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On the Experience of Activity

William James's Late Metaphysics and the Influence of Nineteenth-Century French Spiritualism

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Is there a particular experience-type associated with the exercise of agency? This question was subject to lively philosophical debate in Nineteenth-Century France. William James paid close attention to these debates, and for most of his academic life argued that the answer was “no”. However, in this article, I show that a few years before the end of his life, under the influence of the French spiritualist tradition, he changed his mind. I argue that this change led to a global shift in his philosophical thinking. One major consequence of this is that he modified his philosophy so that it allowed a greater role for ‘objective’ reality, and was consequently at less risk of the charge of ‘solipsism’ directed at him by his critics. After this shift, James’s philosophy could stand on much firmer ground.

Is it possible to have a first-person experience of our own agency? In nineteenth-century France, this question was subject to intense philosophical debate. The two figures primarily associated with each side of the debate were Maine de Biran (1766-1824) and Charles Renouvier (1815-1903). Biran developed powerful objections to Hume’s arguments that purported to prove the impossibility of the experience of one’s inner causal force. These objections formed the match that lit this philosophical fire, and resulted in Biran being recognized as the father of the spiritualist school of French philosophy; a school that included Félix Ravaisson (1813-1900), Jules Lachelier (1832-1918), Émile Boutroux (1845-1921) and Henri Bergson (1859-1941).¹ Renouvier, who found Biran’s arguments unconvincing, developed an opposed school of philosophy that brought together pluralism, phenomenalism, and Kantianism. William James followed these debates from

¹ Stebbing wrote that in Bergson’s philosophy ‘we see the continuation of the current of French thought that proceeds from Maine de Biran through Ravaisson and Boutroux. It would perhaps be hardly necessary to point this out—for no philosopher springs from the void—were it not that, to the English-speaking world at least, Bergson’s views came with such force of novelty that he seemed to have no roots in the past’ (1914: 35-36). Despite the existence of English language works on the ‘roots’ of Bergson’s philosophy (see Lovejoy, 1913, and Scharfstein, 1943), this perception of Bergson as having ‘no roots in the past’ among Anglo-American commentators has hardly changed (although, a recent (2018) article by Sinclair is a pleasing exception). In a discussion of Bergson’s theory of intuition, Moore (2012: 407) claims that Bergson’s own pronouncement that his theory is not original is ‘wild’ and that there is nothing else like it in the whole history of philosophy. Even scholars with better knowledge of the history of French philosophy overemphasize Bergson’s originality, see Moore (1996, xi).

across the Atlantic and, for the most part of his philosophical career (from at least 1885 to 1905), associated himself with Renouvier's neo-critical side. However, at some point between 1906 and 1908, James changed sides. James scholarship has been more or less silent on this shift. Perhaps because it seems like a slight modification—a minor change to his psychology. One of this article's central aims is to show that such a judgment would be wrong. In fact, this change of mind led to a global shift in his thinking, and to major and—most crucially—*positive* changes, not only to his psychology, but also to his metaphysics, and pragmatism.

James was vocal about the developments to his metaphysics. In his *A Pluralistic Universe* lectures, he attributed the changes to his reading of Bergson's 1907 *L'Évolution créatrice* and its critique of *intellectualism* (the belief that we can understand the underlying nature of the world by means of static intellectual concepts).² This is because James had become concerned with the problem of how two different minds can come to know the same one thing. Over time, he realised that this was only a problem if one accepts intellectualism. Bergson provided him with good reasons not to do so. The critique of intellectualism, therefore, helped him to *dissolve* the problem. So far, James scholarship on the change to his late philosophy has focused on this critique, and on what this convinced James to *reject*.³ For this reason, commentators have underemphasised how radical the changes James made to his metaphysics in 1908 were,⁴ and many have even argued that his claim to have undergone a 'Bergsonian conversion' is overblown.⁵

This article aims to show that if we focus not on what the problem of two minds seeing the same thing caused James to *reject* but rather on what the problem inspired him to *accept*, a different picture emerges. The problem inspired him to reject intellectualism, but

² See PU 1909, 101-124

³ See Bernstein, PU, xxiv; Moller 1997, 2001, and 2008; Sprigge 1993: 165-169; Taylor, 1996: 135-137.

⁴ Moller (1997, 2001, and 2008) claims that there has been a radical change, but that the change is that after 1908 James adopts a panpsychist position. However, I agree with Ford, (1982), Sprigge (1993), and Lamberth (1999) that he had taken up a panpsychist position from much earlier, so this cannot be the right story about the change. That James defended some form of panpsychism earlier than 1908 is clear in the *Many and the One* manuscript to which Moller makes explicit reference (See MEN 1903-4, 6).

⁵ Ralph Perry played down the Bergson influence citing a statement from Bergson himself where he highlights (correctly) the significant difference between James's understanding of the 'stream of thought' and his own '*durée réelle*'. Bergson writes that 'the "Bergsonian" influence counts for nothing in the development of his philosophy' (Bergson, 1905, cited in Perry 1935: 600). At the time when Bergson wrote this, he was right to make this claim. The "Bergsonian" influence comes later, and the influence pushes James away from his 'stream of thought' position to something closer to Bergson's *durée réelle*. Bernstein (PU, 1997, v-xxxiv), Čapek (1950), Myers (1986), and Townsend (1997) also play down the importance of this change. Lamberth (1999: 182) refers to it as a mere 'refinement'. Flournoy (1917: 198-206) and Stebbing (1914: 25-26, 37-38, and 123-124) carefully and perceptively point out some crucial differences between the metaphysics of the two philosophers. Boutroux (1912) thinks that James recognized that Bergson's arguments 'lend support' to his already existing views.

this rejection must be understood in tandem with his acceptance of a claim that he had long denied: *we can* experience our own genuine activity, or causal agency. The reason why this change of mind was so important for James, I argue, is that it represents a crucial shift in his methodology, specifically in the way that he analyses experience. Once James changed his methodology, he recognised that significant changes to his philosophy had to follow. Since the conversion was underway *before* 1907, i.e., before the publication of *L'Évolution créatrice*, it is not quite right to call James's conversion simply a 'Bergsonian' one (although his work was a significant factor). The arguments that James uses to express his acceptance of activity as a psychological and metaphysical principle have a heritage that go back to Biran. Therefore, we are better off calling James's late change his 'spiritualist' conversion.

My case will develop in four stages. First, I present the French debate over the first-person experience of causal force. I start with the arguments in its favour made by Biran. Then I address Renouvier and James's objections and show them to be wanting. Second, I examine James's earlier (pre-1906) understanding of experience, his phenomenism, and the methodology that led him to these objections. Third, I focus on what forced James to change his views and the arguments that he developed to make this shift palatable. I finish by showing how James's final view of experience enabled him to allow a greater role for objective reality in his metaphysics and thus resist the charge of 'solipsism' that had previously been levelled at his 'radical empiricism' by his critics.

1. THE DEBATE OVER THE EXPERIENCE OF CAUSAL FORCE

§1.1

Maine de Biran published little in his own lifetime. It was only a decade after his death, when Victor Cousin started to publish significant portions of his work posthumously, that its depth and originality was recognized.⁶ Soon after his work appeared in print, Biran was recognised as the father of a new French spiritualist tradition.⁷ The defence of causal force

⁶ [citation partially redacted for review]. Biran's strong influence on nineteenth and twentieth-century French philosophy is clear. This is explicit in works such as include Bergson (1922), Boutroux (1874), Deleuze (1995), Ravaisson (1867), Tarde (1876), Merleau-Ponty (1968), Henry (1949), and Ricoeur (1950).

