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VOL. XLVIII NO. 1-2	CONTENTS	JAN.-JUNE 2021 Published in May 2023
ARUP JYOTI SARMA	: Hegal's Overcoming of the Kantian 'Is-Ought' Dichotomy	1
MUJANUR RAHAMAN	: William James' view on Reality: A Defense Against the Charge of Incoherence	19
ABEY KOSHY	: A Critique of Biopolitics from the Perspective of a Post-human Philosophical Thinking	34
SREEKALA M NAIR	: Socialization of Scientific Sub-culture: R. sundararajan's Critique of Scientific Rationalism	56
S. PANNEERSELVAM	: A Critique of Transcendental Phenomenology of Prof. R. Sundara Rajan	70
HARISH NAVALE	: Crisis of European Sciences and Participatory Ethics Advocated by Prof. R. Sundara Rajan	87
SHUBHRA JUYOTI DAS	: Rabindranath Tagore on Culturing Human Nature : The Tools and Their Justification	104
DEBASHIS GUHA	: Definitions of Consequentialism	121
SATYARANJAN MISHRA and JATIN BISHOYI	: Understanding <i>Noesis</i> and <i>Noema</i> : A Phenomenological Interpretation	136
BIRAJ MEHTA RATHI	Book Review - Kant's Political Thoughts	146
HARSHA BADKAR	: Book Review - Plato and Arthashastra : Plato's Political Philosophy and Indian Political thoughts	151

WILLIAM JAMES' VIEW ON REALITY: A DEFENSE AGAINST THE CHARGE OF INCOHERENCE

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William James' view on reality: a defense against the charge of incoherence

William James' concept of reality is a unique contribution to the history of metaphysical problem. If we go through the writings of William James we can see that he has discussed about reality from different perspectives and also focused on different aspects of reality. James scholars have often offered various interpretations of James' notion of reality as they tried to defend James' theory against various criticisms. However, some James scholars have not only interpreted James' view of reality but also have shown serious difficulties in James' view. E. K. SUCKIEL is one of them. Suckiel notes that in William James' view reality is of two types -- one is pragmatic reality and the other is metaphysical reality. In her book *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James*, Suckiel writes that "... he approaches the question of reality from two quite different perspectives; and with each perspective he is addressing a different problem and is concerned with "reality" in a different sense."¹

In what follows I shall first try to explain James' views about reality in general and then I shall reflect on Suckiel's interpretation on James' view. In Suckiel's interpretation metaphysical reality is pure experience and pragmatic reality is based on it: so metaphysical reality is basic or fundamental. However, in Suckiel's view if we accept the existence of pragmatic reality on the basis of the principle that reality is 'what it is known as', then pure experience will have no place in James' system of metaphysics. Thus she maintains that though these two realities can be shown to be related in certain ways,

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there still remain serious difficulties regarding their relation. She claims that it is a limitation of James' notion of reality. I will try to show, in this article, why Suckiel's above mentioned claims are unacceptable.

1

William James in his book *The Principles of Psychology* discussed the nature of reality. The second volume of this book includes a chapter entitled 'Perception of reality'. Here the first thing that James says while discussing the notion of reality is that –“The sense that anything we think of is unreal can only come, then, when that thing is contradicted by some other thing of which we think. Any object which remains uncontradicted is ipso facto believed and posited as absolute reality.”² It means that when we are thinking about an object if that object contradicts any other object that we are thinking of, then the object that has become contradictory turns out to be unreal. Let me elaborate this point with the help of an example. Let us consider a boy who is fantasizing of a winged horse (Pegasus) and tells that the winged horse is in the stable. In this case, in James' opinion, a contradiction will appear in the boy's imagination. James would explain the occurrence of the contradiction in the following way. In case any horse is present in the stable for real, then a relationship between the horse and other things present in the stable will take place. But while fantasizing about the winged horse if we think about its presence in the stable then relationship between the fantasized horse and the other things that remain present in the stable is unlikely to take place. We will hardly find any relationship in that case. If we establish a relation between the concept of fantasized horse and the concept of a real stable and proclaim that the winged horse is present in the stable, then a contradiction will arise between these two instances of thoughts. If anything is present in the real stable then it will be related to other things in the stable. Now if the winged horse is conceived to be present in the stable it should have relation with other things in the stable. But the winged horse, being imaginary, cannot have any relation with other things in the stable. So to think that the winged horse is present in the stable is to admit that the winged horse is both related to other things in the stable and

also that the winged horse cannot be related to other things present in the stable. Thus the notion of winged horse leads to contradiction in thought. Accordingly a winged horse will be considered to stand for something unreal because it leads to contradiction. Therefore, the general conclusion for James is that, a fantasized object when thought of in real gives rise to contradiction in thought.

