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Chapter 7

Instead of *Erklären* and *Verstehen*: William James on Human Understanding

David E. Leary

7.1 Introduction

Perhaps more than any other American psychologist and philosopher, William James (1842–1910) was intimately familiar with contemporary European thought and debate, including the discussion of *Erklären* and *Verstehen* advanced by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) and others around the turn of the twentieth century. Even before this discussion was initiated, James had been dealing with related issues, pondering alternative solutions, and formulating his own original views on human understanding. These views coalesced in a distinctive approach to cognition. Fundamental to this approach was a belief in possibility and probability as innate features of the physical as well as mental manifestations of the universe. Also fundamental was a conviction that understanding is understanding, regardless of its viewpoint, object, or label as either “descriptive” or “explanatory.”

A review of James’s approach, preceded by a discussion of its multiple contexts, may help us comprehend why James held these premises and never participated in the debate about *Erklären* and *Verstehen*, despite a personal connection to Dilthey and striking similarities between their views and concerns.

7.2 The Scientific and Philosophical Context of James’s Thought

Well before the turn of the twentieth century, old verities about nature and cognition gave way to uncertainty and even to disbelief in the possibility of certainty regarding ultimate matters. *Ignoramus et ignorabimus* was a common cry (Croce 1995; Mandelbaum 1971), and chance as well as change were common catchwords (Peirce [1893] 1992, 358f.).

In this context, the scientific advances and philosophical consequences associated with the names of Quételet, Buckle, Clausius, Krönig, Maxwell, and Darwin were

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discussed by the members of a small “Metaphysical Club” that met with some regularity in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the early 1870s (Fisch 1964; Menand 2001; Wiener 1949). Revolving around Chauncey Wright, this small group included Peirce (later America’s greatest logician), Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. (later an important Supreme Court justice), and James (later a leading contributor to the transformation of both psychology and philosophy in the United States and elsewhere). It was in the crucible of this group that much of James’s later thinking took initial shape, largely in response to the “nihilistic” dicta of Wright’s positivistic way of thinking. Somewhat older, more intellectually mature, and quite skilled at intellectual boxing (as reported by (Peirce [1907] 1998, 399)), Wright was a thoroughgoing empiricist, who refused to conjecture beyond available sensory data.

Nature or phenomenal reality, Wright ([1873] 1877, 205–229) argued, is simply what is given in experience: so many data, or facts, experienced at particular moments in time. That is all that we can be sure there is, and hence all that we can know. Anything beyond that is mere speculation, and there is no warrant – and no need – to engage in speculation. In his view, there is no reason to concern ourselves about the way our experience *comes* to be ordered, as if the ordering is the result of some other process or reality. Experience simply *is* ordered, and we can formulate and test hypotheses about that order staying entirely within the realm of experience; indeed, that is all we can do, Wright asserted, if we wish to advance the cause of knowledge. For no matter how frequently our hypotheses may be confirmed by experience, we can never arrive at rational, apodictic rules that will guarantee what *must* happen next or what *can not* happen next. To claim that we can do so would be to assume that we can attain knowledge of underlying realities and causes that is simply beyond our reach.

When Wright died unexpectedly in 1875, James published a notice that characterized him as “a worker on the path opened by [David] Hume” and suggested that if Wright had lived to complete his treatise on psychology, it “would probably have been the last and most accomplished utterance of what he liked to call the British school.” With this utterance, James said, “he would have brought the work of [John Stuart] Mill and [Alexander] Bain for the present to a conclusion” (James [1875] 1987, 16). This was a worthy tribute to his esteemed friend and interlocutor, especially since James himself was spending a great deal of time studying the work of Mill and Bain. I emphasize this because James was to become famous for his own version of “radical empiricism” that bears some resemblance to that of Wright. For instance, it starts with and maintains an emphasis on the continuity of experience, and it places a heavy burden on description at the expense of explanation. But in the end it is clearly *not* the kind of aseptic empiricism that Wright advocated, and to understand why it isn’t we need to explore the experiences that James had before participating in the Metaphysical Club.

7.3 The Personal and Literary Context of James’s Thought

William James had moved to Cambridge in 1861, when he entered the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard University in order to study chemistry and eventually physiology, after giving up an earlier commitment to become a painter.

This “suppressing” or “murdering” of a potential self (his painter-self), as he put it (James [1890] 1981, vol. 1, 295), led to frequent periods of depression between 1861 and 1878, the year he was married (Leary 1992). He experienced particularly difficult times between 1865 and 1874. During this time he pondered the meaning of life in general and the direction of his own life in particular. Especially salient in light of his increasing familiarity with advances in the natural sciences (including Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, 1859) was his growing fear that “we are Nature through and through, that we are *wholly* conditioned, that not a wiggle of our will happens save as the result of physical laws” (James 1992–2004, vol. 4, 370).¹ This fear was at odds with his deeply felt desire to “make my *nick*, however small a one in the raw stuff the race has got to shape, and so assert my reality” (*ibid.*, 250).

Repeatedly over years from 1861 to 1878, as he reflected on the conflict between his fear and desire, James had recourse to literature – most notably to the works of Shakespeare, Goethe, Wordsworth, Robert Browning, and Emerson. As he ruminated on these works, he continued to study the empiricist accounts of mental life offered by Locke, Hume, Bain, Wright, and others as well as the growing literature on physiology, neurology, and psychiatry. The combined impact of this diverse reading and consideration was the development of a distinctive view of human cognition.

