

Review of Alexis Dianda, *The Varieties of Experience: William James after the Linguistic Turn*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2023. 288 pp. ISBN 978-0674244276. \$45.00.

How one appraises William James, indeed, how one regards philosophy more generally, may be framed by how his key conception of *experience* is regarded. Alexis Dianda has provided an insightful guide and critical review of this construction and, with her elucidation, we better appreciate how later neo-pragmatists converted his philosophy to epistemological concerns lying tangential to his interests and why a philosophy based on experience has enduring significance for contemporary thought.

Dianda tracks the conceptual origins of experience to the *Principles of Psychology*'s elaboration of the "stream of thought," (later, the "stream of consciousness"). By highlighting the artificiality of consciousness described in terms of "bits," these so-called "resting places" of retrospective characterizations exclude "the places of flight" or the transitive parts that link objects of thought. For James, such segmentation distorts personal experience, which he sought to correct by emphasizing the fluidity of mental life. And with that examination he concluded that "it is an experience, after all, that we introspect to see whether it includes consciousness, [and] discovering that it does not... proves that an experience is logically a more basic concept than consciousness."¹ He thereby would redirect psychology from an exclusive study of sensory inputs and responses to an altogether different concern, namely, characterizing experience as a primary phenomenon.

James's "solution" to the failure of capturing experience in a first order fashion by introspection was to collapse the distinction between consciousness and content into unified experience. He was led to this revision by his underlying opposition to duality in which the unity of consciousness is posed by a subject-object rendition of observation, a representative second order description. Accordingly,

self-consciousness is an artifact resulting from a given "bit" of experience abstracted from the unified flow and retrospectively considered in the context of different relations. Simply, the immediacy of the subjective cannot be captured by objective analysis, whose attempts James famously called the "psychologist's fallacy." In its place, he substituted singular experience as the most basic unit of the psyche, and upon that foundation he would analyze what happens both within the mental realm (its qualities, including continuity) and outside the mental realm in configuring the relations developed in the external world.

Thus, James's anti-reductionism depicts experience as a single phenomenon. In that construction, *mind* and *body* are but different aspects of what is basically one unit.

As "subjective" we say that the experience represents; as "objective" it is represented. What represents and what is represented is here numerically the same; but we must remember that no dualism of being represented and representing resides in the experience per se. In its pure state, or when isolated, there is no self-splitting of it into consciousness and what the consciousness is "of." Its subjectivity and objectivity are functional attributes solely, realized only when the experience is "taken" i.e., talked-of, twice, considered along with its two differing contexts respectively, by a new retrospective experience, of which that whole past complication now forms the fresh content. 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.²

If experience is allowed to rest within its own domain, undisturbed by reflexive re-consideration, the problem of dualism evaporates, "for the dualism of knower and known is an *external* dualism of experienced relations not an *inner* dualism of substance. This is the fundamental metaphysical postulate of James's radical empiricism."³

James thus divided experience between a primordial "pure" form and a derived aspect that is one step removed from the original "vague feelings" that lay beyond articulation. Pre-reflective

experience, or what James called “unverbalized sensation” or subconscious mentation, is “pure” in the sense it resides beyond “culturally specific ways of understanding.”⁴ Dianda goes to great lengths to “pin down pure experience,” whose various formulations have been subject to myriad commentary assigning James’s to putative panpsychism,⁵ a metaphysical realism, or a phenomenology.⁶ By admitting that “pure experience” is a “bit of a misnomer,” she emphasizes a gradation of “experience,” in which primordial pure experience, what James calls “the passing moment,” remains a source of non-epistemic meaning and significance despite its presence as only “vague feelings.”

James sought to offset the encroachment of “intellectualisms,” but not at the expense of the inescapable processing that accompanies introspection or self-awareness more generally. In essence, he is arguing for a spectrum of thought stretching between the inarticulate feeling to the concretized concept in which language plays a crucial role.

