

"Fusion of Fact and Value in Jamesian Pragmatism"
David Kalupahana

Response By
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David Kalupahana proposes that the habits of thinking philosophically in the West have incorporated certain troublesome images of human knowledge. Plato and the idealist tradition following him assumed as a realizable or at least a worthy goal that humans might achieve absolute certainty as knowers. Later empiricist philosophers and empirically oriented scientists claimed to have found that certainty in sensory experience. There arose in Western thinking a dichotomy between the knowledge of the external and concrete world regarded as objective and the subjective conventional realm of human value. Scientists and philosophers of science largely accepted this bifurcated outlook until a convincing conceptual framework overcoming the fact-value split emerged in Western philosophy in American pragmatism. Peirce presented important new philosophical notions but his vision was too much that of a philosopher seeing through a Kantian aperture; according to Kalupahana, it was James, the empirical psychologist-- the careful student attentive to the parameters and dynamics of human experience--who decisively undermined the absolute distinction between fact and value.

In Professor Kalupahana's account, James' thought carries the principle of pragmatism into the arena of psychology, an arena Peirce was reluctant to enter. The Jamesian notion of consciousness as a stream is its author's unique contribution to psychology and philosophy. As a new image in the philosopher's conceptual toolbox, the "stream of consciousness" may be regarded as a conceptual revolution in which James abandoned the conception of a metaphysical subject.

Kalupahana reviews James' treatment of consciousness by focusing upon the five theses in James' original discussion. Thoughts are features of personal

consciousness, James insisted; he thereby stressed that thoughts must always be viewed in relation to the dynamic pattern of other thoughts unique to the individual. James emphasized that within personal consciousness thought is always an emergent; it is the ongoing and incessantly varying character of the stream which invalidates the readily accessible (electronic and mechanical) metaphors we often employ to imagine the exact reproducibility of thoughts. Thought is sensibly continuous within personal consciousness, James contended: even when there is a time gap, consciousness after the gap feels as if it belongs with consciousness before the gap; also changes from moment to moment in the quality of consciousness are never absolutely abrupt.

It is the case, as Kalupahana notes, that James places great emphasis upon "felt relations"⁽⁹⁾¹ in consciousness. Here it seems advisable briefly to press beyond Kalupahana's account and examine the broader Jamesian lexicon in which his discussion of "feelings of relation" fit:

The lingering consciousness of simple objects, we call 'sensations' or 'images,' according as they are vivid or faint; if of complex objects, we call them 'percepts' when vivid, 'concepts' or 'thoughts' when faint. For the swift consciousness we have only those names of 'transitive states,' or 'feelings of relation,' which we have used.²

James saw streaming consciousness as "like a bird's life, it seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings".³ He called the perchings or resting places "substantive parts" and the flights between perches "transitive parts".⁴ Thought moves from one substantive part to the next but James' interest was in the usually overlooked "transitive parts" which he regarded as critically important components of consciousness. Historically, James held, this overlooking had taken two forms (i.e., two schools), the sensationalists and the intellectualists. The sensationalists

unable to lay their hands on any coarse feeling corresponding to the innumerable relations and forms of connection between the facts of the world, finding no named subjective modifications mirroring such relations, they have for the most part denied that feelings of relation exist, and many of them, like Hume, have gone so far as to deny the reality of most relations out of the mind as well as in it.⁵

Intellectualists accept the basic sensationalist conclusion that empirically the "relations" or "forms of connection between the facts of the world" (i.e., the unnamed "transitive parts") are not present; intellectualists hold that such relations are known mentally:

The relations must be known, they say, in something that is no feeling, no mental modification continuous and consubstantial with the subjective tissue out of which sensations and other substantive states are made. They are known, these relations, by something that lies on an entirely different plane, by an actus purus of Thought, Intellect or Reason, all written with capitals and considered to mean something unutterably superior to any fact of sensibility whatever.

As Kalupahana notes, James rejects both sensationalists and intellectualists; both have failed to recognize "feelings of relation" as a part of experience. I am puzzled, however, that Professor Kalupahana sees James' analysis of felt relations as leading into a Jamesian distinction between "statements that presuppose objectivity and those that imply subjective involvement without denying objectivity"(9).

The apparent independence of objects outside of thought is itself a habit of thought according to James; under his fourth thesis he argues this habit is a function of the fecundity of thinking (i.e., the multiplicity of our thoughts) and the commonality of our objects of thought (i.e., many thoughts with the same object). Spaces, times, things and qualities, according to James, in their most primordial aspects are a part of experience (the "stream of consciousness") and can be identified neither as external to the thinking subject or self-conscious thought constructions. James allows that mind does become conscious of its own cognitive functions. But reflective consciousness of the cognitating self is not a necessary prerequisite for the kind of experience which streaming consciousness makes possible.

Finally, it is the selectivity of the "stream of consciousness" which Kalupahana identifies as the Jamesian theme which most directly bridges the fact-value dichotomy. In perception, the stream of thought "carves out its

object" (12); in reasoning, thought picks out from many parts that which "in our given emergency, may lead to the proper conclusion"(12). The active artist selects and rejects from the manifold of possibility in order to achieve purposes; similarly, the human being as a moral agent shaping action chooses from among equally possible courses. Because the thinking stream is always already figured and configuring, James' analysis of perception, reasoning, aesthetic judgment and ethical judgment brings together fact and value. In his conception of the "self-sufficiency of the stream, of thinking as a natural working that needs no additional 'operator' to produce its effects", James is able to "repel the intrusion of all metaphysics"⁷; he, as Kaluphana notes, is able to solemnize the marriage between fact and value "without having to admit extra-empirical postulates" (12).