Although Shakespeare came to serve as the primary example of James’s view of human understanding (James [1890] 1981, vol. 1, 984–986), James was also drawn to the works of Goethe, at first as a means of improving his German, but after a period of incomprehension and even distaste, out of an increasing sense that Goethe had much else to offer. Taking a vital clue from Emerson, James came to see Goethe as “living through every pore of his skin” (Emerson [1850] 1983, 750), and as he read his various works, he remarked more and more frequently in his diary, notebooks, and letters that Goethe had achieved what he himself could not yet achieve: he put aside his own individual ego, with its surfeit of selfish concerns, in lieu of striking a balance between the subjective and objective that allowed him to describe human experience with an accuracy, specificity, and wealth of insight that few other individuals had ever attained. In short, James became convinced that Goethe, by checking his ego, setting aside his prejudices, and applying his perceptual and cognitive sensitivities without hindrance from subjective factors, had managed to understand and convey a richness of detail and significance that transcended typical, prosaic description of the phenomena that he studied. For Goethe, each individual experience was unique and worthy in its own right; yet in focusing upon each experience with sufficiently unfettered attention, he was able to discern patterns (“archetypes”) that elucidated the general nature as well as particular distinctiveness of that experience. Goethe’s method of pure, unhindered observation inspired James to assume what we would now call a phenomenological approach to the analysis of experience: an approach that goes beyond the initial, surface manifestations of reality, shaped to fit the preexisting, subjective, conceptual categories of the observer.

¹I have discussed James’s personal crises as a background for understanding his theories of self and personality in Leary (1990b).

James also turned to the works of Wordsworth, Browning, and others, as he intermittently pursued his studies and recuperation. For instance, at the same time that he was studying the work of Helmholtz, Wundt, Hume, and Bain, and exchanging ideas with Wright and Peirce, he was reading and re-reading Wordsworth's long poem "The Excursion" (Wordsworth [1814] 1977), especially the section on "Despondency Corrected." He left that work – as Mill and Darwin had – with an enhanced sense that human cognition entails what Wordsworth called a "marriage" of mind and matter: a union of the subjective and objective brought about by the mind's "excursive power" to "walk around" phenomena, viewing them this way and that, from one vantage point and another, trying first this metaphorical key and then that, all the while noting that some keys open special doors of perception, while others do not. He also spent time with Browning's works, especially but not only *The Ring and the Book* (Browning [1868–1869] 1971), which schooled him in Browning's groundbreaking explorations of internal monologue, raising his awareness of ongoing streams of consciousness, the very topic he would soon be analyzing with sensitivity and insight, and which would provide the foundation for his psychology and philosophy.²

Thus, by the early to mid-1870s, James's sense of "experience" was considerably different from Chauncey Wright's. Goethe in particular, but also Wordsworth had taught James something that Emerson, too, had argued: that nature is richer than typical positivists realize and that more can be revealed in experience if one sets aside presuppositions and relies on one's own unfettered sensibilities. And Browning helped him realize the inextricable relations between experience and consciousness. James's growing conviction in these regards was apparent in a variety of ways, including his choice of reading materials throughout this crucial period of his life. And all of this – all of James's unique education – started coming to fruition in 1878, less than 3 full years after Wright's death and in the same year that James was finally married, at the age of 36. This fruition was apparent in two public lecture series, his plans for a textbook, and the publication over 2 years of six substantive articles, which served as preliminary drafts for different parts of his proposed textbook. It was also apparent in the courses he was teaching at Harvard. Clearly, James's life and thought were turning away from personal turmoil and indecision – away also from simple empiricism – toward the distinctive intellectual achievements for which he is now so well known.

7.4 James's Vision of a World of Possibility and Probability

Even before 1878, James had hinted at the ongoing development of his thinking. In "The Teaching of Philosophy in Our Colleges" (James [1876] 1978), he had granted a place for Wright's positivism, but asserted the need for other philosophical views:

²The preceding analysis of James's reading of literature draws upon my current research, which is based on a wide variety of untapped and in some instances previously unknown resources.

However sceptical one may be of the attainment of universal truths. . .one may never deny that philosophic study means the habit of always seeing an alternative, of not taking the usual for granted, of making conventionalities fluid again, of imagining foreign states of mind. In a word, it means the possession of mental perspective (James [1876] 1978, 4).

By 1878, James had clarified his own alternative perspective, which was based on an innovative melding of insights and concerns from his personal, scientific, artistic, and literary backgrounds. Specifically, it drew out the implications of Darwin's theory of natural selection into a full-scale cosmology that highlighted the role of possibility and probability over necessity and certainty. It was a bold and compelling vision that made room for ideals, hope, and the belief that individuals can make a difference. To some extent it was theory-driven, but at the center of the theory was an hypothesis – of selectivity – that made sense of a wide range of observable phenomena pertaining to sensation, perception, cognition, emotion, motivation, and action (within psychology) and to epistemology, aesthetics, or morality (within philosophy). Working out this vision in something close to its entirety took the rest of his life, but he had established his basic viewpoint by the late 1870s.

The first explicit indication of James's new way of thinking was given in a lecture series on "The Senses and the Brain and Their Relation in Thought," delivered at Johns Hopkins University in February 1878. In those lectures, James asserted that "evolution accounts for mind as a product" and that "first nervous systems appeared, then consciousness" (James [1878a] 1988, 4). The implication was clear: the mind depends upon matter. And beyond that, James proposed an "important mental principle," namely, that the senses are "organs of *selection*" (ibid., 4). Even if there is "no fulcrum of certainty" for this proposition, he said, this thesis is "not only possible but probable" (ibid., 5). Thus, while granting the positivist's claim of ultimate uncertainty, he argued – with Darwin – that this need not stand in the way of reasonable, empirically grounded conclusions that have a high degree of probability.

Important corollaries followed from James's conviction regarding the selectivity of the human mind: that experience – and the reality represented in experience – is "overabundant," as Darwin put it; that there is always *something else* that could have been selected or could be selected in the future; that the world offers more than is minimally or logically necessary, thus allowing for unforeseen eventualities. As a result, strange and unpredictable things can and do happen, can and do come to be. What is possible in the future is never limited to what has happened or what has been in the past. *Contra* Chauncey Wright, the world of our experience is not simply "given"; it is constituted by our "selections" among givens. And these selections occur, James argued, at all levels of functioning: From a wide spectrum of potential sensations, our sense organs select a very limited number; from these sensory impulses, our perceptual processes select a small portion for attention; from these perceptions, an even narrower range are selected for conceptualization; and from our concepts, even fewer are selected for additional cognitive processing, aesthetic appreciation, and moral consideration. Selection is the key all up and down the line. At each stage, potential phenomena "rise as possibilities into consciousness," with only the "most attractive" becoming "plenary" (ibid., 16).