From the cognitive point of view, all mental facts are intellections. From the subjective point of view all are feelings... And then we see that the current opposition of Feeling to Knowledge is quite a false issue. If every feeling is at the same time a bit of knowledge, we ought no longer to talk of mental states differing by having more or less of the cognitive quality; they only differ in knowing more or less, in having much fact or little fact for their object. The feeling of a broad scheme of relations is a feeling that knows much; the feeling of a simple quality is a feeling that knows little. But the knowing itself, whether of much or of little, has the same essence, and is as good knowing in the one case as in the other.⁷

By emphasizing that thoughts and feelings are two aspects of experience that fall on a continuum, neither one to be taken in isolation from the other, James described the mind in terms that preserved its irretrievable unity and the inviolate standing of unmediated subjectivity.

The most prominent rejection of *experience* as James (inconsistently) used it occurred with the rise of the “linguistic turn”

by which neo-pragmatists (principally Sellars and Rorty) rejected James's notion of experience, which they maintain

is always already mediated by language, [and] if experience cannot play the role of "furnishing" the mind with ideas or data, securing objectivity, then it has no valid *philosophical* status.... There is little room for doubt that experience cannot play the role cast for it at the dawn of epistemology, nor can it live up to the hopes empiricists once invested in it.⁸

The linguistic turn thesis argues that

there is no relevant difference between experience and language. In this view, "experience" is either a convoluted term for what should more properly be seen as a discursive process through which we come to construct the self and culture, or it is a philosophically uninteresting stand-in for the causal events that are more adequately treated by the sciences.⁹

Dianda laments that the discussions about Jamesian experience hinged on debates about objectivity and perception, and she then asks, "how did pragmatism, a tradition that once ranked among the philosophy's great defenders of experience, become nearly synonymous with the overcoming of experience? The response to this question can be briefly put: pragmatic inquiry became preoccupied with traditional epistemological inquiry."¹⁰ By regarding James through the epistemic lens to peer at the concrete, Rorty, Sellars and others in pursuit of their own agenda displaced James's philosophical project in their effort to overturn the philosophical status of representation, truth, and justification.¹¹ Although James and Rorty share a critique of the correspondence theory of truth and representationalism, their differences lie in what kinds of questions are "interesting."¹² Thus the question at the base of their confrontation is the nature of philosophy and the relevant issues guiding its discourse.

Dianda maintains that neo-pragmatic inquiry, having become preoccupied with traditional epistemology, subverted the fecundity

of James's psychology and its larger philosophical significance.¹³ In her overview, she emphasizes that James's original interests were directed to exposing the falsification of depicting mental and moral lives without the contributions of feelings or sensibilities.¹⁴ For James, "reality outstrips the conceptual and the linguistic...[so] the philosopher (as language user) must strive to demonstrate the insufficiency of language itself."¹⁵ He not only denied the concretization that would displace subjectivity with an objectivizing Cartesianism, but he also asserted the active role of the individual in creating the world in which the subject lives. "The human being is always actively organizing her experience. We organize our environment, arrange phenomena, and focus on some aspects of our reality, while ignoring others, for reasons more than mere physical need."¹⁶ Dianda emphasizes that experience is *active* and a *lived* process. Accordingly, the values through which we know the world and frame our own experience are thus constitutive to the reality in which humans live. To fracture the objective/subjective balance governing that knowledge not only distorts our understanding, but it also misconceives it. That orientation pervaded James's thought and directed every aspect of his philosophy, perhaps most importantly, the meaning of truth and the authentication of the personal underlying it. On this reading, James's essential precept is this creative aspect of the mind that undergirds his various appeals to experience as capturing the moral-existential picture of human action and cognition.

Dianda is less concerned with critiquing Rorty as with recalling the primacy of experience and with her eye trained on pragmatism, she mounts a trenchant defense of James's key insight:

For James, philosophy was never an exercise in solving puzzles, erecting systems, or having the final say on some truth. While striving for clarity, the philosopher is more committed to the betterment of life. A theme that is present in James's work from the beginning to the end is the caution against what he calls "vicious intellectualism".... the reduction of the complexities of our existence to excessively limiting concepts or categories; it is vicious to the extent that by focusing on our abstract conceptions we cut ourselves off

from engagement with the very things we purportedly attempt to understand or engage.¹⁷

Or, more pointedly, “a philosophy whose principle is so incommensurate with...emotional pertinency leaves the mind with little to care or act for.”¹⁸ And with that dictum we appreciate the core of James’s humanist philosophy, one forged in denial of a positivism that had crept into all manner of human self-assessment.

