
Radical Empiricism, British Idealism, and the Reality of Relations

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Chapter 33 in *The Jamesian Mind* (2021), Sarin Marchetti (ed.), London: Routledge, 398-411.

This version is the authors' penultimate draft. Citations should refer to the final published version of the paper.

§1. INTRODUCTION

William James often defined his philosophy against his idealist opponents. In polemic tones, he often decried the dogmatism, rationalism, and monism he found associated with absolute idealism. Pragmatism and radical empiricism were often presented by him as counters to monistic idealism. At his home institution, Harvard, James engaged in a series of public disagreements with his idealist colleagues, and with Josiah Royce (1855 - 1916) in particular. But James also sought ought allies and opponents across the Atlantic. He supported the work of the British pragmatist F. C. S. Schiller (1864 - 1937) and frequently engaged with the British Idealism of T. H. Green (1836 - 1882), Edward Caird (1835 - 1908), and especially F. H. Bradley (1846 - 1924). However, despite his oppositional rhetoric, James shared more with his idealist interlocutors than he did with most other philosophers of his time. In *Pluralistic Universe*, James is quite clear that the difference between his pluralism and monistic idealism is a subtle one (PU: 16-20). This chapter will focus on the relationship between James and Bradley, and their metaphysical disputes around the reality of relations and the nature of

immediate experience. We'll see that – far from the idealist and the pragmatist being fundamentally at odds with one another – the real challenge is in discovering exactly where it is that they disagree.

Bradley himself engaged in print with many of the early pragmatists – with James as well as with Schiller and Dewey. Despite the depth of his engagement, Bradley was unsure whether or not he counted as a ‘pragmatist’ precisely because – as he never tired of pointing out – he took himself to be without with a clear account of what pragmatism consisted in. His standard criticism of pragmatism included: that pragmatism was conveniently ambiguous about the relevant nature of ‘practice’; that pragmatists contradicted each other without clearly acknowledging this, and so did not constitute a school; that pragmatism – when it made sense – was simply repeating claim from previous (often idealist) writers; and that pragmatism did not give a significant role to the intellectual needs of human nature (See ETR: 66-106). For these and other reasons, Bradley was often dismissive and high-handed in his approach to pragmatism, and this attitude was more often than not matched by his pragmatist opponents.

On the other hand, Bradley showed a great deal of respect for James’ radical empiricism essays. This is not to say that he agreed with them. Indeed, in published work and in private correspondence, he criticised James’ proposed *Weltanschauung* with his usual polemical verve. But, unlike pragmatism, Bradley clearly thought that radical empiricism was *worth* engaging with. In the preface to his *Essays on Truth and Reality* (1914), Bradley wrote that he had been ‘unwilling’ to include so many pages on the topic of pragmatism, assuring the reader that ‘[t]he subject certainly does not occupy a corresponding space in my mind’, but that he ‘should be sorry if the examination of “Radical Empiricism” were left unread’ (ERT: vi). And, two years after James’ death, he asserted that he could imagine no more pressing task for the ‘disciples’ of James than to ‘make an attempt in earnest to explain and to develop his doctrine of Radical Empiricism’ (ETR: 158).¹

The respect that Bradley accorded to radical empiricism was clearly in part due to the similarity he saw between it and his own monistic idealism. James also appreciated this similarity. In fact, both the public and private correspondence between the two is haunted by a palpable frustration – a frustration which comes from the lurking sense that it is only one or two confusions or misinterpretations which block the two thinkers from heart-felt agreement. James hopes that, like his idealist colleague Josiah Royce, Bradley will see that a form of Absolute idealism can be incorporated into pragmatism (Letter to Bradley, 1904, Kenna 1966: 318, CWJ.10: 433). Bradley hopes that James will see that the majority of his metaphysical ideas are fundamentally idealistic or at least consistent with idealism

¹ This complement is somewhat dampened by Bradley’s subsequent assertion that James lacked ‘the necessary gift of patient labour and persistent self-criticism’ required to be remembered as a great metaphysician (ETR: 158)

(Letter to James, 1905, Perry 1936 vol.2: 489-490). Nonetheless, despite their clear similarities, the two philosophers were doomed to disagreement. After several decades of fragmented communication, the two unanimously decided to stop attempting to convert the other, and correspondence ceased on a note of resigned good-will. As Ralph Barton Perry notes, it is disappointing that ‘a correspondence conducted with so much good will should end on a note of futility’ (Perry, 1936, vol.2: 643). However, it is a useful philosophical exercise to examine the reasons why two philosophers who were in such close agreement deviate so much.