James clarified what he meant by “most attractive” in subsequent writings. More typically, the word he used was “interesting” rather than “attractive.” Every organism, he noted, has “subjective interests” that direct the organism’s attention to different aspects of the “objective world.” These interests “form a true spontaneity” on the part of the organism, thus allowing the organism to “cooperate” with the environment in “molding” what it notices and knows – much as Wordsworth indicated when he wrote of the “marriage” of mind and nature (James 1992–2004, vol. 5, 24f.). Interests are “the real *a priori* element in cognition”; they are “an all-essential factor which no writer pretending to give an account of mental evolution has a right to neglect” (James [1878] 1978, 11). In fact, “interests which we bring with us, and simply posit or take our stand upon, are the very flour out of which our mental dough is kneaded,” and they are equivalent to the “spontaneous variations ... which form the ultimate *data* for Darwin’s theory” (ibid., 18f.). But they actually represent, James argued, a much wider range of values and ideals than Darwin proposed. “Survival is only one out of many interests. ... The story-teller, the musician, the theologian, the actor, or even the mere charming fellow, have never lacked means of support” for the simple reason that people are interested in what they have to offer (ibid., 12f.). There are, then, a variety of interests for which people live, and by directing their attention and shaping their behavior according to those interests, they contribute to the variation of human experience that affords human and social evolution its primary motive force (James [1890] 1981, vol. 1, 380f.).

James pointed out the moral significance of this analysis in the other lecture series that he gave in 1878 – his Lowell Lectures on “The Brain and the Mind.” After discussing the role of “caprice” in the working of the nervous system, and noting how the lability of the brain provides opportunities for the “possible,” James argued against a rigid division between the world as science portrays it, and the world as “Philosophy, Metaphysics, Religion, Poetry, [and] Sentiment” deal with it (James [1878b] 1988, 30). There is no need for a chasm between science and “all that makes life worth living,” he suggested, because science itself has revealed that the “possible” often comes about only through the selective thoughts and efforts of interested parties, whatever their interests may be. “I trust,” he said,

that you too after the evidence of this evening will go away strengthened in the natural faith that your delights & sorrows, your loves & hates, your aspirations & efforts are real combatants in life’s arena, & not impotent, paralytic spectators of the game (ibid., 30).

In other words, if no one is interested in attending to phenomena in certain ways, science will not be advanced; and if no one is interested in attending to them in other ways, the arts or philosophy or ethics or whatever else will not be advanced. Always it is a matter of selective attention and action, with different expectations and results proceeding from each type of attention and action. And no one can say, beforehand, which approach will be more useful in novel situations. Life is an open-ended game with guidelines, perhaps, but no inviolable rules. The world is full of possibilities and probabilities waiting to occur, with or without human assistance.

7.5 James's Views on Human Understanding

In several well known essays, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote of experience or consciousness as a “stream” or “flowing river” (e.g., Emerson [1841] 1983, 385). When James attended closely to his own experience, as Goethe had taught him to do, he realized that Emerson had selected a fitting metaphor. Experience flows; it is continuous – it is “a teeming multiplicity of objects and relations” (James [1890] 1981, vol. 1, 219).

Those final words, “*and relations*,” constituted an important addition to the usual empiricist analysis of consciousness, as presented in the works of Locke, Hume, and Mill. We do not simply have “objects” in our consciousness – be they “sensations” or “ideas” or “thoughts.” Rather, all of these potentially discriminable “things” are embedded – and firmly related – within the ongoing stream of our experience. And the relations, which he called “transitive parts” of consciousness, are just as experientially real as the “substantive parts” (ibid., 236). In other words, the feelings of “and” and “if” and “but” are just as real and present to our consciousness, if we sufficiently attend to it, as are the feelings of “hot” and “cold” (ibid., 238).

This discovery was at the root of James's later articulation, as a philosopher, of “radical empiricism” (James [1909] 1977, 126f.; James [1912] 1976). If we are truly and thoroughly empirical, James argued, we will notice that we do not need any “laws of association” to combine what is present to our mind. It all comes to us related; it is only subsequently that we abstract, or *select out*, certain features of the stream, which we may then associate with other features. In the beginning, we encounter the-table-as-hard-and-brown; later, we separate out the notions of “hard” and “brown.” And we do so, James argued, according to our interests and previous experience, which are themselves frequently related.

James gave some graphic illustrations of the selective nature of consciousness in his *Principles of Psychology* (James [1890] 1981). For instance:

Let four men make a tour in Europe. One will bring home only picturesque impressions – costumes and colors, parks and views and works of architecture, pictures and statues. To another all this will be non-existent; and distances and prices, populations and drainage-arrangements, door- and window-fastenings, and other useful statistics will take their place. A third will give a rich account of the theatres, restaurants, and public balls, and naught beside; whilst the fourth will perhaps have been so wrapped in his own subjective broodings as to tell little more than a few names of places through which he passed. Each has selected, out of the same mass of presented objects, those which suited his private interest and has made his experience thereby (James [1890] 1981, vol. 1, 275f.).

Besides reflecting variations in interest, differences in consciousness may result from what someone has learned in past experience:

Men have no eyes but for those aspects of things which they have already been taught to discern. Any one of us can notice a phenomenon after it has been pointed out, which not one in ten thousand could ever have discovered for himself . . . *The only things which we commonly see are those which we preperceive* [those for which we are on the lookout], and the only things which we preperceive are those which have been labeled for us, and the labels stamped into our mind (ibid., 420).