⁷ There were two schools of spiritualism in nineteenth-century France. One, which is the focus of this essay, fathered by Maine de Biran and another which was aligned with the 'eclecticism' of Victor Cousin. 'Spiritualism' in this article always refers to the Biranian school. On the relationship between these two forms of spiritualism, see Vermeren (1987 and 1995).

is the central doctrine of this spiritualist school. It is the basis from which the rest of their philosophies tends to be unpacked. Biran developed this defence in response to Hume's denial of the experience of force or 'necessary connexion'. In §VII of the *Enquiry*, Hume argues that there are three possible sources for our idea of force or necessary connection: first, external objects; second, reflection on the operation of our minds; and, third, divine power. The third is dismissed as a theoretical fairy-land. But, to undermine the possible testimony of the first two sources, he argues that through both we only ever experience distinct events, and that there is no conceivable circumstance upon which we could perceive the necessary connection between any two of them. When observing external objects, we do not observe a 'power' passed between objects (say from one billiard ball to another as the former strikes the latter). We only experience one event (ball *a* newly next to ball *b*) followed by a second event (ball *b* having moved position). Similarly, we do not experience our own power when a desire to move an arm is followed by the arm's movement. We merely experience one event (the desire) followed by a second (the movement).

According to Biran, the success of Hume's argument was that it showed conclusively that we cannot obtain an idea of force from the evidence of *external* sense impressions; for this 'Hume deserves our gratitude' (OMB.VII.167). Nonetheless, Biran found Hume's argument to be misguided when it is extended to the evidence of *inner* sense, i.e. what Hume had called internal reflection on the mind's operations. Biran argued that the fundamental mistake of the empiricists (Hume, Locke, and Condillac) was to leave the analysis of inner sense incomplete and to confuse it with the outer senses. In contrast, he wanted to show that true reflection on inner sense shows its operations to be incomparable to those of the external senses. While the classical empiricists were right that external sense impressions are presented to us passively (i.e., without the volitional input of the mind), the same is not the case for inner sense. Our causal efficacy or activity, he argued, is a fact discoverable only through inner sense. This activity is most evident to us in the feeling of willed effort. Every time we clench our fists or lift a heavy weight, we have evidence of this activity. It is true that through the external senses we merely experience one event followed by another, but through inner sense we *feel* the activity of willing to lift the object through the strain that is concurrent with the desire.

Charles Renouvier, and William James following him, objected to this inner sense 'proof' of causal force. As Renouvier presented Biran's proof, Biran attempted to show that 'willed effort' and 'muscular sensation' are perfectly connected in one and the same

act (ECG.II.i.261): as I lift a heavy weight, the feeling of muscular resistance reveals to me the causal force that I freely enact. Both Renouvier and James reject the proof for the same reasons. Renouvier presents a short critique in his 1854 *Traité de psychologie rationnelle* and James provides an expanded version backed up with experimental data in his 1880 ‘The Feeling of Effort’ (EPs 83-124).⁸ First, they argue that Biran has misconceived of what this so called ‘experience of willed effort’ is really an experience. For Biran, they suggest, this experience of muscular effort should be the necessary antecedent of the movement itself. It is the feeling of the free activity involved in lifting the object. However, Renouvier and James maintain, on the contrary, that this experience is rather the feeling caused by the muscular tension. ‘Muscular effort’, James writes, ‘is a sum of feelings in afferent nerve tracts, resulting from motion being *effected*’ not the condition of the effect (EPs 1880, 123). So rather than being antecedent to the movement, it is consequent to it. Second, although it is true that when I will to lift my laptop the action follows, there is not an immediate connection between the desired end and the action. Rather, there is a causal chain that the desire initiates. It is only the end itself that appears to consciousness. We have only the vaguest of experiences (if we have one at all) of the connections that lead from the desire to the achieved action. We can hardly say that our ‘feeling of effort’ gives us some idea of a causal force that is necessary for bringing this action into being, if we have only the most confused idea of the process itself (cf. PP 1890, 288 and BC 1892, 400).

§1.2

James and Renouvier’s objections to Biran’s introspective proof are forceful. It is surprising, therefore, to find that at the end of James’s life he appears to defend the Biranian position. In his posthumous *Some Problems of Philosophy*, he claims that our ‘will-acts’ or ‘activity situations’ provide us with ‘perfectly comprehensible instances of causal agency’ (SPP 1911, 109). In 1909, he tells us that we obtain our understanding of causality, activity, efficacy from the ‘dramatic sense of something sustaining a felt purpose against felt obstacles, and overcoming or being overcome’ (PU 107). It is clear that a conversion has occurred. But why? To answer this, we need to know not only why he decided to accept something like the Biranian position, but also why he no longer thought that his and Renouvier’s arguments refuted it. In the rest of this section, I address the ‘road clearing’ problem (which involves showing why James might have finally seen his own arguments to be unsatisfactory), and I discuss the final acceptance of the position in §3.

⁸ For further historical context, see Smith (2011).

As discussed above, James's arguments against Biran's 'proof' depended on Renouvier's reconstruction of it. However, in the first half of the nineteenth-century James started to engage more with the living proponents of the spiritualist tradition (Boutroux and Bergson in France, and James Ward in England) against which Renouvier had directed his attacks. Renouvier's influence on James's had been declining since the 90s (See CWJ VII 351), but this decline picked up speed in 1903 after Renouvier's death.⁹ This engagement with the spiritualist tradition must have led James to consider more carefully their central arguments. Biran was not the only target of James's objections in 'The Feeling of Effort' and the *Principles of Psychology*. In fact, James was more concerned with closer contemporaries such as Alexander Bain, Hermann von Helmholtz, Ernst Mach, and Wilhelm Wundt. Renouvier's reading of Biran allowed James to lump Biran amongst them. But after studying the works of the spiritualists themselves more carefully, James may have started to recognise that Renouvier's presentation of Biran's argument was in some sense a straw man.¹⁰ Although Bain, Helmholtz, Mach, and Wundt do try to show that we get a feeling of effort from muscular sensation,¹¹ Biran did not. When Biran's arguments are studied more carefully, it is clear that he already has forceful responses to the kind of objections Renouvier and James established.

Renouvier's reconstruction was correct insofar as Biran believes that in the act of *willing* we experience our own causal activity. Biran tells us that it reveals to us our existence as a 'hyper-organic force' that is ontologically inseparable yet distinct from 'organic resistance'. Although this 'hyper-organic force' is distinct from the body, it can only be realised in relation to it. Unless there is organic resistance, there is no hyper-organic force. They are only conceptually distinct.

The first fault of the Renouvierian reconstruction is to suggest that this feeling of 'organic resistance' is the feeling of *muscular* sensation. Biran had explicitly criticized such an argument as put forward earlier by the German philosopher Johann Jakob Engel (1741-1802). In contrast to the version held by Engel and attributed to him by Renouvier, Biran makes a distinction not only between my body and the foreign body (e.g. a heavy box), but

⁹ See Girel (2007)

¹⁰ To be fair to Renouvier, when he published his objections in 1854 the more detailed account of his argument that we can find in his *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie* had not yet been published. This was first published in Ernst Naville's 1859 collection of Biran's works. Renouvier did not dedicate time to studying this later collection, and we do not find him adjusting his views in the later revised versions of his *Essai de psychologie rationnelle*. James also owned the earlier 1841 edition of Biran's *Oeuvres* edited by Victor Cousin (See Houghton library, Harvard, WJ 653.41) rather than the 1859 edition. For reliable accounts of Maine de Biran's philosophy, see Azouvi (1995), Frogneux (2005), Gouhier (1947), Meacham and Spadola (2016) Montebello (1994 and 2000), and Voutsinas (1975).

