

ANTI-CARTESIANISM AND JAMES

In his essay of 1904 ("Does Consciousness Exist?") James protests against the absolute qualitative difference between the mental and the material that has come down traditionally as a metaphysical dualism since the time of Descartes. The dualistic systems in the history of philosophy have dichotomized the world into two water-tight compartments which do not admit of anything in common to bridge the gulf. James effected a simplification, since he dispenses with the postulation of two different kinds of entities and substitutes one neutral stuff, to which he gives the name of pure experience. In James' philosophy the dualism between the knower and the known, subject and object, is replaced by the neutral stuff, and this replacement supposedly enables James to achieve emancipation from the age-old dualism.

James points out that thoughts and things are taken by common sense to be names for two sorts of objects which are opposed to each other. Philosophers have reflected on this opposition and have come up with a number of different explanations. Towards the beginning of modern philosophy the most widely accepted view was to regard them as a pair of equipollent substances both of which are equally real and important and irreducible to each other. James notes that the status of thoughts and things as two equipollent substances underwent a radical change after Kant undermined the soul and replaced it by the transcendental ego. Kant argued that the metaphysical belief in the existence of a soul substance is riddled with irresolvable contradictions. He nevertheless held that it is necessary to postulate a transcendental unity of consciousness to explain the possibility of knowledge without committing himself to its metaphysical status. James points out that since the revolutionary doctrine of Kant, philosophy never returned to the erstwhile bipolarism of thought and thing or soul and body. As he writes :

At first, 'spirit and matter', 'soul and body', stood for a pair of equipollent substances quite on a par in weight and interest. But one day Kant undermined the soul and brought in the transcendental ego, and ever since then the bipolar relation has been very much off its balance.¹

James questions the basic premises of the dualistic metaphysics. He does not agree with either of the basic tenets of dualism, viz., (1) that mind and matter are two fundamental *substantive entities*, (2) that mind and matter are *essentially different* from each other. The notion of substance is a fundamental concept in the Cartesian metaphysics. In the Cartesian system, substance is the primary category and the other categories can only exist in a secondary sense as attributes or modifications of substances. Descartes defines substance as follows :

Everything in which there resides immediately, as in a subject, or by means of which there exists, anything that we perceive, i. e., any property, quality or attribute of which we have a real idea is called a *substance*; neither do we have any other idea of substance itself, precisely taken, than that it is a thing in which this something that we perceive or which is present objectively in some of our ideas, exists formally or eminently. For by means of our natural light we know that a real attribute cannot be an attribute of nothing.²

Thus the table is not its shape, plus its hardness and so on. In addition to all the qualities of a thing, Descartes argues that there must be something for them to belong to. Thus substance is that "additional" thing which has all these qualities and in which all these qualities inhere.

With James, there is no notion of a physical substance as "entity" that undergoes changes and holds properties together. James argued that the concept of an unperceivable "something" underlying the attributes is quite dispensable. James rejects the "thingized" (as Spaulding expressed it) concept of substance prevalent in the Cartesian tradition. It follows from the postulate of radical empiricism that evidence for the existence of any entity must ultimately come from experience. James points out that all that we know from experience are particular qualities. A unitary substance over and above the particular qualities is not simply presented by experience. As he writes in his article, "Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered,"

...all we know of the chalk is the whiteness, friability, etc., all we know of the wood is the combustibility and

fibrous structure. A group of attributes is what each substance here is known-as, they form its sole cash-value for our actual experience.³

Since the particular qualities are all that we ever come across through experience it would make no difference to our experience if the so-called substantive "entity" did not exist. However, James does agree with the self-existent nature of a substance. As he writes, "If we ask what substance is, the only answer is that it is a *self-existent* being."⁴ This admission, however, does not lead him to accept it as some kind of entity or thing behind or beyond experience. "Substances" are the things of ordinary experience.

In "Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered," James supported Berkeley's refutation of matter as substance. He agrees with Berkeley that matter does not mean something over and above the qualities. Thus : "The fact of the bare cohesion itself is all that the notion of substance signifies. Behind this fact is nothing."⁵ Again, in his chapter on "The One and the Many," we find James reaffirming his acceptance of the empiricist treatment of the concept of substance.