This insight about the stamping done by labels was behind one of the major methodological cautions that James raised: a caution that has significance for comprehending his views on the limitations of human understanding. It concerned “the Misleading Influence of Speech” (ibid., 193–196). In psychology as in all other fields, we have inherited our basic vocabulary from previous times and peoples. And having been given a word for a particular experience, we are “prone,” on the one hand, “to assume a substantive entity existing beyond the phenomena, of which the word shall be the name” (ibid., 194). Hence, we take for granted that there are such “things” as “ideas” and “thoughts” separate from the stream of consciousness from which we have conceptually extricated them. On the other hand,

the *lack* of a word quite as often leads to the directly opposite error. We are then prone to suppose that no entity can be there; and so we come to overlook phenomena whose existence would be patent to us all, had we only grown up to hear it familiarly recognized in speech. It is hard to focus our attention on the nameless, and so there results a certain vacuousness in the descriptive parts of most psychologies (ibid., 194).

Besides our vocabulary, our previous experience – and what we have learned from it – may get in the way of our attending closely and accurately to new experiences, as Goethe had pointed out and as James knew from his experiences as a painter:

We shall see how inveterate is our habit of not attending to sensations as subjective facts, but of simply using them as stepping-stones to pass over to the recognition of the realities whose presence they reveal. The grass out of the window now looks to me of the same green in the sun as in the shade, and yet a painter would have to paint one part of it dark brown, another part bright yellow, to give its real sensational effect. We take no heed, as a rule, of the different way in which the same things look and sound and smell at different distances and under different circumstances. The sameness of the *things* is what we are concerned to ascertain; and any sensations that assure us of that will probably be considered in a rough way to be the same with each other (ibid., 225f.).

This tendency toward stereotyping our experience, and ignoring any unexpected qualities, is an important concern of James’s since in actuality “our state of mind is never precisely the same. Every thought we have of a given fact is, strictly speaking, unique, and only bears a resemblance of kind with our other thoughts of the same fact” (ibid., 227).

What James believed to be appropriate, of course, was an openness to experience and an awareness of the ever ongoing changes in it. In essence, he wanted everyone to be like the good philosophers he had described, who are in “the habit of always seeing an alternative, of not taking the usual for granted, of making conventionalities fluid again” (James [1876] 1978, 4). This openness to variation is healthy and good, he believed; it prepares us to deal with life’s unexpected eventualities. By continuing to develop discrimination, individuals become more expert at sizing up and responding to situations in quick and appropriate ways.

But how do we arrive at better understanding *beyond* simply making finer discriminations? How does *qualitatively* better understanding develop over time? These questions lie at the heart of James’s views on human understanding. The answer, for him, has to do with what someone does *after* discriminating, or selecting out, relevant properties from among the “well-spring of properties” that adhere

to any given “phenomenon” or “fact” (James [1878] 1983, 17; James [1890] 1981, vol. 2, 959). The person who significantly advances our knowledge does so, generally, by associating this or that property – as no one has before – with a similar property in something else. Using the language of his time, James referred to this process as “association by similarity,” and he noted that “geniuses are, by common consent, considered to differ from ordinary minds by an unusual development of association by similarity” (James [1890] 1981, 972). In more contemporary terms, this means that knowledge tends to be advanced by analogical thinking, which I have referred to elsewhere as “comparative thinking” (Leary 1990a). As we shall see, James made a further distinction between insights reached by analogical thinking alone, and insights, originally based on an analogy, that have subsequently been worked out with greater specificity through empirical study and/or with more generality through abstract reasoning. Still, it all starts with comparison and the fact that

some people are far more sensitive to resemblances, and far more ready to point out wherein they consist, than others are. They are the wits, the poets, the inventors, the scientific men, the practical geniuses. A native talent for perceiving analogies is. . .the leading fact in genius of every order (James [1890] 1981, vol. 1, 500, italics removed).

At root, then, creative or innovative thinking is based upon “the rapid alteration in consciousness” that takes place as one compares two or more phenomena with regard to their “points of difference or agreement” (James [1890] 1981, vol. 2, 971). The poet who makes an apt, new comparison provides fresh insight into human experience, and accordingly may change the way we think about ourselves and perhaps even how we feel and behave. Indeed, James said, Shakespeare may well be the best exemplar of those who “astonish” us by the “unexpectedness” no less than the “fitness” of their comparisons (*ibid.*, 985). Quoting Thomas Carlyle’s assessment that “Shakespeare possessed more *intellectual power* than anyone else that ever lived,” as demonstrated by his ability to make novel yet meaningful connections,” James went on to conjecture that “Shakespeare himself could very likely not say why [he had made any given association]; for his invention, though rational, was not ratiocinative” (*ibid.*, 985f.). Yet “the dry critic who comes after [him],” though incapable of having *created* the connections that Shakespeare made, can after the fact “point out the subtle bonds of identity that guided Shakespeare’s pen” (*ibid.*, 986).

Most humans – even many of the other higher animals – can make “intuitive” connections of this kind, even if the connections are not as inspired as Shakespeare’s. Some humans, however, can and do go further, though James was quick to note that “it would be absurd in any absolute way to say that a given analytic mind was superior to any intuitional one” (*ibid.*, 986). Nonetheless, it is true, he said, that “the former *represents* the higher stage. Men, taken historically, reason by analogy long before they have learned to reason by abstract characters” (*ibid.*, 986). The difference in philosophy – or in science or in any other field of abstract knowledge – is that one is able to “give a clear reason” for one’s views, and in many instances, at least, to give a greater number of relevant instances, which might qualify those views.

In sum, no matter what type of understanding he was considering (the more concrete, intuitive form of understanding or the more abstract, reasoned form of understanding), James argued against the then-common notion, held by Chauncey Wright among others, that the mind is *and should be* passive, simply recording sense-impressions and their cumulative consequences. Instead, James's view was that the mind is *and should be* active; that the knower and what is known are *and should be* closely related; that, as Goethe had exemplified, there is *and should be* no such thing as absolute subjectivity or absolute objectivity. In fact, the pertinent challenge, for James as for Goethe, was to balance the polar tension in experience in order to avoid the distortions resulting from extreme subjectivity and the simplifications resulting from extreme objectivity (James [1878] 1978, 21).