¹¹ See Bain (1864: 92), Helmholtz, (1867: 600), Mach (1886: 57), and Wundt (1876).

also between my body and the ‘hyper-organic force’ itself. In the experience of lifting a box, there are two essential distinctions: first, the distinction between my hyper-organic force which initiates the action and my body which resists my initiation according to its inertia (but nevertheless obeys my commands); and, second, the distinction between my body and the resistance of the box as a foreign body. Engel derives the experience of effort from the *mediate* feeling of muscular sensation resisting an exterior object. If the sensation were only experienced mediately, then Hume, Renouvier, and James would be right to suggest that since we lack knowledge of the material process, we cannot accurately attribute this sensation to a particular source. However, Biran argues that we do not experience a *mediate* feeling of effort, but rather an *immediate* one and it is only by recognising this vital fact that we can overcome Hume’s problem. The feeling of muscular strain would be only *mediate* because it would be the feeling of our body (body *a*) attempting to lift another body (body *b*: the box). But Biran claims that the feeling of the will is *immediate* because it is the feeling of moving one’s own body (body *a*). The resistance that interests Biran is the resistance of body *a* against one’s own will, not the pain body *a* receives from body *b*:

[t]he true origin... of the idea that we attach to the word *force*, consists in the *immediate power of the will* to grasp and determine the inertial or resistant force proper to the muscular organs, and thereby to enter into a conflict of actions. According to M. Engel, it follows from the complication or from the conflict of our force with the alien exterior force, either that the latter is overcome, or that ours is momentarily suspended or as if paralysed by the object. In contrast, I believe that the muscular inertia is always surmounted, and the hyper-organic force, far from being relaxed or as if paralysed by this resistance, *grows in energy and activity*, to the degree that this resistance increases. (OMB.VII.169-70, my italics)

According to Biran, therefore, Engel focused his attention on the wrong aspect of the phenomenology of lifting a heavy box. By focusing on muscular resistance, Engel is drawing attention to the feeling of our will being overcome rather than the feeling of the will itself. For Engel, the muscular sensation is still *presented to us passively*, in the same way as the impressions of our external senses are. We receive the sensation of muscular resistance (the pain body *a* receives from the weight of body *b*) in pretty much the same way as we receive the ideas of ‘green’ and ‘round’ from the perception of a ball. Biran’s critique of Engel’s proof, therefore, is the same as the Renouvier-James critique of Biran’s:

Engel has confused the feeling of muscular contraction with the feeling of the initiation of the action. But unlike James and Renouvier, Biran does not think that that is the end of the story. We *do* experience our volitional force, but to direct our attention to this force, we must no longer focus on these sensations as they are *presented to us*, but rather on experience itself *as lived through*.

To grasp the above point, we need to understand what Biran understands by ‘experience’. As Phemister (2004: 207) notes, empiricists like Hume and Locke understand experience as a noun: it is the thing that provides us with ideas, but it is the ideas themselves that are important. We have *an* experience. This experience (some combination of ideas) is followed by another experience (another combination), and so on. However, Biran is interested in experience not as a noun but as a verb in the active voice; it is experience itself *as lived through* rather than the ideas contained therein that he is interested in. We *experience*. This experience is a process that cannot be broken up into more basic blocks. In willed effort we do not merely receive impressions from muscular effort (although we do also receive these), but we also *experience* ourselves as active agents responsible for continually acting on an external body. Here ‘experience’ should be understood as a verb in the active voice because ‘we apperceive and reproduce it [through willed effort] at every instant’ (OMB.VII.121). Biran argues in the passage above that when we feel our muscles ache, but nonetheless continue to lift the heavy box, we do not feel our will being ‘overcome’, rather we feel our will *growing and increasing*. This is because it requires greater continual mental effort to overcome the feeling of organic resistance. What we feel is the growth of our own ‘hyper-organic force’. While Engel focused his attention on the phenomenology of the sensation of muscular effort, Biran showed that we must focus our attention on our internal active experience. This is a shift from thinking of experience as the experience of atomistic chunks of ideas, to experience as active, continuous, and as the *immediacy of our agency*.

What do I mean by the ‘immediacy of our agency’? Recall Hume’s criticism of the claim that we experience internal force. Hume argued that if there were a necessary connection between the ‘movement of the arm’ and the conscious ‘willing the arm to move’, it would be impossible to have the latter without the former. However, since we know that an amputee can will to move their arm, even after their arm has been removed, such a necessary connection cannot exist. Biran responds that this confuses ‘desire’ with ‘will’. Although a ‘desire’ is not necessarily fulfilled (in this case, the desire to move one’s arm), a ‘willing’ is. Biran argues that if the will does not bring with it a feeling of success,

there is no will at all. The relation between the will and its action is *immediate*. If I will to raise my arm, my arm rises. The initiation of the action and the achieved end are necessarily connected, and in the process of willing, I feel the immediacy of my agency. In other words, I know that this action is occurring (*right now*) only because I am willing it to be so (*right now*). It is not the case that I will the action, and *then* the end occurs, in two stages, rather the willing and the action are concurrent. Effect does not follow cause at a temporally later state; rather, they are fused together.

But what about our amputee? There are two possibilities. First, if the amputee attempts to move their arm, forgetting that the operation has taken place, and moves only their residual limb, there is still the *feeling of success*, and thus, there is willed effort. It is a mistake in memory, not a mistake in feeling. Second, if there is no effect at all, no movement, not even in the residual limb, then while the amputee may have desired to move their arm, they did not will it so. Desires must be *mediated* by the will for an effect to take place, but in the experience of the will itself, the cause and the effect are compressed into an immediately felt indivisible duration.¹² In cases of willing, the cause and the effect are inextricably linked. Therefore, examples that show that the desire and the end are not necessarily connected cannot be used to show that willing and end are not necessarily connected.

The second criticism of Biran's proof offered by both Renouvier and James (also originally made by Hume) was that if we really were able to observe a connection between our volitions and our corporeal movements, we would have to be intimately aware of the movements of the nerves and muscles responsible for the chain of events that leads from the volition to the arm's movements. Biran believes that this line of attack follows from the misconceived assimilation of the inner and external senses. It is true that we do not observe this connection, but this is because it involves two heterogeneous kinds of knowledge. We experience the nerves and the muscles through our external senses, while the feeling of willed effort is an inner sense experience. The fact that we cannot represent these effects of external movement does not, he insists, prevent us from experiencing the feeling of our 'primordial power' or what he calls the 'empire of the will over its organs'. He asks:

What species of analogy is there between the representative knowledge of position, of the interplay and the functions of our organs, such as an anatomist or

¹² See Hallie, (1959: 162)

physiologist can know them, and the inner feeling which corresponds to these functions, and also the internal knowledge of the parts localized in the continuous resistance of which we spoke previously? How could one not see the opposition that occurs between these two kinds of knowledge, an opposition such that at the very moment when the will moves an organ, if the instruments of motility could represent themselves instead of being felt, or be inwardly apperceived, the will could never arise? (O.I.262)

If we were able to observe all the internal actions and reactions inside the retina, we could not experience the colours. This is why the ‘hidden springs and principles’ are withdrawn from view of external senses. However, this does not mean that we have no feeling of power or causal force, but rather highlights the different forms of knowledge that are obtained through the external and the inner senses.

2. JAMES ON EXPERIENCE: THE EARLIER VIEW

Now that I have presented James’s objections to the experience of activity and the reasons why they fail to hit their mark, in this section I present the underlying philosophical methodology and worldview that supported these objections. Following this, in §3, I show why James realised that his methodology, and consequently, his philosophical system, had to change significantly.

§2.1

James publicly denied that we experience activity as late as 1905. At the end of his article ‘The Experience of Activity’, James could not be clearer on his position:

I have found myself more than once accused in print of being the assertor of a metaphysical principle of activity... I should like to say that such an interpretation of the pages I have published on effort and on will is absolutely foreign to what I meant to express. I owe all my doctrines on this subject to Renouvier; and Renouvier, as I understand him, is... an out and out phenomenist, a denier of ‘forces’ in the most strenuous sense. (ERE 1905, 93n.10)

What is ‘out and out phenomenism’? Why does it lead to the denial of forces? Renouvier’s phenomenism is made up of two key claims. The first is epistemological: ‘Only phenomena exist for knowledge’. The second, metaphysical: ‘phenomena and their laws (which are also phenomena but constant or constantly assembled or reproduced phenomena) are reality itself’ (ECG.III.i.3). It is the second claim that differentiates Renouvier’s ‘out and out’ phenomenism from a standard epistemological phenomenalism. When Renouvier tells us that phenomena are *reality itself*, he is not defending a form of subjective idealism whereby all that exists is the phenomenal contents of our minds. Rather, he is presenting a panpsychist metaphysics according to which the fundamental nature of reality has the very same character as our phenomena: *the in itself is for itself*. Just as our own personal identity is constituted by a chain of phenomena proceeding ‘from next to next’ according to the laws of thought, so are all of the other beings in the world. Since the chain of phenomena that constitutes our personal identity is the only kind of existence that we have direct knowledge of, we can either postulate that we can have knowledge of the nature of reality (and thus that reality is throughout analogous to our phenomena) or deny that such knowledge is possible. Starting from the first position (from phenomena) is to start from what he calls ‘the point of view of knowledge’ (ECG.I.i.23).