It may be noted here that this analysis of substance should not be construed to mean that James *identifies* the concept of matter with the phenomenal properties in the flux. According to James, the table is not *exhausted* by the set of qualities. It has some sort of significance beyond the multiplicity of bare data. It is the experienced continuity of things that goes beyond the momentarily experienced groupings of atomistic parts. As early as 1884, in his article on "Against Nihilism" James criticized the positivist's denial of substance and wrote :

Substance metaphysically considered denotes nothing more than this : "*It is meant,*" a *plus ultra* the phenomenon. What this plus is may be left undecided : it may only be the other phenomena with which the present real one is related, — it may, in a word, denote merely the continuity of the real world. In any case, it is unrecognized by nihilism, which maintains that the instant phenomenon is a separate nature absolutely sufficient to itself...⁶

Next, James went on to argue against the other pole of the Cartesian dualism, viz., the existence of consciousness as a sub-

stantive entity. Cartesians have described the mind in terms of the model of "the substance and its state." In this tradition philosophers have believed that in being self-conscious one is aware of a spiritual substance which is housed temporally in the body "like a pilot in a ship". Thus one can legitimately speak of the mind as the entity that experiences, wills and thinks. For James, consciousness regarded as the name of the alleged entity denotes nothing. There is no evidence for the ontological status of mind as an entity. By introspection we have evidence of the occurrence of certain experiences only. James writes :

Consciousness, as it is ordinarily understood, does not exist, any more than Matter, to which Berkeley delivered the coup de grace.⁷

James notes that the rationalists have inflated Kant's transcendental ego into an all-engulfing Absolute, whereas the empiricists have reduced consciousness to a mere function of knowing which has no substantial status. James points out that the logical outcome of this empiricistic trend of thought is the assertion that there is no such entity as consciousness. There is no original stuff or substance out of which our particular thoughts are made—which stuff or substance has to be contrasted with the stuff or substance out of which the material object is made. If the first principles of Being were to be enumerated, they would not include the name of consciousness as an entity.

James is fully aware of the paradoxical nature of this assertion. Since thoughts undeniably exist it may seem absurd to deny that consciousness exists. And hence James is careful to specify the exact sense in which the denial of consciousness ought to be interpreted. What he denies is that consciousness is a name for an entity. But James is not denying the obvious fact that things become known or get reported. 'Consciousness' stands for a real function, namely the function of knowing. Without consciousness things that exist could not get reported or known. But there is nothing mysterious or puzzling about a thing becoming known. As he writes :

There is, I mean, no aboriginal stuff or quality of being, contrasted with that of which material objects are made, out of which our thoughts of them are made; but there is a

function in experience which thoughts perform, and for the performance of which this quality of being is invoked. That function is *knowing*. 'Consciousness' is supposed necessary to explain the fact that things not only are, but get reported, are known.⁸

Having rejected the idea of mind and matter as substantive entities, James went on to reject the other basic dualistic premise that *substances differ essentially*. True to his scholastic heritage Descartes traded upon the ancient doctrine that every substance has an essence. In his writings, Descartes used the words essence, nature, principal property, and principal attribute interchangeably. As he writes: "There is always one principal property of substance which constitutes its nature and essence, and on which all others depend."⁹ Each substance has one and only one essence, e.g., thought is the essential attribute of mind and extension is the essential attribute of matter. With his famous example of wax, Descartes illustrates that extension is the essential attribute that endures through all changes of matter. All other sensible qualities of wax—its particular color, fragrance, texture, etc., are subject to alteration. Descartes writes that when we have abstracted "from all that does not belong to the wax" nothing remains but "a certain extended thing which is flexible and movable." Thus with Descartes the physical substance is that which is extended, *res extensans*, and the mental substance is that which thinks, *res cogitans*. Solidity and spatiality cannot be reduced to anything mental or mental factors like the emotions, beliefs and desires to anything physical. Hence Descartes claimed that "extension" and "consciousness" are the original and fundamental substances. Everything else must therefore be regarded as a modification of these fundamental qualities. These two prime predicates, according to the dualist, are related disjunctively.

