

WILLIAM JAMES AGAINST A DEAD WORLD

SARAH WARREN
Independent Scholar
drsarahklwarren@gmail.com



With the environmental crisis and its many foreseen disasters looming on the horizon, it could not be more timely to ask how pragmatic philosophy can make a difference in our efforts to repair our increasingly devastated Earth. Turning to William James's neutral monism, I ask: what does a Jamesian metaphysics look like? How does it frame the relationship between self and world? What implications does this have for escaping tricky conceptual snares within environmental ethics? And, finally, how can it cultivate perspectives leading to greater environmental intimacy and outcomes? By illuminating the existential binding of spirit and body, mind and matter, I argue that James provides a compelling springboard for escaping problematic tropes and mischaracterizations of the human condition, offering us a chance to develop a robust appreciation for nature and its fulsome affordances—an argument against a dead world.



But all such differences are minor matters which ought to be subordinated in view of the fact that, whether we be empiricists or rationalists, we are, ourselves, part of the universe and share the same one deep concern in its destinies. We crave alike to feel more truly at home with it, and to contribute our mite to its amelioration. It would be pitiful if small aesthetic discords were to keep honest men asunder.—William James¹

While philosophy is an abundant resource for those interested in critically interrogating the relationship between self and world, this literature is not immune to a critique leveled at philosophy in general: rich in theory but light on *praxis*. Philosophy, it is argued, does not take seriously enough the objection that the point of philosophy should be not only to *interpret* the world, but to *change* it.² Certainly, this critique cannot be taken wholesale if this means cleanly dividing interpretation from its consequential effect on the material conditions of our lived experience. While we might not align ourselves with the position of Rorty's philosophical ironist, for whom philosophy is but an endless task of re-description and synthesis of philosophical *Weltanschauungs* as expressed through language, we can at very least appreciate that our interpretation of the world and our place within it directly inflects the possibilities and priorities of our worldly engagement. Philosophies that develop sensitive and robust interpretations of the world are necessary for worldly transformation. Yet, it seems fair to point out that—for all of the compelling work done under the banner of environmental ethics in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century—we still face a host of deeply troubling issues rooted in environmental crisis. Natural resources are being depleted at an alarming and unsustainable rate. Rampant consumerism produces waste disposal practices that threaten human and non-human habitats alike. Global climate change comes in tandem with not only shifts in average temperatures across the globe, but radically changed bioregions and weather patterns—changes which, happening at an unprecedented rate, mark the era of the Anthropocene³ as one of potential catastrophic loss of natural diversity. If environmental progress, however we might characterize it, is one yardstick against which

environmental philosophy may measure its success, it is hard to contend that it has not come up short.

Thus we come to the heart of the pragmatic injunction which we are right, I would argue, to issue philosophy: as articulated by Wayne Viney and Madisson Mullen, this injunction entails “one of the more challenging contemporary tasks . . . the development of an overarching *philosophical orientation* that *encourages ecological attitudes and studies*.”⁴ This injunction, in my reading, consists of two critical components: the first pertains to *philosophical scope*, while the second refers to *intended consequences*. While it is not my goal to articulate a comprehensive vision of the project of philosophy, if we will grant that its general purview is not the investigation of natural phenomena themselves but rather the way in which natural phenomena “hang together” with the remainder of worldly experience,⁵ then we might further understand that such a “philosophical orientation” merely acts to delimit the boundaries of philosophical enterprise. In speaking of “encouraging ecological attitudes,” Viney and Mullen are, however, qualifying their injunction with a pragmatic consideration: such orientations are not merely aesthetic modes of description that we might hope will resonate with an imaginative audience, but a way to structure experience with a measurable “cash value” in terms of its ability to perform *work* in the world. What we need, in short, is a *vision with traction*.

In the account that follows, I will contend that we can find such a vision in the work of William James. While a superficial understanding of pragmatism may understand this school of thought to be at odds with a sensitive environmental framework, prioritizing “concern for experience and immediate results” and epitomizing “the greed, anti-intellectualism, and reckless disregard for future consequences that has characterized personal and public actions over the past century of American history” through “individualism and narrow vision,” such a “careless pragmatism” fails to fully appreciate the ways in which pragmatism was developed alongside rich and environmentally engaged modes of metaphysical understanding.⁶ For James, neutral monism provides a means to see the self as nothing more (or less) than a way of classifying a perspective on the real “metaphysical stuff”: experience. This way of thinking helps us to cement our relationship with the environment

qua material reality,⁷ but also help us to dissolve a key problem within environmental ethics: disputes surrounding anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric ethical systems. Furthermore, his insistence on an attitude of intimacy with the flux of experience gives us an indication of how we might foster attitudes that are not only ecocentric, but which explicitly value natural diversity—a critical issue in a world that faces habitat loss at an alarming and unsustainable rate.

THE INWARDNESS OF THE OUTER, THE OUTWARDNESS OF THE INNER: JAMES'S NOTION OF TWICE-TAKEN EXPERIENCE IN NEUTRAL MONISM

Essential to an understanding of James's neutral monism is the following thesis: “[t]here is no thought-stuff different from thing-stuff”; rather, these different varieties of “stuff” are in fact “the same identical piece of ‘pure experience’” that can “stand alternately for a ‘fact of consciousness’ or for a physical reality, according as it is taken in one context or another.”⁸ This thesis is an ontological claim: rather than understanding the world to be made up of a dualism of mind and matter, James is committed to the idea that the world is made up of *both at once*—one stuff, experience, that captures both consciousness and materiality simultaneously but is only determined as one or the other according to the context in which it is considered *post hoc*.