The rest of the paper will proceed in a loosely chronological order. Following Bradley’s own sense of the relative importance of the debates, I shall focus on James and Bradley’s disagreements around radical empiricism, rather than on Bradley’s criticisms of pragmatism. I will first outline the similarities between James and the British Idealists more generally (§2). Following this, I will look at the disagreement between Bradley and James around the reality of relations in radical empiricism (§3). Finally, the paper will explore the published papers and the private correspondence between the two thinkers in the last years of James’ life (§4). I shall argue that the fundamental divergence between the two thinkers occurs around their interpretations of ‘immediate’ or ‘pure’ experience. Whereas James sees pure experience as containing real relations, Bradley holds that immediate experience is fundamentally non-relational. It is this difference – combined with James’ realism about potentiality – which means that the two thinkers arrive at such different positions from apparently identical starting points.

§2. JAMES AND BRITISH IDEALISM: THE COMMON REJECTION OF ASSOCIATIONISM

Despite the exaggerated tone of some of James’ early papers on idealism, James generally welcomed British Idealism as an invigorating force within philosophy. In the opening passage of *Pluralistic Universe*, for instance, James praises the work of T. H. Green for leading English-speaking philosophy away from both the ‘crudity’ of British empiricism, as well as the ‘technicality and shrillness’ of German rationalism (PU: 8). Though James was a card-carrying empiricist for the whole of his life, he shared with the British idealists a strong antipathy towards the atomism and associationism of the British empiricists. This is no coincidence: James’ relationship with his British empiricist predecessors was shaped by the fact that he read the 1874 edition of Hume’s *Treatise*, co-edited and with an introduction from Green. In that introduction, Green criticises Hume for his ‘failure to provide for relations’ (quoted in Perry, 1936, vol.1: 551). James too criticises the classical empiricists for failing to account for unifying relations, and

instead presenting an atomistic and ‘melancholy’ world in which there is no real connection (EPs: 149, ERE: 23).

Whilst James agreed with the British idealists about the faults of classical empiricism, he disagreed with their solution. As James understood them, the British idealists solved the problem of relations through an appeal to a transcendental unifying agency – ‘the absolute’ (e.g. PU: 38). This is certainly true of Green’s account of relations. Green – against the empiricists – held that relations were real and were in fact *constitutive* of objective reality (*Prolegomena*, §9, §21). Nonetheless, because Green held that relations are not empirically observable, he agreed with the empiricists that relations are the ‘work of the mind’, though he denied that they were by that measure less real (§10). The mind is a ‘combining agency’, but no finite mind or set of minds can provide the relations which constitute objective reality (§29). As such, Green postulates an Absolute mind, or ‘Eternal Consciousness’ to provide that unifying agency (§67). Thus, from the rejection of atomism and the assertion of the reality of relations, Green is lead inexorably to absolute idealism.²

Unsurprisingly, considering his persistent ethical and metaphysical doubts about absolute idealism, James did not accept that realism about relations required an absolute mind. For this reason, despite his broad sympathy with British idealism, he was pleased to report in 1909 that British idealism was being overtaken by a ‘wave of revised empiricism’, in which he included his own position (PU: 9). James’ own revised, or ‘radical’ empiricism was separated from preceding empiricisms precisely due to the emphasis and reality it gave to experienced relations:

To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as ‘real’ as anything else in the system (ERE: 22, emphasis in original).

In this passage we see James clearly separate himself from the associationist or ‘atomic’ British empiricism of Hume and Locke, by admitting the reality of relations. But we also see him separate himself from the British Idealists through his assertion that relations are *directly experienced* and (by that fact) real. This puts him into direct conflict with idealist thinkers like T. H. Green, who hold that relations must be produced by the activity of a mind, and – as we shall see – F. H. Bradley, who holds that relations cannot be real at all, let alone directly experienced (§3).

² For a detailed outline of the metaphysics of both T. H. Green and F. H. Bradley, as well as a comparison of them, see Mander (2011: Chapter 4).

Whilst these views were most forcibly expressed in James' radical empiricism papers of 1904-1905, the foundation of his position on relations was presented in his 1884 paper, 'On Some Omissions on Introspective Psychology', parts of which were later to be printed in various chapters of his *Principles of Psychology* (1890).³ This paper appears to be written under the influence of three articles written by T. H. Green for *Mind* in 1882 (Perry, 1936, vol.1: 565).⁴ The main 'omission' which James wanted to bring to his readers' attention were the existence of 'transitive' parts of our stream of experience, as distinguished from the 'substantive' parts. The substantive parts of experiences are relatively stable and unchanging terms, the transitive parts are the *relations* we experience between them (EPs: 143). The awkward thing about these transitive states – and the reason that previous psychologists had overlooked them – is that they cannot be cognized, and in fact we 'annihilate' them if we try to (EPs: 144). The reason for this is simple – in order to cognize transitive states, we have to take them *statically* rather than *dynamically*, and so we make them into terms rather than into experienced relations. This is not to say that relations cannot be known. James makes clear in this paper that relations come to be known through *feelings* rather than through conception. Just as we might say that we have a feeling of cold, James asserts, we also have 'a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, [and] a feeling of *by*'. These feelings are the conditions of our knowing the 'objective relation[s]' which exist between terms (EPs: 145-146).

