

William James's Pure Experience and How it is Used to Understand and Build our World.

By Gary M. Jaron

James gave a lecture in 1894 to the Aristotelian Society, where he made the following foundational remark: *"Every science must make some assumptions."*¹

James and I assume that we experience living in a single common shared physical universe. However, we do not live in a single common shared social universe.

Now, let's explore how James describes how we experience and come to know this physical world. It all begins with his concept of pure experience. If someone asks, does pure experience exist? The answer James could give is the following:

*...I myself spoke early in this article of a stuff of pure experience, I have now to say that there is no **general** stuff of which experience at large is made. ...Experience is only a collective name for all these sensible natures, and save for time and space (and, if you like, for 'being') there appears no universal element of which all things are made.*²

The crucial statement is: *"There is no general stuff of which experience at large is made."* Pure Experience (PE) is not a thing, not a substance of any sort or kind that could have an existence. Thus, to ask 'Does pure experience exist?' is to actually ask a nonsense question. It is like asking, 'Does seeing exist?' Or 'Does tasting exist?' Seeing, tasting, or having a PE does occur, but you cannot see seeing, or see tasting, or see the PE process. They are words that describe the process of encountering our world. PE is an event, a form of an experience. What I believe James is trying to do is to get you to feel the experience of how it is that we encounter the world.

Let me explain, imagine yourself just before you wake up, and you are still just betwixt and between, between dream sleep and awake. The dreaming has stopped, and at this simple moment, all there is—is silence and darkness. You, at this moment, just feel that there is nothing besides perhaps your beating heart and the sound of your breathing. Then suddenly, you hear your alarm and, at that moment, feel as if something just exploded into existence. Out of nothing, a sound came to be. Then there is the first thought, "Oh. That's my alarm going off." Now you feel that there is noise and there is yourself, yet the world is not fully formed, but it is about to be. When you open your eyes, then—ta-da! In a burst of perception, it is as if 'Let there be light!' created the world. The world felt like it was formed out of nothingness just at your command—that act of opening your eyes.

Of course, you do, in fact, exist encased by your body within your mind. You can never escape from this experience of encountering the world from this vantage point. There is always lurking

¹ (W. James, *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to Pragmatism* 1909, 16)

² (W. James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* 1912, 26-27)

Pure Experience and how it is used to Understand and Build our World

imperceptively a sense of that fleeing immediate first-person present tense flux of life³, which James calls pure experience. PE is the event of feeling the nonverbal sense of encountering the world and your own body. It is a feeling, an experience of solipsistic fiction, of feeling that you and you alone seem to be the only sentient being, it is fiction, but it is how it **feels**. It is an example of a mindfulness meditative state.

Mindfulness is a type of meditation in which you focus on being intensely aware of what you're sensing and feeling in the moment, without interpretation or judgment⁴.

Interpretation and judgments come with the addition of applying conceptions to that which you just experienced. Pure experience is not primary; it is simply primal. PE is simply a stage of experience, the earliest biological processes before the brain/mind reflects upon what was taken in and starts to pull in the higher resources of the brain/mind; it is percepts before the addition of concepts. PE is when you reflect on that fleeting feeling of present tense when you are left in the present to dwell on what was immediately past. You are examining your own past experiences and are now in the process of applying concepts to your perceptions. Once James realized this primal event, he became fascinated by it and wished to explore it and describe it since no one before him seemed to have noticed it. Hence his many essays try to explain this phenomenon of events.

The only way to understand PE is to keep reminding yourself that it is an 'experience'—a feeling. James did not call it 'Pure Thing' or 'Pure Substance' or 'Pure Being' or any other metaphysical term, pointing to some dualistic notion to raise ontological issues and questions of primal stuff. The term means that it is a type of experience.

Definition of experience

1a: direct observation of or participation in events as a basis of knowledge

b: the fact or state of having been affected by or gained knowledge through direct observation or participation

2a: practical knowledge, skill, or practice derived from direct observation of or participation in events or in a particular activity

b: the length of such participation:

'has 10 years' experience in the job'

3: something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through

4a: the conscious events that make up an individual life

b: the events that make up the conscious past of a community or nation or humankind generally

5: the act or process of directly perceiving events or reality⁵

Pure Experience is an experience that is pure. Pure of what? The answer is it is pure percepts,

³ *'...the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories.'* (W. James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* 1912, 93)

⁴ (Mayo Clinice.org 2020)

⁵ (Merriam-Webster 2022)

devoid of concepts. The experience is one of a percept—perception alone. If you keep returning to that idea and don't lose sight of it, you can unravel what James wrote.

PE is not a substance of any sort, not a physical substance, and not a metaphysical substance. This is the fundamental difference between my own understanding of James and Wesley Cooper's and Richard Gale's. Cooper believes there is a '*world of PE*⁶', and it is '*proto-mental in nature*⁷', out of which we extract minds, bodies, and the rest of the physical stuff. Cooper is a dualist who thinks the world consists of physical and metaphysical things. James is not a dualist.

