

# Enduring Philosophical Implications of William James' Radical Empiricism

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William James was one of the first American philosophers with a significant global influence. His radical empiricism served as his metaphysical philosophy but has not received a sufficient scholarly attention. James' radical empiricism formed and emerged gradually, ultimately holding that pure experience is the key to understanding reality while emphasising the reality of relations and the integrity of experience. As a pragmatic metaphysical theory, this radical empiricism joins with James' view of truth to form the whole of Jamesian philosophy. A historical evaluation shows that radical empiricism has close connections with Henri Bergson's philosophy and early phenomenology, and served as a bridge between Jamesian philosophy writ-large and contemporary European philosophical currents. In the context of comparative philosophy and global philosophical dialogues, the doctrine of radical empiricism stands as a significant topic in the dialogue and comparison between Eastern and Western philosophy.

**Keywords:** William James, pragmatism, radical empiricism

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## INTRODUCTION

William James was one of the first American philosophers with a significant global influence. Generally speaking, James' pragmatism is made up of two parts: the doctrine of truth and the philosophical method articulated in the works *Pragmatism*, *The Meaning of Truth* and *The Will to Believe*, and a radical empiricism, that is, James' metaphysics. The former has received more attention, emphasis and criticism overall; the latter has not received its due recognition. Radical empiricism is one of the pillars underlying the entire Jamesian philosophy, and a constantly evolutionary and maturing process itself – even, an ambition which James did not realise fully in spite of his lifelong endeavour. As times passes, however, the philosophical legacy of James' radical empiricism has shown its increasingly great importance. This essay aims to give a brief account of the development of James' radical empiricism, summarise some of its inmost opinions, discuss the encounter between James' radical empiricism and Western and Eastern philosophies, and display the role of radical empiricism in global philosophical dialogue.

## THE GENESIS OF JAMES' RADICAL EMPIRICISM AND SOME OF ITS KEY POINTS

Radical empiricism, an important component of Jamesian philosophy, was pursued by James throughout his life, gradually taking shape and maturing amid his intellectual development. Understanding his doctrine of radical empiricism is a prerequisite for understanding his sense of reality.

### The 'Stream of Thought' Discovered by James in his Early Inquiry was the Rudiment of Radical Empiricism (1870s–1890s)

The kernel of James' radical empiricism mainly comes from the *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912), which was edited by James' colleague Ralph Barton Perry after the former's death. The basic text in this collection of essays may be said to have been started on 20 August 1906, when James presented to the Department of Philosophy at Harvard a collection of twelve reprints of journal articles published in 1904–1905 and deposited a similar collection in the Harvard University Library (James 1976: 200).

The rudiment of James' radical empiricism can, however, be traced back to the stage of his career focused on psychological research. Since the 1870s, James had been committed to studying and teaching psychology and physiology. In 1890, he published *The Principles of Psychology*, which he took 12 years to complete. In this work, with which he achieved his reputation in the field of psychology, James pointed out that traditional philosophy dissected consciousness into separate and atomic ideas but concurrently neglected the inner and mutual relationality and continuity of experience. James advocated instead regarding consciousness as an indivisible whole. For this reason, James presented his doctrine of 'stream of consciousness', which exerted a great influence over psychology, philosophy and literature. This doctrine interpreted the attributes of thought, claiming that each thought is prone to becoming a part of an individual consciousness, and that it is continuous and changeable in individual consciousness (James 1981: 220). His discourse as such had gone beyond the purely psychological, discussing thought and consciousness at a philosophical level. The doctrine of the stream of consciousness was the basis and starting point for James' radical empiricism.