According to James, both the classical empiricists and the idealists make the same mistake: they assume that the manifold of feeling is *discontinuous*. The empiricists accept this discontinuity and atomism, whereas the idealists attempt to overcome this discontinuity by introducing a 'supernatural principle' of unity (EPs: 149). James offers a third way – accept that immediate experience is fundamentally continuous. This hypothesis is supported by phenomenological attention to experience, in which we find that our experience is always of a 'pulse' of experience already unified, rather than a manifold of discrete elements waiting to be unified (EPs: 152). As such, in this early paper, we see the basic stance that James will take towards immediate experience and relations throughout his career: that relations are irreducible and real features of our experience, that they are grasped by feeling rather than by conceptual thought, and that immediate experience is fundamentally continuous.

³ See chapters VII, IX, X, and XII of the *Principles*.

⁴ T. H. Green, 'Can There Be a Natural Science of Man?' in January, April, and July editions of *Mind*, 1882. This material would later be republished in Green's *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883). Though James may well have been inspired by these articles, he was not overly impressed by them. In a letter to his colleague Josiah Royce dated 15th of January 1882, James favourably compared Royce's *Mind* article to Green's: 'poor, feeble, dismal, serious Green, how the transcendental ego oppresses him!' (CWJ5: 197). See also MT: 79 for James' reflections on Green's influence on him, and Klein (2009) for a detailed examination of their relationship.

§3. JAMES AND BRADLEY: RADICAL EMPIRICISM AND REAL RELATIONS

I will not spend much time presenting the details of James' radical empiricism here, as other chapters in this collection have already done so. Here, I will just present three features of radical empiricism which are relevant to his disagreement with Bradley, before exploring in detail some of Bradley's concerns and criticisms of the account. The first feature of radical empiricism to note is the reality of relations. As we have seen, James's version of empiricism is 'radical' to the extent that it holds that relations are real because directly experienceable (ERE: 22). Both conjunctive and disjunctive relations are real on this account because they are both 'just as much matters of direct particular experience' as the objects which they relate (MT: 7).

The second feature of radical empiricism to note is the ontological priority of experience. According to radical empiricism, reality is neither fundamentally material, nor fundamentally 'ideal', but fundamentally *experiential*. Experience is the 'one primal stuff' which constitutes reality (ERE: 4). James sometimes refers to the primal state of experience as 'pure', in the sense of pre-conceptual:

'Pure experience' is the name which I [give] to the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material for our later reflection with its conceptual categories. Only new-born babes, or men in semicomatose from sleep, drugs, illnesses, or blows, may be assumed to have an experience pure in the literal sense of a *that* which is not yet any definite *what*, tho ready to be all sorts of whats; full both of oneness and of manyness [...] Pure experience in this state is but another name for feeling or sensation (1905, ERE: 46).

There are a few things to notice about this description: firstly, James separates pure experience from our actual lived experience, in which pure experience is mediated and interpreted through the use of conceptual categories; secondly, pure experience is by its nature pluralistic and yet unified – full of both 'oneness and of manyness'; thirdly, pure experience can be best understood as immediate feeling or sensation. In the next section, we'll see that Bradley shares this interpretation of immediate experience but argues to quite different conclusions from it.

The final feature of James' radical empiricism to note is that experience is neutral between subject and object:

The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the 'pure experience'. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality or existence, a simple *that* (ERE: 13).

Pure experience, before being interpreted by conceptual thought, is neutral between subject and object. James' thesis of pure experience, then, can

understood as a form of ‘neutral monism’ (ERE: 268).⁵ For James, the distinction between object and subject is a functional one, dependent on the relations a piece of experience enters into. Taken in a context with physical objects, an experience functions as an object. Taken in a context with thoughts and personal feelings, the same piece of experience functions as a thought. In itself, however, the experience is neither subject nor object, but *potentially* either. As such, our thought of an object and the object itself are identical when they are the self-same piece of experience taken in two different contexts (ERE: 27).

James’ simple argument for the reality of relations, then, goes something like this:

- (1) The only thing which is real is that which can be experienced (metaphysical premise)
- (2) Relations can be directly experienced as easily as the objects which they relate (phenomenological observation)
- (3) Therefore, relations are as real as anything else (from 1 and 2).

To challenge such a simple argument, one has to challenge one of the two premises. We shall see that Bradley actually accepts (1), but challenges (2) by denying that immediate experience contains relations (§4).

