

DOES HE PROTEST TOO MUCH? JAMES'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HEGEL

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JAMES'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HEGEL

By

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### **Abstract**

William James's treatment of G. W. F. Hegel is often vitriolic and hostile. James advanced arguments against virtually every aspect of Hegelian philosophy. Despite the widespread grievances James found in Hegel's work, there are a growing number of philosophers who argue that James was in actuality a latent Hegelian himself. On the other side of this debate are those who believe that James provided a final and devastating critique from which Hegel could never escape. This thesis considers both positions and renders a number of historical judgements regarding the relationship between James and Hegel. First, one ought not to consider James a Hegelian. Any attempt to construe James as one must severely distort James's work. Second, despite the volume of arguments against Hegel James provides, the strongest argument is that of vicious abstractionism. Lastly, while vicious abstractionism may provide the basis for a strong argument against Hegel, it cannot be taken as a decisive victory over him. This is because James saw his brand of pragmatism as a mediator between different philosophies present in the philosophical discourse, a conversation from which Hegelian philosophy had all but removed itself in James's time. The concept of vicious abstractionism represents James's attempt to bring Hegelian philosophy back into the discourse through exposing an underlying flaw in its psychology. Aside from providing a resolution to the debate surrounding James's supposed Hegelian leanings, this thesis demonstrates how current pragmatists can enjoy a cautious rather than hostile relationship with Hegel.

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### Abbreviations

*G. W. F. Hegel*

PS            *Phenomenology of Spirit*

SL            *Science of Logic*

*William James*

ERE           *Essays in Radical Empiricism*

OSH           “On Some Hegelisms”

PMT           *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth*

POP 1        *Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 1.

POP 2        *Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 2.

PU            *A Pluralistic Universe*

SPP           *Some Problems of Philosophy*

VRE           *Varieties of Religious Experience*

WB            *The Will to Believe*

## Introduction

“The lady doth protest too much, methinks.” This line is uttered by Queen Gertrude in Act 3, Scene ii of *Hamlet*. In this scene, Hamlet has set up the play-within-a-play “The Mouse Trap” in order to determine whether or not his mother and uncle had any part in the death of his father by gauging their reactions to a storyline that mirrored their suspected actions. Gertrude spoke this line in reaction to her counterpart in the play’s willingness to engage in solemn oaths, as ‘protest’ had a different meaning in Shakespeare’s day. Through time, this line has become a widespread idiom of the English language, though its meaning is tied to a current usage of the word ‘protest’. Now it means that someone denies or refuses something so adamantly, passionately, and frequently that one begins to suspect that this person is trying to convince themselves of the truth of their own position.

It can also be applicable in the philosophical arena. In fact, this is essentially the claim of a growing number of philosophers when discussing the relationship between William James and G. W. F. Hegel. James argued extensively against Hegel, attacking almost every possible facet of Hegelian philosophy in an attempt to abolish it in its entirety. He argued passionately (though perhaps recklessly), often resorting to name calling and colourful expressions in order to make his point more forceful. This has brought some to question James’s true relationship with Hegelian philosophy. Some point to idealistic tendencies latent in his psychological work, others to the resemblance of some of his so-called radical empiricist positions to that of absolute idealism or monism. The consensus is that James held idealistic positions, either from the beginning



or as a product of his life's experience. His constant assaults on Hegel were a product of an inner conflict of his own beliefs.

The purpose of this thesis is to challenge those who hold the position that James was a Hegelian in disguise through an analysis of what they are saying and a rigorous attempt to discern why they are saying it. This project is significant for a number of reasons. First is the counter-intuitive nature of their arguments. If they are correct, then this has far reaching implications for our understanding of one of the most influential American philosophers. The staunch and self-confessed 'radical' empiricist would be subject to a complete overhaul of our historical judgements. Added to this reason is a second and much more alarming reason, concerning the source of these arguments. Two of the three positions analyzed in this thesis come from books compiled with the intent to introduce James and his brand of pragmatism to newcomers to philosophy or those who wish a basic introduction to the subject. One article is found in the *Cambridge Companion to William James*, part of a popular series meant to give a firm foundation in Jamesian thought, published by a respected publisher fairly recently. Given the medium and its intended audience, it would be fair to say that the views expressed would be accepted less critically than if they were written in academic journals. In this light it is especially important for views to be accurate, lest future philosophers begin under a false assumption and have their entire stance on James tainted.

I must stress that this thesis is concerned first and foremost with James and not with Hegel. The arguments made placing James in the Hegelian camp can be analyzed

and refuted exclusively by an appeal to James's work. Hegel will be studied directly only when discussing James's arguments against him.

Chapter 1 examines three examples of those who would put James into the Hegelian camp, namely Bruce Wiltshire, Andrew Reck, and Timothy Sprigge. Each of these philosophers attempts to bring James closer to Hegel through different means. Wiltshire attempts to show that James was a monist, despite frequent claims of pluralism. He does this through the use of the concept of 'pure experience', and by adopting James's broad (and possibly incorrect) use of the term *Identitätsphilosophie* as meaning any philosophy by which things are known through that which they are not. Reck claims that James had idealistic tendencies, and brings them out through an analysis of the *Principles of Psychology*. Lastly, Sprigge goes one step further than Reck and claims that James was for at least a time an absolute idealist. He portrays James's relationship with absolute idealism as an externalization of his inner conflict between radical empiricism and absolute idealist tendencies. All three of these positions will be discredited. My conclusion will be that James is not a Hegelian, and any attempt to portray him as such requires a misinterpretation of his work.

This brings up a very interesting point. There has to be a reason for the attempt at portraying James as a Hegelian, and the most likely explanation is that the scholars felt threatened by the arguments which James levels at Hegel and his followers. Chapter 2 is a systematic analysis of the arguments which James provides against two of the most important facets of Hegelian philosophy; namely, idealism and absolutism. Though there are many arguments, and some which appear quite forceful, James himself softens the

blow of each one. To James, much of the discord present in philosophy is a product of temperamental differences. Some are more attracted to rationalistic, ‘tender-minded’ philosophical systems, and others to systems which are based on facts and are ‘tough-minded’. Further, we will see reasons to think that Hegelian philosophy is in James’s eyes most guilty of pretentiousness rather than outright error. Despite James’s apparent deliberately weakening of these arguments, a promising avenue of attack against Hegelian philosophy presents itself. That Hegelian philosophy is too abstract is a point James hammers on repeatedly. I enlist the aid of Don Morse to help bring this out. While his position is not without difficulty, as I shall show, through his work the possibility emerges of a strong argument against Hegel based on the concept of vicious abstraction.

In Chapter 3 I explain this concept, starting from its foundations in James’s psychology. For James, experience is ‘bipedal’, a joint effort between percepts and concepts. Percepts are yielded by the senses, and concepts by the understanding. Concepts seek to refine percepts and assist the organism in adapting to the world. The threshold for conceptual thinking is set very low by James, so low that even a polyp has a chance of being a conceptual thinker. Though both are required for experience to be intelligible, percepts and concepts have a different nature and function. The most pertinent difference is that while percepts are always in flux and continuous, concepts are static and unchanging. There thus exists the possibility that one can make an error based on the inappropriate use of either. When one uses concepts inappropriately, by taking them to be percepts or as having a greater importance than percepts, one is being

viciously abstract. By taking one's concept of a thing as being wholly representative of the thing itself, one will arrive at a number of paradoxes and inconsistencies. Vicious abstractionism is devastating to any system in which it is found, and James provides many examples which show that Hegelian philosophy suffers from this problem.

The consequences of this discovery are the subject of Chapter 4. Such consequences are numerous. The First is to add more force to the conclusion that James was not a Hegelian. If James felt that Hegel's philosophy was viciously abstract, then there would be no chance that he would adopt it. This is especially the case when one can determine the exact point at which Hegel commits vicious abstractionism, which is revealed to be in his concept of compenetration. The second consequence is that something from Morse's argument from Chapter 2 becomes applicable, showing, the false unity Hegel creates between things. These two consequences support a third; namely, that James has provided a roadblock for the Hegelian project by undermining the need to overcome sense-certainty.

These conclusions do not suggest the end of Hegelianism. James himself did not see his arguments that way. To James, pragmatism is most properly a mediator. It is meant to be a method by which different philosophies can test themselves and their relation to experience. The recurring theme throughout this project, and especially in Chapter 2, is that James views Hegelian philosophy more as a bad houseguest than an illogical, unsupportable position that must be rejected. His main problem with it is that it presents itself as the One Ultimate Philosophy. These pretensions are capable of trapping people who seek to understand Hegelian philosophy, which suggests that James's real

intention was to help those caught in the Hegelian trap by showing a major shortfall of the system.

Two last points are considered in Chapter 4. First is that those philosophers considered in Chapter 1 are not entirely to blame for their insistence on James as being close to if not Hegelian. Recent scholarship on both James and Hegel has been unwittingly moving them closer to each other through the adoption of each other's philosophical vernacular. Richard Norman portrays Hegel as having a view of concepts and experience very close to that of James. Charlene Haddock Seigfried portrays James in such a way that if taken out of context he sounds quite Hegelian. The second point is that there is still some use that pragmatists can have for Hegel, as there are still things which Hegel has done right according to the pragmatic way of thinking.

With this project completed, we shall be able to say confidently that James was not a Hegelian, nor should he be construed as such. Further, James provides forceful arguments against Hegel and enjoys at best a cautious rather than hostile relationship to Hegelian philosophy, focusing on what was done right despite all of the errors.

## Chapter 1

### JAMES AS A HEGELIAN

We understand philosophers in part by their influences. We understand that those whom one reacts against or in accordance with can have a drastic impact on the direction one's philosophy ultimately takes. Yet there is the added point that just because one philosopher is influenced by another, that does not mean that he or she has close ties with that other philosopher, or can be considered a disciple. For a person to be an Aristotelian or a Kantian requires far more than just being influenced by Aristotle or Kant. It requires a deep-seated allegiance to that person's views. It is surprising then that certain current philosophers believe that James was not just influenced by Hegel, but was a Hegelian himself. They claim that this allegiance started as early as his *Principles*, and as James got older, he moved closer and closer to Hegelian positions, ultimately taking them to be correct. Some have even claimed that he believed this all along. Why this is surprising is the fact that James spent a great deal of energy arguing against Hegel throughout his professional life. In this chapter, I shall analyze three major attempts to label James as a Hegelian, by Wilshire, Reck, and Sprigge. I shall show that each argument fails to prove its point. The only way in which James can be said to be a Hegelian is through a misreading or misunderstanding of James's work.

#### **Wilshire: Monism**

The first attempt at showing how James was a Hegelian which I shall examine is Bruce Wilshire's article "The breathtaking intimacy of the material world: William James's last thoughts," found in the *Cambridge Companion to William James*. Wilshire

believes that although James was hostile to Hegel near the beginning of his career, James moved gradually closer to Hegelian positions as his philosophical work matured. The alleged movement occurs over the question of the ultimate metaphysical identity of objects. Throughout his writings, James makes the assertion that pluralism is the only metaphysical presupposition compatible with science. In such a system, there is no underlying substance; rather, there is a plurality of different substances which cannot be reduced. Hegel is a monist, the opposite view which claims that there is one underlying true reality or substance; that is, that the apparently plurality of objects is ultimately reducible to one greater (or deeper) thing. Despite James's association of monism with the soft-tempered, rationalistic, and emotionalist philosophies, Wilshire argues that towards the end of his life, James moved closer towards accepting it. Wilshire claims that the method by which James does this is an unacknowledged use of Hegel's dialectical system.

The core of Wilshire's argument is based on an analysis of two of James's works: the *Principles*, representing James's early work; and *ERE*, representing James's late work. This is then compared with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Wilshire's reading of *Principles* attempts to put James firmly in the monist camp. James stated repeatedly in the *Principles* that he wishes to eliminate as much metaphysical speculation as possible from the discipline of psychology, in an attempt to set it more assuredly on the path of a positivistic science. Unfortunately, as even James himself admits, this project more or less fails. Whenever he starts to muse about purely psychological things, he finds that there are hidden metaphysical assumptions which he

must make explicit and, if necessary, discard.<sup>1</sup> If they cannot be discarded, then they should be relegated to a secondary role and recognized explicitly as tacit and provisional. With this in mind, James identified four distinguishable entities involved in thought to explain its process: the psychologist (thinker), the thought itself, the object of that thought, and the real world independent of the thinker.<sup>2</sup> Each is meant to be a separate category, clearly definable from the others. As James discovers, the perceptual scheme cannot stay that way for long. The thought itself cannot be studied apart from its object, thus those two are inextricably linked. Further, any object of thought is necessarily a thought *about* something. James, being a radical empiricist, believes that all thought must come into contact with experience. Thus any object of thought will be about the real world. Finally, the thinker is not something set apart from the world she is experiencing, but is immersed in it and modifies the experience based on previous experiences.<sup>3</sup> The real world means the world which is real to the psychologist. As this scheme is all connected, the ‘real world’ is nothing less than the psychologist’s system of reality. Wilshire proclaims that this development commits James to the position that any thought necessarily includes the whole of the perceiver’s reality. In the end, “[t]he Object becomes all engulfing: thinkers or experiencers absorbed in the experiencing-experienced-experienceable world.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Wilshire, “The breathtaking intimacy of the material world: William James’s last thoughts,” in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 107.

<sup>2</sup> Wilshire, 108.

<sup>3</sup> Wilshire, 108.

<sup>4</sup> Wilshire, 108-9.



With this conclusion in hand, Wilshire brings in the Jamesean notion of ‘pure experience,’ a notion most clearly developed in *ERE*. Pure experience is the “blooming, buzzing confusion” of undifferentiated, unanalyzed, non-discriminated experience.<sup>5</sup> The only time one would ever come into contact with this is in the first pulse of consciousness after birth. After that, the process of discrimination has differentiated between different colours, shapes, and objects. Yet this discriminated experience is not what one receives, even after that first pulse. One still receives pure experience, as it is the observer who discriminates it, but because of this discrimination one can never experience it directly. Because it is the process of discrimination which delineates objects out of the experiential flux, an object’s self-identity for consciousness is dependent on the ability to distinguish it from what it is *not*. With this, Wilshire claims that James has outlined a world above and beyond perception: an ultimate reality of things which forever outstrips the ability to be perceived as itself. Though it is not absolute idealism *per se*, it is a “pulverized *Identitätsphilosophie*,” or a ‘pulverized identity-philosophy’ by which things are known through that which they are not.<sup>6</sup> As James believes relations between objects are as real as the objects, then all things are connected through this negative relationship in a very real way. Thus Wilshire believes that James has engaged in the Hegelian dialectical method and arrived at similar results. Through James’s method of differentiation we

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<sup>5</sup> For a more thorough examination of how we come to have common experience out of this pure experience, see Chapter 3, below.

<sup>6</sup> Wilshire, 109; Although the term ‘*Identitätsphilosophie*’ most properly belongs to Schelling, this is not entirely a misuse of the term. James himself uses this term to refer to any philosophy in which things are defined through that which they are not through acquaintance with it and other things. See James, PMT, 239, 281.

arrive at the pulverized identity-philosophy, and through pure experience we have the all-encompassing world.

This view of the identity of objects relates to Hegel as it is quite similar to the chapter “Sense-Certainty” in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This chapter is a critique of the basic empiricist premise that the most certain and desirable knowledge is that of immediate sense experience, devoid of any additions or modifications. To Hegel, sense-certainty is a very poor form of truth. This is because all that is indicated in sense-certainty is the ‘thisness’ of an object; that it *is*, and nothing more.<sup>7</sup> It is *that* to which one points. One cannot attribute predicates to describe a thing and remain in the realm of sense-certainty. Rather, it is only that it is *this* thing and not *that other* thing.<sup>8</sup> Further, the subject does not receive the object passively and in an unmediated form, because the act of sense-certainty itself mediates the object. By being engaged with, the object is being necessarily mediated into that relationship by the subject, and the subject is being mediated by the object.<sup>9</sup> The subject is mediating the object by differentiating it from all other objects present to the subject at the time when this relationship is taking place. Thus, one can only know what an object is through differentiating it from what it is not.<sup>10</sup> One only knows that an object is an object because it is not everything else, nor is it oneself. It is only through the negation of everything else that one comes to the identity of that thing. Yet this thing is part of the ‘everything else’ for other objects; thus, through the process of negation everything is connected to everything else and is inextricably part

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<sup>7</sup> Hegel, PS, 58.

<sup>8</sup> Hegel, PS, 59.

<sup>9</sup> Hegel, PS, 67-68.

<sup>10</sup> Hegel, PS, 68.

of it. Again, we have things defined through that which they are not, and connected to an all-encompassing underlying reality.

Wilshire believes that through the preceding argument, he has shown that James did in fact adopt a Hegelian position, despite claims to the contrary. The method is the same as Hegel's, and results in a system like Hegel's. The difference is that James arrives at his system empirically and identifies pure experience as the underlying reality, while Hegel derives his system rationalistically through the concept of negation. As one can see, there are admittedly some similarities between the two thinkers. However, does this similarity mean that James was a Hegelian?