The point of view *without* knowledge is materialism or substance realism. This is because such positions regard our phenomena as inadequate, fleeting, or insufficient representations of the ‘really real’, which is either conceivable by a priori reasoning, or in Kant’s case, beyond the limits of possible experience. Whatever entities do really exist (be these material atoms or simply unknowable essences) are entities that we could never experience. On the contrary, Renouvier’s ‘point of view of knowledge’, regards the phenomena we experience as the really real itself. Given that philosophy and science require that we attempt to gain knowledge of the real, and the point of view *without* knowledge prohibits such a possibility, Renouvier believes that we have good practical reasons to choose the point of view *of* knowledge (ECG.II.ii.39-40). Importantly, however, the point of view of knowledge *is a choice*. Scepticism, he claimed, has taught us a valuable lesson. We cannot prove the existence of the external world, and we cannot prove that we are free—there is no indubitable evidence for either. However, scientific enquiry requires both. We must start by postulating that we are truly free, then freely choose to believe that there truly is an external world, and finally, assume that this external world is of a nature that we could comprehend, i.e., that it agrees with our phenomena. These are only articles

of faith, practical postulates, but ones, Renouvier argues, that are necessary to assume for the acquisition of any knowledge whatsoever, and therein lies their justification.

Why does phenomenism lead to the denial of forces? To answer this question, it is first important to note that James was influenced by Renouvier's analysis of phenomena partly because it offered a richer conception of experience than found in the works of the classical empiricists like Locke and Hume. Locke and Hume are interested in the ideas that make up an experience (the idea of green, round, etc., that make up my experience of a green plate), but they show little interest in the experience itself. The same is not true for Renouvier and James. They are genuinely interested in the character of the experience *qua* experience. James argued that the problem with the classical empiricist, or 'associationist', position is that it commits the 'psychologist's fallacy'. This fallacy occurs when one is asked to explain a thought and one answers not by discussing the thought itself but rather what the thought is *about*. So if the thought is about my laptop on the table, the fallacy is to imagine that our thought is composed of a laptop part and a table part that somehow compose together. However, James is a *mereological nihilist*, which means that he does not believe that parts can of themselves compose. They can only *appear as* composed to an observer. 'In physical nature,' he maintains, 'it is universally agreed, [that] a multitude of facts always remain the multitude they were and appear as one fact only when a mind comes upon the scene and so views them' (EP 1895, 71). For James, it would be a logical contradiction, and out of step with 'the principles of corpuscular or mechanical science', for something to be both 'one' and at the same time 'many' (PP 1890, 179; BC 1892, 397). What is 'one' is by definition is not 'many', and vice versa. We might think that the combination of hydrogen and oxygen atoms into water is a good example of why James is obviously wrong about this. These atoms combine to make water and in that sense they are both *one* (water) and *many* (hydrogen and oxygen atoms). However, James denies that these do in fact form a 'one' at all except for the perceiver or for that upon which the atoms act. He writes:

Let it not be objected that H₂ and O combine of themselves into "water," and thenceforward exhibit new properties. They do not. The "water" is just the old atoms in the new position, H-O-H; the "new properties" are just their combined effects, when in this position, upon external media, such as our sense-organs and the various reagents on which water may exert its properties and be known. (PP 1890, 161)

The atoms remain atoms, but if they group together they cause different effects for those bodies with which they come into contact. They can dissolve sugar or make an animal wet. However, if there is no sugar or animal to experience it, there is no water. The *esse* of the water (or of any composite) *est percipi* (EP 1895, 72).

James believes that just as the parts of H²O do not combine into a new entity *water*, ideas do not combine together either. The taste of lemonade, for example, is not the taste of sugar *plus* the taste of lemon; it is a wholly different psychic fact that cannot be divided into the sum of its parts (EP 1895, 87n.15). My laptop and the table on which it sits do not form parts of my experience, but serve as occasions for the production of a wholly indivisible unit or *pulse* of experience. For the psychologist, therefore, *the entire thought* is the minimum fact with which they should deal. Each thought contains not just its unique object, but relations, tendencies, and duration. It is these crucial characteristics that are inextricably involved in the colouring of our experience that the classical empiricists ignored.

Although they are armed with a richer conception of experience than the classical empiricists, both are as keen to restrict their speculations to that which can be found within it. Part of James's concern with the defence of the feeling of effort in his early works is that this feeling was supposed to be a feeling of our interaction—beyond the phenomena—with the physical world, and thus provides us with direct evidence of an external world (PP 121). Like Renouvier, James believed that external reality could only be postulated as an article of faith. It is something that we can believe in but not prove. To the question: what is 'our warrant for calling anything reality?' He answered: 'The only reply is—the faith of the psychologist, critic, or inquirer' (MT 1885, 16). Muscular sensation does not give us a direct experience of 'force' or the 'physical world', but rather 'reveals to us hardness and pressure... [as the other senses] do colour, taste, smell, sonority, and the other attributes of the phenomenal world. To the *naïve* consciousness all these attributes are equally objective. To the critical all equally subjective' (EPs 1880, 121).

Not only does the defence of the feeling of effort give us a false account of the reports of these sensations, James thought that it relies on a false account of the phenomenology of willing too. He thought that it entailed the view that ideas in themselves have no causal effect on the physical world, but must be initiated by means of some extra 'willing-force', produced by the agent, that passes the effect from the idea in the inner world to the body in the outer one. On the contrary, James argues that all of our ideas are

‘impulsive’, and that any representation of a movement will lead to the body moving in that way unless another idea or representation conflicts with it. ‘Every pulse of feeling we have’, he claims, ‘is the *correlate of some neural activity that is already on its way to instigate a movement*’. We do not need to ‘will’ an idea into action. Unless there is a conflicting idea, action will follow from it successfully (PP 1890, 1134; BC 1892, 367). When we will ourselves out of bed on a cold morning, it is not that we have somehow transmitted enough force into our body so that it is able to emerge from the pleasurable warmth into the pain of the cold day. Rather, it is that we have managed to keep the idea of the cold day out of our mind for long enough so that the ideas of the day’s necessities could take precedence:

‘A fortunate lapse of consciousness occurs... we fall into some revery connected with the day’s life, in the course of which the idea flashes across us, “Hollo! I must lie here no longer”—an idea which at that lucky instant awakens no contradictory or paralyzing suggestions, and consequently produces immediately its appropriate motor effects.’

Once that has happened, we ‘suddenly find that we *have* got up’ (EPs 1888: 220).