James appeals to relations to do two things. Firstly, relations explain the unity of experience and (therefore) reality, without invoking a transcendental mind. If relations are real and directly experienced parts of reality, then we need no additional feature to provide the continuity which is already present in sensory experience. James calls the union such an account provides ‘*concatenated* union’ as opposed to the ‘through-and-through’ union of absolute idealism. The absolute idealist sees reality united within one mind, experience, or perspective. With James’ concatenated union, reality is united through the relations which obtain between parts of reality – a pluralistic ‘hanging-together’ in which each part is connected by relations to its neighbours, but no one experience unifies everything (ERE: 52).

Secondly, James appeals to relations to explain two features of our cognitive lives: intention and knowledge. In 1885, Josiah Royce had presented an account of intention which required an absolute mind, which knew both our mind and the object which it aimed to represent, so that it could unite them (Royce, 1885: 384-435). James’ position on relations is meant to provide an account of knowledge and intention which is *non-transcendent* and does not require an absolute mind. Consider James’ example of his thinking of Memorial Hall:

If I can lead you to the hall, and tell you of its history and present uses; if in its presence I feel my idea, however imperfect it may have been, to have led hither and to now be *terminated* [... then] [t]hat percept was what I *meant*, for into it my idea has passed by conjunctive experiences of sameness and

⁵ See Erik C. Banks (2014: 88-113) for an exploration of James as a neutral monist.

fulfilled intention. [...] Whatever terminates that chain [of intermediary conjunctive relations] was, because it now proves itself to be, what the concept 'had in mind' (ERE: 29-30).

An idea *means* or *intends* an object, on this view, when the idea and the object are linked by a set of experienceable transitive relations, such that one leads to the other. If successfully led, we find that our idea *knows* its object. Knowledge, in fact, 'can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter' (ERE: 4). To say that my idea intends and knows its object, then, is to say that there exist a chain of conjunctive relations which could be followed, and would terminate in a direct experience of that object such that we discover that our idea is identical with its object - they are the same experience taken in two contexts (ERE: 14).

Let us now turn to Bradley's arguments against James' position. There are two types of argument here - Bradley's general argument against relations, and Bradley's particular arguments against radical empiricism. I will consider the general points first, before turning to Bradley's particular arguments against James.

The practical role of relations - the reason they are given a role in our ontology and our account of perception - is that they both *unite* and *distinguish* disparate elements of experience. Without relations, our experience would either be a pure atomism or an undifferentiated nothing. Bradley's attack on relations deny that they perform this practical role - they fail to unite terms related, and when examined are actually logically self-contradictory.

Bradley's arguments against relations are the most famous feature of his philosophy, so I will simply provide an overview here.⁶ We can think about his arguments as having two prongs: an argument against relations considered to be *external* to the terms related, and an argument against relations considered to be *internal* to the terms related. Bradley thinks that *neither* account works. Here is his argument against external relations:

'There is a relation C, in which A and B stand; and it appears with both of them.' [...] The relation C has been admitted different from A and B [...] Something, however, seems to be said of this relation C, and said again of A and B [...] if so, it would appear to be another relation, D, in which C, on the one side, and, on the other side, A and B, stand. But such a makeshift leads at once to the infinite process [...] Thus the problem is not solved by taking relations to be independently real. For, if so, the qualities and their relation fall entirely apart, and then we have said nothing (AR: 18).

To consider Bradley's point, consider the apple and banana on my desk. If we think that these two objects are related by *similarity* to each other, we might

⁶ See Pierfrancesco Basile (2014), sections 4 and 5, for an accessible account of Bradley's argument against relations, as well as the criticisms of it. See also Mander (2011, Chapter 4).

present the relation like this: AcB . The relation of similarity (c) connects the two terms. However – we have now introduced an additional element: the relation c . How does c connect to A and B ? According to Bradley, we have to posit some additional unifying relation (d) which connects c with A and B : $AcdA$. But now we have added an additional element: d . And so, we need to posit an additional unifying relation (e) to explain how d connects with A , B , and c . As such, this account of relations quickly leads to an infinite regress, and so cannot be accepted as an account of something real.

Rather than considering relations in this external way, we might instead consider relations internally – for instance, when two terms are related by virtue of a shared predicate. Consider my apple and banana again. They are similar insofar as they are both fruit – this is why they are related. However, according to Bradley this account too will result in infinite regress. Two terms – if they are not going to collapse into undifferentiated identity – must be related in some ways (e.g. the predicate fruit) and not related in others (e.g. different colours). So, to relate A with B , we have to distinguish between those aspects of A which are shared with B (a) and those aspects of A which are *not* shared with B (α). But now we have broken A into two aspects: a and α . A question arises as to how these two aspects are unified. If the answer is ‘by a relation’, then we are led to another infinite regress – we must ask how the relation r is connected to a and α , and we must answer by adding another relation *ad infinitum*. And so, ‘[w]e, in brief, are led by a principle of fission which conducts us to no end’ (AR: 26).