The roadblock to a reconciliation of these two thinkers lies in the vast difference in their foundations and first principles. There are two such foundational principles which keep James from being a Hegelian. First is that James remains faithful to his idea of pluralism and the pluralistic method. In Wilshire's words, James's worldview will be "messier, more pluralistic, pulverized, and 'irrational' than [absolute idealists] could possibly abide."<sup>11</sup> This does more than just present a difficulty for showing how James became Hegelian; rather, it puts James flatly opposed to such an idea. Despite describing the world of pure experience as Wilshire has, objects remain separate from each other. The world of pure experience is not a commentary on how things *exist*, but rather how they *appear* to us. The second position which is not yielded by James is that of empiricism. It is not the case for James that reason is to be trusted over the senses, or that the senses are inherently untrustworthy. There is no reason to accept Hegel's premise

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<sup>11</sup> Wilshire, 112.

that sense-certainty is only capable of yielding this or that thing but no more. Rather, basic perception can yield a great deal of firm truths.

Wilshire has gone to a considerable amount of trouble to show that James's later positions resemble Hegelian ones. Differences in foundations aside, there is another important point to make about the similarity between their works which makes Wilshire's argument even less plausible. The reasons behind believing something is just as important as the thing believed, and to ignore that fact is to present a superficial description of the object of belief. Consider the following allegory. John believes that retail stores should be closed on Sunday because it forces small business owners to post a deficit if they want to remain competitive. Jane is a hyper-religious evangelical Christian who believes that stores should respect the Lord's Day. Both believe that stores should be closed on Sunday, but to say that both believe the same thing is a superficial view of their actual beliefs. There are differences in potential outcomes, as Jane's claim is made on religious grounds and John's is not. The two may not even work together because of the difference in their foundation. To claim that James moved towards a Hegelian position on the basis of resemblance is like claiming that John moved towards Jane's position by wanting stores closed on Sunday.

Wilshire has gone through a lot of trouble in his attempt to portray James as a Hegelian. However, by keeping James's pluralistic and empirical positions undisturbed, this is impossible, regardless of how similar certain positions may look superficially. It is true that for James we define objects based on what they are not rather than what they positively encompass in experience. It is also true that in the world of pure experience,

objects are undifferentiated. It is false that James means this in any way similar to what Hegel would mean by saying such things. Objects may be undifferentiated in pure experience, but simply due to the fact that we *can* differentiate them means that they *are* separate in the ‘real world’ independent of perception. They are not connected in the Hegelian sense of being connected through the concept of negation. We must conclude that Wilshire’s argument fails, and that we cannot accept as a proof that James accepted Hegelian principles.

**Reck: Idealism<sup>12</sup>**

Wilshire was not the first to attempt to show how James adhered to Hegelian positions. Andrew Reck sought to show much the same thing through an analysis of James’s metaphysical claims in the *Principles*. To prove his point, Reck describes the presence and depth of idealist metaphysical principles operating throughout that work. As much of James’s later works were based upon the observations made in the *Principles*, finding evidence there of James holding idealist positions would lend support to those who claim that James arrived at Hegelian positions. It would add particular weight to arguments against James, as it would have been incorrect of him to criticize Hegel when he held the same or similar positions himself. Unfortunately, Reck provides little support for that position due to several major flaws, errors, and a general misunderstanding of James and his project within the *Principles*.

The most serious problem in Reck’s work on this topic is the lack of a clear definition of idealism itself, or even a working definition of what he means by James

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<sup>12</sup> A modified version of this section was submitted to *Idealistic Studies* on December 12, 2007.

being an idealist. The closest approximation which can be ascertained from his argument is that James did not believe in either direct realism or a strict materialism. While it is true that holding either of those positions would make being an idealist impossible, it is hardly the case that those options are exhaustive. Simply because James was not a materialist does not mean that he was an idealist. Even if one can determine Reck's definition of idealism, Reck never discusses which sort of idealist James would be, granting that he was an idealist. Reck claims that there is a "rationalist thread" in James's philosophy, along with a "transcendental theme" and "idealist elements."<sup>13</sup> With these three elements, it is likely that the answer would be that James was a transcendental idealist. But even then, there are varying conceptions of transcendental idealism. Reck is overly vague in his conception of James as an idealist, and even if his points do succeed, it is hard to determine exactly what they show.

There are two overarching arguments which Reck uses in order to show that James was an idealist. The first of these is a natural extension of the subject matter of the *Principles*. Any study of psychology will necessarily be oriented around individuals. Having to work from individuals to general psychological principles will mean that the individual psyche is going to be the principle entity responsible for defining each individual's reality, which is the direction James takes. Given this starting point, Reck takes James in a vastly different direction than would seem appropriate. He does this through two examples: James's treatment of *a priori* truths, and James's description of a multiplicity of systems of reality.

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew J. Reck, "Idealist Metaphysics in William James's *Principles of Psychology*," in

Before we turn to the examples themselves, a word must be said about Reck's general argument and methodology. Reck places a great deal of weight on James's move away from objective views of problems to psychological views of those problems. Reck's methodology is summed nicely in his concluding remark that James's psychology looks at traditional problems differently from any other viewpoint, being "not about objective topics as traditionally understood, but rather about the psychological processes of our *feelings, attitudes, and beliefs about these topics*."<sup>14</sup> This is important because Reck attempts to establish a close relation between belief and reality, claiming that for James the former creates the latter. What one believes determines what is real, and thus belief about something makes that thing real. Thus, James is an idealist because he eschews the traditional objectivist arguments and accepts a view wherein sentient beings create their own realities through their psychological processes. Reck is able to conclude that James's psychological metaphysics "promises nothing less than a real world for every sentient being, qualified by James's conviction that some of these worlds overlap, and that somehow they are interlaced by a supremely divine being."<sup>15</sup> Now we may turn to the examples themselves.

The first example to support this argument comes from James's treatment of *a priori* and necessary truths, found in the last chapter of the *Principles*. Reck contends that it is here that James provides the clearest account of his metaphysics. As such, let us briefly go over James's thoughts about the *a priori*.

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*Idealistic Studies* 9, no. 3 (September 1979), 214, 219-220.

<sup>14</sup> Reck, 220; emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> Reck, 220.

For James, most *a priori* propositions are “brain-born.” That is, they do not strictly speaking come from experience, but are rather a product of the brain applied *to* experience. The *a priori* in general are simply propositions meant to make experience more intelligible and assist the organism in adapting to the otherwise chaotic world of experience.<sup>16</sup> Keeping in line with this radical empiricism, for James *a priori* truths generally find validation and reinforcement in experience. However, there are some which express ‘ideal relations,’ validations for which are not found in experience. An example of such a relation would be the long-debated concept of causality. The fact that such ideal relations are not immediately validated by experience does not mean that they should be discarded due to being explanatorily ‘barren,’ as ideal relations such as causality make Nature more rational and intelligible. As intelligibility is of greater benefit than irrationality, James states that we often reshape experience and our thoughts about Nature so that they conform to the ideal relations, despite the possibility that Nature looks nothing like that when examined objectively.

Reck does very little to explain why this amounts to James having an idealist metaphysics, especially considering that this is where it is allegedly most clear. The closest Reck comes is to show how metaphysical positions are often rooted in aesthetic feelings. Metaphysical statements help rationalize Nature, making an individual feel less alien and more at home. We shall leave this alone for the moment and come back to it after we have seen the second support.

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 3 for a more detailed explanation of this concept.



Reck's second support is to call attention to a passage in which James describes a multiplicity of systems of reality which can be observed. By Reck's reasoning, if there are multiple and equally 'true' systems of reality, then James is an idealist.<sup>17</sup> James states that there are a multiplicity of systems of reality, which are "indefinitely numerous."<sup>18</sup> Included in these systems of reality are the supernatural realms, the realms of ideal relations, and the world of sense. James held none of these to be the one 'true' system, instead claiming that it is our faculty of attention that chooses for us what is most real. Reck takes this to mean that there is an infinite or close to infinite number of systems, all of which only have reality to the point that they appear real to the person who has created that reality.<sup>19</sup> If belief creates reality, and individuals create their own reality, then it cannot be said that there is any 'true' reality at all. If there is no shared, true system of reality in which we all reside, then it would seem that all systems of reality, and even 'reality' itself, would be ideal. Every reality would require a mind to create it and maintain it by believing in it. There could not be the shared, single mind-independent reality required for a proper empiricism, and thus James could not claim to be a radical empiricist. Instead, it would be a clear example of James adhering to an idealist metaphysical position.

We can now bring together the argument of the *a priori* with this argument of multiple systems of reality to articulate Reck's underlying position. Each person, through using *a priori* truths, seeks to rationalize Nature in such a way that he or she can be

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<sup>17</sup> Reck, 218-219.

<sup>18</sup> Reck, 218.

<sup>19</sup> Reck, *ibid.*

comfortable within it. What would make someone comfortable, and which *a priori* truths are emphasized, depends on the individual in question. Each of these systems creates reality for that individual. Multiple individuals create multiple realities, and since each is using the same faculties in the same way, there can be no one ‘true’ reality or reality which is completely shared among all individuals. When Reck says that James’s position promises “nothing less than a real world for every individual,” he means that each individual has a real world of his or her own, created by that individual through ideal relations.<sup>20</sup> If this argument succeeds, then it would seem that James is an idealist, and perhaps even a Hegelian.

Unfortunately, James’s point is nothing like what Reck makes it out to be. It is true that for James what is taken as practically important is what is most real to us, but this does not mean that the systems of reality between which one chooses are ideal. What James meant by what is ‘most real’ is analogous to Hume’s concept of vivacity coupled with Jamesian views on interest. Something being more vivacious than something else means that it has a greater force or liveness in regards to how it presents itself to an observer. The faculty of attention chooses which system of reality would be of greatest practical interest, and thus that system has a greater force in one’s practical and theoretical considerations. We all see things differently, but that does not mean that we are all seeing different things. While there are many systems of reality, reality itself may not be a system. Reality does not require a system to exist. Once this is realized, there are several possibilities for how James can claim not to be an idealist. One possibility is

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<sup>20</sup> Reck, *ibid.*

that although none of the *definable* systems of reality are the true does not mean that is no such system. Or, Reality could be the totality of all realities taken together. Most forcefully, James could claim one cannot apply truth values to Reality in any meaningful way: reality is what it is, and is neither true nor false.

Another thing to consider is Reck's portrayal of James's belief that there is a vast amount of 'irrationalized facts' which refuse to fall in to our *a priori* categories. Irrationalized facts are facts about the world which have not been cognized by any individual: a tree falling in the forest produces a sound regardless of anyone present to witness the event. How one interprets the meaning of this is quite important to how one takes James's concept of *a priori* categories. Reck appears to portray *a priori* categories as filters through which experience must pass before the individual can understand Nature. This would make James appear to be very much a transcendental idealist, specifically of the Kantian variety. However, this is not the proper way to interpret the *a priori* truths which James accepts. Instead, these principles are meant to be tools at the disposal of the individual, which *can* be used in order to rationalize experience, but do not *have* to be used in any given circumstance. This is especially true given James's belief that idealist principles can only account for a limited range of experience. This suggests that they are used only when needed and not continually as Kantian transcendentalism requires. One person may not rely on the idea of an *anima mundi*, while another may.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This is a reference to Reck's conclusions on James's idealist metaphysics. Part of what James "promises for each individual," along with a real world, is an *anima mundi*, found in the concept of pure experience. This concept is cited as a way in which humans tend to rationalize experience, and thus given the parameters of the discussion is an *a priori* proposition. If this is the case, then Reck is incorrect to

Reck's argument fails to show how James adhered to an idealist worldview.

While it is true that he believes that there are *a priori* principles which help us organize the world more successfully, they do not amount to idealist metaphysics. At best, it shows that James is not a direct realist, but that is already evident from the beginning of the *Principles*, and does not necessarily imply that he is an idealist.

Reck's second argument is to show that James implicitly accepts the transcendental ego, a postulate which he explicitly rejects as being "devoid of explanatory power."<sup>22</sup> The transcendental ego requires an entity which is above and beyond the system of experience, a being to which all internal, conscious, or experiential modifications are happening but which is not part of conscious experience itself. Since this would be the entity creating the systems of reality, it would be ideal itself, and thus James would be an idealist.

Reck's argument is that James's concept of 'ownness' illegitimately brings the transcendental ego back in, otherwise it is impossible to discern what constitutes the sense of belonging between different pulses of consciousness. While it is true that James is unable to fully account for why there is a feeling of camaraderie between thoughts which belong to the same identity, Reck has incorrectly portrayed what James meant by the 'ownness' of thoughts with each other. Reck portrays this as implying that there is a being underlying all thoughts, and making them all belong to same person. This is not what James meant by the concept in question. Thoughts feel at home with each other

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claim that James promises an *anima mundi* to each individual. Instead, he promises that each person can use that proposition if necessary to help feel comfortable in the world, but one need not. In no way does James argue that there is this *anima mundi* to truly be found in Reality. See Reck, 220.

<sup>22</sup> Reck, 216.

because for James they are not static entities. Instead, they ebb and flow into each other. Each thought has in it the partial contents of the thought immediately preceding it, and will itself be part of the succeeding thought. It is a fluid model of consciousness where ‘thoughts’ as static entities do not exist.

Reck makes much ado over James’s claim that thoughts from the same source will have a similar quality and character. According to Reck, this is proof that James believed in a transcendental ego. Again, Reck has misunderstood James’s point. James is involved in a psychological enterprise and is making an observation about how thoughts appear to a third-party. James is first and foremost concerned with *personal* experience. However, he also wants to help make psychology become more of a positivistic science, which takes an external, objective view of what it is observing. Psychology is presented with unique difficulties in this regard, as it requires something personal (the psychologist) impersonally observing something else which is personal (the patient). James’s discussion of ‘ownness’ was based upon this impersonal, external view. His point is that from an external point of view individual thoughts have this observable similarity, but this similarity is not something apart from all of the individual thoughts.<sup>23</sup> Reck has thus mistaken James’s meaning by not acknowledging James’s project in the *Principles*. This is the same mistake that allows Reck to go one step further, and suggest that James came to accept a “supremely divine being” which interlaces numerous systems of reality.<sup>24</sup> James may claim that through impersonal observation, nature appears mind-like;

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<sup>23</sup> This is not to say that James does not allow for first-person introspection to account for some of the resemblance between thoughts. This is merely to show that the evidence provided by Reck does not suggest nor support what Reck is claiming.

<sup>24</sup> Reck, 220.

however, this is only because the person doing the observation has a mind and interprets experience in his or her own image. Again, Reck has failed to show that James adhered to any idealist metaphysics in the *Principles*.

Several important points emerge from the study of Reck's ultimately unsuccessful attempt to expose James's idealistic metaphysical leanings found within the *Principles*. I submit that one must abandon the idea of James having idealistic metaphysical presuppositions or allegiances. Reck misunderstands James's positions regarding the mind mediating experience. Reck claims that this constitutes idealism. This claim is refuted by understanding James's foundations and which faculty gets the most privilege and emphasis.

It is obvious that James believed that our experience is mediated by the mind. However, James's observations that we have different experience, that our experience is mediated, and that a personally creative function operates in experience does not mean that James was an idealist. James repeatedly and emphatically claims that all problems, both psychological and philosophical, ought to be dealt with through sensation and empirical observation. The *Principles* were meant to be a series of empirical observations, and James fought to hold to that requirement, a struggle recognized by Reck. Any philosophical musings revolved around what could be observed, a feature of the *Principles* which served as the basis for his later radical empiricism. The main problem with idealist metaphysics is that the majority of its principles cannot be empirically tested. They cannot be observed and if they are impossible to disprove, they also are impossible to prove. To say that he is an idealist is to ignore the place of radical

empiricism in his philosophy. If using the mediated nature of experience as a starting point, he can only go so far as to say that James was not a direct realist, but that is inadequate to show that James is an idealist, to say nothing of a Hegelian.

### **Sprigge: Absolute Idealism**

The last person whom we shall study on this topic is Timothy Sprigge, specifically his article “James, Empiricism, and Absolute Idealism,” as found in *A Companion to Pragmatism*. Sprigge represents a growing number of philosophers who assume that James was not only influenced by Hegelian thought, but also held it to be true, at least for a time. Like Reck, Sprigge uses the *Principles* as a starting point; but, unlike Reck, Sprigge extends his purview to James’s later work in *PU*. While he does not provide an argument linking James to Hegel *per se*, his position is such that if it were true, it is broad enough that it could provide a reason to link James and Hegel.