James abandoned “pure experience” in his later works because of criticisms he could not resolve. But he would not abandon his central thesis and when facing the philosophical tribunal, he declared,

I have finally found myself compelled to *give up logic*... It has an imperishable use in human life, But that use is not to make us theoretically acquainted with the essential nature of reality. . . . Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it.¹⁹

And Dianda sympathetically concludes that

James’s concerns are not those of the classical empiricist or their descendants, attempting to build a psychological or linguistic/logical foundation for all of our knowledge...James’s concern is the experience of a subject who acts in the world, whose boundaries are porous, and whose mind is never a theater in which the dramas of experience are played. In James’s hands, “experience” refers to the relationship between the subject and her world.²⁰

Or in James’s own words:

We are so subject to the philosophic tradition which treats *logos* or discursive thought generally as the sole avenue of truth, that to fall back on raw unverballed life as more of a revealer, and to think of concepts as the merely practical things...comes very hard. It is putting off our proud maturity

of mind and becoming again as foolish little children in the eyes of reason. But as difficult as such a revolution is, there is no other way, I believe, to the possession of reality.²¹

And for James that reality was fundamentally moral: human-derived, human-constructed, and human-intended. On this view, *experience* that draws from all the diverse sources of the subjective becomes the *métier* of human agency, an idea that could only stand within a renewed humanism. James revitalized that mission and in its further development we find the heart of his philosophy, flawed in its discursive attempts, but reaching to the heart of human subjectivity that, in his view, legitimately restrains the analytic reduction. That theme of limits has had an illustrious history in the century that followed, and it is in that array of ideas James holds *critical* authority. No wonder Wittgenstein read him so carefully!²²

By valorizing and clarifying the structure of experience, James sought to countermand the analytic imperative and thus save subjectivity.²³ Dianda's enlistment in that project, imbued with a philosophical ethos, perhaps out of tune with the temper of the contemporary discipline, is a welcome breath of fresh air by reminding us of James's abiding relevance in validating the personal and understanding the constitutive role of the subjective in acquiring and applying knowledge. That "pure experience" failed its philosophical mission may be understood as a relic of a misconceived project, or, having faced its own limits, philosophy returned to its own comfort zone, for better and for worse.

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NOTES

¹ Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought*, 79.

² James, "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?," 1151.

³ Taylor and Wozniak, *Pure Experience: The Response to William James*, xvi.

⁴ Ford, *William James's Philosophy*, 81.

⁵ e.g., Gale, *The Divided Self of William James*.

⁶ Ford, *William James's Philosophy*, 75-80; Putnam and Putnam, "What the spilled beans can spell;" Wilshire, "The breathtaking intimacy of the material world."

⁷ James, *Principles of Psychology*, 452.

⁸ Dianda 2023, 21-22.

⁹ Dianda, 66.

¹⁰ Dianda 2023, 9-10.

¹¹ Rorty, "Pragmatism, relativism, irrationalism;" Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*; Misak, *The American Pragmatists*.

¹² Dianda 2023, 35-6.

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- ¹³ Dianda 2023, 10.
¹⁴ Dianda 2023, 105.
¹⁵ Dianda 2023, 65.
¹⁶ Dianda 2023, 108.
¹⁷ Dianda 2023, 15.
¹⁸ James, *Principles of Psychology*, 941.
¹⁹ James, *The Pluralistic Universe*, 725.
²⁰ Dianda 2023, 232-3.
²¹ Jame, *The Pluralistic Universe*, 755.
²² Goodman, *Wittgenstein and William James*.
²³ Tauber, *William James and Sigmund Freud on the Mind*.