
James and Hegel: Looking for a Home

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ABSTRACT

Although William James formed his philosophical views in direct reaction to the Hegelianism then dominant in American and British institutions, modern critics have tended to reject James's criticism of G. W. F. Hegel as superficial and outdated. This is in part due to James's energetic rhetorical style, but also because James at his most polemical tends to present his pluralistic empiricism as diametrically opposed to Hegel's idealism, so that it is not clear how the two theories could engage in any meaningful dialogue.

This chapter presents a different interpretation of the engagement between James and Hegel. On this interpretation, James's criticisms of Hegel emerge from what he perceives to be a common starting point: the attempt to find the world to be "a home". As such, James's criticisms of Hegel should be understood as offering a kind of internal critique. According to James, Hegel offers too narrow an account of what it is for beings like us to "feel at home" in the world. This is a unique and internal criticism of Hegel which deserves to be taken seriously.

§1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout his career, William James took G.W.F. Hegel and the British and American idealists influenced by him to be his primary philosophical opponents. His work is littered with references to, and criticisms of, these idealists. However, in the light of contemporary Hegelianism, James's critique might seem as quaint and outmoded as the forms of Hegelianism it is directed against. James paints Hegel as highly metaphysical, absolutist, anti-individualist and intellectualistic, in stark contrast to today's non-metaphysical, humanistic, liberal, and neo-pragmatic Hegel.¹ As a result, one might feel justified in brushing aside James's attacks as just punishment for the fact that he did not engage properly with Hegel's works, instead absorbing them second-hand through the distorting lens of his British and American idealist contemporaries.²

This impatient response is not entirely unjustified. James can appear cavalier, rhetorical, and downright ignorant in some of his comments on Hegel. In fact, James frankly admits that he is not a careful reader of Hegel's philosophy, in part due to the obscurity of his writing.³ In a way that can frustrate modern readers, James spends more time engaging with absolute idealism as a broad metaphysical vision than he does criticizing the technical details of Hegel's philosophy. He does so for two reasons. James was often writing for popular audiences, and as such was wary of delving into the technical details of the philosophies he examined. But, more importantly, James was primarily interested in broad philosophical visions and their pragmatic consequences, rather than in the abstract minutiae of philosophical argumentation. As such, we generally find James engaging with the absolute idealist mindset as a whole, the set of values and presuppositions which support it, and the practical ramifications it entails.⁴

¹ This "new" Hegel is to be found in the work of Robert Pippin, Terry Pinkard, Robert Brandom, and many others, and may be said to constitute the current orthodoxy—which, of course, does not mean it is without critics.

² This sense of dissatisfaction might explain the relatively small number of published studies on the Hegel-James relationship. Of this small number, the following are the most notable: Wilkins (1956); Reeve (1970); Cook (1977); Morse (2005); and Schultz (2015). There is also a brief but useful discussion of James's response to Hegel in Kaag and Jensen (2017).

³ In one letter to George W. Howison in 1893, James complains that – though he agrees with some aspects of Hegel's vision – he "can't follow Hegel in any of his applications of detail" and that "his manner is pure literary deformity" (quoted in Perry 1935 I, 774). And as late as 1909, James is still complaining about the "intolerable ambiguity, verbosity, and unscrupulousness of [Hegel's] way of deducing things" (PU, 1909, 52).

⁴ In *A Pluralistic Universe*, James goes so far as to claim that "I do not [. . .] take Hegel's technical apparatus seriously at all," aiming instead to focus on "the generalized vision, and feel the authority of the abstract scheme" (PU, 1909, 51–53).

A second, connected problem with James's engagement with Hegel is that James generally leveled his criticism against absolute idealism as a whole movement, and was often broadly indiscriminate about which of the idealists his criticisms applied to. James did not see Hegel as an isolated intellectual figure, but as the origin (more so even than Kant) of a whole philosophical school, which at the time included most of the significant thinkers in America and Britain. It is therefore not really possible to study James's arguments against Hegel on their own, set as they are against the background of his engagement with American and British idealists such as W. T. Harris, Josiah Royce, F. H. Bradley, T. H. Green, and a host of related figures. James read Hegel through these figures, and often his criticisms seem more relevant to them than they do to Hegel himself. As we shall see, however, when James does make a distinction between Hegel and the other idealists, it is usually to the benefit of Hegel.⁵

With these problems in mind, it is easy to see James as a poor reader of Hegel, and his critique as an external and crude one. Indeed, James often appears to be setting up his own philosophy as diametrically opposed to Hegel, as he reads him. Hegel is presented as rationalistic, intellectualist, absolutist and monistic, in comparison to James's empiricist, experimentalist, fallibilist, and pluralistic position. Seen in this light, it may seem that there is little to be gained from the encounter between the two, as each side will simply largely talk past the other.

However, in this chapter we suggest that James's criticism in fact emerges from what he perceives as a common starting point, so that James offers something more like an internal critique of Hegel on the basis of what he saw as their shared project. This common ground is identified early on in *A Pluralistic Universe*, where James quotes Hegel as saying that "[t]he aim of knowledge is to divest the objective world of strangeness, and to make us more at home in it" (PU 1909,10).⁶ In this attempt to be at home in the world, James presents Hegel and the absolute idealists as being far closer to his own position than either materialism or theism (PU 1909, 16-19). And as "being at home in the world" is taken to be the aim of both idealism and James's empiricism, success or failure in reaching this aim is presented as a pragmatic test of the competing metaphysical visions. In what follows, we will attempt to unpack what this notion of "being at home in the world" amounts to for James, and argue that this

⁵ In a letter to Josiah Royce in 1880, for instance, James claims that he has a growing "prejudice against all Hegelians, except Hegel himself" (quoted in Perry 1935 I, 787).

⁶ This translation is taken from William Wallace's 1873 Oxford University Press edition, a copy of which James owned and annotated (Hegel 1873/1975: §194 Addition 1, 261; cf. PU 1909, 166, editors' notes, where the date of the edition is wrongly given as 1874). The translation is not quite accurate, however, and the "home" metaphor is not there in German; but Hegel expresses himself this way elsewhere, for example: "'I' is at home in the world when it knows it, and even more so when it has comprehended it" (Hegel 1991, §4 Addition, 36).

common ground gives James's criticisms of Hegel a depth which they might otherwise seem to lack.