Sprigge begins with the bold assumption that it “seems likely that [James] had a strong inclination to believe that absolute idealism was true.”<sup>25</sup> Sprigge also claims that

when James said in the Preface to *The Principles of Psychology* (1880) that in a work of empirical psychology he would be eschewing ultimate metaphysical issues, this was probably because he thought that, although absolute idealism was probably the truth, it was inappropriate to make use of it in an empirical science.<sup>26</sup>

Sprigge thus portrays James’s relationship with absolute idealism as a sort of internal struggle with his own conflicting beliefs. Sprigge acknowledges that James always had moral objections to absolute idealism, but he thinks that it took most of his career to form a philosophical critique of it. At the beginning of his philosophical career, while arguing

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<sup>25</sup> Timothy L. S. Sprigge, “James, Empiricism, and Absolute Idealism,” in *A Companion to Pragmatism* ed. John R. Shook and Joseph Margolis (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), 167.

against absolute idealism, he still held it to be more or less correct. James “was still inclined to think that the final answer to these [metaphysical] questions was Royce’s absolute idealism and that the answer given ... was simply the best that could be done within empiricist or scientific terms.”<sup>27</sup> The break from absolute idealism eventually came through the method of radical empiricism. Sprigge indicates that through the empirical route James was finally able to be “liberated from the hold of absolute idealism.”<sup>28</sup>

Sprigge’s portrayal of James as having an inner struggle with absolute idealism leads to a very troubling point. There are two scenarios possible for interpreting James’s movement towards radical empiricism. In one scenario, James wrote against absolute idealism at great length, using an empirical method, while all the time secretly holding absolute idealism to be true. He viewed his own work as only providing a second rate empirical treatment of subjects, understanding that ultimately he would have to defer to the doctrine of absolute idealism. Then, finally, he stumbled across an argument within his own method which allowed him to reject absolute idealism. In the other scenario, James was always an empiricist, and the empirical method made him hostile to absolute idealism. He therefore wrote against it at great length, and ultimately achieved a comprehensive critique which could deal with it sufficiently. Sprigge would have us believe in the first scenario, but the second scenario seems more plausible and less forced.

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<sup>26</sup> Sprigge, 168.

<sup>27</sup> Sprigge, *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Sprigge, 170.



Sprigge's main connection is made through James's views on the relation between objects and the mind. Sprigge takes as his definition of absolute idealism the belief that "there is one unitary world consciousness or experience which includes everything."<sup>29</sup> Absolute idealist theories, including that of Hegel, state that there is an absolute mind which binds all thoughts and minds together. According to Sprigge, this is what James believed at the time of writing the *Principles*. He cites pure experience and our psychological faculties' role in experience production as evidence for this. Some investigation into the *Principles* will likely shed some light on the truth of this matter.

There are two chapters relevant to this investigation, those entitled "Association" and "Discrimination and Comparison." In these chapters, James provides an analysis of two processes which are evident in perception: association and discrimination. He explains that traditional psychology and epistemology have focused solely on the faculty of association. This focus is evident in claims concerned with how disparate elements of our experience are forged into perceptible wholes, and what is responsible for that process (the intellect or transcendental categories, for example).<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, the other process of discrimination takes the whole object we receive in sensation and analyses it into its component parts.<sup>31</sup> The products of both of these processes are found in experience, and experience is malleable enough that it can be manipulated in either direction.<sup>32</sup> We can receive a whole object, such as a book, and then analyse it down into parts: it is thick, blue, and poorly bound. We can also receive parts and turn them into an

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<sup>29</sup> Sprigge, 167.

<sup>30</sup> James, POP 1, 550-551.

<sup>31</sup> James, POP 1, 483.

<sup>32</sup> James, POP 1, 487.

object. A warm, soft, fuzzy and aromatic object we recognize as a peach. Our psychological make-up requires the continual use of both of these faculties in order to have any meaningful experience.<sup>33</sup>

This sheds light on the current investigation as it reveals a very important facet of the role of pure experience: it is a state of *our* psychological condition, *not* reality's metaphysical condition. The world is as it is, regardless of how we perceive it, but how we perceive it may affect *us*. James echoes this in *PMT* when discussing pluralism versus monism; the world is one insofar as things are connected, and the world is many insofar as they are disconnected.<sup>34</sup> But *both* of these relationships are real, true, and directly experienced. It would be incoherent to claim that behind these ideas James was truly an absolutist, and furthermore an absolute idealist. James did not believe that experience *qua* experience played the role of a substance, and nor did he believe that this one substance bound everything together immutably.

Sprigge's most sustained effort to portray James as having an internal struggle with his own absolute idealism is rooted in James's discussion of the possibility of minds compounding into one absolute mind. To this end Sprigge emphasizes a chapter in *PU* where James apparently admits that his prior treatment of that topic in the *Principles* was incorrect. The prior treatment is James's argument against the 'mind-dust' theory in the *Principles*. Here, James explicitly rejects both absolutism and evolutionary psychology because of the logical impossibility of lesser minds compounding into greater minds. Later, in the *PU*, he admits that: "[t]he absolute is not the impossible being I once thought

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<sup>33</sup> James, POP 1, 550.

it to be ... As an hypothesis trying to make itself probable on analogical and inductive grounds, the absolute is entitled to a fair hearing.”<sup>35</sup> Sprigge takes this to mean that James accepts that absolute idealism might be valid or possibly true, by rejecting his own earlier arguments against it.

This admission could provide ammunition for those who attempt to place James in the Hegelian camp. Taken together with arguments supplied by Wilshire and Reck, Sprigge’s first scenario could be made to look more plausible. We shall thus have to examine more closely what James meant by this passage, and if it could be used to support the Hegelian cause.

The passage would provide support if it were talking about the subject which Sprigge takes it to be talking about. Just prior to this passage, James had changed his topic of conversation from how there are real *existent* parts of minds which can and do compound into greater minds to talking about the epistemic conditions for accepting the absolute as a valid hypothesis. The excerpt itself is actually a conclusion of a long discussion of how one could get around the intellectualist difficulties with the idea of self-compounding consciousness.<sup>36</sup> In this passage of *PU*, James makes two important points. The first is that one can get around the intellectualist difficulties of proving the absolute by merely ignoring them. Second is that James declares that his earlier arguments against the absolute were intellectualistic themselves and thus are not sufficient to discredit it as a hypothesis.

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<sup>34</sup> James, PMT, 78-79.

<sup>35</sup> James, PU, 132; Sprigge, 172.

It is here that we see the true point behind James's 'admission'. James is not showing sympathy to absolute idealism, nor even, as Sprigge suggests, empirical absolutism; instead, is reaffirming his own radical empiricism. James contends that if the absolute is to be proved, then it will have to be done empirically. He realizes that prior to *PU*, all of the arguments which he made did not have the force which he thought them to have, because they are underwritten by an intellectualist claim. Yet this still works as an argument against the absolute idealist position, as it forced him to realize that a rational enterprise of proving the absolute will not succeed. All of the arguments traditionally provided have been through rational rather than empirical means, and thus James concludes that it will be impossible for the absolute to be accepted based on those works, which include Hegel. The 'admission' cannot even be taken as James showing some sympathy for idealism, as Sprigge suggests, because a rationalistic portrayal of empirical data on the part of James would still be required.

Recall the scenario which Sprigge wants us to accept, which claims that at the end of his career James was finally able to reject the Hegelian allegiances which he had harboured from the beginning of his work. There is no reason to believe that James had any such leanings in the first place. At the beginning of his career he rejected idealism, and at the end of his career he still rejected it, albeit for different reasons. The trace of absolute idealism, taken by Sprigge as a basic assumption, is a product of a misunderstanding of James's work. The support of that argument, the alleged admission

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<sup>36</sup> This is evident merely by looking at the first sentence provided by Sprigge: "We have now reached a point of view from which the self-compounding..." implying that a great deal of work has been done prior to that point.

of having not made strong arguments against absolute idealism, was also found to be wanting as it was taken out of context and actually serves to discredit Sprigge's argument.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine both sides of a debate within contemporary literature which deals with the relationship between James and Hegel. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the side of the debate which claims that James is a Hegelian, or at least held positions which greatly resemble those of Hegel. As we have seen from Wilshire, Reck, and Sprigge, these attempts to portray James as a Hegelian fail. In effect, any such argument will require us to accept a scenario not very different from Sprigge's first scenario presented above: that James held absolute idealism to be true, but either did not want to believe in it, or did want to but could only express it scientifically later on in his life. Through an analysis of the portions of James's work which most clearly portray such an allegiance, we have found that any argument claiming that James had idealist leanings is based on a misunderstanding. I conclude that James was not a Hegelian, nor did he have Hegelian leanings.

At this point it would be beneficial to reflect on the motives behind the claims of the philosophers which have been studied thus far as the strongest representatives of this school of thought. If it is clear, as has been shown, that James did not hold the positions which they attribute to him, then why do they insist on showing how he was really a Hegelian? There are two possibilities. The first is that it is a matter of historical interest. We would have an example of a philosopher with fragmented thought, which may help to

explain some of the tensions and difficulties which people have found in his work. This however would seem to be a project far more sympathetic to James than Wilshire or Reck truly are. Their aim is not to clarify James in order that he would be better understood; their motives lie elsewhere. Instead, it is clear that bringing James into the Hegelian fold is meant to have negative repercussions for Jamesean pragmatism. Its implications are meant to show inconsistency and error. By showing how James was Hegelian, these philosophers intend to defuse a philosophical problem, namely the vast array of arguments James has brought against Hegel. Just as there are those who bring James and Hegel closer together, there are also philosophers who have provided arguments meant to show how James's thought provides an excellent set of arguments *against* idealism, rationalism, and absolutism, specifically with Hegel as their target.

The next question, then, is the other side of this debate, the side which claims that James actually provides a series of strong arguments *against* Hegel's position. Friends of this view certainly have their choice of arguments, as James had a keen interest in taking shots when he could. The next chapter shall be to sift through the arguments which James provides against Hegel in an effort to find out whether there is at least one true and strong argument in favour of this second side of the debate.

## Chapter 2

### JAMES AGAINST HEGEL

I stated in the previous chapter that the motivation behind the claims of James being a Hegelian is probably to mitigate a perceived attack by James against Hegel. This is especially likely because James argued against Hegel at length and presented many seemingly forceful objections to his system. While some have tried to sidestep these problems, others have taken these arguments to heart and subsequently believe that James provides the basis for a firm rejection of Hegel. The purpose of this chapter is to examine these arguments. The first task will be to provide two short but important contextual points regarding James's arguments: James's distinction between tender- and tough-minded temperaments, and the influence of the philosophical climate of James's day on James's attitude towards Hegel. I shall then discuss James's views on two important aspects of Hegelian philosophy, namely idealism and absolutism, in order to find James's strongest argument. As many of these issues have a religious angle, the concept of overbeliefs will help clarify James's position, and also make apparent the overarching problem with Hegelian philosophy, the problem of abstraction. The similar position of Don Morse will be analyzed to see if it has any merit. While it ultimately fails, it allows me to draw out the deepest argument that James can provide: vicious abstractionism.

#### **Contextual Points**

A claim which has always troubled both James's supporters and objectors is the claim that all philosophical differences come down to a difference in temperament. James describes two temperaments for philosophers: the 'tender-minded' and the 'tough-

minded'. The tender-minded are generally "rationalistic (going by 'principles'), intellectualistic, idealistic, optimistic..."<sup>1</sup> Opposed to this are the tough-minded who are generally "empiricist (going by 'facts'), sensationalistic, materialistic, pessimistic..."<sup>2</sup> Most people are various mixtures of the two, but in general the philosophy with which one agrees will be more of one side than the other. James includes Hegel as an extreme case of tender-mindedness.<sup>3</sup> James remarks that many philosophical disagreements will never be resolved because the different sides will have conflicting temperaments, and this will never change. People are attracted to philosophical theories on the basis of what *works* best for them, or otherwise fits into their system of beliefs in such a way that the damage to other beliefs is minimal.

Given this setup, one wonders how James could provide a rigorous argument against another philosopher at all. However, the tender and tough distinction was not meant to give a *carte blanche* to philosophers for continuing merely to talk at each other rather than to honestly debate with each other. Rather, his concept of pragmatism was to act as a mediator between the different temperaments, though it did tend to favour tough-mindedness. James hoped that using the pragmatic method would break down the barrier of temperament and provide meaningful conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> James, PMT, 13.

<sup>2</sup> James, PMT, 13.

<sup>3</sup> James, PMT, 11, 25; While the terms James uses would appear to have some pejorative or patronizing connotations, this is not how James intends for them to be taken. The distinction between tender-minded and tough-minded is presented in a different way in WB. There, James distinguishes two different philosophical passions. The first is the passion for simplification and universality, representing the tender-minded. Tough-minded individuals are more likely to possess the "sister passion" of distinguishing, or "the impulse to be *acquainted* with the parts rather than to comprehend the whole." He also describes tough-minded philosophy as being "in the dirt" and tender-minded philosophy to be "noble." The patronizing connotations are a result of his choice of words rather than any intent on his part. See WB, 59 (Emphasis James's).



The portrayal of pragmatism of a mediator also explains why James attacked Hegel specifically. Hegelian philosophy was just starting to gain some ground in Britain and the United States near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As noted by Burleigh Wilkins, the emergence of Hegelian philosophy in these countries was “sudden and spectacular,” especially when compared to previous continental philosophers such as Kant.<sup>4</sup> In a large part this was due to the fact that many religious thinkers felt that absolute idealism was the best defence against the materialistic evolutionism which was prevalent at the time. James disagreed with this tactic, believing that empiricism was a better ally of religious thought, and resented its exclusion.<sup>5</sup> His resentment was coupled with the apparent victory that Hegelian idealism was to win over empiricism in philosophical discourse.<sup>6</sup> This apparent victory came at a time when James was working on the *Principles* and taking his first steps towards developing his radical empiricism. Thus throughout the most formative years of his philosophical career, Hegelian philosophy was set up as the natural enemy to his own thought.

In order for pragmatism to be an effective mediator between conflicting temperaments, all sides must be willing to engage in meaningful debate. The scope of the success that Hegelian philosophy had achieved in philosophical and religious circles threatened that possibility. James had to attack Hegelian philosophy to preserve the possibility of philosophical reconciliation. This is evidenced by the closing remarks of *ERE*. Discussing what he viewed as the “fundamental quarrel” between Hegelian

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<sup>4</sup> Burleigh Taylor Wilkins, “James, Dewey, and Hegelian Idealism,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17, no. 3 (Jun., 1956), 336.

<sup>5</sup> Wilkins, 336.

<sup>6</sup> Wilkins, *ibid.*

philosophy and Empiricism, James asks “what hope is there of squaring and settling opinions unless Absolutism will hold parley on this common ground; and will admit that all philosophies are hypotheses, to which all our faculties, emotional as well as logical, help us...?”<sup>7</sup> Wilkins notes that as Hegel’s grip on Anglo-American philosophy began to wane, so too did James’s categorical rejection of all things Hegelian.<sup>8</sup> But even by the end of his career, the arguments James used against Hegel were the same, and can be grouped into two general classes: his arguments against idealism and his arguments against absolutism. His attitude towards Hegel may have changed, and some of the hostility may have been dropped; however, James still had the same philosophical problems with Hegel to the end. With these two points in mind, I shall now turn to the specific arguments against idealism and absolutism.

### **Arguments Against Idealism**

The recurring theme in the previous chapter was that James felt that idealism had an inherent flaw which made it difficult to engage with philosophically. This problem was, of course, the inability to test many of the hypotheses required for idealism to succeed. As such, James had very little use for it when it came to empirical investigation. This is not so much an argument against idealism *per se*, but rather a portrait of James’s comportment towards idealist positions. As we shall see later, the issue with the improbability of idealism rests on the methodology by which idealism is often defended. The hypothesis itself James has no inherent objection against.

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<sup>7</sup> James, ERE, 146.

<sup>8</sup> Wilkins, 339.

A major issue James took with idealist positions is based on religious grounds; namely, how idealists view the world's relationship to the divine. As Hunter Brown has explained, James believed that idealist positions made it impossible for individuals who held such beliefs to attain the 'strenuous mood', a component of religious life which James felt was vital.<sup>9</sup> The strenuous mood is "a disposition towards the world aroused by the recognition that without vigorous human collaboration ... the world as we wish it to be will never exist."<sup>10</sup> It is difficult for idealists to have this mood because idealism focuses on an eschatology which provides an optimistic picture of the universe, well in tune with their tender-minded temperament. The optimistic picture of the universe is an easy belief which does not demand much of its adherents. The strenuous mood provides no such picture. Further, an idealist understanding of the divine requires that the divine is static and "without history," being perfect and absolute from eternity to eternity.<sup>11</sup> There is nothing that it wants or needs, because if this were the case, it would not be complete and could be considered impoverished in some way. Given this view of the absolute, the world as experienced is merely a shadow of the true Reality. Everything merely is, and will always remain the same, regardless of the actions of finite beings.

James cannot accept this position. For James, the world is constituted by change and striving, and is incomplete. If it is incomplete, then every action taken by a finite being contributes to the process of making the world better or worse. This is what gives rise to the strenuous mood in James's philosophy of religion. In a world of striving and

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<sup>9</sup> Hunter Brown, *William James's Radical Empiricism and Religion*, (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 21.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, 21.

<sup>11</sup> James, PU, 27.

change, it is every being's moral duty to engage in the world while respecting its history and its reality as presented to us.<sup>12</sup> Thus the first problem James has with idealism is its implications for religion. It must ultimately support a position which James felt was detrimental to the purpose of religious belief. Idealism provides an easy way around all of the difficulty confronted when one has a strenuous mood towards life. James does not deny the appeal of such an easy path, but it is based on an erroneous viewpoint on the reality of our experience. While this argument does not address Hegel directly, it is applicable to any position which claims that our experience is not real or as real as an extra-experiential order, a position Hegel does hold.