In that case the one which is un-contradictory is considered as real. James claims, "...we cannot continue to think in two contradictory ways at once".³

In James' opinion when a contradiction arises between two objects of thoughts then we accept one or the other. The one that is accepted is termed real and the other that is rejected is termed unreal. But, one may ask, if a person's choice determines whether something will be accepted or not then the status of the real turns out to be subjective and if it turns out to be subjective then is there not a probability that a single object can appear to be real to someone and unreal to another person at the same moment of time and, in addition, to a single person at different times? Are not these positions counter-intuitive? What will be James' response to this? It needs to be mentioned here that James' response in this context would depend on his notion of pragmatic reality and on the distinction between pragmatic reality and metaphysical reality as drawn by him. In answering the above question on the basis of the notion of pragmatic reality James claims that reality of an object may depend on a person's choice but at the same time he also notes that making a choice does not depend on the person alone. According to James there are uncountable things in this world and these objects bear certain qualities and it is the presence of these qualities that enable them to emerge as real. Thus sensible objects that can draw our attention are lively, they can create pain and pleasure, can impact our will, can create emotional interest, can occur as causes of the sensations and so on. Through the above contention James intends to mean that the qualities of objects are also responsible for determining the choice and thus also for determining the reality of the chosen object. But James will at once point out that the contradicted thing is not unreal in the sense of being non-existent. James states that the things like this one "...still have existence, though not the same existence, as the real things".⁴ To substantiate this discussion

James introduces the notion of “*Universe*” which he also termed “total world”. According to James, objects of imagination, objects of illusion, and objects of dreams are all undeniable features of the Universe. James, in this context mentions the existence of seven different worlds. Each of these worlds has its own different objects. These seven worlds together constitute the whole universe. These worlds include the world of sense, The world of science, the world of ideal relations or abstract truths, the world of idols of the tribe, the various supernatural worlds, the various worlds of individual opinion and worlds of ‘sheer madness and vagary respectively’⁵. He tells that the objects that we think of can belong to any of these seven worlds. Whenever these worlds appear in the thoughts of different people then the person who is thoughtful regarding a particular world consider it to be real and discards the other worlds from his account for that point of time.

But, one may wonder, which among these seven different worlds and their constituents are real according to James? James’s response to the above query, from the viewpoint of pragmatic reality, will be as follows. James, to begin with, will claim that among these seven worlds the one that we attend emerges out as real and the one that we do not attend is not real. He adds that every world has its own reality; however, some of the worlds have more reality compared to others. But he emphasizes that *mere existence* of anything does not assure that it also has a reality. Even if there is existence of something, reality may not be present there as a feature of that thing. If something ‘appears’ as an object it does not necessarily imply its reality in pragmatic sense. Here, ‘to appear as something’ means, for James, to be a thing *which is thought of*. It is important to note here that the feature of *being thought of* is a mark of metaphysical reality in James’ view. Accordingly merely appearing of an object may exist as a metaphysical reality but that is not practical reality, according to James. But if it is *interesting* or *important* to someone then it may be practical reality too. From this perspective James introduces the notions of two realities– practical reality or pragmatic reality and metaphysical reality. While defining practical reality James says – “...what we need is practical reality, reality for ourselves; and, to have that, an object must not only appear, but it must appear both interesting and important. The worlds whose objects are

neither interesting nor important we treat simply negatively, we brand them as unreal.”⁶ It is notable that the term ‘unreal’ used in the aforementioned quotation refers to unreality in pragmatic sense.