James’s conclusion from this phenomenological description is that willing is the ability to maintain our attention on one idea to the exclusion of others. If we want to get up, what we need to do is focus our attention on the idea of the importance of getting out of bed, so as to exclude the alternatives. If we focus our attention on this idea strongly enough, the requisite motor effects will follow. ‘The whole drama’, he concludes ‘is a mental drama’ (PP 1168). Willing itself is a process purely accountable in terms of phenomena. What our will, our moral life, ‘mental spontaneity’, and ‘subjective energy’ boils down to, therefore, is this ability to sustain the *intellectual effort* necessary to focus on one idea over others. This is what James calls our ‘active self’ or the ‘spiritual Me’ (PP 1890, 285; BC 1892 163). Nonetheless, despite accepting that ‘there *is* a feeling of mental spontaneity’, James also doubts that our introspection of the feeling of intellectual effort provides us with a clear proof of its existence (EPs 1880, 115). He confesses that ‘[w]hen I try to become sensible of my thinking activity as such, what I catch is some bodily fact, an impression coming from my brow, or head, or throat, or nose’ (BC 1892, 300; cf. PP 1890 287-288). The ‘feeling’ of this intellectual effort is also characterised by the reports of bodily sensations, rather than some form of inner causality. However, unlike

the feeling of effort supposed to evidence mind to body causation, he does not think that we would be wrong to *believe in* intellectual effort. Like Renouvier, he thinks that although the willing we feel when we ‘strain’ to keep our attention on one thing rather than another is not a ‘sensibly given fact’, as only reports of bodily movements are sensibly given, it is still legitimate to ‘postulate’ that this is the free activity of our will (BC 1892, 400). This is why he famously says that the ‘first act of free-will, in short, would naturally be to believe in free-will’ (PP 1890, 948). It is one of the reasons why Renouvier was such a key figure for James. He offered him a way to stick to the phenomena and criticise the philosophers of effort on those grounds, but without, at the same time, having to deny that activity or free will have a role in our mental life.¹³

§2.2

For Renouvier and James, our consciousness is constituted of a series of ‘pulses’ (indecomposable unities) of experience that come into consciousness, die away, and are then replaced by another.¹⁴ Furthermore, as stated above, Renouvier (and also James) thought that this was not just true of our experience, but of reality itself. Renouvier argued that ‘the world, so far as real, is like an immense pulsation composed of a number (unassignable though at all times determinate) of concerted elementary pulsations of different grades’ (ECR, 1893, 441). James referred to this position, using Peirce’s terminology, as ‘tychism’ (the doctrine that there is novelty in the world), but much to Peirce’s irritation, it was tychism without synechism (the doctrine that there is continuity in the world).¹⁵ Since James and Renouvier regard each new moment as the *replacement* of the previous one, they cannot hold on to the doctrine of continuity (the past moment does not live on in the present in a metaphysical sense).

So far, James and Renouvier agree. There is, however, a key point on which they disagree. Like Hume, Renouvier believes that we are conscious of the passage from one experiential state to the next, but not the immanent relation between these states.

¹³ In this respect, Renouvier stands in sharp contrast to Hippolyte Taine who used the arguments for the denial of the feeling of effort as part of a rejection of activity tout court and the affirmation of a Spinozist universal determinism (see Taine 1870: 479-480). I would like to thank an anonymous referee for bringing this to my attention.

¹⁴ ‘Each pulse of cognitive consciousness, each Thought’, James writes ‘dies away and is replaced by another’ (PP1 1890, 322; cf. CWJ XII 1909, 278). ‘The stream of C[onsciousness] view assumes... that new fields of C[onsciousness] are punctually forthcoming to replace old ones’ (MEN 1906, 109).

¹⁵ See CWJ VIII 1897, 243-246 and CWJ X 1903, 180-182

Thoughts, or phenomena, move from ‘next to next’ due to empirically discoverable laws, and not due to any transitive connection between these thoughts. Renouvier argues that we experience external but not internal relations, or using terminology borrowed from James, we experience only disjunctive relations (one state immediately followed by the next) and not conjunctive relations (the transitory relation between the two states). In contrast, James argues that our ‘stream of consciousness’ is like a ‘bird’s life’ and thus made up of both ‘flights’ and ‘perchings’ (PP I 236). The perchings are the resting places in the stream of consciousness, the ‘substantive parts’ or ‘phenomena’ recognised by Renouvier. But James argues that we must also admit the existence of the ‘flights’, the ‘transitive parts’, or the conjunctive relations between phenomena. After reading 1884 James’s defence of such relations (see EPs 142-167), Renouvier objected that such a defence leads to the affirmation of ‘the infinite’ in psychology. Instead of having a determinate number of finite elements of conscious life, we would have an infinite blob where everything collapses into each other. Renouvier was opposed to the theory of the infinite because he believed that it leads to mysticism and irrationalism (see ECS II 372-376). However, James is opposed to the idea that we can, because of intellectual reasons, deny the existence of something of which we have empirical evidence. Because Renouvier did not stick as strictly to the empirical as James would like, James later accused him of ‘scholasticism’ (SPP 1911, 85). Empiricism, James argued, should be a doctrine that admits only the data of experience, but, in addition, it must also take care not *to exclude* any data given by experience. When we reflect on our inner experience ‘our fields of consciousness seem to run continuously into one another’ (MEN 1903-4, 32). And when we reflect on our personal histories we recognise that they are ‘processes of change in time, and *the change itself is one of the things immediately experienced*’ (ERE 1904, 25). The problem with classical empiricism (and Renouvier’s philosophy) is that it ignores this experience of *conjunction*. Radical empiricism is *radical* precisely because it refuses to exclude this crucial datum.

Renouvier’s denial of conjunctive relations means, James argues, that ultimately his system turns out to be ‘so much dust’ (CWJ VII 1892, 351). This is because it is a world of individual parts (discrete elements of phenomena) without a metaphysical glue to put these parts together. James thanked Renouvier’s ‘masterly advocacy of pluralism’ for freeing him from the ‘monistic superstition’ (SPP 1911, 4 and 85), but just as the monist has to answer the question ‘how then do we account for the disjunctive?’, i.e., disunity, the pluralist has to answer ‘how then do we account for the conjunctive?’, i.e., the unity or the *togetherness*. According to James, it is because of the weakness of classical empiricism to

account for this unity that Kant introduced the transcendental ego and Hegel introduced the Absolute. These acted as the ‘beddings’ for the individual but unrelated pieces of the mosaic (the ‘perfectly definite elementary mental states’ (TT 21)). The strength of radical empiricism is that instead of having to postulate such non-experienceable entities (the Absolute or the transcendental ego) in order to account for the bedding, it is rather ‘as if the pieces clung together by their edges, the transitions experienced between them forming their cement’ (ERE 1904, 42).

If Renouvier’s neo-critical position differs from James’s insofar as it recognises, to return to James’s bird metaphor, *only perchings* and no flights, we might follow Bergson in saying that the spiritualist position differs from James’s because it recognises *only flights* (M 1923, 1418). As Bergson wrote to James, ‘I see *places of flight* in the *resting-places* themselves, rendered apparently immobile by the fixed gaze of consciousness’ (M 1903, 580: KW 357). However, Čapek (1950) and more recently Girel (2011) have warned against reading James’s ‘stream of consciousness’ view through what they see as Bergson’s distorting lens. James’s ‘resting places’ are not supposed to be immobile timeless elements joined together by places of flight, as the passage from Bergson might suggest, but rather they too have a certain duration. The resting places are merely ‘periods of comparative rest’. Čapek and Girel are right to emphasise this point. As James himself puts it, the difference is merely in the ‘rate of change’. When the rate is slow ‘we are aware of the object of our thought in a comparatively restful and stable way’, but when it is rapid ‘we are aware of a passage, a relation, a transition *from* it, or *between* it and something else’ (PP1 1890, 236; cf. 573). Indeed, in James’s chapter on the perception of time, he tells us that the minimum block of conscious experience is always a ‘duration-block’, a unit of duration that is usually a few seconds long¹⁶ (PP I 1890, 570-576)¹⁷. However, after correctly stressing the mobile nature of James’s resting places, both Čapek and Girel underemphasise the real difference that there is between James and Bergson. On the one hand, Čapek claims that when we understand the resting-places as themselves ‘in flight’, Bergson also defends the existence of both. He tells us that for Bergson duration is ‘a droplike succession of temporal wholes’ (1950: 336). Bergson, therefore, is much more Jamesian, than he suggests. Girel, on the other, makes James more Bergsonian than Bergson suggests. For Girel’s James the

¹⁶ In fact, on at least one occasion, James suggests that it is the ‘purely transitive’ flights that occupy ‘no time’ (MEN 1905, 70).

¹⁷ (cf. PBC 245-246)

‘current’ of the stream of thought—the flight—is the primary reality, and the substantive parts—the resting places—are such only by means of abstraction.