A more direct argument against Hegel's idealism comes from the article *On Some Hegelisms*. Here, James argues against Hegel's application of his dialectic method to the concept of determinate being in his *Science of Logic*. James's specific issue is with Hegel's use of negation as the basis for idealism.<sup>13</sup> For Hegel, to say that something is something is to say that it is not something else, thereby excluding from the something else from the identity of the thing in question.<sup>14</sup> Justus Hartnack illustrates this point through the example of a triangle. Hartnack explains that "the determining feature of a triangle ... is understood only by understanding what it excludes; it excludes features that define all other geometrical figures, such as a circle and a square."<sup>15</sup> However, a thing's being is comprised of both what it is and what it is not<sup>16</sup>; thus, the "excluded features"

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<sup>12</sup> Brown, 21.

<sup>13</sup> James, OSH, 203.

<sup>14</sup> Hegel, SL, 113.

<sup>15</sup> Justus Hartnack, *An Introduction to Hegel's Logic*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Hegel, SL, 126.

constitute a part of the thing's being as much as the included features. Triangles can only be triangles in virtue of not being circles or squares, thus non-triangle is part of the determining feature of the triangle. A something is only something in virtue of not being something other than what it is: to say that something is a triangle is really to say that it is not not a triangle. Determinations are thus the product of a double negation: the first negation is when one sets the thing apart from everything else; the second when one negates the first negation and realizes that the being of an object is constituted by non-being. The concepts of 'something' and 'something else' are co-implicated and inseparable.<sup>17</sup> Further, Hegel considers them to be logical categories, and thus categories of thought. As these are required for determinate being, being itself is a product of thought.<sup>18</sup>

James characterizes this argument in the following manner. The basic premise of Hegelian idealism is that regardless of how hard one tries, any determination (or, to James, an 'affirmation') of a thing is also necessarily the negation of the non-thing which corresponds to the thing in question.<sup>19</sup> James explains the meaning of this through example of a table. The existent table is the positive affirmation of the table: it exists. However, according to the Hegelian process it is also the negation of all things which it is not, which James calls the 'non-table'. Since every negation is an intellectual act, the table and non-table are "given to our thought together," and therefore "must be

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<sup>17</sup> Hartnack, *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Hartnack, *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> James, OSH, 203.

consubstantial.”<sup>20</sup> Given this, Being itself is a mental function, as anything which is classified as existent is the result of a negation.

James argues against this point by appealing to real-life experience in an attempt to show how affirmations and negations are not consubstantial. James remarks that affirmations and negations are not “on the same footing at all.”<sup>21</sup> Affirmations are claims about objective experience, and a negation “says something *about an affirmation*, namely, that it is false.”<sup>22</sup> Since negations are always attesting to the falsity of an affirmation, they always take a fiction as their subject; further, as fictions are products of the imagination, the content of negations are necessarily mental. For example, if one were to negate one’s own affirmation that the moon is made of blue cheese, the negation is operating on the fiction of the moon being made of blue cheese. Since it does not correspond to fact, the affirmation was a product of the imagination and thus mental. So far Hegel is correct in saying that negations are always mental. Affirmations, on the other hand, need not have such a relationship to our thought. Affirmations are simply facts about the world, and as such there are affirmations in Nature in a way negations could never be. James reminds us that “there are no negatives or falsities in nature,” and “being makes no false hypotheses that have to be contradicted.”<sup>23</sup> There are thus two kinds of affirmations possible, only one of which Hegel can account for. Hegel can account for affirmations which are the result of the negation of a negation. This would involve exclusively mental content, and thus his argument could succeed. However, he

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<sup>20</sup> James, OSH, *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> James, OSH, *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> James, OSH, *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> James, OSH, 203-204.

cannot account for affirmations which are not constituted wholly by mental content.

Facts about the world are affirmations which require no negation to be “given together in thought,” and thus affirmations and negations are not consubstantial.

Hegel has thus made a gross error in his philosophy because he has ignored how these terms actually function when cashed out into real-life experience. However, as it stands, this argument does not cut very deep against Hegel, nor did James think it did. Instead, he views it as indicating a problem in the *method* Hegel uses to construct his own arguments. As alluded to in the previous chapter, James’s biggest problem with idealism is that it is close to impossible to prove or disprove. Similarly, James’s problem with Hegel is that Hegel proves “by these patent ready-made *a priori* methods that which can only be the fruit of a wide and patient induction.”<sup>24</sup> James does not have an inherent hostility to idealism. As he states, he has “not myself the least objection to Idealism, an hypothesis which voluminous considerations make plausible, and whose difficulties may be cleared away any day by new discriminations or discoveries.”<sup>25</sup> Aside from methodology, James does believe that idealism has a flaw regarding the problem of the one and the many, especially in Hegel’s case. Hegel has an absolute monistic idealism, rather than having the pluralistic worldview for which James fought. As such, James spends a considerable amount of time arguing against that facet of Hegelian philosophy instead.

### **Arguments Against Absolutism**

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<sup>24</sup> James, OSH, 203.

<sup>25</sup> James, OSH, *ibid.*

The facet of Hegelian philosophy against which James argued the most rigorously was that of absolutism. Generally, James took this to mean any position which held that what we experience are mere illusions, as everything is really part of an all-encompassing substance (or Being). The arguments James gives against absolutism can be classified into three groups, each building on the one before: the monistic, the moral, and the hubristic. When their conclusions are taken all together, absolutism fulfills all the requirements of an overbelief. Through understanding this, it will be possible to elucidate James's overarching argument against Hegel.

In James's view, an assumption of monism is required for any absolutism to work. An absolute must encompass all things, and therefore there must be only one absolute. James felt that monism, especially Hegelian monism, was one of the great intellectualist constructs of the history of human thought. This was achieved through disregarding two important relations which obtain between things in the real world, and James believes that these relations are as immediately experienced as the things themselves. These relations James called 'conjunctive' and 'disjunctive' relations. Conjunctive relations express unity and connection between objects of experience.<sup>26</sup> Opposed to these are disjunctive relations, relations which introduce disconnection and separation into experience. One should note that this distinction is not analogous to the affirmation-negation dichotomy presented above. Since James believes that all relations are experienced directly, he would have to say that a disjunctive relation is also

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<sup>26</sup> I shall be taking 'unity' to mean any relation regarding the bringing together of things in experience. This could be an identity relation, or associations based on use, or anything which suggests that things 'go together.' In the case of identity relations, it would be that one recognizes one thing as being the same as something experienced in the past.



experienced directly. Negations are always a statement of the falsity of an affirmation, but disjunctive relations are not statements about conjunctive relations. Disjunctive relations have positive content in a way negations do not, since they tell one something *about* the two objects in question; namely, that they are not unified.

James attempts to discern what monism could really mean in a practical sense, given that we experience both conjunctive and disjunctive relations directly. James lists three possibilities. Monism means “either the name One, the universe of discourse; or it means the sum total of all the ascertainable particular conjunctions and concatenations; or, finally, it means some one vehicle of conjunction treated as all-inclusive...”<sup>27</sup> The last of these is what James takes to be the meaning used in Hegelian discourse. Specifically, James believes that the ‘vehicle of conjunction’ used by Hegelian philosophy is the idea of the one knower, because the Hegelians of the time believed that such a vehicle “involves...the other forms of conjunction,” as it “must have all its parts co-implicated in the one logical-æsthetical-teleological unit-picture which is his eternal dream.”<sup>28</sup>

James observes that the idea of monism presented in this way has a great deal of emotional force. This emotional force compels those who adhere to the idea to be especially concerned with theoretically preserving the absolute nature of the monism. Every disjunction allowed into their system would be detrimental to the adherent’s comfort with the theory, as the monism would move further away from true monism with each such addition. Thus, James believes that adherents to monistic positions are compelled by “a mystical feeling,” to believe that with “logic or [without] logic, absolute

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<sup>27</sup> James, PMT, 74.

Oneness must somehow at any cost be true.”<sup>29</sup> They are led to what James feels are radical beliefs on the nature of disjunction or separation in the world, as

separation is not simply overcome by the One, it is denied to exist. There is no many. We are not parts of the One; It has no parts; and since in a sense we undeniably *are*, it must be that each of us *is* the One, indivisibly and totally...<sup>30</sup>

Here is where James’s main problem with monism becomes clear. In order to maintain the integrity of the One, adherents must deny the existence of disjunctive relations. Disjunctive relations are experienced as directly as conjunctive relations. Therefore, to protect their monistic worldview, adherents must claim that this facet of our experience is illusory. However, when one looks closely, there are more *disjunctive* relations in our experience than *conjunctive* relations. Thus, monists are obliged to consider the *majority of our experience* as illusory in order to make their claims. This would not be a serious problem if disjunctive relations were like negations; however, as discussed above, disjunctive relations have positive content. With such widespread deceit in experience, it does not seem plausible or consistent to trust conjunctive relations either, which undermines the basis for monism in the first place.

Fortunately for monists, James provides a way out of this bleak situation. The problem may be resolved by shifting the idea of the One from the idea of it being vehicle of conjunction to the sum total of all conjunctive relations.<sup>31</sup> Drawing on his Darwinian influences, James explains that it is possible for the One to be reached at the end of an evolutionary process involving greater and greater conjunction. In such a system, “total

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<sup>28</sup> James, PMT, *ibid*.

<sup>29</sup> James, PMT, 76.

<sup>30</sup> James, PMT, 75. Emphasis James’s.

<sup>31</sup> James, PMT, 76.

oneness would appear at the end of things rather than at their origin.”<sup>32</sup> The Absolute or the One would be most properly understood as the *Ultimate*, having the same noetic content as the old terms but with reversed time-relations.<sup>33</sup> In such a scenario, the universe started as close to absolute disunity as it could, and then through the addition of minds became more ordered, and as the minds developed so too did the order of the universe. We are currently at some indeterminate midpoint in the evolution of the One.

The second class of arguments James gives against absolutism rests on a collection of questionable moral claims which an absolutist must make, and in fact were being made by absolutists of James’s time, especially by Bradley. The most pertinent of these claims involve the minimization of human pain and suffering. When most other religious, theological, or teleological positions deal with the problem of pain, the pain is recognized, but is portrayed as being there to serve a greater purpose. This is not so with absolutists. Rather, absolutists must claim that pain is an illusion or otherwise trivialize its importance to the individual experiencing it. It does this through granting unacceptable versions of what James calls ‘moral holidays’, whereby adherents of the absolutist premise need not be concerned with the pain of others.

James is not inherently opposed to the idea of moral holidays, and in fact finds that they have great utility for one’s life, if taken properly. James describes moral holidays as the ability for people to “relax their anxieties occasionally,” and have a “don’t-care mood.”<sup>34</sup> What he means by this is that a person need not be concerned with

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<sup>32</sup> James, PMT, 78.

<sup>33</sup> James, PMT, 78.

<sup>34</sup> James, PMT. 40.

all that is happening in the world all the time, but may occasionally have some apathy about moral concerns. Take, for example, a person who works for a children's charity. One may not fault them for the fact that they do not also work for an adult's charity, saying that they are less charitable because of that perceived shortcoming. Rather, the person is concerned with the plight of children, but has taken a moral holiday from the plight of adults. I must stress that the term 'moral holiday', nor any associated terms, are meant to have negative connotations on the people who take such holidays. They are meant to reflect that we cannot be concerned with all things equally at all times. We have specific moral causes or problems which excite us more than others. In sum, a moral holiday is the ability to refrain from doing actions which are moral to do without being considered immoral.

Important to understanding the concept of moral holidays is that they always have some sort of foundation in one's worldview. Depending on the foundation for one's moral holidays, they may be acceptable or unacceptable. The most common foundations for moral holidays are religious in nature, though they need not be. James believes that these are more likely to produce acceptable moral holidays because of the added function of justifying the actions one does take and not just the ones which one does not.<sup>35</sup> Unacceptable moral holidays have a foundation which may justify taking them, but that foundation does not justify any acts which one does take. Such would be the case if one believes, for example, that their individual actions are meaningless, or that morality itself

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<sup>35</sup> James, PMT, 53.

does not exist and behaves accordingly.<sup>36</sup> This worldview could come from a variety of sources, such as believing the minuteness of oneself and one's actions relative to the universe, and each of those sources would justify granting moral holidays without justifying any other actions. The foundation for granting moral holidays thus determines the moral legitimacy of the moral holidays themselves: if the foundation cannot legitimize actions which one does take and not just the ones which one does not, then the moral holidays themselves are unacceptable.

James sees the bulk of the ability of the absolutist's premise to grant moral holidays coming from its close association with determinism. If there is an all-encompassing Absolute which reconciles all things together, then all things which exist and all things which happen are merely a product of the Absolute expressing itself in a deterministic way. James is quite clear at this point, and deserves to be quoted at length:

since in the Absolute finite evil is 'overruled' already, we may, therefore, whenever we wish, treat the temporal as if it were potentially the eternal, be sure that we can trust its outcome, and, without sin, dismiss our fear and *drop the worry of our finite responsibility*. In short, they mean that we have a right ever and anon to take a moral holiday, to let the world wag in its own way, feeling that its issues are in better hands than ours and *are none of our business*.<sup>37</sup>

James echoes this statement elsewhere. In *On Some Hegelisms*, James voices his displeasure with absolutism's moral outcomes thus: "In the universe of Hegel—the Absolute Block whose parts have no loose play, the pure plethora of necessary being with

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<sup>36</sup> It requires that one behave as if their actions are meaningless in order to be considered a moral holiday at all. If someone believes that there is no such thing as morality, but still tries to act in a moral fashion, then they have not taken a moral holiday towards whatever cause those actions were towards. It is only when one does not act on the basis of such a view that one has taken an unacceptable moral holiday.

<sup>37</sup> James, PMT, 41; emphasis added.

the oxygen of possibility all suffocated out of its lungs—there can be neither good nor bad, but one dead level of mere fate.”<sup>38</sup>

Here is where James’s objection to absolutism’s treatment of pain begins to make itself clear. Good and evil are transcended by the absolute; it truly is beyond good and evil. And if all things are subsumed by the Absolute, then good and evil do not exist, and nor do pain, pleasure or meaning. This is not satisfactory for James, who uses a passage from the prominent anarchist Morrison I. Swift to help his counterargument. This argument states that of all the creatures of which we are aware, we are the only ones which have rational understanding. It is this understanding that allows us to have a concept of the Absolute in the first place. However, we are also the only creatures which have developed concepts of pain and suffering.<sup>39</sup> To accept one over the other is to deny something which makes us human. However, one must also note that we can stay true to common experience while not believing in the Absolute, but we cannot do so while discounting pain and suffering. Absolutists deviate too far from experience when they discount the tangible, real pain and suffering that people go through. Morally, this is reprehensible.

Unfortunately, this argument cannot be taken as a strong argument against Hegel, as James again sees this as a difference in temperament rather than having any serious philosophical implications for absolutists or for Hegel specifically. The tender-minded prefer rationalistic systems which can capture all of reality, whereas the tough-minded do not. He confesses that although he leans towards the tougher end of the spectrum, but

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<sup>38</sup> James, OSH, 204.

still near the middle, this is one premise that he cannot subscribe to at all. The reasoning he gives is that it does nothing to increase his comfort in the world. He may gain a firm grounding for moral holidays, but at the cost of gaining irresolvable philosophical problems which are at odds with the rest of his beliefs.<sup>40</sup> The costs outweigh the benefits *for him* to accept that position, especially since there are many different ways to justify moral holidays. But he does recognize that absolutism is an attractive and effective one of these ways.

Both the monistic and the moral arguments against absolutism have a common theme, and that is the level of hubris involved in the absolutist premise. Hubris is found when the author of the philosophical systems claims that this is The True System that all people ought to adopt it. James sees Hegel as one of the clearest examples of this hubris. He rather characteristically provides an anecdote to illustrate his point:

There is a story of two clergymen asked by mistake to conduct the same funeral. One came first and had got no further than “I am the Resurrection and the Life,” when the other entered. “I am the Resurrection and the Life,” cried the latter. The ‘through-and-through’ philosophy, as it actually exists, reminds many of us of that clergyman.<sup>41</sup>

The first clergyman represents real-life experience, while the second represents absolutists, especially Hegel and his followers. Hegel has made a very bold statement when he claims that his system is the final truth about reality. To espouse something is to make the implicit claim that one knows that thing, which in turn implies that the object of belief is true, which in turn imposes an obligation on others to believe. Hegel is claiming that he alone has found the true system of reality to which all must adhere. He has an

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<sup>39</sup> James, PMT, 21.

<sup>40</sup> James, PMT, 43.

<sup>41</sup> James, ERE, 145-146.

almost prophetic purpose in revealing this truth to the world. This is not to say that Hegel was wrong; indeed, James does very little to argue that, but it does come off as arrogant, or, as James says, hubristic.