James's sustained and explicit criticism of Hegel himself appears in two essays written at either end of his philosophical career. The first is his essay "On Some Hegelisms," which was written in 1881, published in *Mind* in 1882, and reprinted with some alterations in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* in 1897. The second appears in *A Pluralistic Universe*, published in 1909 and based on his Hibbert Lectures given in Oxford the previous year. The fact that both were originally presented as popular lectures and writings lends James's discussion of Hegel a breezy, rhetorical character. This is particularly true of "On Some Hegelisms," in which James addressed Hegel and his followers with a "superficiality" that he would later apologize for (WB 1897, 9). This paper was delivered first to the Hegel class of George Herbert Palmer (1842–1933), a colleague of James's at Harvard. James's aim in giving it was apparently "to leave as disrespectful an impression [of Hegel] on the minds of the students as possible, Palmer having all the rest of the year to himself to wipe it out" (letter to W. T. Harris, 1882, CWJ 5.205). His goal in having it published in *Mind* was similarly to stir controversy, as the editor, G. Croom Robertson, happily acknowledged, while noting with disappointment afterward that it had failed to provoke the Hegelians into a response (letters from G. Croom Robertson, 1881 and 1882, CWJ 5.181–182 and 226–227). While considerably more measured and respectful, the treatment of Hegel in *A Pluralistic Universe* was still written to entertain an audience, though one for whom Hegel is seen as less of a wicked temptation and more as a dead (or at least dying) dog, allowing James to be more magnanimous in his tone (PU 1909: 7). Nonetheless, this is still far from a sober and sombre academic study, and at least one correspondent complained that "[y]ou take your Hegel impressionistically."⁷

Despite the rhetoric and jocularly, however, there seems little doubt that James intended his engagement with Hegel to be taken seriously. James's essential concerns with Hegel's idealism remain constant, and it is clear that his respect for him increased over time.⁸ As will become evident in the next section, outside of these central texts, throughout his career James frequently returns to Hegel as a touchstone, as an opponent, and, very occasionally, as an ally.

⁷Henry Norman Gardiner to James, 1909 (CWJ 12.321).

⁸As Burleigh Taylor Wilkins puts it, "in time James came to treat Hegel more as a philosopher than as a protagonist in a street brawl" (Wilkins 1956, 339).

§2. THE ROOTS OF JAMES'S CRITICISM OF HEGEL

Throughout his career, James consistently presents philosophy's task as attempting to formulate an account of the universe so that it appears "rational." As philosophers, James puts it in "The Sentiment of Rationality," we aim to "attain a conception of the frame of things which shall on the whole be more rational than the fragmentary and chaotic one which everyone by gift of nature carries about with [them]" (WB 1897, 57). However, exactly what it means to find the world a rational place is more complicated than we might at first think. In his early papers, James is clear that the rationality of a conception is not a self-evident property of it, but is only recognized by "certain subjective marks," such as a "strong feeling of ease, peace [and] rest" (WB 1897, 57). These subjective marks indicate that we "feel at home" in the world (WB 1897, 96).

We should not be too concerned about James's appeal to subjective states as marks of what is rational. James is careful never to equate what is rational with what would give us subjective satisfaction, but rather only asserts that our subjective satisfactions are marks of a concept's rationality. This fits in with his broader pragmatism in two ways: the thought that the working of a concept is the best mark of its truth, understood as its agreement with reality (see, for instance, MT 1909, 106); and the broad pragmatist model of inquiry, shared with Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey, which sees inquiry as the attempt to overcome real doubt, understood as a kind of unease or an incapacity to practically continue. With this in mind, we can make sense of James's picture of what philosophy is meant to achieve:

[A]ny view of the universe which shall completely satisfy the mind must obey conditions of the mind's own imposing [. . .] Not any nature of things which may seem to be will also seem to be ipso facto rational; and if it do[es] not seem rational, it will afflict the mind with a ceaseless uneasiness, till it be formulated or interpreted in some other and more congenial way (WB 1897, 99-100).

The aim of our philosophical theorizing, then, is to find an account of the universe which will allow us a certain "fluency" of thought, rather than its interruption by doubt (WB 1897, 58). It is this picture of philosophy's task as finding the world to be a rational place which James takes himself and Hegel to share, and by which he assesses the latter. Being "at home" in the world, for James, thus seems to mean finding it rational in this sense: being able to live, act, and think in the world in a way that does not lead to us encountering severe disappointment, doubt, or other impediments.

James offers several different formulations of what would count as a rational philosophical account of the universe in his early papers. In "Reflex Action and Theism" (1881), James suggests that a rational account of the universe must appeal

to the operation of sensation, conception, and action, as different facets of our engagement with reality, and that any philosophy which does not appeal to each of these in some regard would become, at best, “the creed of some partial sect” (WB 1897, 100). In “The Sentiment of Rationality” (1879/1882), James separates our practical and our intellectual needs in finding the world rational. The intellectual aspect finds satisfaction in simplifying the world and finding identities between apparently disparate things (WB 1897, 58), and the practical aspect aims to keep things distinct, and to be “acquainted with the parts rather than to comprehend the whole” (WB 1897, 59). Our aim should be to “balance” these two “cravings” (ibid.). Another formulation of what it is to find the world a rational place is found in “The Dilemma of Determinism” (1884). Here, James separates an idea or conception having rationality in the sense of meeting our logical or intellectual demands; rationality in the sense of meeting our mechanical, practical, or scientific needs; and rationality in the sense of meeting our moral requirements. None of these, thinks James, should have precedence, each demand being “quite as subjective and emotional as the other” (WB 1897, 116).

Though these formulations differ, several things remain constant. In each case, finding the world to be a rational place is understood as involving several different aspects of our natures, limited not merely to intellectual comprehension, but also involving a practical (and in the 1884 formulation, a moral) engagement with reality. In each formulation, James suggests that a good philosophy needs to provide an account which satisfies or balances all of these different needs. And in each account, Hegel is presented as an example of a thinker who does not aim for this balance, but instead privileges just one aspect of our engagement with reality: the intellectual.