For understanding James’ notion of the real an important issue that needs to be addressed is whether the features of ‘being interesting’ and ‘being important’ stand for necessary conditions or sufficient conditions, or necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be termed real. Here my submission is that the condition of being interesting and the condition of being important are related to Jamesian reality in a complex way. First of all we should note that these two conditions do not always go hand in hand. We can explain it with an example as to how a thing or an object can be interesting without being important or can be important without being interesting. Medicine, for example, which is very important to a patient for staying alive, may not be interesting to her. Similarly a researcher may be interested in a topic which is not related to his research area but not important for his research. Needless to say, however, that certain types of things will satisfy both the condition. If we closely examine James’ notion of pragmatic real we will find that merely being interesting will not be a mark of real for a thing unless the thing satisfies some need. So the feature of being interesting is not a sufficient condition for being real. Nor would James consider this feature to be individually necessary too. For James would claim that if a thing satisfies the condition of being important then it would be real even if it is not interesting. But James would at once point out that ‘being important’ is not a necessary condition for something to count as real because if something is interesting and satisfies our need it will be counted as real even if it is not important. However on this point James will claim that though neither ‘being interesting’ nor ‘being important’ is not individually a necessary condition of pragmatic reality, either of them must be present for accepting anything as real. In other words nothing can be pragmatically real if it is neither interesting nor important. James insists that anything to be pragmatically real must possess either the feature of being interesting or that of being important, or both. He relates these features with two aspects of our life namely emotional aspect and active aspect, and claims that the satisfaction of either of these aspects is a necessary condition of

pragmatic reality.⁷ James would claim that these features of a real thing determine our need of various types. When defining reality James says that, in the relative sense or pragmatic sense reality is that which is connected to our emotional and active life. He maintains that “in this sense, whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real; whenever an object so appeals to us that we turn to it, accept it, fill our mind with it, or practically take account of it, so far it is real for us”.⁶

One may, however, observe here that we do many things without emotion, and accordingly the question that will be relevant in those cases is whether James will term the objects of those activities as real or not? In case of pure logic or mathematics emotion rarely exists. So what would be James’ position regarding the objects of logic or mathematics? To answer this James states that reality might be admitted in those cases but the degree of reality would be comparatively low. According to James, “...as thinkers with emotional reaction, we give what seems to be a still higher degree of reality to whatever things we select and emphasize and turn to WITH A WILL.”⁸. Therefore, the object that we select and emphasize with emotion becomes the higher order reality in pragmatic sense.

The crux of the discussion we have made so far can be put in the following way. James uses the notion of reality in two senses: (a) strict sense or metaphysical sense and (b) relative sense or pragmatic sense. When it is described from the view point of un-contradicted thought it presents real in strict sense and when it is described as something which meets our demands or needs it is termed real in relative or pragmatic sense. It can be observed here that these two definitions given by James can be shown to be mutually complementary. One is the continuation of the other definition. The issues arising from the first definition is found to be clarified in the second definition. To explain, in the first definition it was stated that whatever is contradictory is unreal, and whatever is non-contradictory is real. Here James is considering the term ‘contradiction’ in logical sense. That indicates, according to James, that if one of the terms of the contradiction is accepted the other has to be rejected because one cannot continue with contradictory thoughts. But if contradiction is found between thoughts of two different objects which one should be accepted as real? Both of them could not be accepted together. The

answer to this lies in the other definition. This latter definition says that if something is contradictory then we have an option to choose from the objects involved. Which one to be chosen, will depend on its ability to excite and stimulate our interest. The one that will fulfill our interest will meet our needs and then we will choose that object and that choice will make the things real to us. Thus, the second definition clarifies doubts regarding the first definition.

One may object to James' notion of practical or pragmatic reality as "...whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real."⁶ The objection may be that many times objects of illusion also excite and stimulate our interest and in that case if James will consider matters of illusion as real? For a hungry and thirsty person perception of water in a desert can excite and stimulate his interest as a result of which the person may move forward to drink water but may end up in realizing that it was only a mirage. Would James claim the illusory water to be real? The answer to this question is found in James' later work entitled *Pragmatism - a new name for some old ways of thinking*. Here James mentions another characterization of reality. James holds – "Reality is in general what truths have to take account of".⁹ The answer to the above objection can be provided from this characterization. If anything even after exciting or stimulating our interest turns out to be false then it cannot be real in James' view. To be real it has to be an object of truth. Thus, even if object of illusion excites and stimulates our interest it will be unreal. However an objection may be put here from, what James calls, the intellectualist view that truth involves the notion of reality and hence there is circularity in James' above mention view of reality. In defense of James it may be argued here that this objection is not well-founded one because James will not accept the correspondence theory of truth *simpliciter*, but will be more inclined to define truth in terms of 'usefulness' or 'workability' of belief and idea.¹⁰ While analyzing James' notion of reality we can observe a continuity in discussion in the two books written by James, namely *The Principles of Psychology-II* and *Pragmatism - a new name for some old ways of thinking*. We can also hold that the discussion in the latter book is the extended version of his previous work. In the book *Pragmatism- a new name for some old ways of thinking*, James talks about various constituents of reality. He says