The real problem caused by the hubris involved in absolutist positions has to do with the effects it has on salvation of humankind.<sup>42</sup> The Absolute, regardless of how one envisions it, is eternally complete and perfect. This makes absolutist systems closed systems, where the only comfort one receives is that everything has been taken care of by the Absolute. James finds that this has a negative impact on humanity's salvation. If everything is already complete, then there is no true progress. There are no real possibilities for a better future, and no reason to have optimism about that future. Hegel's hubris is evident in this argument as well. Hegel's invocation of the Absolute requires that it be the only possibility for the existence of things.

James again lessens the force of his own argument, through two important qualifications. The first is noted by Robert W. Beard. Beard notes that James's arguments against determinism are not meant to show that determinism is false, but rather that it is less rational than indeterminism.<sup>43</sup> The more rational a theory is, the more it will assist in problems of morality; indeed, James felt that any theory which had to deny morality to remain coherent was legitimate to discard.<sup>44</sup> James has a standard for determining the level of rationality of a theory. James explains that: "rationality has at

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<sup>42</sup> It is important to note that James has a somewhat special meaning for the term 'salvation,' as he only partially meant it to have any religious content. It is rather the point at which humanity can exist peacefully and happily, the "world as we wish it to be."

<sup>43</sup> Robert W. Beard, "James and the Rationality of Determinism", in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 5, no. 2 (1967), 149.



least four dimensions: intellectual, aesthetical, moral, and practical.”<sup>45</sup> While no theory will be able to satisfy all four to the fullest degree, it can average out to being more rational than other theories and thus best suited for adoption. We are thus looking for “a conception that will yield the largest *balance* of rationality rather than one which will yield perfect rationality.”<sup>46</sup> While James does believe that indeterminism is more rational than determinism, rationality ultimately comes down to a *feeling* of ease one experiences when one has arrived at a system which appears to satisfy the demands of rationalism.<sup>47</sup> Different people may have a greater need for intellectual coherence over aesthetic feeling, or vice versa. Through this, James has at least introduced a component of relativism into the standard of rationality and has weakened his own argument.

The second qualification that James makes is that he does not mean his own brand of pragmatism to be flatly opposed to such beliefs, but rather to act as a mediator. Thus, rather than making a serious claim against Hegel and other absolutists, he is instead indicating a difference in temperament which must be overcome for philosophy to progress. He echoes this sentiment near the end of *ERE*, in “Absolutism and Empiricism.” Here, his frustration with the hubris of Hegel and his followers has reached a boiling point:

...I feel sure that likes and dislikes *must* be among the ultimate factors of their philosophy as well as of mine. Would they but admit it! How sweetly we then could hold converse together! ... But just as I admit that this is all possibly provisional...why might they not also admit that it may all be otherwise...Ah! Why is the notion of hypothesis so abhorrent to the Hegelian mind?<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Beard, 149-150; The idea that determinism is less rational than indeterminism because of its inability to predict the future shall be taken up again later in this chapter.

<sup>45</sup> James, PU, 55.

<sup>46</sup> James, PU, *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> James, SR, 317.

<sup>48</sup> James, ERE, 144-145.

the source of this purpose in anthropomorphic terms, [this] doctrine...defines the categories in which the search for life's meaning is to be sought and carried out.”<sup>50</sup>

Overbeliefs are what allow individuals to adapt their abstract religious faith to the practical sphere. They deal with question that ‘underbeliefs’ cannot, such as the meaning of our lives. They “introduce the concepts needed to encompass one's experience is a teleological perspective, thereby giving the believer's thinking a dispositional component...in other words, function as truths to live by.”<sup>51</sup> It is no wonder that James felt that overbeliefs were one of the most interesting things about people.<sup>52</sup>

Characterizing belief in the Absolute as an overbelief would have a great deal of clarifying power in terms of his past arguments against absolutism. While such belief may not be religious *per se*, it still serves the same function as one, and many of James's arguments have that tone. James's opposition to absolutism based on moral grounds is because overbeliefs are the guiding principles of one's life. It incites one to action, and the actions are determined by the nature of the overbelief. In this case, absolutism is encouraging inappropriate moral holidays on the part of the person who believes in the absolute, while not supplying any code by which to live. The hubristic arguments can also be recast as a facet of the absolutistic overbelief. For James, we “should treat [different overbeliefs] with tenderness and tolerance so long as they are not intolerant

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<sup>49</sup> Although one could create an argument along these lines, the argument would not be about Hegelian philosophy *per se*, but rather how Hegelians treat that philosophy.

<sup>50</sup> John H. Whittaker, “William James on ‘Overbeliefs’ and ‘Live Options’” in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14(1983), 209; emphasis Whittaker's.

<sup>51</sup> Whittaker, 205.

<sup>52</sup> James, VRE, 441.

themselves.”<sup>53</sup> Absolutists claim that their system, and only their system, is the correct view of the universe. Absolutism encompasses all of reality and denies the world as it presents itself to experience. Through being a closed system, offering no hope of the salvation of humankind, it has made itself into an intolerant overbelief.<sup>54</sup>

There is a further element to be added at this point. The justification of overbeliefs comes from their ability to provide positive benefits within one’s practical life. As James sees it, regardless of the arguments used to support absolutism, there are no such benefits apart from the ability to take inappropriate moral holidays. James reminds us that

*the absolute is useless for deductive purposes.* It gives us absolute safety if you will, but it is compatible with every relative danger. You cannot enter the phenomenal world with the notion of it in your grasp, and name beforehand any detail which you are likely to meet there. Whatever the details of experience may prove to be, *after the fact of them* the absolute will adopt them. It is an hypothesis that functions retrospectively only, not prospectively.<sup>55</sup>

Any deductive use is replaced with a near indifference to the actual human suffering of people’s lives. Absolutism abstracts too far away from common experience to be of any practical use to anyone wanting to feel more at ease in the world. This charge is especially poignant because one of the few points on which James openly agreed with Hegel was that the aim of philosophy is to make people feel more at home in the world.<sup>56</sup> Instead of helping with this, the Hegelian position relies on “all the complex hocus-pocus of its triads,” which invariably leads to criticisms that “give forth strange and hollow sounds that make them seem almost as fantastic as the errors to which they are

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<sup>53</sup> James, VRE, *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Here is where the main difference between absolutism and religious beliefs would lie. In most religions, the universe is not complete. Religious salvation, enlightenment, or whatever the religion believes in, has not yet happened during the lives of their followers.

<sup>55</sup> James, PU, 61; emphasis James’s. See also Beard, 150-152.

addressed.”<sup>57</sup> The great error James thought Hegel committed was that his philosophy was too detached from real life, and was negligible in terms of pragmatic benefit. It sounds strange and hollow because it is so abstract. As this is the one position he holds throughout his career spent combating Hegel, this seems to be the most promising route for finding James’s strongest argument against Hegel.

### **Morse’s Argument**

A recent author who has picked up on the theme of abstraction in James is Don Morse, who used James’s *PU* to construct an argument against Hegel. Morse elucidates two concepts in order to provide such an argument, that of ‘vicious intellectualism’ and of false unity, with the latter relying on the former. Morse describes intellectualism in the following manner:

Intellectualism James defines as the belief that concepts can grasp the real, can get at the truth about things, over and above sensations...Its viciousness consists...in its attempt to cover over completely the reality it captures, in its equation of itself with the reality of the thing conceived.<sup>58</sup>

What Morse means by this is not entirely clear. Taken at the most literal, when James levels the charge of vicious intellectualism, he is claiming that the philosopher in question has unduly privileged the conceptual order, believing that the conception of a thing is identical with the reality of the thing. The second objection is that Hegel has committed the fallacy of false unity, putting together opposites in a wholly artificial way which is not grounded in reality. With these two points in mind, Morse believes he has

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<sup>56</sup> James, *PU*, 10.

<sup>57</sup> James, *OSH*, 205.

<sup>58</sup> Don Morse, “William James’s Neglected Critique of Hegel” in *Idealistic Studies* 35, no. 2/3 (Summer/Fall 2005), 205.

eliminated the need to overcome sense-certainty, and thus has rendered the Hegelian project unnecessary.

Morse has made some serious errors in his account which unfortunately renders the entire argument unconvincing, if not simply wrong. The first error is the failure to distinguish which terms are technical in James's work. The largest one of these is 'intellectualism', which carries a specific meaning in James's argument. Intellectualism is equated directly with Rationalism and its method of purely rational analysis. When James refers to vicious intellectualism as "treating of a name as excluding from the fact named what the name's definition fails positively to include," he is providing a statement against the analytic method.<sup>59</sup> In such a method, there is no appeal to outside experience to verify the claims made, but only logic and its standard of soundness. Concepts (another technical term for James) must also be private to the individual who possesses them, and thus vicious intellectualism also publicizes something which is by nature private: at once excluding from the debate anything outside the singular concept, but applying that concept to all individuals. Understood in this way, vicious intellectualism is no more than another word for James's hubrism arguments against absolutism.

This clarification takes away much of the bite which Morse believes the concept of vicious intellectualism should have. As seen above, James has already toned-down his own arguments because of his view that much of the debates between philosophers ultimately come down to a difference in temperament. If we are to believe Morse that vicious intellectualism as he presents it is the foundation for the argument of false unity,

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<sup>59</sup> James, PU, 32.

then a Hegelian would have an easy task in refuting Morse's claims. First, they may be able to simply dismiss the charge of vicious intellectualism as a mere difference of temperament. However, the stronger argument would be to point out that James also considered himself to be intellectualist at points, or at least have such a tone.<sup>60</sup> Hegel does appeal to the senses in order to advance his position in some sense, he does not leave them completely out of the picture. Morse states that the justification for the charge of false unity rests wholly on the vicious intellectualism present in Hegel's work. Thus with the first objection of Morse neutralized, the second, by Morse's own standards, has no leg on which to stand.

At this point we have only seen the shadow of a possible argument against Hegel, but have not seen a strong argument against Hegel which can be attributed to James. Morse's failure to bring the argument of abstraction into clearer light does not mean that it cannot be done. Indeed, it seems that this would be the most promising direction to take. Despite his errors, Morse has hinted at something much deeper. When examined, it brings both of Morse's objections into one solid case against Hegel. As stated, part of Morse's error is that he has failed to properly distinguish which terms are technical for James. By clarifying what these terms mean, and their purpose throughout James's corpus, we will find a strong foundation for an argument against Hegel. This argument keeps with the theme of abstraction, but uses James's psychology as its support. This is the concept of 'vicious abstractionism,' which shall be the focus of the next chapter.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>60</sup> See Chapter 1, above.

In this chapter I have examined the general themes of the arguments presented by James against Hegel. The historical context of James's arguments shed considerable light on why James felt it necessary to argue against Hegel so frequently, though often not rigorously. The Hegelian school of thought was starting to gain momentum in Britain and the United States, places where empiricism had previously reigned. The arguments on which I focused were James's arguments against absolutism. These were grouped into arguments against monism, morality, and hubris. In order to clarify the argument, I enlisted James's help by classifying absolutism as an intolerant overbelief. Unfortunately, the force of these arguments is tempered by James himself, who classifies most of them as no more than differences in philosophical temperament. The one argument which did not fit in with this is the recurring charge of abstraction. Picking up on this, I analyzed Morse's arguments based on this charge, but found them wanting. However, they did hint at the concept of 'vicious abstractionism,' an objection which is quite strong when understood properly.

### Chapter 3

#### VICIOUS ABSTRACTIONISM

Due to his contempt for the doctrine of intellectualism, there was no greater charge James could level against another philosopher than that of vicious abstractionism. This charge encompassed all that James thought was wrong with much of traditional philosophy and is the cause of many so-called problems of traditional philosophy. With a proper understanding of how we come by experience and a clear view of its contents, James believed that we can then concern ourselves with issues of greater importance, such as morality. This is the function James's pragmatism was supposed to serve. One of the thinkers whom James charged with the offence of vicious abstractionism was Hegel. This chapter has two purposes. The first is to give detail to the concept of vicious abstractionism through an analysis of the method by which James understands our acquisition of experience. The percept-concept relationship is vital to this understanding, and as such it will be discussed at length. The second purpose of this chapter is to relate the understanding of vicious abstractionism to James's critique of Hegel and to specify exactly how this is supposed to act as an argument against Hegel's philosophy.

#### **Pure Experience**

The first task for any empiricist to undertake is to explain how it is we come by the experience which serves as our only source of knowledge. While James admired his empiricist predecessors for the foundation which they had laid for a systematic method



for gaining knowledge, he believed that they had not gone far enough.<sup>1</sup> James's own views are inspired by earlier empiricist thought, but radicalized and brought into line with contemporary findings of psychology. According to James, a hallmark of earlier empiricist thought is the focus on particulars rather than wholes, favouring a synthetic, rather than analytic, methodology.<sup>2</sup> He details a theory of knowledge starting from the lowest-level particulars available in experience, and focusing on the psychological conditions for knowledge. More than any of his empiricist predecessors, Jamesean epistemology is an epistemology of process, emphasizing fluctuation and change, and keeping little stable. One must keep in mind a difficulty which arises from the attempt to provide an explanation of such a system wholly in terms of the system itself and the media involved in such an explanation. To foreshadow a bit, writing something is the act of fixing a set of concepts in relation to each other in a static, unchanging way. As stated, the Jamesean psychological process is fluid and in flux; therefore, any written explanation of such a system is going to be on some level unfair, as the act of writing fixates concepts. While there is little which can be done about this, it should be kept in mind.

James believes that at birth we are a true *tabula rasa*, with no innate knowledge, transcendental categories, or concepts to apply to experience.<sup>3</sup> Any predisposition towards the structuring of experience would be a product of evolution as he understood it rather than any preconditions for the possibility of experience. For the first moments of

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<sup>1</sup> James, PMT, 30.

<sup>2</sup> James, ERE, 22-23.

<sup>3</sup> James, ERE, *ibid.*

life, one exists in a state which James calls “pure experience,” the non-individuated, “blooming, buzzing, confusion” of everything all at once.<sup>4</sup> Individuation, a product of the faculty of attention, is a learned ability or a skill which one must develop. Pure experience cannot be understood or processed, neither by a newborn child nor a fully developed adult. It must be truncated and limited in order for the world to make sense and for us to have meaningful experience of it. The concept of pure experience does not refer to an absolutist, monistic whole of experience, but rather stands for a sequence of particulars which the faculty of attention must choose between.<sup>5</sup> The faculty of attention is aided by two processes, corresponding to two units of experience: the senses, which deal with percepts; and the intellect, which deals with concepts.<sup>6</sup> It is through these two processes that we come to have experience as we understand it, and through their employment and training we can extend and refine that experience. The concept of vicious abstractionism is inextricably linked with these two concepts, and as such they shall be examined at some length.

### **Percepts and Concepts**

Percepts are related most closely to perceptual experience and information acquired through the sensory apparatus. They are formed by our faculty of attention, singling out objects of the world of pure experience. Attention is one of the most important faculties which an individual possesses, as the life of sensation is formed and extended on the basis of its proper functioning. Through attention we are able to

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<sup>4</sup> James, ERE, 49.

<sup>5</sup> James, ERE, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> James, SPP, 31.

differentiate objects from each other and from ourselves. James goes further than previous empiricisms by emphatically stating that it is not only the objects of experience which are immediately perceived, but also the relations between them. The fact that all things and their relations can be sensed directly drives his conviction that one must not include in their considerations things which cannot be sensed. In line with how many have viewed the nature of perceptual experience, James states that our percepts are always changing and are pluralistic.<sup>7</sup> The world of experience, as constituted by our five senses, is not an irreducible and simple thing. We have multiple percepts at every moment: of the lighting in the room, the temperature, the various shapes and colours, the gentle hum of the heater, and so forth. Despite the central place given to percepts, they cannot and do not act alone. Since they are purely sense-based, they convey objects to the subject, but yet cannot yield any knowledge about what they are conveying to the subject.<sup>8</sup> For that purpose, we have concepts.

As James is an empiricist, it may seem odd that he has something resident solely in the intellect which is responsible for knowledge *qua* knowledge. Yet even concepts arise from experience, albeit indirectly. Concepts arise out of percepts rather than out of sensory experience itself.<sup>9</sup> Recall that percepts only indicate that there are things in experience, but to say that something is *this* thing or *that* thing is to go beyond the abilities of percepts.<sup>10</sup> A concept marks something about the percept, such as its shape or

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<sup>7</sup> James, SPP, 32; A fair question to ask of James, and which shall be explored in Chapter IV, is what constitutes the pluralism of percepts. James never fully addresses this question, and for our present discussion we shall not pursue this line of reasoning.

<sup>8</sup> James, SPP, 32; In other words, the perceptual flux has no inherent meaning.

<sup>9</sup> James, SPP, 36.

<sup>10</sup> James, SPP, 32-33.

colour. The characters of concepts range from very basic to very complex. Basic concepts require very little content, such as merely the marking of the identity of something as something in experience.<sup>11</sup> Thus James says that even a polyp can be a conceptual thinker if it recognizes an object perceived at  $T_2$  to be the same object perceived at  $T_1$  rather than just undifferentiated object  $X$  and then undifferentiated object  $X'$ .<sup>12</sup> More advanced concepts have a greater level of complexity in terms of judging relations between objects or properties which those objects have.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of complexity, all concepts must be able to be linked back to experience at some point to be meaningful in any sense.<sup>14</sup> However, this does not mean that one must always generate knowledge out of percepts. It is quite common to generate new knowledge using only concepts. This becomes a problem only if it is not possible to test the generated concepts against experience, and thus cannot be validated or refuted.