7.6 Description and Explanation in James's Thought

James provided a summary of his view of human understanding in *The Principles of Psychology* (James [1890] 1981), fittingly expressed in metaphorical terms:

The mind is at every stage a theater of simultaneous possibilities. Consciousness consists in the comparison of these with each other, the selection of some, and the suppression of the rest by the reinforcing and inhibiting agency of attention. . . . The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. In a sense the statue stood there from eternity. But there were a thousand different ones besides it [within the same block of stone], and the sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest. Just so the world of each of us, howsoever different our several views of it may be, all lay embedded in the primordial chaos of sensations, which gave the mere *matter* to the thought of all of us indifferently. . . . Other sculptors, other statues from the same stone! Other minds, other worlds from the same monotonous and inexpressive chaos! My world is but one in a million alike embedded, alike real to those who may abstract them (*ibid.*, vol. 1, 277).

It should be clear from this passage that James was a realist. There is a very tangible "block of stone" that all humans experience and deal with, albeit from different sides or perspectives. But James was also a constructivist, to use a more recent term. Every person has to *make* and then *live with* his or her own partial version of reality, or else accept that of someone else. Beyond that, complicating the sculptor-and-stone metaphor, we "*add*, both to the subject and to the predicate part of reality" (James [1907] 1975, 123). That is, we are not simply knowers standing *beside* and hence *outside* that "block of stone"; we are *part* of the "subject" itself – part of the reality we are trying to comprehend with the "predicates" we are using to get in touch with it. And since our thoughts, emotions, and actions are just as real as any mountain or chair, each new thought, feeling, and act assures that "the world is still in process of making" (James [1909] 1975, 123). Each literally *adds to* and thus *changes* the world that we are trying to describe and possibly to explain.³

³On his application of this perspective to the question of "truth," see James ([1909] 1975).

How we try to describe or explain this open-ended, changing world is largely a matter of temperament, James believed – or if you wish, it is a matter of personal interest or preference (James [1907] 1975, 11). Some people gravitate toward one mode of description or explanation, others to another. Empiricism and rationalism represent two ends of a spectrum. “Reduced to their most pregnant difference, empiricism means the habit of explaining wholes by parts, and rationalism means the habit of explaining parts by wholes” (James [1909] 1975, 9, italics removed).⁴

Bringing his psychological acumen to bear on the matter, James noted that “different men find their minds more at home in very different fragments of the world” (ibid., 10). The result, James said, is that any philosophy, or science, provides “but a summary sketch, a picture of the world in abridgment,” from one of many possible “perspective[s] of events” (ibid., 9). Switching back to a sculpturing metaphor, “we *carve out* order by leaving the disorderly parts out” (ibid., 10). Which parts we find disorderly depends on our experience and preference, but we cannot carve just anything or any way we want. The “block of stone” yields more readily to some potential statues and not at all to others. James ([1909] 1977) called himself a pluralist – someone who believed deeply that there is always *another* way to see, understand, and deal with reality, but he did not think that *anything* goes. Our formulations and actions must pay off, must bear fruit, in some way. Hence his famous notion of pragmatic truth (James [1907] 1975), according to which, as in Darwin’s work, tangible *consequences* are what matter.⁵ Stated obversely, reality for James is that which *resists* some of our formulations and actions (ibid., 99).

As an example of what he meant by individual preference or style (James [1912] 1976) pointed out that “in some men, theory is a passion” that leads them to “systematize and classify and schematize and make synoptical tables and invent ideal objects for the pure love of unifying” (ibid., 136). In distinction, James admitted that he had a strong bias toward empiricism, with its tendency toward “irrationalism” (ibid., 137), by which he meant to indicate an aversion to the kind of “intellectualism” that would reduce everything to a single set of terms and rules (James [1909] 1977, 32). In defense of his own preference, he (James [1912] 1976) simply asked, “Can anything prevent Faust from changing ‘Im Anfang war das Wort’ [a belief in the priority of reason] into ‘Im Anfang war die That [a belief in the priority of experience]?’” His response: “Nothing in earth or heaven” (ibid., 140).⁶

⁴James’s point is nicely illustrated by the fact that the British tended to understand and develop Newton’s work in an empirical way while the French tended to do it in a rational way (Guerrac 1977). On the role of “style” in science, see Hacking (2002).

⁵As James ([1890] 1981) put it, “every scientific conception is in the first instance a ‘spontaneous variation’ in someone’s brain. For one that proves useful and applicable there are a thousand that perish through their worthlessness” (vol. 2, 1,232). James’s “Darwinian epistemology” has been developed by Campbell (1960) and Richards (1977).

⁶Reflecting his artistic background, James frequently contrasted the “classic” and “romantic” styles of intellectual work (James [1907] 1975, 9–26; James [1909] 1977, 7–23). His friend Friedrich Wilhelm Ostwald (1909), the German Nobel laureate in physical chemistry, elaborated the same distinction with regard to natural scientists, using temperament (as discussed by his Leipzig colleague Wundt) as the crucial variable.

As for the issue of description vs. explanation, one might ask if (James [1909] 1977) was offering a description or an explanation when he noted that “different men find their minds more at home in very different fragments of the world” (ibid., 10). James’s own criterion for whether or not this is a meaningful question would be: What difference does it make? What meaningful consequences result from using one of these terms rather than the other? The bulk of James’s work suggests that there is no single, significant, definitive distinction to be made between description and explanation, especially in scientific work, and that the use of either term is generally a matter of individual preference. What counts as one person’s description will be another person’s explanation, and vice versa. For instance, one person’s psychological explanation will be taken by someone else as a description to be explained by physiological factors, which in turn will be taken by yet another person as a description to be explained neurologically or genetically, and so on.