### The Doctrine of Radical Empiricism Took Shape and Matured in the Reflection and Criticism of Traditional Empirical Philosophy (Late 1890s)

James' philosophy matured during this period, as signalled by the publication of his work *The Will to Believe* in 1897 (see Algaier 2015). In the preface to this book, James wrote,

Were I obliged to give a short name to the attitude in question, I should call it that of radical empiricism, in spite of the fact that such brief nicknames are nowhere more misleading than in philosophy. I say 'empiricism,' because it is contended to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience; and I say 'radical,' because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as an hypothesis, and, unlike so much of the half-way empiricism that is current under the name of positivism or agnosticism or scientific naturalism, it does not dogmatically affirm monism as something with which all experience has got to square (James 1979: 5).

That was the first time that James explicitly admitted his belief in 'radical empiricism' (see also James 1976: xiii–xlvi).

In the years after, the doctrine of radical empiricism did not trigger any considerable stir in philosophical discourse although it did cause some debates. This is partly because James specifically discussed radical empiricism in only a few articles in his life, without publishing any monographs to expound on his ideas concerning it, or possibly because his views about pragmatic truths and methods had prevailed, drawing more appreciation and criticism to his pragmatic thought. James himself did not forget his doctrine of radical empiricism in his academic career, though. In a letter to his friend Francois Pillon in 1904, James wrote, 'My philosophy is what I call a radical empiricism, a pluralism, a "tychism", which represents order as being gradually won and always in making... It rejects all doctrines of the Absolute' (James 2002: 410). And in the preface to *The Meaning of Truth*, which was published one year before his death, James said, 'I am interested in another doctrine in philosophy to which I gave the name of radical empiricism, and it seems to me that the establishment of the pragmatist theory of truth is a step of first-rate importance in making radical empiricism prevail' (James 1975 b: 6).

## TWO OF THE MAIN VIEWPOINTS IN JAMES' RADICAL EMPIRICISM

In general, James' radical empiricism can be distilled into two core tenets.

### Pure Experience is a Key to the Understanding of Reality

Pure experience is the primal material or stuff for the formation of all things (James 1976: 4), and the 'originally chaotic manifold of non-perceptual experience' (James 1976: 10). 'This world, just like the world of percepts, comes to us at first as a chaos of experiences' (James 1976: 9–10). Such pure experience can be called 'the stream of thought' or 'the stream of consciousness' (James 1981: 233). It lacks such postulates as attributes and shapes, it can be experienced only in the subconsciousness without any involvement of rational activities. Experience in this sense can be viewed as 'the instant field of the present' and 'a that' (James 1976: 46). In James, experience is not only a link in a human cognitive process, but, moreover, the very basis of all of reality. Moreover, because pure experience is neither physical nor psychological existence, but rather in an undifferentiated state preceding both, it transcends the traditional dualistic subject–object or mind–matter opposition, and is the original existence preceding any division. For this reason, James compared 'pure experience' to marble, stating that just as a sculptor can carve the same piece of marble into different types of objects, 'pure experience' can become both the mind and the body, and its specific form depends upon how experience is arranged or formalised. Therefore, the distinction between mind and body is not a substantial difference, but a difference in organisational forms based on experience. Furthermore, James believed that the consciousness or psychological activity we usually talk about is actually only a part of experience, rather than something independent of experience. This argument not only challenged the traditional view that regarded consciousness as an independent entity, but also provided a new angle for understanding the integrity and fluidity of experience.

### Radical Empiricism Emphasises the Reality of Relations and the Integrity of Experience

James' radical empiricism is doubtlessly empirical in general, but he held that in traditional empiricism each idea or experiential unit is totally separate and lacks inner relations. Therefore, James' radical empiricism lays a special emphasis on the status of 'relations'. In his view, the 'relations' between things are the same as those things themselves, that is, they are all a direct and particular experience and have an equivalent reality. This view breaks down

the practice of traditional empiricism that regards experience as a set of isolated atomic ideas, and instead focuses on how all parts of experience connect each other into an organic whole through their inner relations. In James' view, experience is not a simple pile of separately existing elements, but features a variety of relations, which are themselves a part of experience, and constitutes reality (James 1975 b: 7). These relations not only guarantee continuity and unity within experience, but also enable experience to exist as a whole rather than as a jumble of separate fragments.