Kalupahana turns, in the last half of his paper, from the initial review of basic characteristics of the "stream of consciousness" to other considerations which clarify the lasting importance of this Jamesian concept. He quotes a lengthy section from the final chapter of Principles of Psychology ("Necessary Truths and the Effects of Experience") which again reveals James' criticism of and constructive departure from both sensationalism and rationalism . The sensationalists hold that the knowledge of the subject reflects, in appropriately corresponding sequence, the succession of impressions of an external world; the rationalists argue that the knowing self or mind plays a grander role in forming knowledge independent of the input of the senses. But James, as Barzun notes, has transcended this framing of the problem which worries about how things outside the mind get inside⁸. James as a radical empiricist "made consciousness-as-we-feel-it the starting point instead of the end product; he derived the elements from the activity instead of the activity from the elements".⁹ James thus avoids the debate between sensationalists and apriorists because he posits consciousness as a function, as an ongoing, changing selective

stream, rather than as an entity .¹⁰ The stream is itself a valuing process; the "facts" which are real (i.e., construed as external events and relations) are responses from and within the valuing stream. As Kalupahana suggests, James' "stream of consciousness " is a philosophical foundation which allows James "to locate both facts and values in the world of experience" (16).

The importance of James' new and strikingly remodeled image of the Cartesian thinking subject has been, Professor Kalupahana argues, largely ignored by modern intellectuals. He presents examples in John C. Eccles and Wittgenstein; the latter preserved the non-psychological bent of modern philosophy in insisting the philosophical self is the metaphysical subject. Thomas Nagel more recently in A View From Nowhere has contemplated the limited ambience of philosophical thinking which moves in the groove set by an impossible ideal of ultimate objectivity. Kalupahana sensitively contrasts James' positions with those of Nagel. For James, perspectivalism is the human way: "For him, a view from nowhere is no view at all" (20). James abandons the search for absolute objectivity and "presents a rather flexible conception of the 'factual world' which accomodates human perspectives while allowing its modification in light of future or possible worlds" (20). Finally, although James abandons the rigidly distinguishable world of facts and values and even its manifestations in the quest for ultimate objectivity in ethics, James did not abandon moral discourse; ethical questions are both practical and inevitable.

In sum, Professor Kalupahana's account of James' "stream of consciousness" and its bearing on traditional philosophical distinctions between fact and value is an insightful and incisive placing of James within the context of modern Western philosophical discourse.

The three questions I raise below do not dispute matters internal to reading James; my queries are broadly concerned with how Jamesian perspectives fit or fail to fit with other philosophical strands and how such perspectives

contribute toward convergences in world philosophy.

(1) Professor Kalupahana suggests that it is philosophy's continuing interest in a metaphysical subject and this subject's limits that "give us the objective world of scientism and the subjective world represented by the metaphysical self recognized in some philosophical and religious traditions"(18). This cryptic phrase seemingly implies a Jamesian critique of important figures and perhaps the sweep of modern European religious and philosophical thought. Although it admittedly will be to paint with a broad brush, I would like to hear brief comments from a Jamesian view on the "misguided footsteps" along the path from Kant to Derrida.

(2) In particular I suggest that it may be appropriate to note ways in which some modern thinkers more directly in the Kantian stream emerge from the stream in places which seem to resemble the spot James (with his new conception of consciousness) departed from the stream. The early Heidegger, for example, in his existential ontology eliminates the metaphysical subject as a conscious entity separated from the world: "Dasein is its world existingly."¹¹ Polanyi, likewise, with his functional distinctions between tacit and explicit components of knowing seems, much like James, to undermine perspectives which assume sharp distinctions between facts and values. Are there not points of convergence between James and figures like these?

(3) Let us grant, as Professor Kalupahana argues, that James takes philosophy beyond conceptual habits which separate sharply fact and value. What counsel does James offer those in the late twentieth century who are perhaps more perplexed by pluralism¹² than by sharp divisions between fact and value. It strikes me that James celebrated diversity but that he lived in a time in which such a stance felt altogether like an opportunity rather than also like a threat.

Notes

¹ References to David J. Kalupahana's "Fusion of Fact and Value in Jamesean Pragmatism" are noted simply by page number in parenthesis following the quoted section.

² William James, The Principles of Psychology, ed. Frederick Burkhardt and Fredson Bowers, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981, 1983, p. 239.

³ The Principles of Psychology, p. 236.

⁴ The Principles of Psychology, p. 236.

⁵ The Principles of Psychology, p. 237.

⁶ The Principles of Psychology, p. 238.

⁷ Jacques Barzun, A Stroll With William James, New York: Harper and Row, 1983, p. 49.

⁸ A Stroll with William James, p. 110.

⁹ A Stroll with William James, p. 48.

¹⁰ A Stroll with William James, p. 110.

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, translated John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962, p. 416.

¹² For a recent (one of many) discussion see the Spring 1986 edition of Critical Inquiry (Vol. 12, No. 13); this special topical issue is titled "Pluralism and Its Discontents."