Nonetheless, James made it clear that “all attempts to *explain* our phenomenally given thoughts ... are metaphysical” and that as a scientist he was committed, instead, to a “strictly positivistic point of view.” Having underscored this point, he admitted that the kinds of empirical descriptions in his *Principles of Psychology* would keep “running out into queries which only a metaphysics alive to the weight of her task can hope successfully to deal with” (ibid., 6). So, even though he added that such successful dealing “will perhaps be centuries hence” and that “meanwhile the best mark of health that a science can show is this unfinished-seeming front” (ibid., 6f.), he seemed to leave the door cracked open to metaphysics and hence, presumably, to explanation in a sense clearly distinct from description. This crack might be seen as widening further when he defined psychology as “the Science of Mental Life, both of its phenomena *and of their conditions*” (ibid., 15, italics added). However, James’s use of “conditions” signaled, not causality in a metaphysical sense, but causation in the positivistic sense discussed by John Stuart Mill in *A System of Logic* (James [1872] 1973). According to Mill, “cause” is simply a term for the “assemblage” of observable “conditions” that seem invariably to accompany a phenomenon (ibid., 327–342). The use of the term should not, Mill insisted (and James now implied), be understood as a metaphysical claim about ultimate, ontological causality (ibid., 326).⁷

We could leave the matter here, except for James’s response to George Trumball Ladd’s review of *Principles*. In that review, this philosopher-psychologist (1892) averred that “as descriptive science, the work is admirable,” but “as explanatory science, without metaphysics, it is, at best, *no science at all*” (ibid., 24, 38). These comments reveal Ladd’s very different conception of what science should be, and that would be the end of the matter, except that James ([1892] 1984) changed his definition of psychology *to the one that Ladd had suggested* when he published an abbreviated version of his textbook in 1892:

⁷James owned and carefully annotated the eighth edition of Mill’s *Logic* and taught courses on Mill’s logic in 1881–1882 and 1886–1887 (James [1881–1882] 1988, 490).

The definition of Psychology may be best given in the words of Professor Ladd, as the *description and explanation of states of consciousness as such*. By states of consciousness are meant such things as sensations, desires, emotions, cognitions, reasonings, decisions, volitions, and the like. The ‘explanation’ must of course include the study of their causes, conditions, and immediate consequences, so far as these can be ascertained (James [1892] 1984, 9).

In assessing this change, we should note that James mentions both “causes” and “conditions,” as if they are separate things, and that he put “explanation” in quotation marks. This may provide a key to a final understanding of his views on description vs. explanation. It seems that by explanation James meant an *ultimate* description of how things fit, in absolute rather than relative terms, in some definitive, rational account of the way things are. (This accords with his later, more formally philosophical statements on the matter.) But, as we have seen, James did not believe that such an account was actually possible – and certainly not within the foreseeable future. We need to keep that in mind as we read this additional statement from his introduction to his abbreviated textbook:

Most thinkers have a faith that at bottom there is but one Science of all things, and that until all is known, no one thing can be completely known. Such a science, if realized, would be Philosophy. Meanwhile it is far from being realized; and instead of it, we have a lot of beginnings of knowledge made in different places, and kept separate from each other merely for practical convenience’ sake, until with later growth they may run into one body of Truth. These provisional beginnings of learning we call ‘the Sciences’ in the plural (*ibid.*, 9).

Having underscored that no individual science offers a final, definitively “true” explanation of its subject matter, James went on to write that “a *provisional* body of propositions about states of mind, and about the cognitions which they enjoy, is what I mean by Psychology considered as a natural science” (*ibid.*, 10, italics added).

So James’s new way of talking about psychology as science, though it included the word “explanation,” did not signal a new way of thinking about it, and any ambiguities vested in “conditions” and the implications of his use of “cause” can now be resolved. He still believed what he wrote in the final chapter of *Principles* (James [1890] 1981, vol. 2): “Reality *exists* as a *plenum*. . . . But we can neither experience nor think this *plenum*” (*ibid.*, 1,231). Instead we select and focus on “collateral contemporaneity” (*ibid.*, 1,232): what he – and Mill – had meant when speaking of “conditions.” As for “causes,” James takes an agnostic perspective:

We have no definite idea of what we mean by cause, or of what causality consists in. But the principle expresses a demand for *some* deeper sort of inward connection between phenomena than their merely habitual time-sequence seems to us to be. The word ‘cause’ is, in short, an altar to an unknown god; an empty pedestal still marking the place of a hoped-for statue (*ibid.*, 1,264).

In short, it is a promissory note: a hunch that some “conditions” are more significant than others, but what we have in psychology, as in other sciences, nonetheless remains “a mass of descriptive details” (James [1890] 1981, vol. 1, 7) for which our “causal explanations” are, in fact, only hypotheses (James [1912] 1976, 143). Whether these disciplines have assumed logical or narrative form, none has achieved the status of

an idealized, apodictic science. The latter might be a good heuristic goal, but the open-ended nature of reality, the partiality of human viewpoints, and the novelty of human experiences, including innovative ways of associating all those “descriptive details,” make its realization unlikely. Nonetheless, the provisional understanding that we have reached through science and other forms of knowledge can be useful in the course of human life: so useful that it is well worth pursuing.⁸

7.7 The Personal and Intellectual Relations Between James and Dilthey

In 1867, about 5 years before the Metaphysical Club was established, a remarkable event took place in Berlin. William James, in Europe on one of his periodic recuperative trips, had presented a letter of introduction from Emerson, a family friend, to Herman Friedrich Grimm, who was translating Emerson’s works into German. Grimm responded by inviting the 25-year-old James to supper on at least three prior occasions. Then, on October 16, James arrived for another meal and found another visitor, a professor (he wrote home) “whose name I cd. not catch,” who was “a man of a type I have never met before. He is writing now a life of Schleiermacher of wh. one vol. is pub^d” (James 1992–2004, vol. 4, 213). This professor

was overflowing with information with regard to every thing knowable & unknowable. He is the first man I have ever met of a class wh. must be common here, of men to whom learning has become as natural as breathing. . . .He talked and laughed incessantly at table, related the whole history of Buddhism to Mrs. Grimm, and I know not what other points of religious history. After dinner. . .while G. & the Prof. engaged in a hot controversy about the natural primitive forms of religion.

Then, after a brief nap, the visitor

rose refreshed like a giant and proceeded to fight with Grimm about the identity of Homer. . . .From there through a discussion about the madness of Hamlet. . . the sun waned low & I took my leave in co. with the Prof. We parted at the corner, *without* the Prof. telling me. . .