The truth, however, is that Bergson’s rejection of ‘resting-places’ does point to an important distinction between James’s and the spiritualist understanding of experience. It is also a difference that follows from the kind of introspective methodology used by James, on the one hand, and the spiritualists, on the other. To claim that Bergson sees duration as a ‘droplike succession of temporal wholes’ is to undermine the radical nature of his views. Bergson’s duration is a pure continuous flux without breaks. Sure, when we reflect on time we cannot help but *think* of it except in terms of temporal wholes, but, as Bergson proclaims, ‘we do not *think* real time. But we *live* it’ (CE 53). When we ‘live through’ real time, we experience it as pure becoming. This is not a time that could in any real sense be broken up into ‘beads’ that are somehow measurable in clock-time. Crucially, for Bergson, it is the pure flux of duration that is *absolute* reality, while the temporal wholes are mere, albeit practically useful, abstractions. In James’s philosophy, in contrast, clock-measurable ‘duration blocks’ are the *really real*. Blocks that are certainly joined together seamlessly, but there is no suspicion that these duration blocks—the *relative* resting places—are in any sense *less real* than the flights.

The methodological distinction between James and Bergson is that James does not discuss ‘intuiting’ real lived time. For the James of the 1890 *Principles of Psychology* ‘the law of time’s *discrete flow*’ is the ‘composition out of units of duration’ (PP I 1890, 585). Bergson, following Biran, has moved from the perspective of experience as a noun to experience in the active voice, experience not as *presented to* but as *lived through*. Any ‘psychical state’, he writes ‘can only be separated and constituted into a ‘state’ by an effort of abstraction or of analysis’. (IM 31) States are the ‘already-made’, but intuition, by turning us away from the faculty of ‘seeing’ towards the faculty of ‘willing’, enables us to focus on the ‘being made’ (CE 238; 259). Biran’s influence is clear: we are turning away from the evidence of the ‘external senses’, and focusing on inner sense, because it is via inner sense that we can understand our experience as an activity, as a verb in the active voice, as ‘continual flux’.¹⁸ In this continual flux, we do not experience one discrete moment pass by and which is then replaced by another, although this is how we must understand it when we reflect upon it, but a pure continuity where every moment extends into every other. James, before 1908, hasn’t made the requisite methodological shift to understand experience in this way. James is still answering the question ‘what do we get when we try to observe *an* experience?’

¹⁸ On the relationship between Bergson and Biran, see Bergson (1922), Janicaud (1997), and Lefève (2003)

This is evident in the fact that he is still thinking of experiences as *units*. Bergson would agree that he has got the right answer to *that* question, but insist that James is asking the *wrong* question.

One might base an objection to my claim on James's understanding of 'pure experience'. Prima facie there are parallels between duration, on the one hand, and what James calls 'pure experience', on the other. In brief, 'pure experience' is the primary matter out of which all else is formed; '[t]here is no stuff but pure experience-stuff' (ERE 1904, 31). Unlike *actual* experience, pure experience is neither conscious nor material but potentially or dispositionally either (MEN 1903-4, 26-7), and becomes one or the other (or both) by means of its relations to other pure experiences. Pure experience is also only experienceable in states where our conceptual categories are not readily available to cast it within their net. He tells us that 'new-born babies, or men in semicomma from sleep, drugs, illnesses...' may have a 'pure experience' because they are having an experience without a definite *what*. (In other words, they are having an experience that has not been captured conceptually). Whatever this somewhat mysterious 'pure experience' stuff is, it seems to exist at the future fringe of our present experience, and is moulded into its consequent conceptual form by means of its relations with antecedent experiences.

There is a major difference between these two doctrines, however. For Bergson, in the intuition of duration, we access reality in an absolute sense. Intuition reveals to us a reality that is *prior to* the reality of perceptual experience insofar as the latter cuts up and abstracts from this fecund basis. Duration is reality as it really is and from which we make practically necessary abstractions; it is where the action *really* is. However, pure experience just does not have this relevance for James. In a revealing note written circa 1905 on James's copy of Bergson's *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, James wrote 'I, in my way of dealing with pure experience, should say that the pure bits of durée [duration, but for James, *pure experience*]... are *germs* and that the developed 'objects' which they change into, including among these the notion of a time succession of all things, even of themselves, are *true* and supersede them'.¹⁹ The point James is making here is that his 'pure experiences', the pure bits of duration, are not what is most important to him. The important elements are in fact what these 'pure bits' develop into. The final developed thoughts are not 'less true'; rather, more so. A pure experience is only the germ of reality, not reality itself. This is the polar opposite view to Bergson's (and to James's later one).

¹⁹ Ref WJ 607.75 at the Houghton library, Harvard

3. THE EXPERIENCE OF ACTIVITY

In 1904, James returned to the problem of the feeling of effort for his president's address to the American Psychological Association (ERE 1905: 17-96). There he claims that despite the important work done by philosopher-psychologists, such as Bergson, G.F. Stout, and James Ward—thinkers whose work on activity he will explicitly align himself with after 1907 (see SPP 1911, 110)—his sympathies are still with Renouvier (ERE 1905n.10). For the empiricist, radical or not, our experience of activity can do no more than 'record the fact that the strain is sustained' (ERE 1905, 87). What we call 'activity' is what he calls a 'conjunctive' or 'synthetic' object, a relation 'experienced between bits of experience already made'. It is a kind of remembrance of a succession of thoughts; only the 'superficial sign' of the activity *felt*. Therefore, it can tell us nothing of the source of this activity. What we feel to be activity is in fact the record of this succession having taken place, not the feeling of ourselves putting it into action (ERE 1905, 88).²⁰

One thing that is clear in the presidential address is that James remains wedded to a false dichotomy: either (i) stick to empiricism and thus to what is revealed in *an* experience; or, (ii) defend a metaphysical active force beyond the phenomena and thus gives up on one's empiricist credentials altogether. However, sometime in 1906-7, James realises that there is a third option and finally decides that he had been wrong about the experience of activity. We have already addressed one reason why he might come to realise this: he treated the arguments for this kind of experience unfairly. However, we also need

²⁰ A referee has asked me: if 'The Experience of Activity' expresses the same view as James held in 'The Feeling of Effort' and the *Principles*, then why does he include the work as an appendix to the post-conversion *A Pluralistic Universe*? This is a very good question. I think that the answer to this is that although the position on whether or not the experience of mind to body activity is simply a record of bodily activity is crucial to this present discussion, it forms a relatively minor part of the presidential address. James's main aim is analytical and pragmatist. He shows just how many types of question are involved in understanding the experience of activity, sketches a way to think about whether or not one is the true cause of an action in terms of the pragmatic method, and suggests that further speculation on activity might lead to a panpsychist view of the world. All of this is presented in a fairly inconclusive way. Even when James investigates what the pragmatic consequences might be for where we locate the experience of activity, none of the options he considers (that the true actor is the absolute, competing ideas, or nerve cells), are the one that should truly be of interest to him: that *I* am the true actor. He highlights how different the pragmatic results might be, and thus the importance of the investigation, but concludes that 'I cannot even hint at any solution of the pragmatic issue' (ERE 1905, 91). Nonetheless, all of this preparatory work remains very useful for thinking about these issues, even when James changed his mind on the issue under the microscope in this current article. A further reason why he might not felt the need to alter the text is that he is clear in the *A Pluralistic Universe* lectures themselves that he has undergone a conversion since the time of the article's original publication (see PU 94, 107, and 116-119).

to understand why he was motivated to reopen his investigation into this problem and to consider these arguments anew.

We can find the reason in a notebook that James kept between 1905 and 1908 now known as the ‘Miller-Bode Objections’ (MEN 63-130).²¹ In this notebook, James wrestles with the problem of ‘how two minds can know the same thing’. Dickinson Sergeant Miller and Boyd Henry Bode (1905) had objected to James that this question could not be answered by his ‘radical empiricist’ conception of experience. Bode wrote that radical empiricism ‘does not account for our awareness of a world beyond our individual experience; and it also fails to show how there can be a world that is common to a multiplicity of individuals’ (1905: 133). Why so? ‘The reason why it fails to account for how we can be aware of a world beyond our experience follows from James’s mereological nihilism. The mereological nihilism underlying James’s radical empiricism means that it must implicitly hold that the composite objects that we experience are not, strictly speaking, out there in the world itself. So when I perceive a pen on a table, this perception of the pen is not a duplicate or representation of the pen outside of me; *it is the pen*. James maintains that ‘object and subject fuse in the fact of ‘presentation; or sense-perception—the pen and hand which I now see writing, for example, *are the physical realities* which those words designate.’ (MT 1905, 73 my italics). There is no pen outside of me, just ‘molecules and what not’ (MEN 1906, 106). These molecules in no way form parts of the perception. They cannot because if the pen were truly *a* pen outside of me, and at the same time its constituent molecules, it would mean that the pen was ‘one’ *and also* ‘many’. Something, as we have seen, that James takes to be logically contradictory. Consequently, ‘knowledge of the percept is not the *effect* of the object it *is* the object’ (MEN 1906, 108). However, if the *esse* of this pen is its *percipi by me*, how can I say that I have any knowledge of that which is not *percipi by me*?