While James's account is deeply *cognizant* of relations, it might (in a limited, provisional sense) be considered a misnomer to call it a “relational account.” In a relational account of experience, we are compelled to think in terms of at least two metaphysical components: on the one hand, a subject or “self”; on the other, an object or empirical reality with which this subject interacts and thus shares relations. If we understand a relational account in this manner, we cannot avoid a consequential dualism—that “not subject, not object, but object-plus-subject is the minimum that can actually be.”⁹ Such dualisms, however, are antithetical to a Jamesian way of thinking. We are better off, he contends, to think of relations as not interactions between different “stuffs” that constitute discrete categories of experience, but rather as connections that might emerge within one “stream of consciousness,” where we take such a consciousness merely as a *function* and nothing more. If we wish

to retain the language of “relation” (as James himself does), we need to think of this relation as *intra*-experiential rather than *inter*-ontological. “Experience” here is not a phenomenological term that seeks to describe the way in which exterior phenomena impinge upon the sensory and affective experience of a subject that stands fundamentally apart from the world, ever-negotiating the *me* in relation to the *it*; rather, it is the “primal stuff or material of the world” that can be taken twice over as the stuff of “subjectivity” or the stuff of “objectivity.”¹⁰

James's use of analogy is informative here. According to traditional ideas of consciousness, he argues, we can understand consciousness to be a kind of “paint of which the world pictures are made”: consisting of a menstruum (that within which pigment is suspended—e.g., oil) and the pigment itself (i.e., the colored material that forms a “mass of content”), consciousness can be siphoned into two distinct substances or “factors of experience” by a kind of physical subtraction, the material “stuff” of the pigment in contradistinction to the ethereal “menstruum” of consciousness which suspends it.¹¹ Such a view, however, might be said (in non-Jamesian terms) to confuse *heuristics* with *ontology*. Consciousness, as a *function*, can distinguish within experience between modes in which we might want to turn our attention to the *knower* (i.e., the subject-pole of experience) or, conversely, the *known* (i.e., the object-pole of experience) —in this analogy, the menstruum or the pigment—but this function does not imply two discrete substances, but merely two different contexts in which the focal point of experience is shifted and which we may then heuristically differentiate between. There is (analogically speaking) no menstruum and pigment, but merely paint: in one context, this is a physical substance that we might chemically analyze to break down into its constituent elements to learn how it might causally react with another substance; in a different context, it is a potential vehicle of subjective artistic expression with the potential to incite existential or sociological reflection. Yet, as we would intuitively understand in the last iteration of the analogy, it is only ever *one thing*: paint, singular but multi-faceted.

This functionality that consciousness possesses is not merely an underhanded re-branding of an old substance. The function of consciousness is *knowing*, but it posits no transcendent subject in

order to know.¹² We see evidence of this in James's articulation of conceptual knowledge, wherein we have two distinct instances of "pure" experience (i.e., the "immediate flux of life"¹³)—the thinking/thought-of and the thing/perceived-of—whose connection is confirmed by the former *leading* to the latter as a terminus, two bookends of intermediary (i.e., "conjunctively transitional") experiences that lead from the first to the second (as in his famous example of Memorial Hall¹⁴). The intentionality that we might traditionally ascribe to a substantial consciousness is here not an intrinsic power of a subject that directs thought, but is instead adequately captured within experience by the notions of *substitution* and *leading*. Knowledge is "accomplished" when a concept, which can be substituted in different mental and physical operations, *leads* to a terminus in a percept that verifies the concept as true in the sense of "cognizant of reality" (rather than conflicting with reality)—as that which was "meant" and thus is properly said to be "known."¹⁵ When this successful terminus is reached, we can step out of "pure" experience in recognizing these two "bookends" as, on the one hand, the *knower* (i.e., the starting-point) and the *object known* (i.e., the terminus). "In this continuing and corroborating," James remarks, "taken in no transcendental sense, but denoting definitely felt transitions, *lies all that the knowing of a percept by an idea can possibly contain or signify.*"¹⁶ Consciousness here is no *deus ex machina* that directs our knowing, but simply denotes, after the process of progressing through and verifying concepts in our experience, the later distinguishing between the different poles of this experience¹⁷—a distinguishing *created by* the percept's existence as terminus.¹⁸ Invoking the traditional non-functional idea of the consciousness is additive in that it mistakenly projects dualism where in fact there is only one experience counted twice over.¹⁹

The relevance of this particular metaphysical framework to an environmental ethic may not be obvious, yet has real consequences. As James himself articulates, the distinction between the material and immaterial—matter and spirit, body and mind—is a distinction with a philosophical lineage that, originally representing two "equipollent" substances each as worthy of interest as the other, has come to decidedly weigh in heavily on one side or the other, depending on philosophical temperament.²⁰ In rationalist camps, the

immaterial that “strings the world together” is of paramount import; in empirical camps, however, the immaterial is naught but a residual spectre, a ghost of philosophies past that, not being conducive to empirical study, at best cannot be substantially engaged. Yet, taking up the metaphor of blindness that James employs elsewhere in his discussion of temperament,²¹ both of these camps (taking, as they do, a particular vantage point from which to pursue their scholarly endeavors) fail to fully appreciate the gravity of the essential connection between these two facets of experience. Certainly James, in seeking to dissolve any notion of consciousness beyond a word denoting a function, has sympathies more clearly aligned with empiricism (as we might expect from a self-proclaimed “radical empiricist”). He will have no truck with a strict absolutism.²² However, this key notion of what I previously called an intra-experiential relationality, woven integrally into the fabric of James’s metaphysical thought, is uniquely positioned to seriously consider the idea that “subject” and “object” cannot be dualistically divorced and can only be understood as, to speak colloquially, “two sides of the same coin.” Such thinking, I argue, is an important step on the way to constructing a viable environmental framework.