that “By ‘realities’ or ‘objects’ here, we mean either things of common sense, sensibly present, or else common-sense relations, such as dates, places, distances, kinds, activities”.¹¹ He further adds that abstract entity and relations of mental ideas are also real. In James’ language “Realities mean then either concrete facts or abstract kinds of things and relations perceived intuitively between them. They furthermore and thirdly mean, as things that new ideas of our must no less take account of, the whole body of other truths already in our possession.”¹² However, it is important to note here that all these constituents are considered to be pragmatically real only when they satisfy the conditions of interest, importance and that of truth as mentioned earlier, though their *existence* does not depend on these conditions. It is interesting to observe here that James would admit that *the whole* of a pragmatically real object does not depend on the subject’s need of any kind. Thus a subject- independent object becomes a constituent of pragmatic reality.

In the book *Some problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy* James gives another definition of real. While stating the definition of real according to pragmatic rule James says that “The best definition I know is that which the pragmatist rule gives: anything is real of which we find ourselves obliged to take account in anyway.”¹³ That means real is something which cannot be ignored. It means that if to understand an experience we cannot but admit certain constituents then all those constituents would enjoy the status of real object. For example, in James’ opinion, for explaining an experience we need to admit both percept and concept, and thus both percept and concept are to be admitted as real. This definition reveals quite clearly that pragmatic reality is not merely a subjective phenomenon but it is regulated by extra-subjective factors or certain factors in subject-object relationship which explains the compulsion of admitting certain objects or parts of objects as real. James’ account of metaphysical reality has been elaborated in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Here James describes reality in the following way. He says: “there is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff ‘pure experience,’ then knowing can easily be explained.”¹⁴ Explaining thle notion of ‘pure experience’ James says

“‘Pure experience’ is the name which I gave to the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories... which is not yet any definite what, tho’ ready to be all sorts of whats; full both of oneness and of manyness ...”.¹⁵

According to James, pure experience is neither mental nor physical. It may be called ‘mental’ if viewed from one perspective and ‘physical’ from another perspective, it depends on our perspective. Different types of dualism like mind-body, subject-object, and knower-known are only distinguishable functions within pure experience. Pure experience is a stream of experience which James considers to be blind by itself; it cannot say anything about itself. We speak for them. In James’ opinion pure experience may function as a *thought* in some context while it can function as *thing* in another context. For example, when paint is within a pot in a paint shop, it may be counted as a thing that is to be sold. On the other hand when it is applied on a canvas along with other paints it becomes an element having, aesthetic appeal. In a similar way the same piece of experience plays the role as thought in one context and in another context plays the role as thing. James gives an excellent illustration of this. He says, “A sensation is rather like a client who has given his case to a lawyer and then has passively to listen in the courtroom to whatever account of his affairs, pleasant or unpleasant, the lawyer finds it most expedient to give.”¹⁶

Though it is evident from Jamesian notion of metaphysical reality that it makes ample room for the admission of pragmatic reality which can be brought out from pure experience once the existence and importance of the subject of experience is admitted as a part of pure experience. James scholar, however, point out that it is very difficult to offer a coherent view of James’ notion of reality if we take into consideration the various characterisation of reality found in James’ writings. Suckiel, to mention one, draws our attention to some such difficulty and she claims that the relationship between pragmatic reality and metaphysical reality cannot be comprehended if we give equal weightage to all the characterisation of the reality mentioned by James. In the next section I shall deal with Suckiel’s understanding of James notion of reality to see which aspects of James’ account appear problematic to her.

2

Ellen Kappy Suckiel in the chapter entitled “James’s conception of reality” of her book *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James* undertakes a critical study on James’ conception of reality. She observes that the diverse claims made by James regarding the nature of reality have led to various types of disagreement and uncertainty among the James scholars. According to Suckiel, James’ view on the nature of reality is the most complex and tangled part of his philosophy. She emphasizes that James has discussed the notion of reality from two different perspectives. According to her, “...James’s view comes from the fact that he approaches the question of reality from two quite different perspectives; and with each perspective he is addressing a different problem and is concerned with “reality” in a different sense.”¹⁷ As already mentioned these two senses are respectively the metaphysical sense and the pragmatic sense. On the basis of these two senses James distinguishes between pragmatic reality and metaphysical reality.