⁸James’s point, as Perry (1935) summarized it, is that “the problem of causation has remained unsolved. . . because philosophers have oscillated between the two impossible views that cause and effect are identical and that they are external and mutually exclusive” (ibid., vol. 2, 665). As James ([1911] 1979) wrote, “enlightened opinion’ about cause is confused and unsatisfactory,” leading at best to a view of the universe as “consisting of nothing but elements with functional relations between them” (ibid., 104). James was not disappointed by this state of affairs since, as he admits, if *causa aequat effectum* were shown to be true, it would mean that “no *real* growth and no *real* novelty could effect an entrance into life. . . .Such an interpretation of nature, would of course relegate variety, activity and novelty to the limbo of illusions, as far as it succeeded in making its static concepts cancel living facts” (ibid., 103). James had built his entire psychology and philosophy on the premise that variety, activity and novelty – or if you wish, pluralism, freedom and possibility – were real factors in the universe.

that he would be happy to see me at his domicile, so that I know not whether I shall be able to continue acquainted with a man I wd. fain know more of (*ibid.*, 213f.).

This professor was, of course, Wilhelm Dilthey, 9 years older than James and on holiday from his university post at Basel – a good reason for not giving James his home address! (Dilthey was called from Basel to Kiel in the next year and then to Berlin in 1882, to replace Hermann Lotze in the chair that once belonged to Hegel.) So far as I know, the two men never met again, and whether they ever realized, later, that they had met, I do not know. But they came to know each other's work when James's good friend and Dilthey's Berlin colleague, Carl Stumpf, brought James's *Principles* to Dilthey's attention in November of 1890, calling it "an excellent work, the best we have, which makes Wundt look sorry by comparison" (Ermarth 1978, 212). Four years later, Dilthey approvingly cited several passages from James's *Principles* in his "Ideas concerning a Descriptive and Analytic Psychology" (Dilthey [1894] 1977, 50, 60), in which Dilthey elaborated his distinction between explanatory and descriptive psychology. Subsequently, after Hermann Ebbinghaus's (1895) critique of Dilthey's article, Dilthey turned to James's work to help formulate his response (Ermarth 1978, 212f.).

In 1900, Dilthey nominated James, successfully, for election to the Prussian Academy of Sciences (James 1992–2004, vol. 9, 592, 598), and 2 years later, he reacted positively to James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James [1902] 1985), which he judged to be "the great American contribution to the psychological understanding of religion" (Hughes 1961, 197). He also referred to James as a "psychological genius" and mentioned James occasionally in materials now deposited in the Dilthey archives, including materials associated with his move *away* from his 1894 position and *toward* his later hermeneutical position (Ermarth 1978, 212, *passim*). In this latter regard, Dilthey's comments sometimes had a negative tinge, as when he chastised James – and himself – for a residual constructivist (explanatory) bias (*ibid.*, 185).

We do not have a similar record of James's knowledge of Dilthey's works, probably indicating that James did not read them, even though he read widely in the German philosophical literature, including works by Wilhelm Windelband (whose work he liked, though he disagreed with much of it) and Heinrich Rickert (whose work prompted him to significant marginal note-making, despite – or because of – significant disagreement).

However, even without specific documentation, it seems almost certain that James at least knew about Dilthey's article on "Ideas concerning a Descriptive and Analytic Psychology" (Dilthey [1894] 1977). Beside the fact that it dealt with issues that concerned him, especially in the wake of Ladd's criticism of his psychology, James would have heard about the article and the subsequent controversy from Stumpf, among others. In addition, it is hard to imagine how James could have invited Dilthey to the Third International Congress of Psychology, held in Munich in August of 1896, without being aware of Dilthey's article. (The invitation was extended on behalf of both James and Theodor Lipps.) As things turned out, Dilthey declined the invitation and gave up lecturing on psychology, almost certainly in response to the controversy aroused by his article on explanatory vs. descriptive psychology (Ermarth 1978, 185).

There the record of personal and intellectual encounters between James and Dilthey seems to have come to an end.⁹ What is striking is how asymmetric they were, with Dilthey drawing upon James's work, but not vice versa.

7.8 Conclusion

Despite the asymmetry in their relations, James and Dilthey had much in common. Their general views and concerns were remarkably similar. Both wanted a psychology that would be true to what they conceived to be the essential characteristics of humanity. Both emphasized the importance and continuity of lived experience. Both developed ideas and approaches that led, through different paths, to twentieth-century phenomenology. Both recognized that beliefs lie at the foundation of knowledge. Both had an abiding interest in religion and the ways that people seek, or lose, meaning when religion no longer attracts allegiance. Both believed that humans are fundamentally historical creatures. Both believed that basic perspectives, or worldviews, define the circumference of human knowledge.¹⁰ Both were concerned about ethics as well as aesthetics. And both had a deep and abiding connection to literature, which in significant ways – perhaps most evidently in their shared admiration for and probing reflection upon Goethe and his various works – helped to set the tone and agenda for their scholarly careers.

Yet James proposed that humans have a single, capacious way of understanding. Whether thought to be descriptive or explanatory, all knowledge in the Jamesian scheme comes from within, so to say, as situated, interested minds select and then compare what they have taken from the ongoing flow of experience. With hypotheses derived from this process of abstraction and comparison – whether of “physical” or “mental” phenomena – they proceed to act and draw further inferences, thereby testing their understandings by their consequences. Dilthey, meanwhile, as discussed more fully in other chapters in this volume, came to believe that there are two modes of comprehension, one indicated by the German word *Erklären*, signifying causal explanation based upon inductive and synthetic construction of disparate elements inferred from experience, and the other by the German word *Verstehen*, standing for understanding based upon deductive analysis of immediately given and originally coherent experience.

⁹The only other communication between James and Dilthey, of which I am aware, was a recommendation from James that the French philosopher Charles Renouvier be admitted to membership in the Prussian Academy, but this communication was sent to Dilthey through Stumpf (James 1992–2004, vol. 9, 599).