My reasons for this assertion are twofold, and address two overarching problems in our treatment of materiality within the history of philosophy. First, we can look as far back as ancient Greek philosophy (e.g., Platonic Forms) to find that metaphysical accounts that treat mind and matter as fundamentally different (whether a scaffolded pluralism or a monism that marks a difference between appearance and reality) have a tendency to cultivate environmentally dangerous notions of human exceptionalism. There is nothing inherently wrong with recognizing unique human capacities, and some of these capacities are verifiable through empirical investigation. However, treating these unique capacities non-naturalistically, as the privileged offshoot of a transcendental *je ne sais quoi*, produces grand narratives that reinforce a felt distance from the material environment that comes in tandem with disadvantageous normative valuations. Rationalist metaphysical frameworks, for instance, that bolster a hierarchy with subjective “mind” on top and objective “matter” on the bottom not only produce an awkward liminal space for the body in attempting to preserve an “ontological hygiene” between kinds,²³ but furthermore

foster attitudes that reflect an understanding of the material environment as merely a phenomenological playground for a more sophisticated type of being. Rationalist philosophers of the absolute variety, James argues, “dwell on so high a level of abstraction that they never even try to come down,” its absolute mind “compatible with any state of things whatever being true here below” and indicating “no single actual particular.”²⁴ Such attitudes of relative indifference toward material reality, evidenced by a history of rhetoric around the supremacy of the human spirit and “mastery of nature” (e.g., eighteenth-century Enlightenment sensibilities), can only be harmful in trying to adopt ecologically sensitive environmental attitudes that see humans as but a node in a web of complex and potentially vulnerable environmental interactions.

Second, however, we can understand that even empirical approaches that direct their attention to the study of what is given to us *via* sensory experience are in danger of cleaving apart subject and object into dualism, rendering them susceptible to short-sighted utilitarianism in human/non-human interactions. In a multiverse of radically different objects available for empirical study, consciousness can be understood as the bare presence of a *witnessing* that marks the difference between what is consciously entertained and that which is not.²⁵ While possessing greater primacy than in more rationalist accounts, objects are yet treated as discrete and divorced from us. I agree with James in seeing the empiricist’s commitment to the richness of concrete experience—its “recogni[tion of] particulars in their full completeness”²⁶—as an improvement in degree from the rationalist approach, yet it does not do enough work in undermining the dualism that rationalism sustains.²⁷

It is worth pausing here to note that rationalism and empiricism (or, in an equivalent iteration of James’s categorization of philosophical thought, idealism and materialism) are both animated by the desire to “banish uncertainty,”²⁸ to “have expectancy defined.”²⁹ They are a reflection of the translation of personal experience into a philosophical temperament with a certain way of understanding how we ought to engage the world, whether this is (in the former case) “the reason, the atonement, that lies in the heart of things, and that we can act with” or (in the latter case) “the opacity of brute fact that we must react *against*.”³⁰ That is to say, they do

not most fundamentally reflect different ontological positions for James, but rather a greater preference for either simplicity that unifies or a fragmentation that distinguishes.³¹ However, how these motivating desires are taken up by philosophical temperament pushes one toward metaphysical frameworks that will result in aligning oneself with a more rationalist or empirical model that comes imbued with historically developed commitments to either ideal or material preeminence as the essential “stuff of the world.” And both of these frameworks, I argue, offer evidence of James’s claim that “[o]ur mind is so wedded to the processes of seeing an *other* beside every item of experience, that when the notion of an absolute datum is presented to it, it goes beyond its usual procedure and remains pointing at the void beyond, as if in that lay further matter for contemplation.”³² While James here is specifically noting the philosophical attraction to nonentity or the void “beyond,” it is adaptable to the tension imposed by James’s own neutral monism and its inherent lack of “other” beyond experience.

But this “other” beyond experience is exactly what James’s neutral monism successfully eliminates. Speak of the object of your knowledge, speak of yourself as the knower—what you are speaking of in each instance is *precisely the same thing*. James’s conception thus offers a compelling means to fruitfully interact with live topics of discourse within environmental ethics. The debate between anthropocentric versus non-anthropocentric environmental accounts is one such example. In anthropocentric models, ethical consideration is firmly anchored in the sphere of the human; this would equate to what Tom Regan calls “an ethic for the use of the environment” whereby the environment possesses ethical significance in virtue of its human use-value.³³ Conversely, in non-anthropocentric models, ethical consideration is rooted instead in the non-human sphere itself: a true “ethic of the environment” wherein the environment possesses intrinsic value. The tension introduced here, articulated in brief, should be clear: on the one hand, the vulnerability of anthropocentric models to exploitative practices that prioritize human preferences above environmental considerations; on the other, the seeming incoherence of attributing human values to non-human environmental entities.