By privileging the intellectual need, Hegel’s “intellectualist” account results in several features, according to James. It privileges unity and simplicity over particularity and distinctness. It aims to satisfy our need to understand the world over our need to act within it. Further, it aims to understand the world completely, for “if the universe is reasonable [. . .] it must be susceptible, potentially at least, of being reasoned out to the last drop without residuum” (WB 1897, 108). As a result, the aim of the intellectualist account is to provide a system whereby everything is unified in a whole, ending in the apprehension of a “universal concept” or “absolute datum” (WB 1897, 62; 63). Finally, such a philosophy has a tendency to see the universe as already complete, finished and perfect, and our own contribution to be merely that of bringing this rational whole to consciousness, rather than contributing at all to the makeup of reality (SPP 1910, 111). Our practical or moral engagement with reality will be seen, at best, as purposeful only insofar as it can further our theoretical comprehension of the universe (WB 1897, 109). As such, the intellectualist will tend to be a rationalist and a monist. In this thought lies the core of James’s critique of

Hegel: according to James, Hegel privileges the intellectual, and denies the practical, in his account of how we are to find the world a rational place.

We will now consider in further depth how this issue underpins James's mature engagement with Hegel in *A Pluralistic Universe*, and consider how far James's critique of Hegel on this issue should be taken seriously. James's strategy in *A Pluralistic Universe* is twofold, and we shall consider each aspect in turn. First, James attempts to negate arguments for the logical necessity of absolute idealism (the first section below III), and then James considers the plausibility of the concept of the absolute taken as a hypothesis, judged against the criterion of "feeling at home" (the next section). After this, we shall return to James's early papers to detail the differences between Hegel's and James's accounts of feeling at home in the world (the final section).

§3. AGAINST THE LOGICAL NECESSITY OF ABSOLUTE IDEALISM

When James returns to seriously engage with Hegel in *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), it is to contrast his own metaphysical system with Hegel's absolute idealism. James's "radical empiricism" is a vision of the universe which is pluralistic and empiricist, and so sharply distinct from the monism and rationalism of Hegel's system. The common criterion by which James compares these two metaphysical hypotheses is "intimacy"—a notion which has replaced the prior notion of "rationality" (PU 1909, 144-145). Intimacy is contrasted with "foreignness" and is a measure of how at home in the world a particular philosophy allows us to feel. This is not, for James, a merely abstract measurement, but one which carries serious pragmatic weight:

From a pragmatic point of view the difference between living against a background of foreignness and one of intimacy means the difference between a general habit of wariness and one of trust (PU 1909, 19).⁹

Early on in *A Pluralistic Universe*, James repeats his claim that both he and Hegel take philosophy's aim to be, in part, allowing us to feel at home in the world. Though he recognizes that "[d]ifferent men find their minds more at home in very different fragments of the world" (PU 1909, 10), we should not lose sight of this common aim:

[A]ll such differences are minor matters which ought to be subordinated in view of the fact that [. . .] we are, ourselves, parts of the universe and share the one deep concern in its destinies. We crave alike to feel more truly at home in it,

⁹ David C. Lamberth is one interpreter who places James's notion of "intimacy" as central to his philosophical project. See Lamberth (1997) and (1999), especially Chapter 4.

and to contribute our mite to its amelioration. It would be pitiful if small aesthetic discords were to keep honest men asunder (PU 1909, 11).

This common aim not only unifies differing philosophies, but it also provides a criterion of assessment. James very quickly rejects materialism and theism as not meeting this criterion, and presents his own thesis and monistic idealism as the only accounts of reality offering sufficient intimacy. In this sense, James presents himself and Hegel as aligned in project and vision, and as differing only in the form which an intimate view of the universe should take. Whereas monistic idealism will hold that the true form of reality should be conceived of as a rational whole, to be accessed through reason alone, James will take the world to have no such “all-form,” and reality to be accessed primarily through experience. We will return to this broad distinction in the next section.

However, while James thinks that it is on the question of intimacy that the real issue between absolute idealism and radical empiricism really turns, he recognizes that absolute idealists also offer a priori arguments for their position. So, before assessing the two metaphysical theses in light of the common criterion of intimacy, James must defuse absolute idealism’s apparent claim to be logically necessary.

In his lecture on “Monistic Idealism,” James clearly lays out the common argumentative trajectory which he sees Josiah Royce, F.H. Bradley, Hermann Lotze, and all “post-Kantian absolutism” to have taken. These thinkers start from a position he is happy to share, but end in a position which holds the absolute as logically necessary:

First, there is a healthy faith that the world must be rational and self-consistent. “All science, all real knowledge, all experience presuppose,” as Mr. Ritchie writes, “a coherent universe.” Next, we find a loyal clinging to the rationalist belief that sense-data and their associations are incoherent, and that only in substituting a conceptual order for their order can truth be found. Third, the substituted conceptions are treated intellectualistically, that is as mutually exclusive and discontinuous, so that the first innocent continuity of the flow of sense-experience is shattered for us without any higher conceptual continuity taking its place. Finally, since this broken state of things is intolerable, the absolute *deus ex machina* is called on to mend it in his own way, since we cannot mend it in ours (PU 1909, 38).

Though James does not mention Hegel at this point, this line of thought is strikingly similar to one attributed by him to Hegel in “On Some Hegelisms” some twenty-seven years previously (WB 1897, 198ff). When James turns to Hegel in 1909, however, in the lecture titled “Hegel and His Method,” he is careful to separate Hegel from the other absolute idealists in light of this passage. As such, it is worth dwelling

on this passage in some detail, to bring out the ways that James differentiated between Hegel and his followers in his criticisms of absolute idealism.

The line of thought begins with the claim that we aim to find the world rational and self-consistent. This is merely the assertion of the philosophical project which James sees as unifying himself and the Hegelians.¹⁰ However, things start to go wrong at the second step.

