⁴ Interestingly however,

³¹ “A World of Pure Experience” in James, William, and John J. McDermott. *The Writings of William James, a Comprehensive Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1977: p. 203.

³² “Percept and Concept – The Import of Concepts” in James, William, and John J. McDermott. *The Writings of William James, a Comprehensive Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1977: p. 235.

³³ “Percept and Concept – Import of Concepts” in James, William, and John J. McDermott. *The Writings of William James, a Comprehensive Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1977: p. 234.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

James still makes a passing reference to the notion of self-identity in the service of his radical re-description of experience in “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” In this fascinating and elusive piece, James famously attempts to re-describe our conceptual understanding of our experiences of knowing in an attempt to support his thesis that there is no such thing as consciousness as an entity. Rather, there is only pure experience, in which knowers and objects known are both understood as intersections of on-going processes. James uses the metaphor of intersecting lines to explain “the puzzle of how the one identical room can be in two places” (that is, in the knower’s ‘mental’ experience and in a ‘physical’ reality).³⁵ The experience of the room, like all of ‘pure experience’ involves an intersection between at least two (probably many more) on-going processes and therefore “it [the experience of the room] could be counted twice over, as belonging to either group, and spoken of loosely as existing in two places [in the mind and in physical reality], although it would remain all the time a numerically single thing.”³⁶

Such a passage is neither easily nor unproblematically understood, but the questions it provokes are important. Specifically, are these ontological or epistemological claims?³⁷ Is

³⁵ “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” in James, William, and John J. McDermott. *The Writings of William James, a Comprehensive Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1977: p. 173.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

³⁷ Perhaps even asking this question is predicated upon a compartmentalized vision of philosophy that is contrary to James’s work as a whole. Nevertheless, I take this question to be one of the crucial points where the critics of pragmatism have often gathered. Indeed, critiques of James’s ‘theory of truth’ by Bertrand Russell and others, as well as critiques of pragmatism as merely crude instrumentalism invariably fail to consider this intersection between ontology and epistemology. If one is operating with a more or less realist ontology, as for example Russell is, than James ‘theory of truth’ loses a great deal of its nuance and becomes nearly incoherent.

Nevertheless, in blurring the boundary between his epistemology and his implicit metaphysics, James risks mis-describing the objects he is analyzing, and so drawing unwarranted conclusions. Ludwig Wittgenstein, a lifelong reader of James (in particular *the Principles* and *Varieties of Religious Experience*) who is generally sympathetic to his work in disagreement, is particularly worried about what he takes to be James’s lack of clarity on the distinction between linguistic words as conceptual tools and the phenomena of experience taken as metaphysical categories. ‘Experience’ for Wittgenstein, is a word and so conceptual, whereas James uses it metaphysically. On Wittgenstein’s account then, all of James’s efforts are characterized by a problematic usage of the term ‘experience’. See “Wittgenstein and *The Principles of*

the metaphor advanced in the service of explaining away a pseudo-problem in philosophy (that of the problem of the mind ‘knowing’ reality) or is it advanced as illustrating a substantive claim about the very nature of reality? For the purposes of this paper, it is enough to point out that these two questions are linked. Furthermore, following the passage just quoted, James writes: “The one self-identical thing has so many relations to the rest of experience that you can take it in disparate systems of association, and treat it as belonging with opposite contexts.”³⁸ What is striking about this passage is its functional or structural parallel with the earlier analysis of ‘concepts’, in that James still needs some point of ‘self-identity’ in order to get a workable epistemology off of the ground. The locus of this self-identity has shifted from an apparently internal mental entity in the earlier work, to now reside somehow in the experience itself, understood as single point of intersection between and among disparate and divergent processes. For this reason, while the single point can be described in different ways depending upon context, James wants to resist a collapse into a radical and ungrounded extreme subjectivism, because there is taken to be some point, the experience itself, which is not only a matter of its description, but is rather self-identical, that it, has *some identity*.³⁹ While the earlier notion of ‘concepts’ as fixed and eternal is clearly inimical to the line that James is now running, their function in the earlier work still seems necessary at this later point.

Psychology” in Goodman, Russell B. *Wittgenstein and William James*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

³⁹ Innumerable difficulties arise here. Especially in light of the way that language is always going to involve a partial selection, it would seem that this very self-identity can’t ever be captured in words. All contexts will be partial. Here the formal affinity between the ‘self-identity of the experience’ and the earlier ‘self-identity’ of the concept is noteworthy.

We can, in closing, turn the pragmatic method itself to the very questions we are asking. What is at stake in establishing a possible relationship between epistemology and metaphysics in William James? Does it make a difference in our understanding of his work, or in what we take that work's effects and value to be? How we answer these questions is in large respects indicative of our own philosophical temperament, but it seems to me one mark of James's expansive as a thinker that we *can* ask these questions – that his work opens avenues for speculation even as it warns against the dangers of such flights collapsing into dogmatism.