¹⁰Interestingly, James ([1909] 1977) illustrated his belief that “a man’s vision is the great fact about him” and that “a philosophy is the expression of a man’s intimate character,” not with a reference to Dilthey’s publications on *Weltanschauungen*, but with comments on a book in which Dilthey, among others (including Wundt, Ostwald, and Ebbinghaus) presented their various “idiosyncratic” philosophies. Turning from one chapter to another, James said, was like “turning over a photograph album” (ibid., 14).

There is some irony here. James, the resolute pluralist, concluded that there is a fundamental unity among the various forms of cognition, whereas Dilthey, the would-be reconciler of idealism and realism, was convinced that there are, in fact, two different modes of cognition. These modes were not, of course, coextensive with “physical” and “mental” phenomena, since the explanatory mode could be – and had been – applied to psychology (e.g., by “associationists” who treated sensations, ideas, and affects as so many elements to be related by explanatory laws). A better way to express the difference, according to Dilthey, is to distinguish between explaining-from-outside and understanding-from-inside. But to James, as suggested above, all cognition develops from inside, whether aimed at what is conceived to be “inside” or “outside” the person who knows or understands.

The fact that, in this one regard, James maintained a kind of monism and Dilthey espoused a form of dualism should not blind us to the related fact that both James and Dilthey opposed an *explanatory* monism, whether based on idealist or materialist premises. And more specifically to the point, both opposed the encroachment of positivistic scientism into the domain of the spirit. Still, what separated them was not so much their views on psychology as their views on science. In the end it seems that James’s greater familiarity with, and more thorough criticism of, contemporary natural science was the fulcrum of their differences with regard to *Erklären* and *Verstehen*. Although Dilthey had been diligent in studying the history of science, as is apparent in his epoch-making *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (Dilthey [1883] 1989), his focus had been on physical science of the more distant past. James, however, was more knowledgeable than Dilthey regarding contemporary as opposed to historical developments in the physical sciences, and *much* more knowledgeable regarding current advances in the biological sciences, about which Dilthey’s knowledge seems to have been relatively rudimentary, judging from his published discussions of science (Dilthey [1883] 1989, 192–206). In fact, Dilthey made *no* reference at all to Darwin in his treatment of science in his *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, concentrating exclusively on highly abstract features of traditional physical science.¹¹ Since Darwin was so central to James’s conceptualization of human life and experience – indeed, of the world in general – this can only be seen as relevant to their differing positions regarding the natural and the human sciences, and regarding *Erklären* and *Verstehen*. Dilthey clearly contrasted *mechanistic physics* with the understanding of human experience, whereas James used *evolutionary biology* to elucidate it. In doing so, as we have seen, James brought evolutionary thought into conformity with his personal search for a meaningful human existence, one that left room for freedom, possibility, and hope. Meanwhile, Dilthey, who was not trained in science as James was, described physical science

¹¹There is *one* mention of Darwin in the drafts and plans, never realized, for a second volume of Dilthey’s *Introduction*, but this reference has to do with the general notion of *adaptation* rather than Darwin’s specific theory of evolution. Indeed, Dilthey ([1883] 1989) wrote that this “great law of all life,” that living creatures adapt to their environment, “is the same whether one applies the explanations of Aristotle or Cuvier, Goethe, Lamarck or Darwin to it” (ibid., 468).

as he understood it in a way that restricted belief in freedom, possibility, and hope to the realm of subjectivity, in stark contrast to the objectivity supposedly mandated by the scientific worldview.

This may be enough of an explanation – or is it a description? – of the differences between these two otherwise similar individuals. But there may also have been a relevant conceptual or temperamental difference between them – a tendency to seek similarities and connections, on the part of James, as opposed to a tendency to make distinctions and divisions, on the part of Dilthey. A nice illustration is provided by James's ([1890] 1981) description of a *tension* between the “transitive” and “substantive” elements embedded alike in the stream of consciousness (*ibid.*, vol. 1, 233–240) and Dilthey's subsequent conversion of this tension into a radical *antinomy*, which he then used as a reason to reject introspection in favor of a hermeneutic understanding of human expression (Ermarth 1978, 212f.). This possible difference is further suggested by James's reaction to Windelband's distinction between fact and value. Writing to F.C.S. Schiller in September of 1904, James noted that he did not feel that he had missed much by not attending the Second International Congress on Philosophy in Geneva because the chief event had apparently been “a discourse by Windelband on the *distinction* of Fact & Value. . . . If so it shows how arrieré they are on the Continent. For we at least have got the question of their *connexion* clearly raised” (James 1992–2004, vol. 10, 473).

This is a telling comment. As James ([1912] 1976) said elsewhere, “life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected” (James [1912] 1976, 42), and he sought out transitions or connections, sometimes even of an ethereal sort, before he accepted apparent divisions and differences. Again, this may reflect his more “organic” or “biological” premises, especially as these supported the pragmatic viewpoint that he shared with Schiller. We can see this viewpoint and related tendency in his erasing of a clear distinction between subjective and objective as well as in his denying any necessary differences between explanation and description – or *Erklären* and *Verstehen*.¹²

So we can understand the difference between James and Dilthey, as regards *Erklären* and *Verstehen*, in two ways: (1) James did not believe there was an adequate reason to suppose a radical distinction between description and explanation. (2) This principled conclusion accorded with his temperamental preference to see relations among even seemingly disparate views. Perhaps this suggests a good way to think about the difference between James and Dilthey themselves: not so radical that we should fail to appreciate the common spirit and overlap in their ways of thinking.

¹²To be fair, James sometimes made hard-and-fast distinctions, and Dilthey sometimes cautioned against over-reliance on distinctions. For instance, Dilthey ([1910] 1985), like James, commended the balancing of subjectivity and objectivity in Goethe's thought and work (Dilthey [1910] 1985, 278), and he is known to have opposed “one-sidedness” (Ermarth 1978, 78), as illustrated by his *Idealrealismus*. Still, I think there is a point to be made about their relative emphases in this regard.

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