Overall, then, Bradley is brought to the following conclusion:

A relational way of thought – any one that moves by the machinery of terms and relations – must give appearance, and not truth. It is a makeshift, a device, a mere practical compromise, most necessary, but in the end most indefensible (AR: 28).

Whatever reality ultimately consists in, it cannot be self-contradictory: ‘[u]ltimate reality is such that it does not contradict itself’. This is an ‘absolute criterion’ of judgement, in the sense that we have to assume in whenever we are making any judgements about reality (AR: 120). According to this absolute criterion, then, relations cannot be a part of ultimate reality as they are self-contradictory. They remain useful and active features of ordinary experience, of course, but we cannot accord them status as ultimately real – they remain, in contrast, mere appearance. The rejection of relations as real also involves the rejection of everything which requires relations, including our concepts of space, time, change, motion, thing, and self (see AR: 30-63). In order to avoid the self-contradiction which relational thinking entails, then, reality must be one non-relational whole. As such, Bradley’s argument against relations lead him to a decidedly Eleatic version of absolute monism.

In 'The Thing and its Relations' (1905), recognising that radical empiricism stands or falls with the thesis that experienceable relations are real, James explicitly seeks to 'rescue radical empiricism from Mr. Bradley' (ERE: 53). The central original point James makes in response to Bradley's rejection of relations seems to concern taking relations as *transitive* parts of experience. When we perform conceptual operations on reality, we isolate and make distinct parts of the sensory flux. When a relation is thus isolated and made discrete, James agrees, it does not perform a unifying function, because it loses the felt continuity of directly experienced relations. But the relation taken as an isolated feature is not incompatible with the continuity of that relation '*as experienced in the concrete*' (ERE: 57). In fact - according to radical empiricism - the relation taken as thought and the relation directly experienced in reality are identical. This will be the crux of James' response to Bradley - that we can *return* to the immediately felt continuity of pure experience to supplement the deficiencies of our conceptually thought relations. We will return to this point in the next section (§4).

Alongside his general rejection of relations, Bradley had some specific criticisms of James' radical empiricism. Most notably, Bradley was wary of James' attempt to provide a non-transcendent account of knowledge and intention by appealing to felt conjunctive relations. Bradley supplies James with a dilemma: either *whatever* experience our ordinary idea happens to terminate in is what that idea *meant*, or our idea must have meant its object before the conjunctive relations were actually followed. Taking the first option would amount to a kind of relativism in which error was impossible, as *any* set of conjunctive relations and *any* terminating percept would validate our ordinary idea. Taking the second option, however, would mean that James had a tacit notion of transcendence, as the idea would have to *mean* its object *before* any actual conjunctive relations were followed:

If the starting-place really *leads*, it is because that place *points*, and, if it really points, then, at once and now, it refers beyond itself [...] [f]rom the very first it plainly is self-transcendent and qualifies an object beyond itself, and needs no process of waiting for something else to happen to it in the future (ETR: 155).

Taking this second option would not involve relativism, but would require the idea transcending the immediate experience in exactly the way in which James is rejecting.

James was unable to answer Bradley's criticism, due to it being published after his death. Nonetheless, whatever answer we might offer on his behalf will have to involve the idea that *potential* relations can constitute knowledge. In fact, James is quite clear that potentially experienceable relations between our idea and its object are sufficient to count for knowledge. We are 'virtual knowers' of the object 'long before we [are] certified to have been its actual knowers' (ERE: 34). Indeed,

James is quite happy to assert that most of our knowledge exists in this virtual state (P: 100) and that – pragmatically at least – ‘virtual and actual truth mean the same thing’ (MT: 60). As such, James seems to accept the idea that ideas ‘transcend’ their immediate experiential context to refer to their objects, so long as that reference is articulated in terms of concrete and experienceable conjunctive relations which would lead from one to the other. Whilst such an account still needs to be developed, it does not immediately impale itself on either of the horns of Bradley’s dilemma.

Bradley does recognise that James can and does appeal to potentiality in his account, but dismisses this as ‘obvious conjuring with delusive terms’ (ETR: 150, see 147, 156). This is because Bradley holds a kind of nominalism about potentiality, in which ‘[t]he possible, as such, exists nowhere at all but in the heads of men’ (PL: 206). In part, this is because he holds the thought that potentiality is real to be contradictory: logically speaking, something is possible insofar as it is not yet real and ceases to be possible when it becomes real (PL: 206). So, potentiality, like relations, are unreal according to Bradley because contradictory (AR: 346). Oddly, despite this, James and Bradley seem to hold very similar accounts of potentiality. Both hold that potentiality should be defined in terms of actual facts, and that a possibility is more or less grounded insofar as its conditions are more or less actualised in reality (P: 136, AR: 343-344). This presents an interesting problem – if James and Bradley *do* share an account of potentiality, then why does James think that potential relations are real and can be constitutive of knowledge, whereas Bradley rejects both theses? There are two interconnected concerns which Bradley can be seen as pushing here: firstly, it is unclear that *potential* relations are experienceable *as* potential – and so they may not legitimately be called real on James’ metaphysical system; secondly, if the vast majority of knowledge consists in unexperienced – and so unreal – relations, how can we *really* have knowledge that is never verified? Whether or not the radical empiricist can adequately answer these concerns, Bradley makes clear to us that radical empiricism stands or falls with its realism about potentiality just as much as it does with its realism about relations.