Ultimately, James was less concerned by this problem than he was by the second: how there can be a world that is common to a multiplicity of individuals? This is because he believed that any adequate philosophy must be able to account for the ‘togetherness of things’. A world in which it is impossible for any two people to know the same thing is clearly not a world of ‘togetherness’. The problem is that such togetherness seems prohibited due to James’s rejection of the composition of consciousness. As James writes in the notebook:

²¹ First so-called by Perry (1935: 750-762).

In my psychology I contended that each field of consciousness is entitatively a unit, and that its parts are only different cognitive relations which it may possess with different contexts. (MEN 1905, 65)

But how can two minds know the same thing unless ‘an identical part can help to *constitute* two fields?’

Bode & Miller both pick up the contradiction. The fields are not then entitative units. They are decomposable into “parts”, one of which at least is common to both, and my whole tirade against “composition” in the psychology is belied by my own subsequent doctrine! (MEN 1905, 65)

If, as is the case according to James’s radical empiricism, our knowledge of the pen *is* the pen, and the pen that I perceive is not in any way ‘composed’ of parts outside of my perception of the pen, then two people cannot see the ‘same’ pen. For the pen that I see will be the pen that I see *in virtue of* being the pen that I see. Its *esse* is its being perceived *by me*. In contrast, the pen that you see will be the pen that you see *in virtue of* it being the pen that *you* see. Its *esse*, in contrast, is its being perceived *by you*. Since *my* pen and *your* pen contain no common parts, (they are not *composed* of molecules and what not), the different percipients result in different *esses*. Therefore, they are *different* pens: ‘pen co-my mind can’t be the same as pen co-your-mind’ (MEN 1906, 101).

On September 12th 1906, he started to wonder whether the whole problem might be due to the very acceptance of the terms of intellectualism. The problem that Miller and Bode impose on him may in fact result from the fact that he is using ‘logical and statical categories’ for ‘what is really a living and dynamic situation’. ‘Didn’t I’, he asks,

stick to “pen,” “me,” & “you,” and the relations “co” and “ex,” in a purely static manner? Did n’t I leave them as so much flat “content,” immediately given, and, as such, fixed for the time being? (MEN 1906, 104)

In this notebook entry, James is beginning to become critically aware of the introspective methodology he is using—one that analyses experiences strictly as they are *presented to us*—and of its limitations. He notes that in his radical empiricist philosophy, he has not just been treating the experiences themselves *as nouns*, but also the *relations* themselves: ‘the conjunctive relations, as I have talked of them so far, are *inactive*’ (MEN 104). This means

that radical empiricism had ignored the processes by which the experiences themselves ‘come to pass’ (MEN 105). He realises that he had been limiting himself to showing *that* certain experiential facts exist, but ignoring the causal processes through which they come to exist in the first place (MEN 106).

The obstruction in the way of focusing on these causal processes is James’s long-held belief that *we do not experience our own activity*. However, as we have seen, the obstruction in the way of recognising that we experience activity is his methodology for analysing experience. The recognition of causal forces thus requires that he take on a new philosophical methodology. And this is exactly what he realises. The solution will arise, James says, if will treat the elements of the problem from ‘the dynamic point of view’ (MEN 106):

Would n’t [*sic*] the remedy lie in making activity a part of the content itself, reintroducing agents, but not leaving them behind the scenes? Vivify the mechanism of change! Make certain parts of *experience* do work on other parts! Since work gets undeniably done, and “we” feel as if “we” were doing bits of it, why, for Heaven’s sake, throw away that *naïf* impression, and banish all the agency and machinery into the region of the unknowable, leaving the foreground filled with nothing but inactive contents?

Why does this help? By February 1908, James had worked the answer out. If the problem is set out in terms of a ‘static’ logic – that is in terms of the ‘static’ singular experiences we find if we analyse experience *as a noun* – then, *I* can only perceive *my pen*, and *you* only *your pen*. However, if we understand reality in a dynamic sense, even the ‘instantaneous constitution of reality’ will be active and changing. The solution is to be found, James told his audience later that year during the *Pluralistic Universe* lectures, if you ‘place yourself at a bound, or *d’emblée*, as M. Bergson says, inside of the living, moving active thickness of the real’; if you ‘place yourself at the point of view of the thing’s interior *doing*’ (PU 1909, 116-117). Here James is clear that we must analyse *experience as a verb*, that is as *lived through* not *presented to*. This is because from this point of view we will recognise that the ‘*my pen*’ that *I* perceive is not one self-same logical bit of stuff but a dynamic changing process. This means that:

when you say it is anything, it obliges you also to say not only that it is more and other than that thing, but that it *is not* that thing, both the *is* and the *is not* implying at bottom only that our grammatical forms, condemned as they are to staticity and alternation, are inadequate, if we use them as literal substitutes for reality. (MEN 1908, 123)

What we perceive is not a static identical subject, but rather, as Bergson argues, a ‘manyness-in-oneness’. ‘At bottom’, James writes, we must consider ‘the constitution of being as activity, neither stark sameness nor stark otherness’ (MEN 1908, 129). An active being is a being that becomes what it is not but at the same time remains what it is. As Biran claimed, activity *grows and increases*. However, if we have a direct experience of something being what it is and what it is not (without stopping to be what it is), and James—now convinced by the French spiritualists’ analysis of experience—believes we do, then it is intellectualism that is at fault and which must be rejected. Life, for James, has priority over logic. Previously, our pen was not only a different pen as perceived by me and as perceived by you—it had a different *esse* in each case, dependent as the *esse* is on *percipi*—but also a different pen at every moment. If things cannot compose then this means that the new pen cannot really endure into the next moment, because then the pen at t^2 would include pen at t^1 as a composite part. However, our experience of activity shows that there is continuation from one moment to the next—we do not have the emergence of the radically new at every moment, rather the past *lives on* into the present. Even if *logically* we cannot define an individual without paradox, through such an experience we can understand it by ‘awakening sympathy’ with it. An individual is what James calls an active continuum, and we can understand what active continua are like, because we are active continua and we know this through intuition. For example, as I lift a weight in the air, I become what I was not, but I do this without ceasing to be what I was; through the lifting of the weight, I feel my past persisting into the present through the growth of the feeling of activity. In the same way the pen that exists at t^2 might be something that the pen existing at t^1 was not (for a start, pen at t^1 did not exist at t^2 , yet), but at the same time as being something new, it remains the pen that existed at t^1 . ‘Thus, to sum up’, James writes:

mental facts *can...* compound themselves, if you take them concretely and livingly, as possessed of various functions. They can count variously, figure in different

constellations, without ceasing to be “themselves”—understanding by a self not a stark same nor a stark other.’ (MEN 1908, 129)

James’s metaphysical position, therefore, has changed fundamentally. As I stated in §2, James called his radical empiricist metaphysics ‘tychism’ (the doctrine of real novelty), but tychism *without* ‘synechism’ (the doctrine of continuity). However, now James has recognized, as Peirce had been trying to convince him for years, that synechism cannot be given up. As James wrote to Bergson in 1907:

whereas I have hitherto found no better way of defending tychism than by affirming the spontaneous addition of *discrete* elements of being (or their subtraction), thereby playing the game with intellectualist weapons, you set things straight at a single stroke by your fundamental conception of the continuously creative nature of reality. (CWJ XI 377)

Previously, James’s philosophy was a philosophy of the present moment (albeit a moment that had its own duration). However, after this conversion, his universe is really growing (SPP 1911, 29 &108). By this he means that the amount of *being* in the world is really increasing. He admits that how this could be the case is a problem that is one of the ‘darkest in all philosophy’ (SPP 1911, 30), but this is, nonetheless, what intuition shows to be the case. Perception, he says in the 1911 *Some Problems of Philosophy*, just as he did in the 1890 *Principles of Psychology*, ‘changes pulsewise’, but—and here is where the latter text differs from the former—‘the pulses continue each other and *melt their bounds*’ (SPP 1911, 32 *my italics*). The ‘pulses’ of experience no longer *replace* each other, but now *melt into each other*.