James questioned the basic dichotomy of the Cartesian metaphysics, the tendency to split the entire universe into two substances. James repudiated the old traditional doctrine of essence. He does not believe that mind or matter have an essential core of qualities which makes them what they are and without which they could not be. A traditional metaphysician believing in a doctrine of essence would hold that mind is essen-
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tially different from matter—that anything mental possesses an essential nature of its own that can be possessed only by a mental object and by nothing else. The same holds of matter. Anything extended is matter and anything that is matter is extended. James protests against such “a priori determination” of the concept of materiality. He argued that the concept of matter (or mind) cannot be determined on an a priori basis. It must be determined on the basis of experience. Our experience does not support such an absolutistic contention that extension is the essential property of matter. James argued that one could also conceive of a different kind of extension which could very well belong to a mental state.

Let us for example think of a picture hung on the wall. The picture on the wall undoubtedly has extension. James asks why should not extension be attributable to our thought of the picture as well? Of course the extension attributable to our thought of the picture has to be different from the extension belonging to the picture itself. The extension belonging to the thought will be a subjective extension as distinguished from the extension belonging to the picture which is objective. The difference between subjective and objective extension is clear and is one of relation to the context in which the extended object belongs. In the case of subjective extension various “extents” do not maintain any fixed, unalterable order in relation to each other. But in the case of objective extension the order is necessarily fixed. A physical object in outer space (to the left of another object, the latter necessarily to the right of the former, but not vice versa) necessarily excludes another physical object from occupying the same place, and their changing relations follow a fixed order. James therefore admits that subjective extension is very different in nature from objective extension. Nevertheless he fails to see why subjective extension could not be regarded as extension at all and why our mental states could not be characterized by subjective extension.

James' main point is that a philosopher should not face the world with a set of pre-determined notions such as that to be material something must be extended and anything extended is material, and then try to fit the facts into his scheme. To a

philosopher approaching the facts with such a presupposition the essential difference between mind and matter may be enshrined in the very presupposition. But if we rise above such presuppositions and study the facts impartially we find that there is no essential difference between mind and matter.

James avoids the heterogeneity of thoughts and things, for "thought and actuality are made of one and the same stuff, the stuff of experience in general."¹⁰ The percept of a tree and the physical tree are one and the same bit of pure experience, taken twice, one time as belonging to this, then again as belonging to the other group. The supposed heterogeneity of thought and thing is to be explained as an affair of relations. 'Subjectivity' and 'objectivity' refer not to any intrinsic property but are only relational or functional attributes.

Since James holds that both consciousness and matter come from the same source, namely pure experience, one may be misled into thinking that according to him the original "stuff" is a whole containing both consciousness and matter within itself. Consciousness is obtained from such a whole by subtracting it from the other half of the whole, namely matter, and vice versa with regard to matter. Upon such a construction the distinction between matter and consciousness will be the result of abstraction or of separation of one aspect of the whole from the other aspect.

But this kind of metaphysics is very far removed from James' doctrine. According to James, though both consciousness and matter come from the same source neither can be labelled as "conscious" or "material." It cannot be regarded as a whole both containing consciousness and matter within itself. Rather the original stuff is of a much simpler nature that does not as yet permit the distinction between consciousness and matter. However the same experience after entering into one web of relations can be distinguished as conscious or material. When the experiences enter into relations of mutual action and interaction of an ordered and predictable sort, they come to belong to the "physical world." On the other hand, when the same experiences enter into relations of a very different nature, viz., when they are transitory, plastic, and changeable at will, they

become a part of the "psychical world." The same original experience thus becomes either a consciousness or a material thing depending on the relational context in which it occurs. Thus the development of the original stuff into something conscious or material is the result of being added to either of the two groups of elements differently related. In itself, experience has no inner duality. Thus the distinction between consciousness and matter is functional and not original. An experience becomes conscious or material depending upon the phenomenal group in which it becomes a vehicle of reciprocal action. Designations like "mental" and "material" do not stand for ontological features of ultimate reality, but are significant of the particular context in which they occur.

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NOTES

1. *The Writings of William James*, ed. J. J. McDermott (New York : Random House, 1969), p. 169.
2. *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, ed. E. S. Haldane and G. T. R. Ross (Cambridge : University Press, 1967) II, p. 53.
3. *The Writings of William James*, p. 391.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (2 Vols : Boston : Little, Brown, and Co., 1935), I, p. 527.
7. *Essays in Radical Empiricism and A Pluralistic Universe*, ed. R. J. Bernstein (New York : Dutton and Co., Inc., 1971), p. 120.
8. *The Writings of William James*, p. 170.
9. From R. M. Eaton, *Descartes*, (New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), p. 275.
10. *The Writings of William James*, p. 187.