According to James, Hegel has two central features to his monistic idealism: “[t]he first part [is] that reason is all-inclusive, the second [is] that things are ‘dialectic’” (PU 1909, 44). Perhaps surprisingly, James agrees with both when sufficiently limited. James takes the first point to be a commitment to holism, the claim that “[t]he full truth about anything involves more than that thing. In the end nothing less than the whole of everything can be the truth of anything at all” (PU 1909, 45). In “On Some Hegelisms,” James held that a commitment to a modest holism was “an integral part of empiricism, an integral part of common-sense” and, we might add, an integral part of pragmatism (WB 1897, 206). The second, dialectical claim, on James’s account, concerns a fundamentally empirical truth that within our experience nothing is ever perfectly stable or complete. James goes as far as to suggest that this is a great empirical truth to which Hegel brought philosophy’s attention:

What, then, is the dialectic method? It is itself a part of the hegelian vision or intuition, and a part that finds the strongest echo in empiricism and common sense. Great injustice is done to Hegel by treating him as primarily a reasoner. He is in reality a naively observant man [. . .]. He plants himself in the empirical flux of things, and gets the impression of what happens (PU 1909, 44).¹¹

As such, James approves of both central facets of Hegel’s philosophy, when “taken in the rough” as empirical claims. The mistake comes, on James’s view, when the Hegelian begins to interpret these empirical results conceptually.

It is this move from the empirical to the conceptual which marks the second step of our paragraph. Hegelians find sense experience insufficient for providing the kind of rationality they are looking for, which they think can only be found in a substituted conceptual order. Despite his keen observational sense, James thinks that Hegel was not satisfied with a merely empirical philosophy, but wanted to have his philosophy be a “product of eternal reason,” to work via logic and a priori reasoning (PU 1909, 46). For James, this is a mistake for two reasons. Firstly, because experience can provide us with the unity we are looking for, as long as we do not have the desire for

¹⁰James O. Pawelski, in contrast to this interpretation, contends that James argues against “every step” of this argument for the necessity of the absolute, including this first one (2007, 85).

¹¹ Morse points out that James was actually quite prescient in this interpretation: “in light of more recent Hegel research that has managed to be quite fair to Hegel’s position, James himself initially exhibits a remarkably accurate sense of Hegel’s basic standpoint” (Morse 2005, 200).

total unity. Secondly, because the idealist's treatment of concepts means that we further dis-unify our experience by treating it conceptually.

The first point first. James's own metaphysics is built on the idea that we do not need to appeal to any non-experiential forces when giving a unified account of our reality. The universe of our experience is unified through conjunctive and disjunctive relations, which are themselves experiential (ERE 1904, 22). In this way, the universe "hangs together" by the edges, rather than being unified by one overarching substance, idea or agency.¹² Moreover, our experience taken in its immediacy is not simple, but already has a complexity and a connection to other "pulses" of experience. James suggests that in some way, we can see each portion of experience acting "as its own other," in the sense that "no part absolutely excludes another, but [...] they compenetrates and are cohesive" (PU 1909, 121). As such, James's assertion is that experience, treated correctly, can provide the (moderate) need for unity and the (moderate) need for holism that Hegel requires. It is only because the absolute idealists are intellectualists, and think that total or absolute unity is required for us to feel at home in the world, that Hegel and his followers think that the world of sense is not sufficient for meeting this need.

The second reason James thinks that it is a mistake to move from the experiential to the conceptual realm when seeking unity is that James thinks that the intellectualist is constrained to think of concepts as "mutually exclusive and discontinuous." As such, moving to a conceptual way of treating our experience results in less rather than more unity, as experiential elements which are conceptually distinguished are treated as being necessarily or essentially distinct. This is the third step of our paragraph. James calls the treatment of experience via concepts which are mutually exclusive and discontinuous the mistake of "vicious intellectualism" (PU 1909, 32). The mistake occurs when we assume "that a concept excludes from any reality conceived by its means everything not included in the concept's definition" (PU 1909, 52). Such reasoning, to take James's tongue-in-cheek example, results in suggesting that "a person whom you have once called an 'equestrian' is thereby forever made unable to walk on his own feet" (PU 1909, 32). As a result of treating the world conceptually in this way, Lotze, Royce, and Bradley are not able to account for how these conceptually distinct properties can ever be unified. This leads them to the fourth step of the line of thought presented earlier: the invocation of a kind of *deus ex machina* in the form of a trans-experiential agent of unity: the Absolute. On James's analysis, then, it is the conceptual separation of our experience into mutually exclusive and discontinuous parts which leads the Hegelians to the conclusion that the absolute is a logical necessity.

¹² James calls this the difference between a "concatenated" unity and a total, or "through-and-through," type of unity (ERE 1905, 52).

However, Hegel himself did not have precisely this problem, according to James. Hegel does not need to invoke a semi-divine absolute to unify our conceptualized experience, because Hegel moved past the logic of identity, which saw that concepts could only be related by sameness, and moved onto the thought that concepts “are identical with themselves: but only identical in so far as at the same time they involve distinction” (Hegel 1873/1975, §115 Addition, 168; quoted by James PU 1909, 47).¹³ Hegel’s most profound originality, for James, lay in transporting his dialectical vision of empirical reality to the sphere of concepts:

Concepts were not in his eyes the static self-contained things that previous logicians had supposed, but were germinative, and passed beyond themselves into each other by what he called their immanent dialectic. In ignoring each other as they do, they virtually exclude and deny each other, he thought, and thus in a manner introduce each other. (PU 1909, 46)

Hegel therefore does not require the invocation of an absolute mind to unify the world treated conceptually, because for Hegel it is the mutual exclusivity of concepts themselves which provide their own continuity. James sees Hegel as finding the unity he is searching for through their disunity, by a kind of determination by negation. By concepts excluding each other, they must refer to each other, and so in some sense include each other in their identities. As each concept does this, we unify the world into an absolute through their contradiction and negation (PU 1909, 52). In this sense, Hegel is meant to offer a unique, but vivid, example of vicious intellectualism, though one which does not require the agency of the absolute as a unifying mind. So the main difference between Hegel and the other idealists for James is that Hegel does not appeal to an absolute mind; rather, Hegel’s absolute emerges from the dialectical movement of concepts.¹⁴

To sum up, James thinks that any a priori argument for absolute idealism fails because it makes two key mistakes: (a) it assumes that experience is not rationally satisfying; and (b), it assumes that concepts are at some level “mutually exclusive and discontinuous.” In contrast, James thinks that experience is sufficiently unified and coherent, and that the shift to the conceptual level is not required. We can see this in James’s interpretation of Hegel’s holism and dialectical methodology as primarily empirical insights. So, James’s analysis at this stage is supposed to serve two purposes: it defuses monistic idealism’s claims to logical necessity, and it shows that the enterprise of monistic idealism is predicated on a certain suspect treatment of both experience and concepts.