## **REVIEWING THE PHILOSOPHICAL LEGACY OF RADICAL EMPIRICISM IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY**

The term 'pragmatism' in James has both broad and narrow senses. Broadly, it refers to Jamesian philosophy as a whole, but in the narrow sense, it means James' theory of truth and his doctrine of philosophical methods. When examined in the context of the developmental history of pragmatism, James' radical empiricism has received far less attention than his views on truth and methodology. Objectively, this has affected the scholars' evaluation of James' radical empiricism. James' radical empiricism has produced a unique effect in present-day scholarly discourse, playing a positive role in the formation of James' philosophy as a whole, the establishment of pragmatism as an object of comparative philosophy, and the integration of James' philosophy into the dialogue of global philosophy.

### **As a Doctrine of Metaphysics, Radical Empiricism Joins with James' Pragmatic View of Truth to Form the Whole of Jamesian Philosophy**

It is well-known that James held a negative attitude towards traditional metaphysics, believing that pragmatism was a means of ending metaphysical debates. Pragmatism is also a theory of truth, while truth is effectively the cash-value of ideas (James 1975 a: 97). This view of James not only challenges the understanding of the essence and criterion of truth in traditional philosophy but also highlights the core role of both experience and practice in the process of affirming truth.

It is important to recognise here that while James opposed traditional metaphysics, he nonetheless constructed a metaphysics of his own, that is, his radical empiricism. James himself did not deny this. 'I give the name of "radical empiricism" to my *weltanschauung*.' (James 1976: 22). Similarly, some western philosophers regarded James' metaphysics as a 'metaphysics of experience' (Lamberth 2004) or 'the metaphysical level of pure experience' (Cooper 2002).

Therefore, James' philosophy as a whole consists of pragmatic methodology, a theory of truth, and metaphysics. If we regard methodology and the theory of truth as the very kernel of James' pragmatic philosophy, then radical empiricism – his metaphysical system – serves as its foundation. On the one hand, James' radical empiricist metaphysics fundamentally undermines the subject–object dualistic metaphysics he criticised, providing a crucial theoretical premise for his opposition to traditional theories of truth based on dualism; without this metaphysics, James' pragmatic theory of truth and methodology would lack a reliable basis. On the other hand, the dynamic, relational and process-oriented worldview upheld by James' metaphysics offers a key support for his rejection of closed, static and isolated theories of truth, and his advocacy of an open, dynamic, relative and conventional theory of truth. It is only through James' theory of truth and methodology that his metaphysics can exert practical significance in the life world.

## Radical Empiricism is a Bridge Between Jamesian Philosophy and European Philosophy Centres

James's radical empiricism provided a bridge enabling American philosophy to stride over the Atlantic and interact and engage in dialogue with European philosophies. In view of the influence of Jamesian philosophy in Europe, the relationship between his and European philosophies is a complex and broad topic. For instance, the debates between James and Bertrand Russell and the possible influence of Jamesian thought upon Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jean-Paul Sartre, Sigmund Freud and Alfred N. Whitehead are all important. But because of the limited length of this essay and its focus on James' radical empiricism, it will simply select the phenomenological elements in James' radical empiricism and the possible comparison between James and Bergson for a brief discussion.