James’ reality in pragmatic sense is bipolar, according to Suckiel. She says that if we go through James’ presentation of the notion of pragmatic real we find that on one hand there is teleological subject which has interest and values while on the other hand there is flux of experience. An individual selects from a chaotic stream of experience and arranges them as per her interest and then constructs a comprehensive worldview. She reminds us that for James pragmatic reality to a person is that which brings satisfaction in his life. On this point Suckiel emphasizes that this constructed reality is a non-basic type of reality compared to the status of metaphysical reality.

In metaphysical sense, as claimed by Suckiel, pure experience is the sole and ultimate reality which underlies common sense world. Suckiel adds that, “James calls his metaphysical theory “radical empiricism”.”¹⁸ Describing radical empiricism Suckiel says that this type of empiricism is characterized by two major claims namely, “everything real must be experienceable”, and “every kind of being experienced must somewhere be real”. So whatever is real must be experiential as well. Suckiel claims that on James’ view *ultimate* metaphysical reality

is “pure experience”. This experience is continuous, flowing, and an ever-expanding reality. Using different types of concepts we analyze the flux of experience to meet our daily needs. While analyzing stream of experience we cut it off them with concepts. But conceptual thoughts can never present pure experience correctly. In Suckiel’s opinion these conceptual thoughts “...stand only for distinguishable functions within experience itself.”¹⁹

After having examined the two senses of reality as admitted by James, Suckiel observes that James has left unaddressed the relationship between these two senses of reality. As a James scholar Suckiel wants to fill up this gap in James’ account. Accordingly she proposes her view regarding the relation between pragmatic reality and metaphysical reality. On the basis of her reading of James she claims that pragmatically real objects are constructed by the subjects from the flux of experience. She also contends that in James’ scheme pure experience is the only material stuff of the world and pragmatic reality is created from that stuff by the subject. If there is no stuff other than pure experience then pragmatic reality is not possible. On the basis of this understanding of James’ view of metaphysical reality Suckiel claims that pure experience is ontologically basic and pragmatic reality is formed by acting upon it. In this sense pragmatic reality depends on pure experience or metaphysical reality. In this case their relation is compatible. Suckiel however points out that in some places James has characterized reality as what it is known as and she argues that if pragmatic reality be characterized in this way then pure experience can no more be regarded as its real stuff because pure experience cannot be considered as ‘known as’. Suckiel arrives at this conclusion on the basis of James’ claim that pure experience is undifferentiated and is free from subject-object distinction within it. Suckiel would insist that if something cannot be considered to be an object then, it cannot be characterized as ‘known as’. Accordingly Suckiel concludes that no satisfactory account of relation between pragmatic real and metaphysical real can be given if we try to develop a coherent account of James’ theory of reality by taking into consideration *all* the characterization of the real mentioned by

James. My submission is that Suckiel's interpretation of James is based on certain misunderstanding of what James intended to say regarding reality.

In what follows I shall try to show that the notion of pragmatic reality is integrally related to the notion of pure experience itself and pure experience is also pragmatically meaningful.

3

From the definition of pragmatic reality as given by William James in his various books we can identify certain criteria or conditions of pragmatic reality. If some object, be it physical or mental, fulfils these conditions, then these objects can be termed pragmatically real.

Among those criteria, the first criterion is that an object (concrete or abstract) has to be independently real. James mentions that the first part of reality is the flux of our sensations. We do not have any control on the matters of these perceptions. We can perceive when the stream of this perception arrives, but its arrival is not in our control. When the perceptual flux influences us then we do not have any control over their nature and quantity. We cannot change the sequence and quantity according to our will. Accordingly the objects which are experienced as a part of this flux must have some existence independent of the subject.

The second criterion is that something can be termed pragmatic real only when it is able to satisfy our interest and need. According to James this need may be emotional, active, intellectual and aesthetic. Even though the components of reality are fixed, we have the right to deal with them. The perceptions are undoubtedly out of our control. But the part of perception which will be attended, noted down and emphasized upon will depend on our interest, and reality will emerge depending on the part that received attention.

Thirdly, to be real it has to be an object of truth, or it must be consistent with or at least related to previous truth. However, if it is neither an object of truth nor related to previous truth then it is not real. We have already mentioned that if an object or fact satisfies our need but does not satisfy the requirement of truth then it cannot be pragmatically real. Since the world is changing continuously we have new kinds of experience. Contradiction or inconsistency may arise

between previous truth and new experience and then we may require revising the previous truth if the new experience satisfies other criteria of pragmatic reality and if it can coherently relate to the larger body of truth already possessed by the subject.

