

PRAGMATIC REALITY, PURE EXPERIENCE AND THEIR RELATION:

AN EXPLORATION OF WILLIAM JAMES' METAPHYSICS

Synopsis of the Thesis

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William James (1842-1910) is of the opinion that no precise definition of the term "metaphysics" is possible, but it might be appropriate to characterize it in terms of its particular problems. James offers a list of metaphysical problems in order to define metaphysics. According to this list metaphysics is the branch of philosophy concerned with such topics as ontology, time, the Mind–Body problem, the problem of personal identity, the problem of freedom and determinism, laws of nature, causation, and material objects etc. James examines ontological issues and evaluates many traditional philosophers' attempts in his book *Some Problems of Philosophy*. (**James, 1916**) It is important to keep in mind that James approaches metaphysics and traditional metaphysical problems from a pragmatic standpoint. William James' metaphysical theory occupies an important position in contemporary discussions on metaphysics also.

In his various writings James has discussed about two types of reality: one is pragmatic reality and the other is metaphysical reality. He considers pure experience; in his book *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, (**James, 1912**) as the metaphysical reality. He says that pure experience is the primal stuff from which all things are created but it is important to note here that he does not make clear whether there is relation between these two realities, rather we do get hints of apparent contradiction in his writing about this matter. As a result there is debate among James scholars as to whether there is any relationship between two realities at all and if so what kind of relation it is. There are some James scholars, like C.H Seigfried who would deny any type of relation between pragmatic reality and pure experience. On the other hand those who would admit relation between these two realities would differ among themselves regarding the nature of this relation: some of them, like Ellen Kappy Suckiel would argue that pure experience is fundamental and pragmatic reality is dependent on it, while other thinkers, like Sami Pihlström will consider pragmatic reality to be fundamental. If we go through these interpretations of James' view of reality offered by the various scholars it will be apparent that none of them reflect the whole spirit of James' view of philosophy in general and metaphysics in specific. The aim of my research is to make an attempt to arrive at an interpretation of the relation between these two realities which will be more consistent with the Jamesean spirit of philosophy.

Let me briefly mention the chapter divisions and summarize what I have discussed in the chapters.

In Chapter 1, I shall elaborate on William James' conception of pragmatic reality. We find discussions of pragmatic reality in various works of James, such as *The Principles of Psychology*, *Pragmatism a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, *The Meaning of Truth*, and *Some Problems of Philosophy*. James gives some definitions of reality in his discussion of pragmatic reality. He says that anything that can affect my interest is real to me. Pragmatic reality is what I take to be real. Pragmatic reality is the one that fulfills our various needs. One may object to James' notion of practical or pragmatic reality as "...whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real." (James, 1890) Various doubts and objections can be raised about the above mentioned characterization of reality. In this chapter we will deal with these doubts and objections in favor of James' view.

In Chapter 2 we concerned with William James' view of pure experience. James' account of pure experience as the metaphysical reality has been elaborated in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Here James describes reality in the following way. He says: "there is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff „pure experience,“ then knowing can easily be explained...." Explaining the notion of pure experience James says "Pure experience" is the name which I gave to the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories... which is not yet any definite what, tho" ready to be all sorts of whats; full both of oneness and of manyness ...".(James, 1912). According to James, pure experience is neither mental nor physical. It may be called „mental“ if viewed from one perspective and „physical“ from another perspective, it depends on our perspective. Different types of dualism like mind-body, subject-object, and knower-known are only distinguishable functions within pure experience. Pure experience is a stream of experience which James considers to be blind by itself; it cannot say anything about itself. A detail understanding of the notion of pure experience will be attempted at in this chapter.

Chapter 3 is entitled 'Two types of reality and their relation: various interpretations'.

In this chapter, I have discussed the interpretations of James scholars on James' view regarding reality and the relation between pragmatic reality and pure experience. Scholars I have discussed include Charlene Haddock Seigfried, Sami Pihlström, Richard Gale, Ellen Kappy Suckiel, John Wild, and Wesley Cooper.

Seigfried claims that pure experience is a metaphysical reality. Pragmatism is actually an epistemological doctrine with no metaphysical component. The gist of Siegfried's argument is that since traditional metaphysics is denied and refuted in pragmatism, it can be said that there is no metaphysics in pragmatism. It is basically a theory of knowledge. In her earlier period, Seigfried accepted that there is a relationship between pragmatic reality and pure experience. But in the latter phase, Seigfried changes her mind. She says pure experience is also not a metaphysical reality. So these two cannot be called realities, and hence there is no relationship between them as reality.