Phenomenology carries a considerable weight in contemporary European philosophy. Although Charles Sanders Peirce, who was one of James' friends and also a founder of pragmatism, had used the term 'phenomenology' as early as the beginning of the 20th century, it may be too dogmatic to simply assert that pragmatism had advocated phenomenology before Edmund Husserl did; there is, however, something in common between the ideas of Peirce and James and of European phenomenology in a broad sense, and even Husserl himself admitted that he benefited from James in general (Spiegelberg 1994: 16, 17, 101). As early as the mid-20th century, scholars have noted that James' radical empiricism has an apparent phenomenological characteristic (see Wilshire 1968). Although Husserl did popularise the meaning of the term 'phenomenology', he did so ten years after the publication of James' work *The Principles of Psychology*. In the said book's chapter 'The Stream of Thought', James largely set up a model for phenomenological analysis. He would agree to impose a group of transcendental categories upon our description of experience, but would maintain that one should start with the observation of experience itself. James acted in his own manner to eliminate the traditional distinction between 'things' and 'relations' (MacLeod 1969: v). With the resurgence of pragmatism in the second half of the 20th century, many philosophers asserted that phenomenological theorists had found surprising similarities between their theories and certain pragmatic viewpoints, publishing monographs holistically comparing pragmatism and philosophical phenomena and engaging particularly in a comparative study of James and the phenomenologists (Craig 2010; Rosenthal, Bourgeois 1980; Bourgeois, Rosenthal 1983).

Bergson occupies a crucial position in modern Western philosophy, and neither James nor Bergson concealed at all their personal appreciation of the other. Those two philosophers shared many critical ideas concerning such issues as experience, reality, process, time and consciousness (see Teixeira 2011), and opposed the mechanical interpretation of consciousness. Close similarities can also be found between Bergson's duration and James' stream of consciousness, between James's radical empiricism and Bergson's immediate experience and between James's reality constructed by pure experience and Bergson's reality that can be directly grasped by intuition without relying on analysis etc.

On the other hand, there are indeed some differences between James' and Bergson's philosophical views. Some scholars have noted that James' philosophy faces forward, aiming to use philosophy to scrutinise both the overt and subtle tendencies of his time. In contrast, Bergson engaged in a synthesis of the philosophical traditions, restating concepts in contemporary modes of thought and harmonising with contemporary modes of feeling.

Correspondingly, Bergson has a system in which there is a logical relation between premise and conclusion. Without reference to his entire system, it becomes difficult to plausibly state any single opinion of Bergson's. James, by contrast, exhibited a heightened sensitivity to the unique and individualistic elements inherent in all stages of life and reflection. Furthermore, due to the novelty of James' viewpoints and his distinctive understanding of philosophy's core concerns and priorities, interpreting demands a more direct engagement with his original texts. It is therefore plausible to argue that the comparative study of James' and Bergson's philosophies possesses a substantial potential for further expansion and in-depth investigation (Kallen 1914).

### **James' Doctrine of Radical Empiricism is an Important Case in the Dialogue Between and the Comparative Study of Western and Eastern Philosophy**

Pragmatism has been studied and disseminated for over a century in East Asia, especially in China and Japan. In comparative philosophy, pragmatism is a particularly important topic, and both Western and Eastern scholars have prolifically researched the commonalities between John Dewey's thought and doctrines originating from Eastern Asia, especially Confucian thought. From the perspective of the comparative study of Western and Eastern philosophies, James' radical empiricism should be made a priority for future research.

While developing his philosophy of religion, James employed the Yogic term *samadhi* to demonstrate that people in certain states can directly see the truth beyond intuition and reason (James 1985: 317). But there is still no documentation sufficient to prove that James' radical empiricism received any direct or rich influence from Eastern philosophy.

In East Asia, James' radical empiricism has been actively responded to and accepted and assimilated by Japanese scholars. Kitaro Nishida, in his first philosophical work *The Inquiry into the Good*, goes straight to the point, saying,

What we usually refer to as experience is adulterated with some sort of thought, so by *pure* I am referring to the state of experience just as it is without the least addition of deliberative discrimination. The moment of seeing a color or hearing a sound, for example, is prior not only to the thought that the color or sound is the activity of an external object or that one is sensing it, but also to the judgment of what the color or sound might be. In this regard, pure experience is identical with direct experience. When one directly experiences one's own state of consciousness, there is not yet a subject, and knowing and its object are completely unified. This is the most refined type of experience (Nishida 1990: 3–4).