As this section has shown, the major difference between the two thinkers concerns whether we can appeal to relations – and, indeed, *potential* relations – to do substantial metaphysical and cognitive work. In short – it concerns whether or not relations are real. In the next section, we shall see that this disagreement very much depends for both figures on what can and cannot be said about the immediate experience which reality consists.

§4. JAMES AND BRADLEY: IMMEDIATE EXPERIENCE AND THE ABSOLUTE

There are two central commonalities between James and Bradley's metaphysics: a commitment to the ontological priority of experience, and an anti-intellectualism which holds that concepts cannot adequately grasp this experience. Despite these clear commonalities, however, the two thinkers end in very different positions. In this section, I will present their similarities before exploring how their different interpretations of immediate experience ground their disagreement.

Bradley's commitment to the ontological priority of experience is presented in a way almost identical to James' thesis of pure experience:

Everything phenomenal is somehow real [...] Sentient experience, in short, is reality, and what is not this is not real (AR: 127).

Like James, then, Bradley holds that reality is fundamentally *experiential*. Immediate experience – what James calls 'pure' experience and Bradley sometimes simply calls 'Feeling' – is the foundation of all later forms of thought. Conceptual or relational thought still rests on this 'immediate background' of felt experience (ETR: 178). Also like James, Bradley holds that immediate experience contains an unity of both continuity and diversity, an 'immediate union of the one and many' which is the "ultimate fact" from which we start' (AR: 508). The unity within diversity which is immediately experienced in feeling 'prefigures' or gives us a 'clue' as to the ultimate nature of reality. Immediate experience contains in 'an elemental form' the kind of unity which will 're-emerge in its perfection' in the absolute (Wollheim, 1959: 130, 188).

Ultimately, however, immediate feeling is unstable, and has tensions within it which naturally lead to its division into subject and object, and so to relational thought (ETR: 190). In relational thought, experience is broken into terms and relations, which as we have seen are ultimately contradictory and so unreal (§3). Though Bradley often cites his Hegelian influence, this is one clear deviation from this heritage: a denial that reality can be understood in conceptual thought:

[A] lingering scruple still forbids us to believe that reality can ever be purely rational. It may come from a failure in my metaphysics, or from a weakness of the flesh which continues to blind me, but the notion that existence could be the same as understanding strikes as cold and ghost-like as the dreariest materialism (PL, vol. 2: 590-591)

This is Bradley's anti-intellectualism – his notion that conceptual or relational thought is unable to capture the continuity, diversity, and richness of felt reality. Despite relational thought not being fully real, according to Bradley, it does bring with it demands for truth and knowledge which itself it is unable to satisfy. Our conceptual thought – which makes reality relational and disjointed – cannot provide a satisfactory account of the continuity and diversity of reality. Nor can

we return to immediate experience, according to Bradley, as this too would not satisfy the intellectual demands for truth and knowledge. The only way in which the intellect could be satisfied would be if it were capable of moving to a higher level of experience – *absolute* experience:

‘In one sense I agree that we never can break out and pass beyond feeling. Everything that is real must be felt [...]. But, on the other side, I urge that our felt content is developed in such a way that it goes beyond and conflicts with the form of feeling or mere immediacy. And it is in the character also of this ideal content that we must, I submit, seek to find the full nature of the Real. We must conclude to a higher Reality which at once transcends, and yet re-includes, the sphere of mere feeling’ (ETR: 157).

The absolute represents an experience in which both the continuity and diversity of immediate experience and the intelligibility sought in conceptual experience are both preserved and satisfied. The absolute – for Bradley – is what is ultimately real, because it is non-relational, non-contradictory, preserves the richness of appearances, and is ultimately satisfying to our intellectual natures (see ETR: 237, AR: 114, 431). Nonetheless, the absolute cannot be *thought*, as all thinking involves the mechanism of terms and relations.