Unlike percepts, concepts are singular and unchanging. As things which are generated, they may be destroyed or maintained, but they do not change or evolve. A concept is forged from a single percept, which is formed by all of the faculties of the person having the percept. A concept singles something out as having a certain series of properties under certain conditions.<sup>15</sup> James attempts to ground these observations firmly in psychology to add force to this argument. All of the faculties involved in both

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<sup>11</sup> For example, that this shape is not that shape.

<sup>12</sup> James, POP 1, 463.

<sup>13</sup> For example, consider the concept of a right-angled triangle. I recognize that the shape before me is a triangle, and further a right-angled triangle, because it has one right angle and two forty-five degree angles. I know that I would need to use the Pythagorean theorem to calculate the length of the hypotenuse, and other such things.

<sup>14</sup> James, SPP, 36.

<sup>15</sup> James, POP 1, 463.

perception and conception are considered mental habits and are the result of the discharge of energy over the brain. As such, the physiology of the brain changes slightly with each percept, and thus the person's perceptual history and capabilities change continually as well. This makes it necessary that concepts be static and unchanging once created. Any time someone has another percept of what they consider to be the same thing, they are literally looking at it in a different way than the time before. As the percept has changed, a new concept must be generated. Though the new concept could be objectively judged to be a refinement over the first concept, it is not the case that the same concept has been changed.<sup>16</sup> For a concept to evolve, it would have to add the entire content of the new percept to the entire content of the old one, which cannot happen. Thus concepts may be abandoned in favour of newer, more detailed concepts, but they do not evolve.

Given that concepts are static, with no ability to adapt to the ever-changing experience, there is something that is lost when one moves from the realm of percepts to the realm of concepts. As mentioned, James believed that the relations between objects are as immediately sensed as the objects themselves. When converted into a concept, the relations are also conceptualized and made static.<sup>17</sup> In creating a concept one wrenches an object of experience from the perceptual flux and holds it fast, freezing it and its relations.<sup>18</sup> In this act, the nature of the object involved in the process is changed completely. Percepts are in flux, concepts are not. What is lost when one creates a concept is the inherent nature of the percept whence it came. This entails the loss of the

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<sup>16</sup> James, POP 1, 465.

<sup>17</sup> James, SPP, 46-47.

<sup>18</sup> James, POP 1, 461.

feeling of activity and flux, and of the changeability and malleability of experience.<sup>19</sup>

This presents some interesting challenges to conceptual thinking. For example, the idea of change itself would not change. Everyone has the idea of change; otherwise, they would not be able to understand anything. Yet the idea of change is far different than change as experienced in sensation. One can have the idea of change as a concept, but the concept itself does not change. Change, as represented in concepts, does not change! It is always 'x at T<sub>1</sub> and ~x at T<sub>2</sub>'. The more things change in this fashion, the more our concept of change remains the same.

The percept and the concept work together in assisting in the formation of experience and knowledge. In common experience, one must use both. Percepts are formed out of the world of pure experience, and concepts are from percepts. If entertaining a concept of an object of experience, one has abstracted away from the percept which one had for that same object of experience. The content of the concept is determined by one's faculties of attention, discrimination, and interest. The concepts of objects of experience are formed out of what interests the organism about the percept of that object. This assists the organism in recognizing the same object of experience when encountered again, and to recall the use and function of that object for the organism. Without concepts, knowledge cannot progress. Concepts are thus required for the proper functioning of a human being, when coupled with percepts.

The process of moving from percepts to concepts, or from concepts to other concepts, is called 'abstraction'. Abstraction is highly useful in the progress of thought.

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<sup>19</sup> James, SPP, 46-47.

Without its widespread use, our cognitive abilities would be impoverished. If we could not abstract from percepts, then we would not be able to form concepts and thus not have any abilities at all. With only limited abstraction, we could not trust our concepts as guides to the percepts which they represent. We would have to form new concepts *only* from percepts, meaning that to discover more about an object of our experience it would always have to be present in experience. Abstracting to concepts allows us to form an idea about the object of experience, and more abstract concepts allow us to judge between concepts and develop our knowledge about the object of experience without it being present. Any human endeavour requires abstraction and must employ it regularly.

Yet no matter how abstract one becomes, one must recall that experience and thought are ‘bipedal’ ventures. While it is possible to generate new concepts and knowledge without the original percept being present, there must remain the potential to retrace one’s steps back to the perceptual order.<sup>20</sup> In order to keep one’s concepts from being overly abstract, one must recognize that one has abstracted, and that there is a fundamental difference between one’s abstract system and the experience whence it was derived. This was seen in the preceding chapter in James’s arguments against absolutism. Revisability would be a property of any abstract system which properly respected the bipedal nature of experience. One would always keep in mind that there could be future experiences which would require a revision of what one previously thought as being true. James has no quarrel with abstract systems, but only with ones

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<sup>20</sup> That is, one must be able to demonstrate how the concept is based on empirical evidence at the beginning of the process which led to that concept. One would do this by showing how the concept from which the new concept was generated is based on empirical evidence. As long as the basis for the original concept was a percept, one is not being viciously abstract.

which overlook the fundamental difference between concepts and percepts: that concepts are secondary to percepts and that the nature of the former is different than the nature of the latter, having lost the feeling of activity and change.

### **Vicious Abstractionism**

With this loss of the feeling of activity, it is easy to make some seemingly minute but really egregious errors which may taint one's theory. This could, depending on the severity of the error and its centrality to one's system, ultimately result in being unable to reconcile one's own thinking with the real world, making it unpersuasive. The greatest of these errors James calls 'vicious abstractionism.' This error occurs when one takes one's concepts to be one's percepts and ignores the conceptual shift required when one makes such a movement. For example, consider James's arguments against absolutism in Chapter II above: one uses their personal concept of something and then extrapolates it across all times and persons. To give a firm definition of vicious abstractionism, we turn to James himself, who shall be quoted at length:

Let me give the name of 'vicious abstractionism' to a way of using concepts which may be thus described: We conceive a concrete situation by singling out some salient or important feature in it, and classing it under that; then, instead of adding to its previous characters all the positive consequences which the new way of conceiving it may bring, we proceed to use our concept privately; reducing the originally rich phenomenon to the naked suggestions of that name abstractly taken, treating it as a case of 'nothing but' that concept, and acting as if all the other characters from out of which the concept is abstracted were expunged.<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere, James also adds to the definition: "The misuse of concepts begins with the habit of employing them privatively as well as positively, using them not merely to

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<sup>21</sup> James, PMT, 301-2.



assign properties to things, but to deny the very properties with which the things sensibly present themselves.”<sup>22</sup>

Instead of recognizing the concept as being a fixed and static thing which is private to the individual, it is taken instead as characteristic of experience as a whole, applicable across all time periods and for all people.<sup>23</sup> Vicious abstractionism is using one’s concepts illegitimately, meaning that one uses static concepts in an attempt to explain that which is naturally dynamic, without acknowledging the shift.

There are a number of detrimental effects which accompany vicious abstractionism. When employed viciously, abstraction “mutilates things; it creates difficulties and finds impossibilities; and more than half of the trouble that metaphysicians and logicians give themselves over the paradoxes and dialectic puzzles of the universe may ... be traced to this relatively simple source.”<sup>24</sup> James calls this “one of the great original sins of the rationalistic mind.”<sup>25</sup> Philosophers who have committed vicious abstraction have thus created many of the problems with which they have difficulty. Thus James is led to conclude that “When you have broken the reality into concepts you never can reconstruct it in its wholeness.”<sup>26</sup>

This is not to say that one should not use concepts when forming philosophical systems, as this would be a similarly one-sided venture. It is through using both concepts and percepts, and recognizing their place and function, that we are able to proceed on strong epistemic and psychological footing. Without using both, we are as people

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<sup>22</sup> James, PU, 99.

<sup>23</sup> James, PMT, 302.

<sup>24</sup> James, PMT, *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> James, PMT, *ibid.*

“hopping on one foot.”<sup>27</sup> For clarity of understanding, the definition with which we shall be working is: *vicious abstractionism is taking the vehicles of thought (concepts) as being wholly representative of the vehicles of sensation (percepts), and furthermore the entirety of the thing itself.* For the remainder of this thesis, this shall be the definition to which ‘vicious abstractionism’ refers.

At the core of this concept lies a distinction which most philosophers have overlooked in examining this concept in James’s work, to which we must now turn our attention. This distinction, alluded to in the previous chapter, is the distinction between James’s concepts of vicious intellectualism and vicious abstractionism. Historically this distinction has been overlooked, or treated as if it were negligible. Morse, for example, describes something very similar as “vicious intellectualism,” a concept in its own right, and uses examples from both concepts. Given the number of similarities between the two concepts, as well as James’s loose definitions at places, the failure is understandable. Unfortunately, the failure to sufficiently draw this distinction has contributed greatly to the confusion on both sides of the debate, and once drawn properly will help us to answer the questions at hand in a clear manner. In order to draw the distinction into the light, we shall look to James’s writings on both concepts and then base our conclusions upon what we notice occurring in the scholarly literature.

Vicious intellectualism is usually brought up in conjunction with the rationalists and the grandiose metaphysical systems which they constructed during the early modern period. Intellectualism, as defined by James, is using the intellect as the primary means of

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<sup>26</sup> James, PU, 116.

engaging in philosophical thought and using that faculty almost to the exclusion of the senses. Intellectualism was a long-time enemy of James's, who pitted it against his own radical empiricism. He believed that by using the Intellectualist methodology, one is only listening to one side of the story, the intellectual, and ignoring or abandoning the sensory side. Vicious intellectualism is just the taking of the intellectualist methodology to such an extent that it undermines one's own position through an utter lack of attention to sensory experience. In James's words, it is the "*treating of a name as excluding from the fact named what the name's definition fails positively to include.*"<sup>28</sup> This is a direct attack against the *a priori*, 'top-down' methodology of the rationalists.<sup>29</sup> To James, abstract, intellectual definitions are not exhaustive of what a thing truly is or how it should be treated philosophically. Vicious intellectualism is the holding "fast to the old rationalist contempt for the immediately given world of sense and all its squalid particulars, and never tolerat[ing] the notion that the form of philosophy might be empirical only."<sup>30</sup>

This can be archetypically represented by René Descartes. It is very early in the *Meditations* that he dismisses the use of the senses to come to truth, as they have been known to deceive him in various ways, and thus cannot be the foundation of his epistemology.<sup>31</sup> After realizing that he is saved through the use of his reason, he then bases everything else upon that fact. Descartes also engages in another common practice

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<sup>27</sup> James, PMT, 300.

<sup>28</sup> James, PU, 32.

<sup>29</sup> See also James, OSH, 203.

<sup>30</sup> James, PU, 46.

<sup>31</sup> Descartes, "Meditations on the First Philosophy" in *The Rationalists* trans. J. Veitch, (New York: Anchor Books, 1974), 112-114.

of the rationalists; namely, proving the existence of God through definitions, as found in Meditation Five. There, Descartes defines God as being omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, and anything outside of this concept, such as omnimalevolence, is excluded because it is not part of the definition.<sup>32</sup> Descartes is using his own concept and definition of God as the starting point for the argument and treating it as if it is the only relevant. Yet his methodology does not allow for extra-rationalistic evidence to be admitted into consideration. This is vicious intellectualism at work. In contrast, for James, the characteristics of God would have to be determined through empirical observation and testing against experience.<sup>33</sup>

Through the example of the ontological argument, the true nature of vicious intellectualism becomes apparent. Vicious intellectualism, by James's account, is a *methodological* problem. It is an error in how one goes about answering the problems of philosophy. One commits this error by focusing either predominantly (standard intellectualism) or exclusively on the intellect (vicious intellectualism). Intellectualism is equated with rationalism, which James defines as "the way of thinking that methodically subordinates parts to wholes," meaning that one's methodology excludes percepts.<sup>34</sup> In the debate before us, the charge of vicious intellectualism has been cited by both sides as something which provides a point of attack against the other side. Sprigge, for example, attempted to show how James eventually came to see that his own account of Radical

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<sup>32</sup> Descartes, 143-149.

<sup>33</sup> As James notes in VRE, this does not result in a very detailed description of God, nor of religion in general. This is because to stay within the realm of empirical data, one can only describe what religion *is* and how it *works* in people's lives, without engaging in theology. This is why his conclusions are tenuous and broad. To say anything further on the subject would be an 'over-belief'. See VRE, conclusions.

Empiricism in the end became viciously intellectualist and was therefore on equal footing with Hegel's account.<sup>35</sup> In fact, this point is irrelevant against James or his radical empiricism. Rather than a reversal of viewpoint, it is a coming to believe that his defence of radical empiricism had an intellectualist *tone*. This is not a defect because he never truly does fall to those vices.

In fact, the problem of vicious intellectualism, as well as the intellectualist tone which James found himself to have,<sup>36</sup> can be attributed to the constraints placed upon philosophy by its professionalization. As is the case in present times, there are certain venues and media one had to utilize to be considered a legitimate philosopher. One had to write books and articles, present lectures for university departments, and cater to an intellectual audience. These media present a problem for a philosopher who intends to have a very fluid and fluctuating worldview. Essays are printed and immortalized. Speeches must be prepared and followed. In each case the philosophical feeling in which James's thoughts are rooted must become fixed and static. Given these circumstances, *any* philosophical system is going to be defended in an intellectualist fashion: even the staunchest empiricists had to rely on intellectual arguments to defend their empiricism. It could be the case that the true defence of radical empiricism is not something which would be considered 'philosophical' in the conventional sense, but rather a living-out of one's life with no need to appeal to such a defence. Nevertheless, James's admission of

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<sup>34</sup> James, PU, 48.

<sup>35</sup> Sprigge, 7.

<sup>36</sup> See Chapter 1, above.

this limitation does not mean that he is not sure of his own philosophy or that he has abandoned it. It was that that he must revise its defences to remain true to its spirit.

Vicious abstractionism is not a methodological error, which can be revised or corrected. Instead, it is a far deeper error to commit and is almost impossible to remedy. Vicious abstractionism, as outlined briefly above, is rooted in James's conception of the percept-concept relationship. Concepts freeze percepts and change their dynamic relations into static relations, sapping all activity from the experiential flux. Concepts are required for surviving in the world, as they greatly assist in memory and classification. Abstraction is the process of going from the percept to the concept, or from concepts to other concepts. One may abstract away from experience a great deal without ever becoming viciously abstract. Vicious abstractionism occurs if one or both of the following two conditions obtain: one takes the concept which one has created of a percept as that percept itself; or one attempts to put the concept back into the perceptual order whence it came without recognizing the change in relations which must go along with it. Instead of a methodological error, like vicious intellectualism, it is a *conceptual* error, an error in the way one thinks. This is best illustrated through an extended example.

While it is not hard to find examples of philosophers who have committed this error, there is some difficulty which comes in explaining the error in Jamesian terms while still being fair to the other philosopher. We shall have to be careful in how we lay out their philosophy and how it relates to vicious abstractionism. In order to illustrate this concept, we shall look at Zeno and his paradox of the arrow. Through this, we shall

more clearly understand the differences between vicious intellectualism and vicious abstractionism, and anticipate how vicious abstractionism would apply to Hegel.

Zeno's paradoxes of motion have always entertained philosophers of every stripe. Despite apparent solutions, the paradoxes always seem to come back with a vengeance, further provoking more people to attempt to find a way out of them. The paradox of the arrow is relatively straightforward.<sup>37</sup> Imagine an archer shooting an arrow at a target. It would seem to be a perfect example of motion. Zeno asks us to look closer at this. If there is motion throughout the whole event, then there should be motion at any interval within that event. But if you do so, there is only one location where it is, and has set coordinates. For it to be elsewhere, you would have to take a different instant. There is, then, no motion at the level of the instant. How can we legitimately say that there has been motion in the whole series when it is plain that at any instant there is no motion? If it had indeed occurred, we should easily be able to find even one instance of it when we do the thought experiment. Zeno concludes that the concept of motion is illegitimate, and given that the common ancient belief was that time is motion, time itself becomes something which cannot be taken for granted.<sup>38</sup>

The paradox can only be defeated by rejecting the framework itself, which can be done by appealing to vicious abstractionism and seeing if it applies to Zeno. It is apparent that Zeno has been viciously abstract from the outset. Percepts are in flux and continuous, whereas concepts are singular and static. When abstracting from percepts to

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<sup>37</sup> This account of the paradox of the arrow has been taken from Richard Sorabji's "Zeno's Paradoxes of Motion" in *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, (Cornell University Press, 1983), 332-333.

<sup>38</sup> Sorabji, *ibid.*

concepts, the relations between things are frozen and made static, even though in percepts those relations are fluid. One cannot get duration from the concept of an instant because an instant is an abstraction. Though abstracted from the percept of duration, the concept of the instant has lost the feeling of activity and of happening, which it can never regain. This is not to say that the concept of an instant is not useful in advancing knowledge of the world around us, but rather that it has a specific nature which must be respected. Zeno commits vicious abstractionism because he uses the absence of the feeling of motion in concepts to argue against the existence of the feeling in percepts. Through substituting relations between concepts for relations between percepts, Zeno has given his adversary an impossible task. Substitutions of that nature will always result in what seems to be a paradox, but is really a flaw in one's conceptualization of the problem at hand. It is not the case that we have yet to find a full answer to Zeno's paradox, but rather that the question itself is bad.