Bryan Norton, in locating an ambiguity within the term “anthropocentric,” attempts to resolve this problem by proposing

two strains of anthropocentrism—*strong* and *weak*—that differentiate between anthropocentric preferences that are merely *felt* (a desire sated at least temporarily by an experience) and those that are more fully *considered* (such a desire that has been filtered through and thus judged according to a rationally adopted worldview).³⁴ The “cash value” of such a differentiation is that, if we adopt a *weak* anthropocentrism, we can acknowledge that humans may be the *source* of value in the world while yet acknowledging the environment as a *locus* of human value which, in light of our human interests in the environment as they emerge as part of our *Weltanschauung*, we ought to accord ethical consideration. Weak anthropocentrism gives us a means to criticize exploitative environmental practices that, while in line with felt preferences, are not “rational” in reflecting consideration of the impact on an adopted worldview, and furthermore allows us to recognize human experience as key to value formation³⁵—as Kelly A. Parker phrases it, not saying that “human whim is the measure of all things, only that humans are in fact the measurers.”³⁶

Norton's weak anthropocentrism does do a significant amount of “pragmatic heavy lifting” in terms of its ability to arbitrate between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric philosophical orientations, but it maintains a dualism through which loopholes in environmental stewardship may yet emerge. If weak anthropocentrism only demands of us that we take more seriously *considered* preferences that come in tandem with a rationally adopted worldview, then exactly what this worldview “looks like” remains undetermined—and it may not be closely linked with environmental principles of sustainability at all. We need not look so far as the extremes of transhumanist utopianism transcending corporeal form to recognize that our material conditions—while no passive “phenomenological playground”—do lack the vocality to assert their inestimably vast role in shaping subjective experience. This, I would argue, is how the account loses traction: it presumes a rational worldview that is fully cognizant of the material facet of human experience. James's own view, on the other hand, dissolves the tension between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric accounts while offering a metaphysical perspective that makes this omission in recognition much more difficult.

There can be no divorce between the subject and their material

conditions because experience is incoherent without both “poles”: even conceptual thinking, abstractions that we are wont to think of as somehow removed to some degree from reality, only express ideas that stand in for percepts that can be verified through an experiential terminus, “shiveringly thin wrappings for so thick and burly a world as this.”³⁷ Here, “anthropocentric” and “non-anthropocentric” simply refer to perspectives taken toward these different poles as circumstance dictates: the knower that orients experience or the object that constitutes its parameters. Jason Scott Robert, who adapts James's metaphysical account into his own pragmatic environmental ethics coined “wild ontology,” supports this point, claiming that the primacy of experience means that “the debate between anthropocentrists and nonanthropocentrists never even arises.³⁸ There is only one *ontos on*, or really real: experience.³⁹ The question relevant to sustaining environmental diversity thus becomes: what kind(s) of experience *do* and *should* we value?

INTIMACY⁴⁰ AND FLUX AGAINST A DEAD EARTH

In his lecture on Henri Bergson, James extols the virtues of a philosophical framework that resists positing the conceptual valorization of rationalism at the expense of the concrete particulars of experience.

What really *exists*, is not things made but things in the making. Once made, they are *dead*, and an infinite number of alternative conceptual decompositions can be used in defining them. But put yourself *in the making* by a stroke of intuitive sympathy with the thing and, the whole range of possible decompositions coming at once into your possession, you are no longer troubled with the question which one of them is really real.⁴¹

Concepts are here the *memento mori* of life arrested; what is most lively and real is the creative and shifting force that precedes them, which can be found in the flux of life. Philosophy, he argues, “should seek this kind of living understanding of the movement of reality, not follow science in vainly patching together fragments of its dead results”—understanding the *really real* as experience, we can see that empiricism not only fails to properly banish

consciousness as a woolly residue of stronger dualisms past, but furthermore misunderstands its own object of study by playing into the scientific pursuit of seizing and extracting conceptual knowledge from the fullness of sensory experience. “Reality falls in passing into conceptual analysis; it mounts in living its own undivided life—it buds and burgeons, changes and creates.”⁴² Courting this “intuitive sympathy” in “div[ing] back into the flux”⁴³ will open us up to a sophisticated understanding of reality, and will furthermore help us appreciate that the proper role of conceptual knowledge is only to “harness up reality in our conceptual systems in order to drive it the better.”⁴⁴

This last sentiment might give the cautious reader reason for pause. If what we are looking for is a way to skirt orientations toward the world that lead to shortsighted exploitation, then the notion that the world of experience is something that we might, with the lasso of conceptual thinking, drive like a beast of burden is obviously somewhat problematic. But we would be wise here to bear in mind the context in which James uses this analogy. James’s analogy is not employed to bolster some kind of narrative of the triumph of the human spirit over a wild nature; rather, he is making the point that the function of conceptual thinking is a reflection of our fundamentally pragmatic interaction with the world. Sensible reality is “too concrete to be entirely manageable”; the wide swath of this reality in comparison to the limitations of any finite living being dictates that we have a practical interest in finding means to more efficiently navigate the former.⁴⁵ Conceptual thinking, then, is the way by which we can use our powers of abstraction to more efficiently “get about.” It is concerned with mitigating our own limitations within a challenging world rather than treating this challenging world as a latent provocation or arena for a dual of wills. Our faculty of abstraction allows us to traverse the world “almost as if we controlled a fourth dimension, skipping the intermediaries as by a divine winged power, and getting at the exact point we require without entanglement in any context,” and even though these faculties are themselves of a mental constitution, they steer towards *particular* termini within concrete experience.⁴⁶ James’s account, then, avoids the snare of troubling narratives that we would rather avoid while staying sensitive to the essential bond that affixes the full range of human modes of experience to the particulars of

experience.