Suckiel is right in her view that pure experience is ontologically prior to pragmatic reality and the basis of it. But we would argue that though pragmatic reality is based on pure experience the latter cannot be claimed to be the sole basis of the former. If any object is termed pragmatically real then it is a function of pure experience. But pure experience cannot turn out to be a substance or function by itself unless the subject of experience exercises its function of attention, selection etc. the items of pragmatic reality cannot turn into existence. So, pure experience as such cannot be the sole element responsible for the production of pragmatic reality. As a matter of fact the possibility of pragmatic reality is contained in pure experience as such. But the actualisation of pragmatic reality involves certain process which can take place only when the *purity* of pure experience surrenders itself to the divisive activity of the subject. We would claim that this interpretation of the relation between metaphysical reality and pragmatic reality is much more consistent with the spirit of Jamesian philosophy than the interpretation offered by Suckiel. Suckiel's reading of James suggests that James will be prepared to accept the reduction of pragmatic reality to pure experience. But throughout his philosophy James has opposed both dualism and reductionism. So to emphasize *only* on the metaphysical real or pure experience as being something of metaphysical import is to go against James' spirit.

On this point one may wonder that even though the existence of metaphysical reality is significant for the existence of pragmatic reality, can pragmatic reality be in any sense significant for the existence of metaphysical reality as pure experience? Our contention here is that the Jamesian notion of metaphysical reality contains two presentations of pure experience: pure experience as *the possibility of the pragmatic real* and pure experience as *the basis of actualised pragmatic reality*. If pure experience is taken in the form of first presentation then it is undifferentiated though containing the possibility of differentiation. In the second presentation, however, pure experience is to be viewed

as flow of experience in which the various elements are differentiated where some differentiated element takes the role of a subject and the others are its object. Since this differentiated state is synonymous with pragmatic reality, it can be claimed that pragmatic reality is significant for the second form of presentation of pure experience itself. It is in this sense that James' notion of metaphysical reality has integral connection with pragmatic reality. From one viewpoint metaphysical reality is significant for pragmatic reality while from another viewpoint pragmatic reality is significant for metaphysical reality. This in its turn brings out the metaphysical significance of pragmatic reality in James' philosophy.

We will conclude this article by pointing out where Suckiel goes wrong in her observation regarding the limitation of James' view which she thinks to be due to James' description of reality as something 'known as'. In our opinion Suckiel has taken the expression 'known as' in the sense of propositional knowledge which is descriptive in nature. But if we go through the various writings of James²⁰ we will find that James was not very happy with the expression 'known as' because of its association with propositional knowledge only. Specifically in the context of radical empiricism when James uses the expression 'known as' he means 'whatever is experienced'. In the editorial preface to James' *Essays in Radical Empiricism* R.B. Perry has clearly mentioned this point to bring out how the principle of reality as 'known as' when taken in the sense of reality as experienced relate pragmatism to radical empiricism. Since pure experience is all through a state of experience James will consider pure experience as something experienceable and it is in this sense he would also consider pure experience to be something 'known as' though not in the sense of propositional knowledge.

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Foot-notes

- 1 Suckiel, Ellen Kappy (1942), p. 122
- 2 James, William (1891), pp. 288-89
- 3 James, William (1891), pp. 288-89
- 4 Ibid, p. 291
- 5 Ibid, p. 293
- 6 Ibid, p. 295
- 7 James emphasizes on the disjunctive nature of the two features, viz 'being interesting' and 'being important' has been implicated in, Ibid, p. 295
- 6a James, William (1891), p. 295
- 8 Ibid, p. 297
- 9 James, William (1921), p. 244
- 10 For James' explication of the notion of truth which is relevant for the present context, see p. xi, xiv, 60
- 11 James, William (1921), p. 206
- 12 James, William (1921), p. 212
- 13 James, William (1916), p. 101
- 14 James, William (1912), p. 4
- 15 Ibid, pp. 93-94
- 16 James, William (1921), p. 246
- 17 Suckiel, Ellen Kappy (1982), p. 122
- 18 Suckiel, Ellen Kappy (1982), p. 132
- 19 Ibid, p. 134
- 20 James, William (1909)
James, William (1912)
James, William (1921)