Vicious intellectualism is a fault in methodology, choosing the intellect over the senses. We see this procedure in Descartes's *Meditations*, specifically in the fifth meditation and the Ontological Argument for the existence of God. Vicious abstractionism is a conceptual error, which introduces a deep-seated flaw in the way one is thinking. One is abusing the proper role of concepts: one exchanges dynamic percepts for static concepts, but treats the latter as the former.

Vicious abstractionism should not be seen as an error in methodology. Methodology is primarily concerned with what constitutes proper evidence and evidence-gathering procedures for one's argument. Zeno was not merely arguing from definitions



and one cannot alleviate the problem with the introduction of an experiential element.

Vicious abstractionism is a conceptual error, where fails to recognize the different elements (perceptual and conceptual) involved in knowledge. Zeno mistook the concept of an instant for time as it is found in experience, and came to a number of predictably mistaken conclusions.

As I mentioned in passing in the preceding chapter, vicious intellectualism is a product of vicious abstractionism. The relationship between the two is more complex than that. Vicious intellectualism *cannot* lead to vicious abstractionism, no matter how viciously intellectualist one is, though one can go in the other direction, from vicious abstractionism to both vicious abstractionism and vicious intellectualism. Allowing only rationalistic evidence in one's thought processes does not necessarily mean that one is committing vicious abstractionism, as long as one remains in the private realm. Concepts are private, and if one is creating a philosophical system which is meant to be applicable at all times to all people based solely on one's own concepts, then one is attempting to extend the private to the public. This is an example of vicious abstractionism leading to vicious intellectualism (and not vice-versa) because one must have already have had the mistaken view of concepts before one engaged in the vicious intellectualism, otherwise there would not have been the desire to declare one's concepts as absolute. While vicious abstractionism *may* lead to vicious intellectualism, it is not necessary. One may try to

make a system based on both percepts and concepts, but abuse the concepts which are used and thus be viciously abstract.<sup>39</sup>

If vicious abstractionism can be found in a philosophical system, there is little which can be done to save it. James felt this to be a particularly damning vice, and considered it the greatest argument which he could level against another philosopher. If James is to provide an argument against Hegel, then it is going to be through this concept. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to looking at the specific places where James criticizes Hegel's vicious abstractionism, both indirectly and directly.

### **James's Indirect Charges of VA in Hegel**

An example of viciously abstract reasoning that James discusses is the argument that "[r]esemblance, in the way in which we naïvely perceive it, is an illusion."<sup>40</sup> This point can be best explained through an appeal to a common experience. Were someone to ask you what the resemblance between two objects in your perception is, you would have to define what the resemblance is, which would result in "a mixture of identity with otherness."<sup>41</sup> If you looked at two objects which were similar, say, two coffee mugs, you would immediately grasp that while they were not the same object, they were definitely similar in many ways. When asked why that is so, one might enumerate the qualities of the two mugs, comparing which qualities they share and which they do not. At this point a skeptic might point out that the colours, though they *seem* the same, are really not:

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<sup>39</sup> This is not meant to be taken as an argument against any and all abstract systems or concepts in general. It is meant as an illustration of the single direction of vicious abstractionism to vicious intellectualism. As long as one is able to trace one's path back to one's percepts, one is using concepts legitimately. It is therefore possible to have a highly abstract system which is not vicious.

<sup>40</sup> James, SPP, 50.

<sup>41</sup> James, SPP, *ibid.*

differences in the pigment made them different from the beginning, and usage patterns have amplified this. They may seem equally as thick, but there is a standard variation in production methods, and they measure slightly different. Through taking our concept of resemblance in a viciously abstract way, one is led to the conclusion that our perception of resemblance is illusory, being a product of our perceptual faculties not discriminating enough detail.

James's argument here is a veiled reference to Hegel's dialectic. Any object, for Hegel, goes beyond itself into the not-itself, or, the object into the other. Hegel claims that sense-certainty can only give us *this* thing or *that* thing, but must move beyond these to arrive at universal, common properties.<sup>42</sup> James believes that this line of thinking bears the mark of being viciously abstract. If Hegel is correct in insisting that sense-certainty itself cannot account for universals, then the movement to universal properties becomes problematic if not impossible. This is because universals are comprised of particulars, and the former only exist in virtue of the latter. While both James and Hegel would agree that a higher faculty is required for classifying particulars into universals, James believes that the data for how particulars should be classified must be present within sensation along with the particulars themselves. In James's account, relations between things are as immediately perceived as the things themselves; for Hegel, they are not. There is nothing in Hegel's view of sensation which indicates to which universal a particular should belong; as such, sense-certainty cannot perform the required function of moving to universals as Hegel claims that it does. Hegel must deny that resemblance is

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<sup>42</sup> Hegel, PS, 68.

present in sense-certainty in order to move towards the universal, but resemblance within sense-certainty is required for universals to have content. Through this inconsistency, James believes that Hegel has acted in a viciously abstract way: he has taken his concept of sense-certainty as sense-certainty itself, and as such finds a problem common in viciously abstract positions within his own.

Another sort of vicious abstractionism James discusses is the argument that “no real thing can be in two relations at once.”<sup>43</sup> The example James uses is the moon. If John and Joe are both looking at the moon, two propositions can be formulated:

- A. John is looking at the moon.
- B. Joe is looking at the moon.

Taken in the abstract, proposition A is not identical to proposition B and thus proposition B must be considered ‘not-A’. Therefore, if one were to say that both people are looking at the same moon, then one would be forced to say that both A and not-A obtain at once, which is a “logical sin.”<sup>44</sup> This is again an indirect or veiled reference to Hegel’s dialectic. In dialectic, there is only one meaningful relation in which any given object is engaged. An object immediately implies its negation, going beyond itself and into its ‘other’. This negation is then negated, reconciling the object and its other. No other relation is deemed as being important for the advance of knowledge.<sup>45</sup> The claim that there is only one set of logical relations between objects which is pertinent to knowledge is viciously abstract. Hegel has created a concept about how knowledge functions, an action which is not in and of itself viciously abstract. But by claiming that it is the only

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<sup>43</sup> James, SPP, *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> James, SPP, *ibid.*

relationship in experience pertinent to the advance of knowledge is to use that concept illegitimately, as he is replacing the relations found in common experience with his own private conception of that public experience. Hegel has fulfilled James's prediction by claiming that everything is only in one relation meaningful to knowledge. To abstract so far away from experience to that one relation is to be thinking in a viciously abstract way: we are forced to declare that in the real world, where we see clearly that things have multiple relations to other things, there is only one true relation which obtains between them.

James's *pièce de résistance* of these problems which arise from abusing concepts is the claim that "the very relation of subject and predicate, the backbone of conceptual thinking itself, is unintelligible and self-contradictory."<sup>46</sup> For Hegel, sense-certainty pushes thought beyond sensation because of its inability to sense the universal.<sup>47</sup> Hegel claims that it is through otherness that all things are connected, as everything is an other to everything else, including itself. This is an example of the problem to which James claims vicious abstractionism leads. Subject and predicate are overcome by a greater synthesis. The object is an 'other' to the subject, but the converse obtains as well: the subject is an 'other' to the object. Thus all things are connected in 'otherness,' as all things are others to all other things, and thus the barrier between subject and object is dissolved. To stay at the level of particular subjects or objects is to stay at the level of sense-certainty, which for Hegel is incapable of yielding any truth. As James points out,

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<sup>45</sup> Hegel, PS, 58-59.

<sup>46</sup> James, SPP, *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Hegel, PS, 62.

the relation of subject and predicate is the backbone of conceptual thinking.<sup>48</sup> Thus Hegel, being viciously abstract, has cut his own throat by engaging in vicious abstractionism.

James did not intend these arguments to demonstrate that Hegel has been viciously abstract. Instead, they anticipate the tensions or problems that arise, granting that he committed that error. They are symptoms which would arise in viciously abstract systems. These symptoms can be found in Hegel's philosophy, and as such it must be investigated further to see if he truly was viciously abstract. James notes that Hegel was well aware of all of the problems which arose from thinking abstractly, and acknowledged that Hegel did attempt to find a way out of these problems. The point of including these before analyzing the argument proper is that it foreshadows to the heart of the Jamesean response to Hegel and his work. If Hegel did engage in vicious abstractionism, then there are certain facets of his system which will never be acceptable, tensions which can never be resolved, and lacunas in his work which will never be overcome. Hegel's system would be shown to be based on errors in using the cognitive faculties and faulty reasoning which can never be set right.

### **James's Direct Charge of VA**

The argument James uses to prove that Hegel did act in a viciously abstract way is found in the first volume of the *Principles*. The primary error Hegel commits comes from taking certain terms in his dialectic, namely 'being' and 'nothing', in a strict and

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<sup>48</sup> James, SPP, *ibid.*

static manner with no regard to how they actually arise in thought.<sup>49</sup> Words for James assist in conceptualization and cognition, allowing us to attach meaning to things which otherwise would have none. It is possible to take terms in a purely abstract sense, where they do not directly attach to the real-world experiences. Doing this is not necessarily committing vicious abstractionism, but one does so when one crosses the line and claims that definitions of words are the actual, complete, and exhaustive representations of what those words represent. This is the charge James levels at Hegel. The terms ‘being’ and ‘nothing,’ taken abstractly, can be conceptually linked in such a way that one can arrive at a new concept through the proposition ‘absolute being is absolute nothing.’ As James states, taken intellectually, both ‘being’ and ‘nothing’ evoke no sensorial images and are in that sense the same.<sup>50</sup> This is only because the original concepts themselves, the building blocks of the new concept, have been divorced from their real-world connections. “But,” writes James, these terms, when “taken dynamically, or as significant, --as *thought*,--their fringes of relation, their affinities and repugnances, their function and meaning, are felt and understood to be absolutely opposed.”<sup>51</sup> In the practical world, we perceive immediately the difference between being and non-being, between something and nothing, between existence and non-existence. They have real, dynamic relations which cannot be ignored.

This is not the only argument which James deploys to establish that Hegel is indulging in vicious abstractionism. The second argument is constructed from Hegel’s

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<sup>49</sup> James, POP 1, 265.

<sup>50</sup> James, POP 1, page 265.

<sup>51</sup> James, POP 1, *ibid*.

belief that perception does not yield any truth because the immediate data of the senses are not their own others.<sup>52</sup> Recall that an object is negated by its other, and then reconciled in an object-other synthesis. For something to be its own other means that it is negated by nothing less than itself. Hegel reserves this peculiar relation strictly for the Absolute. If the Absolute is all-encompassing, then whatever is taken as the negation is also part of the Absolute, whereas the negation of a sense-datum is a different sense-datum. Thus Hegel is lead to the conclusion that only the Absolute can be true.<sup>53</sup> James rightfully points out that this argument hinges on the assumption that objects of experience cannot be their own others. James accepts this, but only if one were to take the concept of the immediately given data of the senses in an abstract, conceptual manner.<sup>54</sup> Hegel only views sensory data as insufficient because he is taking the concept of sensation in an abstract and static way.

However, were one to take the immediate data of the senses and study them empirically, it is evident that some of them are their own others and remain true even under Hegel's system. When put back into the practical sphere, the insufficiency disappears, due to the natural flux of perception.<sup>55</sup> Even the most minute objects "compenetrate and are cohesive" with all other neighbouring objects.<sup>56</sup> Each object *contains* elements of every other object. If one takes the object plus its living relations instead of just its dead, bare existence, then "every minutest thing is already its Hegelian

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<sup>52</sup> James, PU, 53.

<sup>53</sup> James, PU, *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> James, PU, *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> James, PU, *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> James, PU, 121.



own other, in the fullest sense of the term.”<sup>57</sup> Any element in perception, when negated as the dialectic requires, will be negated by something else which contains the original element. Under Hegel’s own scheme, they should then be regarded as capable of yielding truth. It is only vicious abstractionism which keeps objects absolutely independent from everything else. Hegel’s view arises because he is only thinking about sensation in a viciously abstract way.

These are two clear examples of vicious abstractionism at work within Hegel’s system. The process itself is viciously abstract if it produces products which have the mark of vicious abstractionism. With these two arguments, James feels that he has proved that Hegel does in fact commit vicious abstractionism. Hegel’s system is built on terms which are only taken in a static manner, torn apart from the dynamic setting whence they arise. He treats the dynamic immediate experience as static and fixed. Through this, he is using concepts to represent percepts, which is by definition the vice of vicious abstractionism.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter represents the heart of James’s attack against Hegel. The strongest argument which James could make against any other philosopher was that of vicious abstractionism. To understand how devastating this argument can be, we first examined its roots in James’s psychology. We then corrected a longstanding problem in Jamesean literature by drawing a clear distinction between the concepts of vicious intellectualism and vicious abstractionism. Vicious intellectualism is a methodological problem, taking

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<sup>57</sup> James, PU, *ibid.*

the usual tenets of rationalism to an extreme degree by ignoring experiential evidence altogether. Vicious abstractionism, on the other hand, is a conceptual error made by unduly using one's concepts in place of one's percepts and mistaking the former for the latter. It is an error in one's thought rather than in one's methodology. It is using static concepts in place of dynamic concepts, without admitting or justifying the shift in use. In order to more clearly understand the difference and how it might apply to Hegel, we analyzed Zeno's paradox of the arrow and saw that the only way in which it can be completely solved is through vicious abstractionism. Our attention then turned to the specific arguments where James appears to be claiming that Hegel has committed vicious abstractionism. With all this completed, we must now put aside exposition and see if we can come to a conclusion about the debate over James's relationship with Hegel.

## **Chapter 4**

### **HISTORICAL JUDGEMENTS**

In the preceding chapter I detailed the concept of vicious abstractionism and showed how James indicated that Hegel was guilty of this vice. In this chapter, I will apply the concept of vicious abstractionism to the overarching questions with which this thesis deals. The critique of vicious abstractionism is the final effort required to keep James firmly outside of the Hegelian camp. It does this by moving the focus away from similarities in the specific positions of the two philosophers to the question of the proper use of concepts. Though the critique of vicious abstractionism is a strong argument which has potentially devastating effects on Hegelian philosophy, James does not mean it as a refutation, and nor should it be taken as such. James's criticism was meant to bring Hegelian philosophy back into philosophical discourse. Lastly, I will consider what use pragmatists could have for Hegelian philosophy despite its vicious abstractionism. With all of these questions answered, we shall be able to make firm historical judgements about the relationship between pragmatism and Hegelianism.

#### **Was James a Hegelian?**

One effect that the critique of vicious abstractionism has is on the first problem addressed in this thesis; namely, whether or not James was a Hegelian, or whether he made movements toward such a position later in his life. Those who would claim that James was a Hegelian show how he adheres to various positions which Hegel also accepts. They also attempt to show how certain changes of heart on the part of James indicate an inner conflict between his own radical empiricism and Hegelian philosophy.

At the end of the first chapter, I concluded that in order for any of these arguments to succeed, one must engage in a broad misrepresentation of James's position. They distort James's position to make it seem Hegelian, but they are just that: distortions.

Hegel shows many signs of vicious abstractionism in his system. His thought is muddled by substituting the perceptual order for his own conception of that order without realizing that there is a fundamental difference between the two, and that one cannot reconstruct the former through the latter. Nevertheless, this is not sufficient to make the criticism of vicious abstractionism in Hegel a success. For that, we must discuss the specific point at which Hegel commits this error.

The major case of vicious abstractionism in Hegel's philosophy concerns the phenomenon referred to by James as 'compenetration'. Compenetration refers to the relationship between different things. For James, everything compenetrates everything else, both conceptually and in experience. Though often used as roughly equivalent with the term 'overlap', compenetration is a deeper concept, as it implies a high degree of unity at the points of intersection not present in the idea of mere overlap. For example, consider the interplay between percepts and concepts discussed in the previous chapter, and especially how the latter refine the former. Though separate things, there is a strong unity involved. James writes: "in the real concrete sensible flux of life, experiences compenetrates each other so that it is not easy to know just what is excluded [as conceptual] and what not."<sup>1</sup> The compenetration of sensation and conception brings them together inextricably. Concepts are required for percepts to be intelligible, but in

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<sup>1</sup> James, PU, 113.

turn require percepts for content. Thus, though different things, they are so closely linked that one cannot tell them apart. They permeate throughout each other in such a way that their very natures co-penetrate. A similar phenomenon arises in the passage of time. For James, the experience of time is most properly the experience of duration. The specious present has a variable duration, and each experienced duration flows into other experienced durations, as “all *felt* times coexist and overlap or compenetrates each other.”<sup>2</sup> All things compenetrates all other things. Things *qua* things are not static, fixed entities, but have blurry edges and meld with each other.