We can thus see that, while the radically pro-conceptual intellectualism that James so strongly critiques is a real problem for properly understanding the world, conceptual thinking remains critical for us. In fact, perceptual engagement that pays attention to the particulars of the world, far from being fundamentally contrary to it, goes hand in hand with conceptualization. It is only by using concepts that we can make sense of and more fully interact with the non-conceptual, and the two are in fact so tightly knit that it can be difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. “The universal and the particular parts of the experience,” he comments, “are literally immersed in each other, and *both are indispensable*.”⁴⁷ Attempting to rectify a misguided notion of concepts as divorced and purified from the flux of experience, James further comments that

[c]onception is not like a painted hook, on which no real chain can be hung; for we hang concepts upon percepts, and percepts upon concepts interchangeably and indefinitely; and the relation of the two is much more like what we find in those cylindrical ‘panoramas’ in which a painted background continues a real foreground so cunningly that one fails to detect the joint.⁴⁸

Achieving intimacy with the flux of experience, then, does not (as in the analogy of menstruum and pigment with consciousness) consist of somehow “stripping away” conceptual thinking in order to “get at” the raw goods of perception, but rather entails fostering a kind of attentiveness that enriches both as two inextricably intertwined facets of experience. We can see this in James’s comment that “[p]erception prompts our thought, and thought in turn enriches our perception”—meaning that “[t]he more we see, the more we think; while the more we think, the more we see in our immediate experiences, and the greater grows the detail and the more significant the articulateness of our perception.”⁴⁹

Having said this, we might now ask: how do we achieve this intimacy? While we ought not look to James for specific guidance that we might treat as an environmental “how-tos,” we can look to “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” for clues. In this text,

James in part turns to nature as the indefatigable source of meaning that intellectualist tendencies, swollen beyond their proper utility, render invisible (or, at very least, diaphanous). The problem with a high degree of education, he argues, is that it socializes us to value only the exceptional, and we are given to understand that the exceptional is to be located only within the domain of the extra-natural—something to be found in what was earlier called the transcendental *je ne sais quoi*. “We are trained to seek the choice, the rare, the exquisite exclusively, and to overlook the common,” and—“stuffed with abstract conceptions, and glib with verbalities and verbiages”—we fail to see the value in the perceptual side of mundane experience.⁵⁰ Yet, according to James, “of the kind of fibres of which such inanities consist is the material woven of all the excitements, joys, and meanings that ever were, or shall be, in this world.”⁵¹ To recognize this, we must become like those who, like Emerson, have such “responsive sensibilities” that they can, faced with snow puddles under a clouded sky, be “glad to the brink of fear.”⁵² This involves a kind of *descent*, to be “brought down to the non-thinking level, the level of pure sensorial description” whereby the “good of all the artificial schemes and fevers fades and pales; and that of seeing, smelling, tasting, sleeping, and daring and doing with one’s body, grows and grows.”⁵³

I am loathe to take up too wholeheartedly James’s vision of this descent; its echoes reverberate in “What Makes a Life Significant,” which seems to romanticize “virtue with horny hands and dirty skin” in a way that might be construed to make an exploitative spectacle of working class life as somehow humble but authentic and necessary.⁵⁴ However, James’s descent might be fruitfully taken up as an endorsement of a quasi-eco-phenomenological approach to understanding the richness of world-self relations. Writing on the relative merits of both phenomenology and pragmatism for an environmental ethic, Meg Holden says that, while phenomenology is primarily oriented toward achieving descriptive depth with phenomena, pragmatism is slightly differently tuned into the way in which the salient aspects of this description can transform people’s cognition and understanding.⁵⁵ If we are aiming for a philosophical orientation toward the environment with real purchase and we need to emphasize the value of an anti-dualistic neutral monism that sees experience as the Janus-faced coin of subject and object, then

pragmatism will be interested in picking up threads of phenomenological description that are capable of transforming one's private vision of the environment. Phenomenological engagement with the natural environment presents possibilities of refining one's understanding of how subjectivity, not something set apart from "other" nature, simply expresses a way of classifying experience that is receptive to something radically larger than the subject. This form of thinking is much more in line with ecosystem models that urge us to understand how humans are bound up with a living structure of complex ecosystems of which humans are an unusually powerful but rather minuscule part—an understanding rooted in careful perceptual interaction, but built up with enriching conceptual processing.

And evidence that immersion in natural habitats *can* and *does* produce such thinking abounds. Nancy Wells and Kristi Lekies, for instance, found in a study conducted with a sample size of two thousand adults that exposure to both "domestic" and "wild nature" as children positively correlated with an identification with nature that developed ecocentric (rather than anthropocentric) attitudes later in life.⁵⁶ These findings are echoed by Christien Diehm's work in deep ecology and conservation social science.⁵⁷ James's encouragement of developing our "responsive sensibilities," then, might be productively explored as a suggestion to simply spend more time, especially in our formative years, exposing ourselves to natural settings in order to develop a perceptive and thoughtful understanding of subjectivity as merely a lens for understanding our place in systems of worldly relations within a naturalistic experience.