This passage concerning pure experience obviously echoes James' doctrine of radical empiricism (Osaki: 125). Nishida did not stop at this: by means of a further analysis of 'pure experience', he devised a 'self-conscious system', and resorted to the concept of 'field' to transform and enhance this system of pure experience and self-consciousness. To this day, the differences and similarities between Nishida and James, and Nishida's proposal on how to go beyond these superficial similarities and radicalise James's pure experience, are still a key concern of both Western and Eastern philosophy (see Stone, Altobrando 2023).

Scholars in Mainland China are still beginning the work of comparing James' radical empiricism and traditional Chinese philosophy. In six years of editing and translating the ten-volume *Collected Philosophical Writings of William James* (2017–2023), I realised more and more clearly that this work is a rich mineral vein that urgently awaits exploitation, and have made some simple proposals regarding the relevant research' (see Chengbing 2017).

With the completion of the editing and translating of this collection, I will focus on researching this topic; this essay is actually a part of my preparatory work for future research. To this end, I would like to put forwards or reiterate some main points of the next step of this inquiry.

Firstly, we should take James' radical empiricism as a cue to inquire into the metaphysical views in Chinese and Western philosophies. Metaphysics is 'first philosophy' in both Western and Chinese philosophies, but metaphysics in Chinese philosophy is unique and different from the Western metaphysics which originated from ancient Greece. Take Daoist philosophy as an example. The Dao appears directly neither in space and time nor in language (being a non-name); it shows a remarkable 'non-substantiality'. Metaphysics in Chinese philosophy manifests itself as practical wisdom, mind-nature dimension and realm theory, while metaphysics in the Western tradition is full of logical and epistemological attributes, with the premise of a strict distinction between the world of phenomena and the world of the thing-in-itself (Kai 2018: 78). James' radical empiricism as metaphysics in a Western form shares a similar set of concerns as metaphysics in Chinese philosophy. One cannot only conduct comparative research between James' specific (Western) metaphysics and Chinese metaphysics, but also can further discuss the differences and similarities between Eastern and Western metaphysics.

Secondly, we should compare and contrast James' pure empiricism and certain views in Buddhist philosophy, especially those associated with the Consciousness-only School. This school, also known as the *Dharmalakṣaṇa* sect, is an important branch of Mahayana Buddhism originating from *Yogācāra* in ancient India. The thought of this school can be summarised as the following: (1) *All things are the manifestations of consciousness*. This school believes that all phenomena (including substance and spirit) arise from the mind or consciousness, emphasising that 'all the three universes come out of the mind only, and all beings as well as the principles behind them are the outcome of consciousness'; that is, all the universes and all things in them are the manifestations of the mind or consciousness. (2) *Only consciousness exists, not the world*. This school goes further in negating the objective reality of the external world, maintaining that 'there is only inner consciousness, there is no external world'; in other words, all to be perceived is simply the projection of the mind or consciousness. This doctrine has a considerable similarity and comparability with radical empiricism's analysis of both consciousness and the subject-object world. In my opinion, pursuing comparative research between Husserl and Buddhist philosophy is very popular among Chinese scholars at present. Because there are some similarities between James and phenomenology as shown above, our research should be expected to integrate into mainstream research on Husserl in China.

Thirdly, we should discuss the incommunicability and knowability of the mysterious state of consciousness proposed by James, and certain states of being mysterious but also graspable that are discussed in traditional Chinese culture. James' doctrine of religious experience is another version of his radical empiricism. His religious philosophy specifically discusses the mysterious state of consciousness. In his view, the mysterious state of consciousness has such attributes as incommunicability, knowability, temporality and passivity. These mysterious states in James' mind have a considerable similarity with certain propositions in Eastern philosophy. Further research on James' doctrine concerning the mysterious state of consciousness should follow the relevant perspectives and approaches of both Chinese Daoist philosophy and Daoism (see Chengbing 2022).