There is, however, more to the change of his understanding of experience than this. Insofar as James is now able to analyse experience as a verb and not a noun, he recognizes, as Biran did before him, that the feeling of activity is a feeling of our causal interaction *with the world*. Previously, James’s theory of experience was always one step removed from the world: we perceived *our* pen, but beyond this perceived pen exist only molecules or mind-stuff. This presented him with some serious problems. If the *in itself* of the pen is not in any sense part of my experience or your experience, then how can we be said to know the pen? However, he now argues that our ‘concrete perception of causality’ or our ‘feeling of activity’ is revealed to us in what we ‘live through’ (SPP 1911, 106). What we ‘live through’ are the feelings of will and triumph, of ‘obstruction, striving, strain or

release. They are what he now calls the ‘ultimate *qualia*... of the life give us to be known’ (SPP 1911, 107). Experience *is* activity, and activity requires *passivity*, i.e. it requires interaction with another. It requires the real interaction between mind and world. This is why he tells us that ‘[t]he concept ‘reality’, which we restore to immediate perception, is no new conceptual creation, but a kind of practical relation to our Will, *perceptively experienced*’ (SPP 1911, 60). In sum, reality is not a creation of what James called *conception* (understanding, intellection), and it is no longer a mere practical postulate, but rather an immediate experience, what he called *perception* (Bergsonian intuition, or that out of which concepts are constructed).

Now we have all of the pieces together ready to give a final answer to the question that had plagued James: how can two minds know the same thing? By means of understanding experience as *lived through* (as a verb), rather than as *presented to* (as a noun), James recognised that we experience ourselves as an active continuum, something that continued to be what it is even as it turns into what it was not. Therefore, what I was continues to be part of what it is that I have come to be, and what I have come to be is a ‘compound’ of the old and the new. I am one and many. Since we have direct experience of the fact, it must be the case that the supposed logical incompatibility of the ‘one’ and the ‘many’ cannot be taken to have any force when it comes to metaphysical matters. Furthermore, since what we have experience of is experience of ourselves as active agents, and what it is to be an active agent is to be an *interactive* agent, this means that what we are and what we become is itself a product of our interactions with others. I interact with both Joe and Jess, and these interactions are formative in what I am to become, but at the same time Joe and Jess both interact with the same *me*. Similarly, both Joe and I interact with the same Jess, and Jess and I the same Joe. Of course, it is the case that the way I perceive Jess will be different to the way Joe perceives her, because both of our experiences will inextricably be affected by our own emotional responses, aesthetic preferences, memories, and other subjective factors, but, nonetheless, we will end up agreeing on key structural features, because we both interact with the same objective reality: Jess’s *esse* is *more than* *percipi*. Jess *qua* Jess is a *real ingredient* of both mine and Joe’s experiences. An individual is now, James says, a ‘business centre’, since it is ‘alive enough to carry on more than one business’ (MEN 1908, 128). It is ‘centre of reference and action’ that can radiate in many directions. It ‘can *turn* inside of itself—which means that without ceasing to *be* itself, it can stand in many relations, of which being with the “rest” is only one’ (MEN 1908, 128).

4. CONCLUSION

I have argued that James's change of mind about whether we are able to experience our activity followed from a change in his methodology. Although he defended a form of phenomenism for most of his academic life, he finally gave up on the phenomenist method around 1906. This meant that he gave up on trying to analyse experience as passively presented to us, and began to analyse it as we live through it. Although Bergson was one of the important causes of this shift, the can be traced all the way back to the father of spiritualism Maine de Biran. The consequences of this change in methodology for his philosophy are far too numerous to discuss in an article. Changes must occur to his metaphysics (his understanding of the nature of reality and causality, as we have discussed, but also to his understanding of time and personal identity), and also to his psychology (most explicitly his understanding of the stream of consciousness). Furthermore, it has considerable ramifications for our understanding of his place in the pragmatist tradition more generally. Although James is sometimes accused of excessive subjectivism,²² his response to the Miller-Bode objections shows just how important it was for him to attempt to make room for objective reality within his philosophy. James did not live long enough to detail the full ramifications of this shift of position would be for the rest of his philosophy, and it would take considerable reconstructive work for a scholar to do this job themselves. Nonetheless, as the debates concerning the ongoing relevance of the work of the classical pragmatists for contemporary philosophy continue to be extremely productive, I believe that such reconstructive work would be most fruitful.²³

²² See Moore (1908) and Misak (2013)

²³ I'd like to thank Emily Herring, Alexander Klein, Trevor Pearce, Neil Williams, and two anonymous referees for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this article. I'd also like to thank the audiences at the University of Sheffield 'Pragmatism and the Analytic-Continental Split' conference, the Manchester Metropolitan University 'French Spiritualism and its Critics' conference, and a University of Durham Work-in-Progress session and Departmental Seminar. The research for this article was partially funded by a University of Sheffield/Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellowship.

Abbreviations

Bergson

- CE ([1907] 2016) *L'Évolution créatrice*. Paris: PUF
---. (1944) *Creative Evolution*. Translated by A. Mitchell. New York; Random House
- IM ([1903] 2011) *Introduction à la métaphysique*. Paris: PUF
---. (1912) *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by T.E. Hulme. Cambridge: Hackett
- KW (2002) *Bergson: Key Writings*. Edited by K. A. Pearson and J. Mullarkey, London: Continuum
- M (1976) *Mélanges*. Paris: PUF

James

The format of all in-text citations is as follows: abbreviated title—volume number (if appropriate)—original date of publication (or writing if correspondence)—page number

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- EP (1978) *Essays in Philosophy*. London: Harvard University Press
- EPs (1983) *Essays in Psychology*. London: Harvard University Press
- ERE (1976) *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. London: Harvard University Press
- MEN (1988) *Manuscript Essays and Notes*. London: Harvard University Press
- MT (1975) *The Meaning of Truth*. London: Harvard University Press
- P (1975) *Pragmatism*. London: Harvard University Press
- PBC (1984) *Psychology: Briefer Course*. London: Harvard University Press
- PP (1981) *The Principles of Psychology*. 2 vols. London: Harvard University Press
- PU (1977) *A Pluralistic Universe*. London: Harvard University Press
- SPP (1979) *Some Problems of Philosophy*. London: Harvard University Press
- TT (1983) *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*. London: Harvard University Press

Maine de Biran

OI: Maine de Biran (1859) *Œuvres Inédites de Maine de Biran*. Edited by E. Naville. Paris: Dezorby, E. Magdeleine

OMB: Maine de Biran (1984-2001) *Œuvres de Maine de Biran*. 20 Vols. Edited by F. Azouvi *et al.* Paris: Vrin

Renouvier

ECG: Renouvier, C.B. (1912) *Essai de Critique générale*. Cited by *Essai* and volume number.

- (I) *Premier Essai: Traité de logique générale et de logique formelle*. 3 Vols. Paris: Librairie Armand Colin
- (II) *Deuxième Essai: Traité de psychologie rationnelle d'après les principes du criticisme*. 2 Vols. Paris: Librairie Armand Colin
- (III) *Troisième Essai: Les Principes de la nature*. Paris: Librairie Armand Colin

ECS: Renouvier, C.B. (1886) *Esquisse d'une classification systématique des doctrines philosophiques*. 2 Vols. Paris: Au Bureau de la Critique Philosophique

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