¹³ A more accurate translation is given in Hegel (2010, 179): “To be sure, the concept and, further, the idea are self-identical, but only insofar as they contain the difference in themselves at the same time.”

¹⁴ See Slater (2014) for a more detailed analysis of James’s criticism of Royce and the other Anglophone idealists.

How compelling is James's critique of Hegel in these respects? Firstly, considering (a), it may appear that James's worry is justified up to a point. It seems that, in Hegel's treatment of the relation between experience and conception, we often find him privileging the conceptual. In support of this reading, James quotes a passage from Hegel's discussion of the ontological argument in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, which he takes to give us a vital insight into Hegel's "central thought" and "vision":

It would be strange if the Notion, the very heart of the mind, or, in a word, the concrete totality we call God, were not rich enough to embrace so poor a category as Being, the very poorest and most abstract of all—for nothing can be more insignificant than Being (quoted by James 1909, PU, 44).¹⁵

And James might perhaps have continued by citing the rest of this passage as evidence for his interpretation (switching to a more recent translation):

Only this much may be more trivial, namely, what one first imagines somehow with respect to being, such as an external, sensory existence like that of the paper here in front of me. But after all, no one will want to talk about the sensory existence of a limited, transient thing.¹⁶

Here, it seems, we find expressed just the kind of lofty Platonic contempt for mere "external, sensory existence" that James identifies as typical of Hegel; and James could also have cited evidence for it elsewhere, had he wanted to. For example, in an important passage from *The Science of Logic*, Hegel writes that "[t]he idealism of philosophy consists in nothing else than in recognizing that the finite has no veritable being," and that by virtue of recognizing this "[e]very philosophy is essentially an idealism."¹⁷ Similar examples can be multiplied, so James's misgivings would seem to have more than adequate textual support.

And yet, in a way that critics find so frustrating, it is not clearly the case that Hegel's position is as simple as these various passages suggest, for they arguably represent but one side of a more nuanced view, which must at least be taken into account before pronouncing on the effectiveness of James's critique. Perhaps the most important point to make on Hegel's behalf is that these sort of passages come in a context in which Hegel is himself trying to administer a corrective to those who themselves one-sidedly decry the significance of concepts and thought to our metaphysics and epistemology, as if "mere experience" of things in purely sensory terms might be enough to give us an adequate grasp of the world around us, and as if any process of thinking and conceptualization must involve a distorting abstraction away from what

¹⁵Cf. Hegel (1873/1975 §51, 85).

¹⁶Hegel 2010, 101.

¹⁷Hegel (1969, 154–155). For an equivalent passage in Hegel (2010, see §95, 152): "Thus, too, finitude is at first determined in terms of reality. But the truth of the finite is rather its ideality. . . . This ideality of the finite is the chief proposition of philosophy, and every true philosophy is for that reason idealism."

is fundamentally real in this respect. Against such positions (which had defenders in Hegel's time, as well as in James's and our own), Hegel is keen to stress the positive role thought and concepts can play in giving us knowledge of the world, and the metaphysics required to make sense of this—namely, a form of conceptual realism which treats substance-kinds and laws, for example, as fundamentally real. Thus, while Hegel's rhetoric in this context may sound a Platonic note at times, many other passages make clear he would be closer to a more Aristotelian view that treats these conceptual structures as embodied in the world, rather than subsisting in some ideal and transcendent realm of pure abstractions.¹⁸

Turning now to point (b), concerning James's criticisms of Hegel's treatment of concepts as related through negation, James's points seem to apply best to Hegel's account of concepts at the level of Being, where the "determination by negation" principle is used most and where he characterizes the relation between categories or "thought-determinations" as one of "transition" or "going over" (Übergehen): but later levels in the Logic of Essence and Concept treat concepts as inherently more interrelated, without any "atomistic" moment to be overcome, characterized in terms of "reflection in the other" (Scheinen in Anderes) and "development" (Entwicklung), respectively, such that the categories of the "concept" (Begriff) are understood as each requiring the others in a holistic manner. James would therefore seem to have mischaracterized the way that Hegel's dialectic works and the way he conceives of the relation between the higher categories.¹⁹

However, even if these points in Hegel's defense are successful, we might think that James could nonetheless concede these replies without damaging his overall case: for, in effect, they mean that Hegel does not subscribe to the premises that the a priori argument for the absolute was said to require. He must therefore argue for the absolute not on a priori grounds after all, but on other grounds, namely, that it is most likely to allow us to feel at home in the world. For James, this is to offer the absolute as a kind of hypothesis, and for its validity to be assessed by how well it fulfils this role of allowing us to feel "at home." It is to this way of deciding the issue between James and Hegel that we now turn.

§4. RATIONALISM AND MONISM

Having dealt to his satisfaction with what he takes to be *a priori* proofs for absolute idealism, James is now free to treat his own position and absolute idealism as co-

¹⁸ For more on this reading of Hegel's Idealism, see Stern (2009, 45-76).

¹⁹ Cf. Hegel (2010, §161, 234).

ordinate metaphysical hypotheses, to be assessed in part by how rational they allow us to find the world, or how “at home” they allow us to feel:

The great claim made for the absolute is that by supposing it we make the world appear more rational. Any hypothesis that does that will always be accepted as more probably true than an hypothesis that makes the world appear irrational. Men are once and for all so made that they prefer a rational world to believe in and to live in. (PU 1909, 54–55)

James’s central claim, when the problem is understood in this way, is that a monistic and rationalistic system of the sort James takes Hegel to be committed to cannot provide a sufficiently intimate philosophy, and will leave us alienated from the world in which we are attempting to feel at home. We can treat the accusation of monism and the accusation of rationalism separately, though James saw them as clearly linked. The monistic claim is commonly expressed by James as the view that there is a total form, or an “all-form” to the universe, contrasted to James’s own pluralistic standpoint in which “no single point of view can ever take in the whole scene” (WB 1897, 136). The rationalistic claim is that the real nature of the universe can be exhaustively described conceptually, with nothing relevant being lost.