In 1909 and 1910, James and Bradley had a final series of exchanges in private correspondence, in which each tried to pinpoint the ground of their metaphysical disagreement. James wrote up and published his side of this correspondence in ‘Bradley or Bergson’ (1909). James, Bradley and Bergson all agree that in the continuity and diversity of immediate feeling we ‘encounter reality’. All three agree that concepts are insufficient to grasp reality because they are incapable of articulating true continuity. But whereas Bergson and James feel able to return to the immediacy felt continuity of experience, Bradley invokes the absolute (EPh: 151-152). In correspondence and in the published paper, James is at a loss to explain *why* Bradley cannot find the unity which eludes thought by returning to immediate experience. James presents the difference between the two as an emotional or temperamental difference (CWJ.12: 374), and explicitly calls the difference between his own experiential pluralism and Bradley’s absolute monism a will to believe choice, in the sense of being grounded in passions rather than pure reason (EPh: 155). From James’ perspective, Bradley is obstinately persisting in an activity which he himself has admitted is futile by seeking ‘some further transformation’ of conceptual thought (CJW.12: 376). The only ‘principle’ which James can discover operating in Bradley is ‘that of doggedly following a line once entered on to the bitterest of ends’ (EPh: 153).

It might appear unfair to Bradley to diagnose his position solely as a kind of stubborn insistence on intellectual thought. In fact, it is more charitable to understand Bradley’s concern with radical empiricism to be much the same as James’ concern about monistic idealism. Both thinkers abhor reductionism. Both thinkers want to provide an account of reality which *preserves* the richness of lived

reality. On Bradley's account, the absolute preserves the richness of appearances and the significance of relational thought (AR: 114). Bradley's concern is that by returning to pure experience to provide an account of ultimate reality, radical empiricism appears to reject or render illusory the relational and conceptual level of experience. For James, on the other hand, a return to immediate experience amounts to 'knowing life in its full thickness and activity' (EPh: 155). The key difference, then, between the two thinkers is rooted in their interpretations of immediate experience.

Why is it - according to Bradley - that we cannot return to pure experience to find the unity lost in conceptual thought? In a posthumously published paper, Bradley addresses this:

[T]o regain this [diversity in unity], we may fall back blindly on a form of experience which in its essence is not relational. We may rest on a covert appeal to experience in the form of mere feeling, to help us beyond our mere abstraction to the result which we need. But any such appeal must be at once illegitimate and suicidal. For the unity of feeling contains no individual terms with relations between them, while without these no experience can be really relational (CE, vol.2: 643)

Bradley's central point, then, is that pre-reflective experience is by definition non-relational. As such, any return to pre-reflective experience would be in effect an abandonment of the elements and aims of relational thought. It would be a kind of 'suicide', or a 'relapse', as he puts it elsewhere, 'into a stage before thinking begins' (AR: 508, see AR: 560). However, for James - as we have seen - immediate experience contains relations. As such, for James nothing important has to be sacrificed by a return to immediate experience.

Bradley accuses James of ambiguity on this score:

I will notice next an ambiguity with regard to the nature of what is experienced. Have we terms and relations given as such, and therefore, as such, ultimately real? Or is what we actually experience, on the contrary, a non-relational whole, a continuous flux, with relative emphases of its diversity, but with no actual relations or terms? Are terms and relations, in a word, abstractions and mere ideal constructions, or are they given realities? The above two views to myself are irreconcilable, and to myself Prof. James seems committed to *both* of them.' (ETR: 150-151).

James clearly and frequently expresses the idea in his radical empiricism that relations are immediately felt parts of pure experience and are therefore real (e.g. ERE: 22-23). For Bradley, this would be incomprehensible - as relations serve more to *disunify* than they do to unify, and so including relations as part of immediate experience would destroy the immediately felt continuity.

The problem with James' position is concretely articulating the idea that we have direct experience of relations. This assertion is problematic for two reasons.

Firstly James, like Bradley, holds that conceptual activity abstracts from immediate experience in a way that is ultimately falsifying to its immediately felt continuity and coherence. But the relations which James typically mentions – nextness, similarity, continuous with, etc. – are clearly conceptual. So, for James to hold that such relations are a part of immediate experience, he would have to hold either that immediate experience contains conceptual elements, or that we can conceptualise relations – unlike any other feature of experience – without distortion. A second, and connected, concern is a ‘myth of the given’ type worry. James appears to be suggesting that pre-reflective and immediate experience can provide us with cognitive content, at least regarding relations. This goes against James’ own rejection of the idea that we have any special intuitive function which can ever identify truth without interpretation (e.g. WB: 33).

I suspect that the best view of James’ position requires that we take seriously two of his commitments: the identity of thought and object, and his realism about potentiality. Consider the following passage:

Far back as we go, the flux [of experience], both as a whole and in its parts, is that of things conjunct and separated. [...] [T]he continuities and the discontinuities are absolutely co-ordinate matters of immediate feeling. The conjunctions are as primordial elements of ‘fact’ as are the distinctions and disjunctions. (ERE: 46).