More specifically, Wells and Leckies highlight an especially crucial accomplishment of such an exposure to nature: a heightened sensitivity and respect for biodiversity.⁵⁸ This sensitivity and respect has a direct bearing on the potential to reinforce the value of a diverse and pluralistic material world within which selves can develop rich and meaningful lives. James, in his adoration of plurality, explicitly advocates on its behalf not only in terms of philosophical outlook, but also experiences at large: the philosopher knows that they "must vote always for the *richer* universe, for the good which seems most organizable, most fit to enter into *complex relations*, most apt to be a member of an inclusive whole."⁵⁹ If, in

short, experience only takes place as a transaction with and cognitive redevelopment of percepts rooted in worldly situations, then limitations on the available objects of perception indicate limitations on the kinds of perceptual and conceptual content with which we can engage. Natural diversity takes on the cast of existential values. We can thus look to James to understand that intimacy with the flux of life entails not only closing the gap between subject and objective reality, but valuing the plethora of difference that the latter offers us—and taking steps to preserve it for the sake of value intrinsic not to a subject or an object in itself, but the fecundity of experience of which we all partake.

What, then, is the most distinctively pragmatic takeaway from a Jamesian project of environmental intimacy through neutral monism? Environmental intimacy *via* immersion, I have argued, is key, and well-substantiated by research within, e.g., environmental psychology. But to merely recommend more time outdoors, especially for children, does not seem to be a particularly innovative insight, nor does it have clear avenues for deployment. While this paper has been primarily exegetical, carving out a space for the further development of a robustly Jamesian approach to combating environmental degradation, it is important that it not ironically remain at the level of the conceptual without returning to the rich humus of lived experience. I will thus gesture toward one domain which I contend is ripe for a Jamesian intervention: environmental education. Environmental education is increasingly available as a curricular component at most levels of education, from elementary through postsecondary; however, the way in which environmental education is often siloed, treated as distinct from humanistic disciplines, is an impediment to understanding the environment as experientially and thus existentially holistic. In fact, an interdisciplinary approach to environmental education that takes history, literature, and art (non-exhaustive) as not mere allies but genuinely integral components could do a great deal to enrich both environmental understanding and the virtues that might mobilize sympathy into action. This is especially true in the context of biodiversity diminishment. I have maintained above that the Earth affords us a dynamic cast of materials that directly undergird and inflect the quality of our lives within it; the implication here is that a diminishment of this dynamism, as is the inevitable consequence

of biodiversity reduction, has broad ripple effects on our lives as diverse as life itself. This is a lesson that is facilitated by environmental immersion, but can be fostered further (and with a wider range of objects of study), through pedagogical means emerging through a variety of modalities.

Take, for instance, a familiar example: the coffee plant, most commonly gracing our kitchens as the roasted drupes of *Coffea arabica*. Most of us—75% of Americans, at very least, if we consider individual weekly consumption⁶⁰—are familiar with the distinctive rich waft of freshly brewed coffee. It is an aesthetic pleasure, consumed black (a bitter and bracing comfort), with cream and sugar (a decadent and well-balanced treat), or in a variety of other ways—even sweetened and adorned with a scoop of gelato in a luxurious *affogato*. However, coffee is more than a gastronomical delight. It enhances our cognitive faculties, improving our alertness and memory (psychology), and rendering us more capable of executing ambitious projects. In 17th century Britain, coffee houses—also known as “penny universities”—provided a public space for education, reflection, and conversation (history). Refined, the caffeine in the coffee plant is a helpful substance in combatting migraines (medicine). The coffee plant *Coffea arabica* is one empirical object that might be taken many such ways, and likely many more as its form adapts across time and space. It is also (along with other *Coffea* species) an endangered species in the wild, rendering its cultivated forms especially vulnerable to disease (see, for example, the history of the banana). A Jamesian metaphysics understands that such a plant is an object that might be known, and certainly understanding its biological characteristics (e.g., morphology, habitat, symbionts) is crucial for its preservation. But this object also reaches back to the subject in an act of mutual reconstruction in the flux of experience whereby we are shaped by its capacities and these, in turn, shape its future. Articulating this multifarious relationship in multimodal, interdisciplinary fashions is one way in which we can more powerfully articulate the bases of experiential goodness for a diverse audience of pluralistic learners—including those who may not have direct access to environmentally rich landscapes. We would do well to heed the advice of environmental hermeneuticists like Brian Treanor, who point to environmental writing as a critical tool in environmental

immersion,⁶¹ as well as take note of the tremendous popularity of texts such as Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Anna Tsing's *Mushroom at the End of the World*, Merlin Sheldrake's *Entangled Life*, and other kindred texts within the environmental humanities that reach well beyond an academic context.⁶² From nature writing to geomapping to archival research, there are a plethora of offerings within diverse fields to fruitfully understand experience as bridging subject and object.

A metaphysical framework cannot, in and of itself, provide a remedy for all of the world's ills. A Jamesian approach to metaphysics, however, promises to point us in new directions, including one fruitful to environmental education—one that knits more tightly together the diverse empirical realities that we face with the transformative goods and values that our material realities provide.

CONCLUSION: THE MORAL IMPERATIVE OF ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHIZING

As we might expect from the author of an essay titled "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," James is no stranger to feelings of moral impulse: we have "but *one conditional commandment*, which is that we should seek incessantly, with fear and trembling, so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which we can see."⁶³ The philosopher is uniquely positioned here to assist in the achievement of this good. A philosophical orientation that takes seriously a neutral monism that sees not "thought-stuff" nor "thing-stuff" as the be all end all of life, but rather an experience that renders both simple classifications of the primal stuff of experience can help environmental ethics progress beyond the chasm of anthropocentrism and anti-anthropocentrism that disconnects thinkers who are united in their care for our environment. Furthermore, the intimacy with the flux of life that takes percepts as fundamental yet "melted into" concepts—an intimacy that James strongly advocates—can help us recognize how immersion in natural environments can aid in developing ecologically-friendly dispositions that are important to maintaining natural diversity. James's metaphysics is thus fruitful from a theoretical standpoint, helping environmental thinking progress beyond stultifying philosophical tensions, as well as more directly

in terms of informing strategies for cultivating social attitudes of environmental stewardship.