The difference between monism and pluralism is one of form. In *A Pluralistic Universe*, James suggests that the major difference between his own philosophy and any monistic idealism is that the latter privileges unity and totality, holding that the “all-form” is the real form of reality, whereas his own account holds that “a distributive form of reality, the each-form, is logically as acceptable and empirically as possible as the all-form” (PU 1909, 20). We should understand the “all-form” to be essentially what James means by “the absolute.” It is for this reason that “monistic idealism” and “absolute idealism” are used interchangeably in these lectures. James’s suggestion, contra the absolutist, is that the “each-form” is sufficient for our empirical needs, and for finding the world to be a rational place.

First, what precisely does James mean by “the absolute”? James spends a good deal of time describing the properties he takes the absolute to have, but because he rarely distinguishes between different versions of absolute idealism, it is hard to tell which properties he takes to be applicable to which accounts. For an idealist like Royce, the absolute is a kind of mind active in unifying the universe. For Hegel, the absolute is some kind of final or total fact, the universe seen as an organic whole. Though we can find upward of sixteen different properties attributed to the hypothesis of the absolute in these lectures, the properties most relevant to James’s conception, and definitely attributed to Hegel, are the following: that the universe can be successfully understood as one total fact, or as having an “all-form” (PU 1909, 21); that this one fact has no environment, that there is nothing outside of itself (*ibid.*); that we are to understand the absolute as being mind, minded, or mind-like (PU 1909, 22); that the

universe qua absolute is complete, perfect, and timeless (PU 1909, 22); that the absolute denies chance or contingency any real role in the universe (PU 1909, 39); and that the universe qua absolute has no “history” (PU 1909, 22). Finite beings have history insofar as they impact on one another, help or hinder each other, whereas the absolute “neither acts nor suffers, nor loves nor hates; it has no needs, desires, or aspirations, no failures or successes, friends or enemies, victories or defeats” (PU 1909, 27). As such, it “stands outside of history” (PU 1909, 28).

Monists will claim that it is only by comprehending the universe in its “all-form” that we can come to see it as rational. As James puts it, understanding the world as an absolute in this way produces a “spherical system,” a world with no outside, and “with no loose ends hanging out for foreignness to get a hold upon” (PU 1909, 51). As James contrasts “foreignness” with “intimacy,” we might think that James here is conceding that conceiving the world under the absolute hypothesis allows us to feel most at home within it. But, in fact, James finds such an interpretation of the world wanting on grounds of intimacy, for reasons continuous with his earlier concerns.

To demonstrate this, we can return to James’s multifarious notion of rationality. Toward the end of his lecture on Hegel, once he takes himself to have refuted the logical necessity of absolute idealism, and before he supersedes the notion of rationality with intimacy, James introduces the following distinction:

[R]ationality has at least four dimensions, intellectual, aesthetical, moral, and practical; and to find a world rational to the maximal degree in all these respects simultaneously is no easy matter (PU 1909, 55).

Once again, we find the assertion that different philosophies attempt to meet these differing demands for rationality in different ways, but that the aim should be to provide an account which “will yield the largest balance of rationality” (PU 1909, 55). James’s more subtle evolution of his earlier accusation that Hegel privileges only one of the competing demands of rationality is that Hegel does not succeed in balancing these competing dimensions.

Firstly, James concedes that the absolute idealist hypothesis is aesthetically rational, in the sense that the human mind tends to find unity more aesthetically pleasing than disunity. Secondly, although it is an intellectualist thesis, James claims that the absolute is intellectually obscure, once we deny (as James takes himself to have done) its logical necessity (PU 1909, 55-57). Finally, practically and morally, the thesis of the absolute fares worse. Practically, the hypothesis of the absolute is “useless,” in the sense that it cannot offer any predictions about experiential events, though it will subsequently “adopt” these events into its theory. It is, James tells us, a “hypothesis that functions retrospectively only, not prospectively” (PU 1909, 61). Morally, the thesis of absolutism brings with it a speculative problem of evil, and a license to take

“moral holidays.” Let us consider each of these objections regarding practicality and morality in more detail.

Though we might suspect such a speculative problem of evil will bother only those theorists who understand the absolute as a kind of active mind, there is a broader way of articulating this concern. James is struck by the fact that the universe qua absolute and the universe qua finite beings have wildly different properties. Whereas the finite beings suffer, strive, and value the world, the universe as a whole does not. “The absolute” is final, complete, and finished, and has no environment in which to strive. As such, James thinks the monistic hypothesis often engenders a feeling of alienation from the universe as a whole. Qua absolute, the universe is perfect and complete, and has overcome all evil and error. “On the ground,” though, in our own experiences, we find evil and error in abundance, and so find ourselves alienated from the universe as a whole. This discordance or “lack of fit” between ourselves as finite entities, and the universe understood as absolute, is what constitutes this sense of alienation or foreignness. We cannot feel intimate with, or at home in, a reality which is so removed from our own concerns. In a pluralistic conception, on the contrary, the “problems that evil presents are practical, not speculative” (PU 1909, 60).

Turning now to the second objection, by “moral holidays,” James means the capacity to take a kind of rest from the problems of our moral lives. This issue once again stems from the idea of the all-form as complete, and as having no history, in the sense of interactions with finite beings such as ourselves. If the absolute is already complete and perfect, we can relax our concerns about making the world a better place. At its best, this license to take moral holidays may satisfy the need in us to rest once in a while, to put the success of our moral interests in hands other than our own. In this sense, it could be seen as a strength of the absolutist position (see P 1906, 42-44; MT 1909, 123ff). At worst, however, such an approach negates any need to adopt the “strenuous” attitude in our moral lives. Under the absolutist hypothesis, seeing as the universe is already perfect and complete, and our actions can make no real difference to it, we have no reason to act morally.²⁰ We will return to this idea in the next section.