What is interesting about this passage is that James refrains from directly calling the disjunction and conjunctions felt in pure experience *relations*, but they are clearly what *become interpreted as* relations within conceptual thought. Indeed, James tells us that conjunctions ‘flower out of the stream of pure experience [...] as naturally as nouns and adjectives do, and they melt into it again as fluidly’ (ERE: 47). Like terms, the immediately experienced conjunction, and the idea of relation, are identical if my idea can lead to and seamlessly ‘melt into’ the experience. The thought of a relation and the experience of conjunction are *identical* in this case. Sometimes it is useful to conceptualise, but concepts can never capture the continuity of felt experience. On James’ view, as he expresses it to Bradley, experience and conception should be used like two ‘blades of a pair of scissors’ (Letter to Bradley, 1909, CW.12: 396). Confusion only arises when we expect conception to do something which only experience can do – such as perform the kind of continuity only demonstrated in immediate experience. Another way of putting this is that immediately felt conjunctions and disjunctions are *potentially* relations. Like the relatively stable patches pure experience which become terms, the transitive relations are immediate ‘thats’ but are *ready to become* particular ‘whats’ when conceptual thought is applied. As such, we are *virtual knowers* of the relations when we merely feel the conjunctions – *were* we to bring conceptual thought to bear on that felt experience, *then* we would know them as relations. If we understand James’ view in this way, he is not guilty of ambiguity, or importing conceptual thought into immediate experience, or of ‘myth of the given’ type worries. Though – once again – such a view requires

development, some answer like this shows promise at overcoming Bradley's criticisms.

§6. CONCLUSION

The metaphysical debate between F. H. Bradley and William James is interesting precisely because it is so difficult to pin down exactly upon what grounds the two disagree. Both are committed to the ontological priority of experience, the rejection of atomism, the importance of continuity, and the insufficiency of concepts to grasp reality, and have many other areas of agreement not explicitly explored here. And yet, from this common starting point, Bradley develops a monistic idealism which denies the reality of relations, and James develops a pluralistic empiricism which holds that relations are real, and constitutive of the cohesion of reality.

Other critics have offered accounts of where to locate the vital difference between the two. According to Ralph Barton Perry, it is fundamentally a difference concerning the nature of truth, and whether absolute truth is necessary or even desirable (Perry, 1933 vol.2: 493). According to Robert Stern, the difference is primarily about the role of concepts – whether they serve to give us insight into the nature of reality, or primarily to allow human beings to practically act in the world (Stern, 2009: 337-341). According to T. L. S. Sprigge, the key metaphysical differences involve disagreements on the relative priority of particulars and universals, the nature of relations, and the nature of time and eternity, as well as fundamental ethical differences concerning free will and evil (Sprigge, 1993: 576-580). My aim in this chapter is to draw attention to an additional, and perhaps more fundamental difference between the two: the nature of immediate experience. Whereas James holds that relations are *parts* of immediate experience, Bradley holds that they are *abstractions* from it. From this apparently small distinction, the two develop substantially different metaphysical positions.

This is a vital difference between James and Bradley which – along with other temperamental and ideological commitments – helps explain why they diverged so completely from each other. For James, relations as we conceptualise them are ideal instantiations of the felt continuities and differences immediately felt in experience. Therefore, James held that a return to this immediately felt continuity could supplement the deficits in our conceptual thought. For Bradley, on the other hand, a return to pre-reflective experience would involve an abandonment of everything gained in relational thought – and so would represent a kind of reductive or regressive move which denied a wide swathe of human experience. Further, James was aided by an imperfectly developed appeal to realism about potentiality, which enabled relations to perform the metaphysical and cognitive roles required of them. Bradley, on the other hand, denied the reality of both relations and possibility, and so was unable to accept James' position. His debate

with Bradley, then, reveals more about James' position than either participant realised. Bradley was right: without potentiality, the metaphysical vision James presents in radical empiricism simply will not work. But the exact nature of James' position on relations, experience, and possibility remains to be fully developed. And as Bradley tells us, there is no greater task for serious readers of James than to make an earnest attempt to 'explain and to develop his doctrine of Radical Empiricism' (ETR: 158).

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FURTHER READING

The majority of the major published interactions between James and Bradley can be found in their edited collections: *Essays in Philosophy* in the case of James and *Collected Essays* and *Essays on Truth and Reality* in Bradley's. Those interested in the correspondence between Bradley and James should look at J. C. Kenna (1966) for James' side and R. B. Perry (1936) for Bradley's. Those who are interested in learning more about British Idealism should read W. J. Mander's *British Idealism: A History* (2011), and those interested in Bradley in particular should try to locate Richard Wollheim's *F. H. Bradley* (1959). Of course, anyone interested in either figure or their connection should make sure to consult T. L. S. Sprigge's comprehensive *James and Bradley* (1993).