Despite having a philosophy based on process and becoming, Hegel still treats things as being static through the process of determination. One determines something when one makes the assertion that the thing in question is that thing and not something else. To clarify what is meant by determination, consider James’s example of determining a glass of milk. When determining a glass of milk by asserting that it is that glass of milk, one excludes all other milk and all other glasses. In dialectic one must go beyond the given thing into its negation, and then negate the negation to reach a higher synthesis. Despite having this movement, it still entails a static conception of the universe. This is especially the case when one understands how compenetration functions. You do not need to go beyond an object of experience, for it is already compenetrating and being compenetrated by everything else. This was the foundation for the discussion of the concept of the ‘own other’ in the second chapter. James’s point was against Hegel’s requirement that for something to be at the deepest level of being it must

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<sup>2</sup> James, PU, 104.

be its own other, which he thought perception could not do. Through compenetration, things already are their own others, as they are part of things which they are not themselves. If Hegel had understood this, he would have been far more attentive to perception in his philosophy, but it is precisely this misunderstanding which prompts him to vicious abstractionism.

Morse's charge of false unity builds upon the discussion of the own other. Hegel determines that sense-certainty "cannot comprise its own direct relationship to other things (and cannot, therefore, adequately grasp within itself the whole of what is)".<sup>3</sup> This is what forces Hegel to conclude that the true content of sense-certainty is the universal.

As Morse explains:

It is only because [Hegel] can introduce the universal that he can then move on to perception (in which we make universal judgments) and then surpass it through understanding, and then surpass that through culture, and so on up to the Absolute. James is right: everything hinges for Hegel upon the way he characterizes sense certainty and what he demonstrates about it.<sup>4</sup>

Remember how Hegel intends to prove his position. He wants to examine sense-certainty not as it appears but as it actually is. He tries to do this through a rationalistic examination of the concept of sense-certainty, leading him to deny that it can yield any truth and must give way to the universal. It is easy to see how the argument depends on vicious abstractionism. Hegel has formed a concept of sense perception and has treated sense perception itself as if it were a concept. The fallacy is evident, and its effects are devastating.

James points out that Hegel's basis for believing that sense-certainty is a simple immediacy incapable of providing connections is not the conclusion of an argument, but

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<sup>3</sup> Morse, 206.

is instead simply *assumed*. Morse embellishes this point by showing that Hegel inherited Hume's idea of experience (via Kant) uncritically, an idea which James had already dismantled in his *Principles*.<sup>5</sup> In a text dedicated to examining experience, Hegel has uncritically accepted the view of experience common in his tradition. To counter Hegel's claims, James takes up the same project in earnest. He shows how Hegelian philosophy has completely lost touch with the experience it was supposed to be examining and has opted instead to follow its own conceptions. Hegel has committed the fallacy of false unity because a unity had already existed but was ignored. In its place was put a system of unity which is wholly artificial. Vicious abstractionism is thus the basis for the entire Hegelian system. Hegel would not have been able to get his project off of the ground without it.

### **Does James provide an argument against Hegel?**

Hegelian philosophy has thus been dealt a devastating blow. James has shown clearly that Hegel was being viciously abstract in his reasoning. By being viciously abstract Hegel has opened the door for a vast array of psychological problems to enter into his system, some of which are blatantly evident upon examination. As mentioned in the previous chapter, once vicious abstractionism has been found within a system, there is little that can be done in order to save that system. At this point we must explore the effects of James's argument on Hegelian philosophy. It shows that Hegel's reasoning is based on a psychological flaw. In order to correct this one must start from the very

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<sup>4</sup> Morse, 206.

<sup>5</sup> Morse, 209.

beginning again and work one's way towards a psychologically more tenable position, being careful not to make the same mistakes again.

This sounds as if James has been able to eradicate any hope for Hegelian philosophy and that it should be rejected, but James is emphatic that this is not the case. James does not intend his argument to support a wholesale rejection of Hegel, nor was he naive enough to believe that it accomplished that task. The concept of vicious abstractionism is not aimed at Hegel's philosophy *per se*, but rather at *Hegelians*. James believed that to truly understand a philosopher, one must catch the glimmer of insight that was the basis of the rest of his philosophy.<sup>6</sup> Philosophies are built around such glimmering insights, and one must work into the centre in order to reach them, and one ought to do so before one claims to know what any given philosopher is going on about. To James, Hegel is a special case which requires a certain amount of care.<sup>7</sup> James comes very close to likening Hegelian philosophy to a kind of addiction. Regarding Hegelian philosophy, James states that "once catch well the knack of this scheme of thought and you are lucky if you ever get away from it. It is all you can see ... your feeling of a contradiction being implied becomes a habit, almost a motor habit in some persons..."<sup>8</sup> An example of this addictive behaviour is the belief of absolutists that any possible chink in absolutism's armour could have potentially devastating consequences and must be resisted by any means necessary. James sees that he must undermine the glimmer itself in order to cure someone of this addiction.

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<sup>6</sup> James, PU, 44.

<sup>7</sup> James, PU, 48.

<sup>8</sup> James, PU, *ibid.*



James's concept of vicious abstractionism can be seen as the rehabilitation for those who have fallen into such an addiction. By revealing the Hegelian system as viciously abstract, those who are caught in it can start to break free and come back into the philosophical discussion. Recall that for James, one of the most aggravating facets of Hegelian philosophy was that it effectively removed itself from philosophical discourse. While not claiming that Hegel was flat out *wrong*, James has shown that how Hegel's argument was based on a blatantly flawed psychology that one cannot maintain. It may turn out that Hegel is correct; indeed, James admits that much of Hegel's philosophy is accurate about many things. However, why Hegel is correct is for far different reasons than the ones that he gives.

Ultimately, we must conclude that James is not providing an argument against Hegel in a strict sense; instead, and in keeping with the results of Chapter 2, we ought to consider James as playing the role of mediator. Philosophy can only function if all sides are willing to air their opinions in an open and honest fashion through recognizing that every philosophical position is a hypothesis that has not yet been proven. With even one position refusing to hold parley on such terms, conflict will proliferate. Current philosophy would be well to take notice of James on this point, lest an excess of certainty become commonplace. Progress can only be made when all sides are willing to reconsider their position if shown that they are wrong. Most philosophers would do this, but even one holdout is enough to stall progress. During James's time the main holdout was Hegelianism, and the critique of vicious abstractionism is meant to show Hegelians that they do not have the right to be as certain about their philosophy as they are.

Therefore, while vicious abstractionism provides a way for Hegelians to question their position, it does not provide the basis for any sort of rejection of Hegel.

Due to the effects the critique of vicious abstractionism has on Hegelian philosophy, it is no wonder that Hegelian philosophers have attempted to bring James into the Hegelian fold. If they can show James to be cut from the same cloth as Hegel, then any criticisms levelled at Hegel could rebound back onto James. This strategy fails on two counts. First, vicious abstractionism is meant to tone down Hegel, not refute him; thus, the Hegelians need not panic. Second, and more importantly, James is not viciously abstract himself, and therefore the criticisms cannot rebound back onto him, no matter how close James and Hegel are brought together. However, there is a second reason why Hegelians might be attempting this, outside of the debate currently at hand. Independently, scholars of both thinkers have unwittingly brought them closer together, or have at least expressed each of them in the other's language. As an example of this trend, we shall briefly examine Hegel's views on knowledge and experience as reported by Richard Norman, and James's role as a phenomenologist as portrayed by Charlene Haddock Seigfried.

In Norman's work, Hegel's critique of empiricism rests on a very *Jamesean* understanding of concepts. Consider the following quotation: "But 'experience' is itself impossible without concepts ... the 'empirical' and the 'conceptual' are equally essential moments in the totality; each requires the other to complete it."<sup>9</sup> This is strikingly similar to James's views on the same topic in *SPP*, as presented in the previous chapter; namely,

that experience requires concepts for form, and concepts require experience for function. Later, Norman describes Hegel's view of experience without concepts as 'pure flux.' But the point at which Hegel sounds the most like James is when Norman is discussing the active role of consciousness. Norman claims that Hegel holds that "consciousness must *work* on its object ... consciousness has to postulate an inner reality behind appearances in order to make sense of the appearances, and in this sense consciousness itself provides the inner world with its content."<sup>10</sup> It is easy to see how someone could begin to see how James may have been Hegelian in this light. The positions which Hegel is said to hold are appear quite similar to those James holds.

Recent scholarship on James sometimes reaches similar conclusions. Certain positions lend themselves especially well to being taken out of context. Such positions suggest that James was the torchbearer of the Hegelian project, finally completing what Hegel could not. Charlene Haddock Seigfried, for example, portrays James as being a precursor to phenomenology. While not intending for this to indicate any relation to Hegel, she makes a few statements which could be construed as such. She argues that James held that experience is constituted by the individual and that it deals with what "perceptually appears," bracketing the question of whether our experience corresponds to reality.<sup>11</sup> Because of this, James should be seen as having broken with the empiricist tradition and "align[ed] him[self] with the constructivist tradition of Kant and Hegel,

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Norman, *Hegel's Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction*, (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 44.

<sup>10</sup> Norman, 44-45.

<sup>11</sup> Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 76.

although not with their transcendental analyses.”<sup>12</sup> As she sets it up, James believes that what is experienced is what is real. She is evasive on whether or not James believed that there were real things which were not experienced. The issue is further confounded by remarks made by Morse. Morse explains that James’s own position is formed by taking Hegel’s project seriously, and attempting the same rigorous analysis of experience, but in a less abstract way.<sup>13</sup> Of course, neither Seigfried nor Morse support the view that James was a Hegelian, nor do I want to suggest such a thing. Instead, I suggest that it is quite possible to misconstrue their work in such a way that one can use their work to support such a position if one so wished. Recall from the first chapter that those who are forcing James into the Hegelian camp are misinterpreting James and his project. A person in such a position is also likely to misinterpret scholarship on James in order to further their own arguments. Seigfried and Morse are examples of how James scholars may also be unwittingly fuelling the fire.

### **What can a pragmatist learn from Hegel?**

The superficial similarities between James and Hegel raise the question about what kind of relationship could exist between pragmatists and Hegelians. More precisely, one must consider what pragmatists could still learn from Hegel, apart from the facetious claim that he is an example of how not to do philosophy. As we shall see, there is still a great deal that a pragmatist could learn from Hegel, and the relationship between pragmatism and Hegelianism need not be hostile.

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<sup>12</sup> Seigfried, 322.

<sup>13</sup> Morse, 209-211.

James himself shows a certain degree of appreciation for Hegel in the *Varieties*. To James, a great deal can be learned if one stops holding a Hegelian position as if it were a religion (an intolerant overbelief), and starts looking at it as a religious view in and of itself, and possibly extra-philosophical. The driving force behind Hegel's views, James says, was plainly the result of a mystical feeling, a feeling which is not uncommon among other mystics.<sup>14</sup> Granted, James was comparing this particular feeling with the effects of inhaling nitrous oxide, but even in that case "the sense of a profound meaning having been there persists," and this sense of newfound meaning can persist after the intoxication has worn off.<sup>15</sup> This feeling is that things are not separate from each other, that all things are connected in some way.

The first lesson that pragmatists could then learn from Hegel is that even if the nature of reality is pluralistic, things are not forever shut off from everything else. They compenetrates in some fashion or another. James describes this belief as the "monistic insight," and in most others it usually leads to accepting a monistic position.<sup>16</sup> After reading through James's views on pluralism and monism, it is striking to see James attribute a certain degree of truth to mystical positions, and extend that truth to a thesis which he disagrees with almost in its entirety. I believe that Wilkins has a reasonable explanation for this. Because of the historical context in which James was writing, a great deal of time and effort was spent combating various aspects of Hegelian philosophy, often leaving very little time for a full statement of his own position. In other

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<sup>14</sup> James, VRE, 336.

<sup>15</sup> James, VRE, 335; See also OSH. In this passage of the *Varieties*, James is severely playing down the point he made in *OSH*. This provides further proof for Wilkin's point that James's hostility to Hegel waned as Hegel's influence declined.

words, James spent so long fighting Hegelian monism that he was pushed into pluralism, and was unable to provide a systematic explanation of the connectedness prevalent in experience as well as the monistic insight.<sup>17</sup> Support for this position comes from the nature of James's own work. Most of the works available to us are lectures he presented at various events or personal correspondence with others, throughout which a recurring theme is the defence of pragmatism against those who have misunderstood it. James still saw that there was merit to Hegel's monistic insight, and that he needed to account for it in his own philosophy in some way. Despite the poor basis for believing what he did, Hegel was correct in indicating that there must be some connection between things.

Another lesson which can be learned from Hegel is that experience always presents a modified view of what one is experiencing, but with the further understanding that this does not amount to an idealism. A pragmatist who took this point to heart was John Dewey. During the years spent at Johns Hopkins, Dewey was highly influenced by Hegelian philosophy, though he felt that many of its concepts were better understood once they were "completely emancipated from the Hegelian garb."<sup>18</sup> Through correspondence with James and others, Dewey was converted to pragmatism. Despite this conversion, Dewey was always influenced by Hegelian philosophy. It had, in his words, "left a permanent deposit in my thinking."<sup>19</sup> Dewey's primary disagreement with

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<sup>16</sup> James, VRE, 336.

<sup>17</sup> As a result of having to argue against Hegel at length, James was left unable to provide detailed explanations about his own concepts in a clear manner. Thus we have the concept of compenetration as James's recognition of the connectedness of things, but do not have any rigorous explanation of this concept and what it is meant to entail in James's own work.

<sup>18</sup> George Dykhuizen, "John Dewey at Johns Hopkins (1882-1884)", in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22, no. 1 (Jan.-Mar., 1961), 114.

<sup>19</sup> Dykhuizen, *ibid.*

James's pragmatism was over the existence of 'brute facts', a hypothesis espoused by empiricists of all stripes.<sup>20</sup> Brute facts are facts which are true regardless of any observer or perspective on such facts. The Hegelian critique of empiricism challenges the possibility of such facts, claiming that brute facts are usually considered negatively: if you take away all perspectives, you are left with the brute fact of the thing. Hegel's point is that when one is considering something, one is considering it in a modified sense, as it has been altered by one's consciousness and concepts.<sup>21</sup> To remove one's viewpoint does not leave as a remainder a thing in itself, but rather a modified version of the thing as it is.

Pragmatism's relationship with Hegelian philosophy can thus be cautious and not necessarily outright hostile. Indeed, much of the early development of pragmatism was dependent upon Hegelian philosophy. Without Hegelian philosophy, pragmatism as we know it would not exist. Hegelianism provided the framework for which positions in pragmatism were developed and which were not. As Wilkins notes, James may have been able to provide a more consistent and coherent system in his radical empiricism if he had not spend so much effort arguing against Hegelianism.<sup>22</sup> Much of the work we have from James is not so much an argument for pragmatism in and of itself, but rather an elaborate response of a pragmatist to Hegelianism. Pragmatism was defined by going

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<sup>20</sup> Though Dewey himself claims that he was won over by Hegelianism, it is important to note that the true duration of Dewey's Hegelian phase has been questioned. While most consider the phase to have lasted for the majority of his graduate career at Johns Hopkins, R. Jackson Wilson argues that it really was only the last portion of his last year there. Along with this claim is that Dewey played up his Hegelian sympathies and was not as much of a Hegelian as he suggested he was. Even if this were the case, Wilson still agrees that Dewey stayed more Hegelian on the one point addressed above. See R. Jackson Wilson, review of *The American Hegelians; An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America*, by William H. Goetzmann, *History of Education Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (Spring, 1975): 90-92.

outside of itself and negating the opposing viewpoint, but by doing so brought itself into a relationship with that opposite. There is not a small amount of irony involved in this.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have answered all of the questions required to make three important historical judgements about the relationship between James and Hegel. First, despite any superficial similarities between the two camps, the critique of vicious abstractionism must keep James from ever seriously being construed as a Hegelian. Even if someone were to show that James held some of the same points as Hegel, vicious abstractionism drives a wedge between the two which cannot be removed. The second judgement is that while vicious abstractionism does keep James and Hegel apart, it does not refute Hegelianism. I argued that James did not intend for his argument to perform such a function; rather, it was meant to bring Hegelianism back into philosophical discourse by showing a flaw in their psychology. The last judgement is that pragmatists still can learn a great deal from Hegelian philosophy through recognizing what it gets right as well as respecting how much of an impact it had on the development of pragmatism. A pragmatist can still admit that Hegelian philosophy was correct to emphasize process. It also was correct to treat the ‘monistic insight’ seriously and to maintain that all things are connected in some way and not radically disconnected from each other. Lastly, Hegel was correct to focus on how all experience is mediated, and that a naive realism is impossible, a point which influenced Dewey especially. A

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<sup>21</sup> Hegel, PS, *Introduction*.

<sup>22</sup> Wilkins, 341-343.



pragmatist should then be cautious about Hegelian philosophy, but need not feel eternally opposed to it.

Thus all of the questions surrounding this debate have been answered. Though we should admire the attempt to bring different philosophers together in an effort to better understand the relationship between them, this reconciliation should not be encouraged when it requires the blatant misconstruing of one or both of the philosophers in question. In this case, it requires misconstruing James. With the better understanding of the foundation of Jamesean pragmatism gained through this project, more progress can be made in finding the proper place for James in the history of philosophy.

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