Now let us look at James’s criticisms of rationalism, insofar as they differ from his criticisms of monism. In James’s sense, rationalism either means prioritizing the whole above the part, in which case it is very close to monism, or the belief that reality can and should always be understood conceptually. This latter line of thought is often found in Hegel, for instance in this introduction to the *Encyclopedia Logic*, in which he claims that “the true content of our consciousness is preserved in its translation

²⁰ See, for instance, James’s discussion of the problems of Gnosticism and Romanticism in “Dilemma of Determinism” (WB 1897, 128-132).

into the form of thought and the concept, and indeed only then placed in its proper light.”²¹

In James’s earlier papers, James attributes a kind of arrogance or hubris to this rationalistic side of Hegel. Hegel’s solely intellectualistic and rationalistic way of approaching reality demands its “unconditional surrender” to the intellect, the demand that “all of existence must bend the knee to its requirements.” In comparison to this “intellectual despotism,” James presents pluralism as a more democratic view, in which the reasoning agent “gives to other powers [in the universe] the same freedom it would have itself,” rather than demanding that everything be part of one intellectual system (WB 1897, 201-202). This presentation of his own metaphysical position as somehow more democratic, and the rationalist’s as more despotic, recurs throughout his assessment of idealism (e.g., PU 1909, 145). James’s un-argued assumption seems to be that the democratic attitude is preferable because it encourages more intimacy with the world than does the despotic attitude.

What is missed, according to James, if we treat the world solely by conceptual means? The answer is: the non-conceptual elements of reality which cannot be generalized, which cannot, without violence, be described exhaustively in general terms. Consider James’s example of lovers from “What Makes Life Significant” (1898):

Every Jack sees in his own particular Jill charms and perfections to the enchantment of which we stolid onlookers are stone-cold. And which has the superior view of the absolute truth, he or we? Which has the more vital insight into the nature of Jill’s existence, as a fact? [. . .] Surely to Jack are the profounder truths revealed [. . .] For Jack realizes Jill concretely, and we do not (TT 1899, 150–151).

In such examples, James focuses on those elements of reality which we can only access via sympathy with the concrete feeling of those elements. Treating the sensational, concrete, particular, and personal aspects of the world as somehow less real or less important than the universal and the general, again, renders the universe alien to us, seeing as these former elements are those with which we are most intimately acquainted.

These thoughts support James’s assertion that the pluralistic and empiricist hypothesis which he proposes meets more of the requirements of rationality—namely the practical and the moral aspects—than the rationalist model of the idealist. In offering these criticisms of Hegel, James’s position may be compared to a long line of critics, from the late Schelling onward, who have found Hegel’s idealism problematically conceptualist and “totalizing,” submerging within it all particularity, difference, and finitude. What makes James’s criticism interestingly distinctive,

²¹Hegel (2010, §5, 32).

however, is that this is offered as a form of internal critique, in arguing that Hegel's outlook must in the end fail to achieve its own goal, of enabling us to feel "at home," for it ultimately leaves us unable to feel "intimate" with the universe in the way that James's thinks their shared project requires.

Nonetheless, the Hegelian may make several replies to James's criticisms. Firstly, the Hegelian might suggest that James provides an interpretation of Hegel's absolute which is too transcendent. James's presentation of the absolute as outside of time and history seems to run counter to Hegel's, who treats spirit as immanent within the world and so—in a more processual and concrete manner—as embodied within history. It is less clear that a non-transcendent notion of the absolute would lead to the same problems that James identifies for the more transcendent interpretation he criticizes, which is said to reduce the absolute to a bare "one" in a monistic manner. Indeed, Hegel himself criticizes such monistic conceptions, which he identifies with Spinoza in particular, on grounds that James might well share.²²

As for the accusation of rationalism, contemporary Hegelians may well argue that James's approach assumes that conceptualization involves a process of abstraction, which removes us from the concrete world. However, in developing his account of the "concrete universal," Hegel aims to create room within universal concepts for precisely the kind of particularity which concerns James, while avoiding cutting such particularity off from conceptualization in a way that itself might look dubiously anti-rationalistic and dualistic, as if the world of particulars remained fundamentally alien to the mind.²³ The problem James's approach might encounter is that placing particular aspects of the world outside of conceptual understanding would itself be alienating. James's more extreme anti-rationalist statements would seem to leave the world opaque and mysterious in a manner that would leave us rationally dissatisfied and without a proper home.²⁴ This was precisely Hegel's concern about Kant, for whom "what [things] are in themselves remain for us an inaccessible world beyond this one [Jenseits]."²⁵

²² Cf. Hegel 2009, 122.

²³ For more on these issues in Hegel, see Stern (2009), particularly the chapters on "Hegel, British Idealism, and the Curious Case of the Concrete Universal" and "Individual Existence and the Philosophy of Difference."

²⁴ E.g. James (PU 1909, 96–97): "Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it . . . I prefer bluntly to call reality if not irrational then at least non-rational in its constitution."

²⁵ Hegel (2010, §45 Addition, 90).

§5. PRACTICALITY AND CONTINGENCY

Thus, in response to James's anti-rationalist assertion that certain elements of reality cannot be fully captured by conceptual thought, the Hegelian could argue that any such reality would be one in which we could not experience the "intimacy" that James seeks. However, it is precisely at this point that the force of James's claim that philosophical systems must satisfy the practical as well as the intellectual aspects of our natures is felt. Strange though it might seem to the Hegelian or the rationalist, James's claim is that a reality which was perfectly rational and complete would in fact be profoundly alienating to beings like us, because our practical natures could find no function within it.

We can find this line of thought expressed in *A Pluralistic Universe*, especially in James's exploration of Henri Bergson (e.g., PU 1909, 144). But it is perhaps best expressed in James's earlier work. There James emphasizes that finding the world rational in a practical sense involves us finding it a place in which we have both the power and the motive to act, with one vital motivation being the awareness that our actions matter to the wider world. It is precisely this which is lacking in Hegel's picture. The aim of our philosophy, James argues, cannot be to conceive of reality as a conceptually rational whole, or to bring the already rational structure of the universe to consciousness. Such aims would ignore the need of our practical natures to contribute to the world. According to James, the idea that we have nothing to contribute to reality can only lead us to a sense of alienation, or a "nameless *unheimlichkeit*" (WB 1897, 71).