While it might be tempting to underestimate the value of, colloquially, “helping philosophers talk to one another” by dissolving differences in ethical theory, it is important to realize what James himself appreciates so well: that conceptual thinking, yes, *subtracts* something of the fullness of concrete experience, but so too has the power to transform it. Philosophical discourse, then, is anything but impotent. But so much of current philosophy becomes hopelessly mired in recognition of the minutiae of *difference*: is phenomenology right to focus so exclusively on the experience of the subject, even if recent reformulations (e.g., eco-phenomenology) try to do this with an eye toward the formative role of the material environment? Or are we better off thrusting the subject to the side and trying to cultivate some means for the objective world to speak for itself—taking in tandem the difficult charge of performative contradiction (e.g., new materialisms)? If philosophy is a resource for providing an orientation toward the world, and pragmatism is committed to thinking of ways that such thinking can produce real effects on the world, then a paramount value of James’s work is that it develops ways for us to free up the invaluable resource of philosophical contemplation by pointing to modes of thinking that more directly connect with ways of transforming our lives. As he so beautifully phrases it, we are all “part of the universe and share the same one deep concern in its destinies,” and it would be a shame “if small aesthetic discords were to keep honest men asunder”—especially in a project of such visceral and immediate gravity as sustaining the Earth that hosts us all.⁶⁴

NOTES

¹. William James, "The Types of Philosophic Thinking," in *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977), 486.

². Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in Frederick Engels, *Feuerbach: The Roots of the Socialist Philosophy*, trans. Austin Lewis (Whithorn: Anados Books, 2018), 59.

³. The term "Anthropocene" is not without its detractors, and for good reason: the prefix *anthropos-* suggests that it is an era marked by geological change caused by the human species at large, failing to recognize both the unequal environmental effects incurred by developed Western countries and the histories of colonial violence that undergird relationships with land and economy. However, as no equally suitable term has been solidified in relevant literature, I use this term provisionally with this caveat appended.

⁴. Wayne Viney and Madisson Mullen, "Tempering the Foolish Faiths: William James and Ecology," *Ecopsychology* 9, no. 1 (2017): 26.

⁵. James, "The One and the Many," in *Writings*, 265.

⁶. Robert C. Fuller, "American Pragmatism Reconsidered: William James' Ecological Ethic," *Environmental Ethics* 14, no. 2 (1992): 160.

⁷. For the purposes of this paper, "the environment" will be used interchangeably with "material reality," "the physical world," "concrete experience," "the objective realm," "the perceptual," etc. to stand in for the natural non-human aspect of experience (rather than, for example, human built or social environments).

⁸. James, "The Place of Affectional Facts in a World of Pure Experience," in *Writings*, 271.

⁹. James, "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?," in *Writings*, 170.

¹⁰. James, "Consciousness," 170.

¹¹. James, "Consciousness," 172.

¹². James, "Consciousness," 170.

¹³. James, "The Thing and Its Relations," in *Writings*, 215.

¹⁴. See James, "A World of Pure Experience," in *Writings*, 201.

¹⁵. James, "World," 201-203. James does specify that a great deal of our knowledge operates provisionally (or "virtually") in that

it *could* be verified but never is fully verified by experience—what matters is that it is not challenged by our experience. See James., “World,” 204-05.

¹⁶. James, “World,” 201.

¹⁷. James, “Consciousness,” 170.

¹⁸. James, “World,” 203.

¹⁹. James, “Consciousness,” 171.

²⁰. James, “Consciousness,” 169.

²¹. See James, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” in *Writings*, 629-645.

²². James, “The Present Dilemma in Philosophy,” in *Writings*, 368.

²³. The phrase “ontological hygiene” is a productive one for thinking about normatively loaded ontological taxonomies, and I borrow from an excellent cross-disciplinary text on posthumanism: Elaine Graham, *Representations of the Post/human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 35.

²⁴. James, “Present Dilemma,” in *Writings*, 368.

²⁵. James, “Consciousness,” 171.

²⁶. James, “Sentiment of Rationality,” in *Writings*, 319.

²⁷. The older dualism of rationalism, James argues, related to the soul and matter, whereas the “indefeasibly dualistic” neo-Kantian conception (wherein “the evaporation of the soul-substance has proceeded as far as it can go without being yet complete”) is that of subject and object—see James, “Consciousness,” 170. The distinction to be made here pertains to the project at hand mostly only inasmuch as the more recent neo-Kantian conception brings subject and object closer together yet not quite close enough.

²⁸. James, “Consciousness,” 326.

²⁹. James, “Consciousness,” 332.

³⁰. James, “Consciousness,” 333.

³¹. James, “Consciousness,” 319.

³². James, “Consciousness,” 322.

³³. Tom Regan, “The Nature and Possibility of an Environmental Ethic,” *Environmental Ethics* 3, no. 1 (1981): 20.

³⁴. Bryan Norton, “Environmental Ethics and Weak

Anthropocentrism,” *Environmental Ethics* 6, no. 2 (1984): 134.

³⁵. Norton, 135.

³⁶. Kelly A. Parker, “Pragmatism and Environmental Thought,” in *Environmental Pragmatism*, ed. Andrew Light and Eric Katz (New York: Routledge, 1996), 33.

³⁷. James, “Concerning Fechner,” in *Writings*, 530.