Suckiel claims that James uses the concept of reality in two broad senses, namely metaphysical and pragmatic reality. Pure experience is metaphysical reality. Metaphysical reality is basic; pragmatic reality is secondary and depends on metaphysical reality. In this sense these two realities are related.

Interpreting the philosophy of William James, John Wild claims that radical empiricism or pure experience is the main metaphysical theory on which the pragmatic theory of truth is based. Pragmatism is a partially epistemological theory with no metaphysical element in the ultimate sense. Wild contends that the only way to demonstrate a consistent relationship between pragmatism and radical empiricism is through an existential phenomenological approach. Wild claims that these two theories may be independent, but the relationship between them is only possible in this way. If we read James's theories with this existential-phenomenological approach, we can understand that for James, the main reality is pure experience.

Sami Pihlström has expressed a completely different view from other scholars regarding the relationship between pragmatic reality and metaphysical reality. He claims that pragmatic reality is the basis on which other metaphysics depend, but the pragmatic reality does not depend on any other fundamental metaphysical theory.

Gale, like Pihlström, recognizes the connection between these two realities, but for different reasons. Richard Gale says pragmatic reality is the fundamental metaphysical reality, but pure experience cannot be called the fundamental metaphysical reality as it has certain limitations. Gale asserts that if pure experience is called a basic metaphysical reality, then many things cannot be accepted as reality in James's metaphysics.

According to Cooper, James's approach has two levels: one that is metaphysical and another that is empirical. According to him, these two levels are unique and separate from one another. He places pragmatism on the empirical level and pure experience on the metaphysical level. According to Cooper, discussing pragmatic reality does not require addressing metaphysical realities. Moreover Cooper asserts that it is possible to address metaphysical realities without also considering pragmatic reality at the empirical level. There is no connection between these two realities on an empirical level. A radical empiricist is not always a pragmatist. Cooper seeks to demonstrate that, if the metaphysical level is accepted, it can explain pragmatic reality. Cooper discusses the connection between pragmatic reality and metaphysical reality at the metaphysical level.

In Chapter 4, I shall critically evaluate the interpretations of James scholars discussed in chapter 3. Against Seigfried' view we would argue that James does not say that traditional metaphysics is not possible. James only claims that traditional metaphysics is not adequate because taking it in this sense would leave many things out of metaphysics that also have metaphysical value. Thus, it can be said that pragmatism does not make traditional metaphysics impossible but rather show that limited and inadequate. We have made an effort to present a number of arguments to refute Siegfried's claims.

Suckiel is right in her view that pure experience is ontologically prior to pragmatic reality and the basis of it. But we would argue that though pragmatic reality is based on pure experience the latter cannot be claimed to be the sole basis of the former. If any object is termed pragmatically real then it is a function of pure experience. But pure experience cannot turn out to be a substance or function by itself unless the subject of experience exercises its function of attention, selection etc. the items of pragmatic reality cannot turn into existence. So, pure experience as such cannot be the sole element responsible for the production of pragmatic reality. As a matter of fact the possibility of pragmatic reality is contained in pure experience as such.

Suckiel's reading, Wild's reading, and Pihlström's reading of James suggest that James will be prepared to accept the reduction of pragmatic reality to pure experience or the reduction of pure experience to pragmatic reality. These scholars either call pure experience basic or pragmatic reality basic. If these two realities are understood from the perspective of basicness, then the objection of reductionism arises. But throughout his philosophy, James has opposed both dualism and reductionism.

Gale asserts that if pure experience is called a basic metaphysical reality, then many things, like contents of the abstract world, and that of super natural worlds etc. cannot be accepted in James's theory of reality. If we read James's writings, especially Pragmatism and Essays in Radical Empiricism, we see that this interpretation is not acceptable. When James acknowledges the existence of pure experience, he says that the flow of experience can create a variety of objects with the help of "relation." Consequently non phenomenal objects can also arise from the flow of experience.

Cooper's central thesis is that reality differs as levels differ. There will be issues with how these two levels relate to one another if they are considered independent. Here the problem of dualism arises. But if we examine James' philosophy, we can find that he opposed dualism from the very beginning. As a result, James's claims will be inconsistent if we adopt Cooper's perspective. Therefore, it cannot be argued that the two levels are distinct.

I have divided the conclusion into three parts. In the first part I have argued that there is relation between pragmatism and radical empiricism. In the second part I have summarized the main arguments of various James scholars regarding the relation between pragmatic reality and pure experience to show how from all these interpretations we can arrive at the conclusion that the two realities admitted by James are interdependent. In the third section, I went over to see how pure experience and pragmatic reality relate to the idea of process. I would like to argue here that James' philosophy can be explained better by considering his notion of reality as a process.

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