An example of this thought can be found in James's assessment of moral action. A vital part of our moral lives, for James, is acting under our ideals and faiths. So, finding the world to be rational in a moral sense involves our ideals and faiths having the requisite power and motivation. But it is only when the outcome of the universe remains undecided, when there remains some contingency to be overcome, that our moral action has the power to contribute something real to the outcome of the universe. It is only with the admission of "real, genuine possibilities"—for both good or bad outcomes—that we gain the "willingness to act, no matter how we feel" (WB 1897, 135). As such, if our moral and practical natures are involved in feeling at home in the world, rather than just our intellectual natures, then we must provide an account of reality in which they truly matter to its makeup.

The practical difference, according to James, is between seeing the universe as something like a fight and seeing it as something like a game:

If this be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may

withdraw at will. But it feels like a real fight – as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem [. . .] For such a half-wild, half-saved universe our nature is adapted [. . .] [H]ere possibilities, not finished facts, are the realities with which we have actively to deal (WB 1897, 55).

Ideals and faiths are motivations to act on realities which are not yet decided, and to which our action will make some difference. It is this idea which can be taken as the vital difference between the monistic and pluralistic theses. The pluralistic hypothesis holds that reality is still in the making, that it will always be so, and that the direction of its growth depends in part on our actions. The monistic world, on the other hand, is already complete and rational, either already or eventually, and its growth proceeds via a logical and necessary order of which we are at best the instantiators.

The clash between Hegel and James as it is presented here, then, is between two very different approaches to feeling at home in the world. Hegel presents our project of feeling at home in the world as one in which we can comprehend and understand everything as part of the rational whole, and so rest in peace and intellectual satisfaction. For James, this is akin to the “tranquillity of the boor” (WB 1897, 62). Though there will always be those who find such a merely intellectual picture satisfying, James aims to present an alternative and more encompassing picture of feeling at home in the world.²⁶ We can think of James’s criticism as having two levels. The first is that any philosophy which aims to provide an account of reality which will allow us to feel “at home” within it must not merely provide a description which satisfies our intellectual natures, but must also leave room for our practical natures to have power and motive to act. The second level of this criticism is that in order for our practical natures to have a meaningful motive to act in the world, that world must be indeterminate, incomplete, or have elements of contingency. According to James, Hegel underestimates the richness of human rationality, and so what it takes for creatures like us to feel at home in the world.

Now, again, there are Hegelian responses to be considered. One might be that James once more underestimates the place for contingency and openness in Hegel’s rationalism, where such contingency is even said to be itself necessary.²⁷ But a more radical response might be to allow that James is right, and that in the end the Hegelian picture does aim to overcome the need for our practical natures to be exercised, instead encouraging us to become purely contemplative and reach a kind of rational

²⁶ Though monistic idealism might satisfy a select few philosophers, it is because of the narrowness of idealism’s vision that it will at best be “the creed of some partial sect,” as we have seen earlier. Ignoring as it does several important aspects of our collective human experience, monistic idealism is unstable, and will always be challenged by someone with a richer perspective. As James puts it, “[s]omeone,” eventually, “will be sure to discover the flaw” (WB 1897, 100).

²⁷ For classic discussions of this issue, see Henrich (1959) and Burbidge (1980).

satisfaction to be found at the “end of history” when the work of reason has been fully realized and achieved. What would be so bad about that, the Hegelian might ask—why would it not rather be the attainment of the highest good, taking us beyond the toils of the world?²⁸

It is clear, however, that for James such a vision of humanity would be profoundly lacking. Offering an example of such a purely contemplative life which he found in the Chautauqua Lake Institution, James complains of the “absence of human nature in extremis” which resulted in a “flatness and lack of zest.” And even if we were somehow able to change our natures so as to find such “atrocious harmlessness” satisfying to us (IT 1899, 152-154), our natures would thereby be made less rich, less diverse, less strenuous and less emotional. And this, James would argue, is precisely the difference between the pluralistic and monistic theses.

Here, again, James touches on deep concerns that can be raised against Hegel’s position from an internal perspective. In particular: does Hegel offer a final and complete vision of a rationally ordered world, from which all agency and further progress is ultimately removed at the “end of history” or from the “absolute standpoint”? Or does Hegel allow that the world remains open-ended, and that human agents are always required to contribute in a significant manner? And, if he does not allow for this practical element, is it correct to say that the ideal of contemplation only satisfies part of our natures, albeit a significant part? It is certainly the case that Hegel’s rationalism is far from one-sided, that his picture of the human good is much broader than many philosophers, and that it aims to bring in several of the pluralistic elements which can also be found in James. It is also clear that there are dangers for James if he embraces a more extreme pluralism, in which dualisms and incommensurable clashes might put pressure on his claim to have shared with the idealist the pursuit of a coherent view of the universe. If such issues are not to be fully settled here, the hope is that at the very least, this discussion has shown that James’s contribution to debates concerning Hegelianism are both more insightful and also more closely connected to Hegel’s own project than has been previously appreciated.

²⁸ Cf. Hegel’s quotation from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* XII, 7, with which the entire *Encyclopedia* system concludes, where central to the passage Hegel quotes is Aristotle’s suggestion that “contemplation is what is most pleasant and best” and that “God is always in that good state which we sometimes are” (1072b, 24-26).

§6. CONCLUSION

We have argued that despite James's own frequent presentation of his and Hegel's positions as diametrically opposed, James in actual fact argues from what he understands as a project which he and the idealists share: that of finding the world to be a rational place, or of finding ourselves "at home" in the world. We have shown that James appreciates much of the empirical and dynamic side of Hegel's philosophy, and sees it as similar to his own in many respects. But through his career-long engagement with Hegel, James examines what it is to find the world rational, and finds Hegel's account lacking. Whereas Hegel sees our aim as comprehending the universe as a rational whole, James argues that for creatures like us, such a world would be profoundly alienating. James's contrary vision is of a world which is, in part, still in the making, and in which there is room for our practical needs to be exercised. As such, James offers a unique and internal criticism of the Hegelian position which, at the very least, deserves more serious engagement than it has often received.²⁹

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²⁹ Previous drafts of this chapter were given at conferences on "Rethinking Modern Philosophy" (Sheffield), "Idealism and Pragmatism" (Paris), and at the Second European Pragmatism Conference (Paris); we are grateful to members of the audiences who responded on those occasions. We are particularly grateful to Alexander Klein for his very helpful comments as editor of this collection.

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