³⁸. Jason Scott Robert, “Wild Ontology: Elaborating Environmental Pragmatism,” *Ethics and the Environment* 5, no. 2 (2000): 202.

³⁹. Robert, 197.

⁴⁰. Throughout this paper, “intimacy” and “environmental intimacy” are being used to connect James’s use of the word “intimacy” (direct subjective experience, unity) with the standard environmental philosophy concept of “environmental intimacy” (a deep, experiential, and meaningful understanding of the relationship between self and world).

⁴¹. James, “Bergson,” in *Writings*, 577 (second emphasis added).

⁴². James, “Bergson,” 577.

⁴³. James, “Bergson,” 573.

⁴⁴. James, “Bergson,” 569.

⁴⁵. James, “Bergson,” 569.

⁴⁶. James, “Bergson,” 569.

⁴⁷. James, “Percept and Concept—Some Corollaries,” in *Writings*, 256 (emphasis added).

⁴⁸. James, “Percept,” 256.

⁴⁹. James, “Percept,” 256.

⁵⁰. James, “Blindness,” in *Writings*, 642.

⁵¹. James, “Blindness,” 640.

⁵². James, “Blindness,” 642.

⁵³. James, “Blindness,” 642-43.

⁵⁴. James, “What Makes a Life Significant,” in *Writings*, 649.

⁵⁵. Meg Holden, “Phenomenology versus Pragmatism: Seeking a Restoration Environmental Ethic,” *Environmental Ethics* 22, no. 1 (2001): 40.

⁵⁶. Nancy M. Wells and Kristi S. Lekies, “Nature and the Life Course: Pathways from Childhood Nature Experiences to Adult

Environmentalism,” *Children, Youth and Environments* 16, no. 1 (2006): 13.

⁵⁷. See Christian Diehm, *Connection to Nature, Deep Ecology, and Conservation Social Science: Human-Nature Bonding and Protecting the Natural World* (Lexington: Lanham, 2020).

⁵⁸. Diehm.

⁵⁹. James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” in *Writings*, 626.

⁶⁰. National Coffee Association of the U.S.A., “National Coffee Data Trends 2025,” accessed November 22, 2025, <https://www.ncausa.org/Market-Research/National-Coffee-Data-Trends>.

⁶¹. Brian Treanor, “Narrative and Nature: Appreciating and Understanding the Nonhuman World,” in *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham, 2014).

⁶². Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life: How Mushrooms Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures* (New York: Random House, 2020).

⁶³. James, “The Moral Philosopher,” 625-26.

⁶⁴. James, “Philosophic Thinking,” 486.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Diehm, Christian. *Connection to Nature, Deep Ecology, and Conservation Social Science: Human-Nature Bonding and Protecting the Natural World*. Lexington: Lanham, 2020.

Fuller, Robert C. “American Pragmatism Reconsidered: William James’ Ecological Ethic.” *Environmental Ethics* 14, no. 2 (1992): 159-176.

Graham, Elaine. *Representations of the Post/human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.

Holden, Meg. "Phenomenology versus Pragmatism: Seeking a Restoration Environmental Ethic." *Environmental Ethics* 22, no. 1 (2001): 37-56.

James, William. "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings." In *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, edited by John J. McDermott, 194-214. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

James, William. "Concerning Fechner." In *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, edited by John J. McDermott, 194-214. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

James, William. "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" In *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, edited by John J. McDermott, 194-214. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

James, William. "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." In *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, edited by John J. McDermott, 194-214. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

James, William. "The One and the Many." In *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, edited by John J. McDermott, 194-214. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

James, William. "Percept and Concept—Some Corollaries." In *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, edited by John J. McDermott, 194-214. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

James, William. "The Place of Affectional Facts in a World of Pure Experience." In *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, edited by John J. McDermott, 194-214. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

James, William. "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy." In *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, edited by John J. McDermott, 194-214. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

James, William. "The Sentiment of Rationality." In *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, edited by John J. McDermott, 194-214. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

James, William. "The Thing and Its Relations." In *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, edited by John J. McDermott, 194-214. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

James, William. "The Types of Philosophic Thinking." In *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, edited by John J. McDermott, 194-214. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

James, William. "What Makes a Life Significant." In *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, edited by John J. McDermott, 194-214. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

James, William. "A World of Pure Experience." In *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, edited by John J. McDermott, 194-214. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

- Marx, Karl. "Theses on Feuerbach." In *Feuerbach: The Roots of the Socialist Philosophy*, translated by Austin Lewis. Whithorn: Anados Books, 2018.
- Norton, Bryan. "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism." *Environmental Ethics* 6, no. 2 (1984): 131-148.
- Parker, Kelly A. "Pragmatism and Environmental Thought." In *Environmental Pragmatism*, edited by Andrew Light and Eric Katz. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Regan, Tom. "The Nature and Possibility of an Environmental Ethic." *Environmental Ethics* 3, no. 1 (1981): 19-34.
- Robert, Jason Scott. "Wild Ontology: Elaborating Environmental Pragmatism." *Ethics and the Environment* 5, no. 2 (2000): 191-209.
- Viney, Wayne, and Madisson Mullen. "Tempering the Foolish Faiths: William James and Ecology." *Ecopsychology* 9, no. 1 (2017): 26-32.
- Wells, Nancy M. and Kristi S. Lekies. "Nature and the Life Course: Pathways from Childhood Nature Experiences to Adult Environmentalism." *Children, Youth and Environments* 16, no. 1 (2006): 1-24.