## CONCLUSIONS

This essay has offered a simple analysis of the formation and gist of James' radical empiricism, discussed the role and status of the doctrine of radical empiricism, and studied the role of Jamesian philosophy in the age of globalisation by reviewing the relevance of James's radical empiricism to Bergson's intuitionism and phenomenology, and the possible comparability and dialogue between James' radical empiricism and non-Western philosophy.

In a certain sense, this essay is a revisiting of James' doctrine of radical empiricism. I thus hope its discussion can inspire further consideration of Jamesian philosophy in four major senses. Firstly, when trying to understand pragmatic philosophy, people tend to pay more attention to the positivist lineage of classical pragmatism represented by James, Pierce and Dewey and then trace the relevance of pragmatism to analytic philosophy, as well as the combination of analytic philosophy and pragmatism in the first half of the 20th century following the former's arrival in America. They thus relatively underrate James' radical empiricism and its relevance to contemporary non-positivist philosophy. In the development of Western philosophy since Hegel, one path extends from Nietzsche and Schopenhauer (voluntarism) to Bergson (intuitionism), Heidegger and Sartre (existentialism) and Freud (psychoanalysis), and then on to postmodernist Derrida, Foucault and Deleuze (see Stuhr 2021). James' place in this lineage, being the founder of a more or less alternative kind of pragmatism, and specifically the proper positioning of his radical empiricism, requires closer investigation. Secondly, classical pragmatic philosophy doubts and criticises traditional metaphysics, and at the same time formulates a pragmatic metaphysics. The position of James' metaphysics, centred on radical empiricism, in the school of pragmatic metaphysics and in a broader context of all Western metaphysics is a topic requiring more research. Thirdly, while James' radical empiricism, together with his theory of truth, constitutes the whole of James' philosophy, these two components exhibit distinct differences in terms of their philosophical approaches: James adopted a positivist (analytical) approach for his theory of truth, whereas his radical empiricism appears to rely more heavily on a descriptive approach. James himself explicitly acknowledged this distinction. How to integrate these two approaches so as to achieve a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of the coherence of James' philosophy remains a key topic for future research. Fourthly, the encounter, dialogue and comparison between James' radical empiricism and Eastern philosophy cannot only present James' radical empiricism as an 'other' of Eastern philosophy, but also reveal the differences and similarities between radical empiricism and Eastern philosophy, facilitating global philosophical dialogue and the integration of their philosophical horizons.

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## Ilgalaikės Williamo Jameso radikalios empirizmo filosofinės implikacijos

### *Santrauka*

Williamas Jamesas buvo vienas pirmųjų JAV filosofų, turėjusių didelę pasaulinę įtaką. Radikalusis empirizmas buvo jo metafizinės filosofijos pagrindas, tačiau iki šiol nesulaukė pakankamo mokslininkų dėmesio. W. Jameso radikalusis empirizmas formavosi palaipsniui ir ilgainiui iškilo kaip požiūris, teigiantis, kad grynoji patirtis yra raktas į tikrovės supratimą, kartu pabrėžiant realybės ir patirties santykių vientisumą. Kaip pragmatinė metafizinė teorija, šis radikalusis empirizmas kartu su W. Jameso požiūriu į tiesą sudaro visą W. Jameso filosofiją. Istorinis vertinimas rodo, kad radikalusis empirizmas yra glaudžiai susijęs su Henri Bergsono filosofija bei ankstyvąja fenomenologija ir tarnavo kaip tiltas tarp W. Jameso filosofijos plačiąja prasme ir šiuolaikinių Europos filosofinių srovių. Lyginamosios filosofijos ir pasaulinių filosofinių dialogų kontekste radikaliojo empirizmo doktrina yra svarbi Rytų ir Vakarų filosofijos dialogo ir jos tarpusavio lyginimo tema.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** Williamas Jamesas, pragmatizmas, radikalusis empirizmas