Gale when he summarized what was to him all of James's seemingly contradictory statements concerning PE, Gale wrote, "*...it looks as if the metaphysical interpretation of pure experience wins.*⁸" This seems to mean that for Gale, PE is a metaphysical statement, not one that points to external physical reality. Cooper and Gale are both wrong when they think that James believes that PE is some kind of metaphysical 'stuff' PE is what it says it is- it is the experience of encountering the physical world in our minds purely without any concepts. It is the state of just being in the moment without reflection. James is trying to describe that moment, trying to describe that feeling and imagine how it seems to feel.

James does believe in the primal fact of physicality; however, James as the pluralist that he is, sees no value in reducing anything down to any one aspect of a physical factor. The significance is that the world is made up of many physical things, and the interactions of those things are the how and whys of the world. Just saying that the world is physical does not lead to any sort of understanding. James's focus on the multitude and not on the singular abstraction or reductive fact makes him a pluralist, not a monist. Complete reduction to monism is the elimination of insight and understanding. It is a useless activity. James is trying to get us to be sensitive to the multiplicity and subtlety of existence.

PE is significant not because it is of primary importance or primary significance but because it is primal and thus an experience that is pure. PE is just the experience of feeling perceptions before we have the experience of applying any and all concepts. All concepts must be added to and brought out of the PE event to create clarity in our understanding of ourselves and our world.

James is trying to get us to realize that we live inside our minds, which are housed in a physical form, our bodies. However, we experience the world as if we were some kind of 'ghost in the machine' that is our body. That is what PE is trying to get us to realize. To recognize that although our bodies interact directly with the shared physical world and are elements found in that same physical world, our experience of that event and interaction is all felt in our minds. Our experience is all we have. It may be the result of how our body operates as part of the physical world, but we don't experience it as simply a PE. Since we usually don't just dwell in that state of PE. We inevitably allow ourselves in our ever-moving stream of consciousness to reflect back on the PE event, and thus we experience it through the layers of

⁶ (Cooper 2002, 4)

⁷ (Cooper 2002, 4)

⁸ (Gale 1999, 207)

concepts of that encounter. Hence that 'ghost-in-the-machine' feeling.

When we tried to understand PE and reflect back on the prior PE event, we are in the process of making up and utilizing concepts for everything. Thus, we experience the world as being made up of concepts in our mind – our thoughts, feelings, emotions, and the things we feel that we are encountering are all experienced as if it was made up of the same stuff – it is all labels of our mind trying to describe and understand the very physical PE event. James is doing the ultimate act of introspective analysis. He is thinking about how it feels to think and feel. Recognizing that only in the mindfulness meditative state of PE are we actually in touch with our physicality and the world. But, once we reflect on that experience, we destroy the purity of the PE and build something new. That something is the conceptual space and conceptual experience of being a body in the physical world. It is us living in our personal conceptual world and also living in a shared socially constructed conceptual world. Through that act of reflection, **it is as if** we create out of the PE a world of us, the subjects who feel, and the objects that are felt. We pull our concepts from past PEs, and we fashion new concepts out of those PE as well.

Now, I agree with Immanuel Kant⁹; there are concepts 'known' to us prior to experience. Kant never considered where they might be and therefore never talks about where they 'are' Those a priori concepts do not exist in some kind of Platonic world of Ideas. Rather, I believe they are built into the very fabric of our body's neural network. We, and all animals, take actions depending on our reality, and built into all of us is the expectations of those a prioris—space, time, causality, etc. Initially, for us, they are unconscious assumptions. Eventually, we do consciously label them with the terms causality, space, time, etc.—these are our foundational concepts.

As for how we learn from experience, James's explanation begins with *pure experience*:

By the adjective 'pure' prefixed to the word 'experience', I mean to denote a form of being which is as yet neutral or ambiguous, and prior to the object and subject distinction. I mean to show that the attribution either of mental or physical being to an experience is due to nothing in the immediate stuff of which the experience is composed,—for the same stuff will serve for either attribution—but rather to two contrasted groups of associates with either of which, as they add themselves to the original experience, our reflection upon it tends to connect it, and which in their totality are classed as the mental and the physical world. Functioning in the whole context of other experiences in one way, an experience figures as a mental fact. Functioning in another way, it figures as a physical object. In itself it is actually neither, but virtually both.¹⁰

James was in that single quotation summarizing all that I have been trying to describe. Pure experience is an event. It is the fleeting moment of our experience of the world as we feel it before having the chance to think about it at all. We are just in that mere fleeting moment of immediacy before we get lost in thinking and reflecting on what is happening. Descartes started from the first principle of "I think; therefore I am." James seems to be replacing that with "I experience; therefore I am." I feel, perceive, and

⁹ (Kant 1781, 1787) & (Collins 1999)

¹⁰ (W. James, *The Works of William James: Manuscript Essays and Notes* 1988, 26-27)

sense—all of that is captured in the word ‘experience’

*Experience, I believe, has no such inner duplicity; and the separation of it into consciousness and content comes, not by way of subtraction but by way of addition. ...I maintain, does a given undivided portion of experience, taken in one context of associates, play the part of a knower, of a state of mind, of ‘consciousness’; while in a different context the same undivided bit of experience plays the part of a thing known, of an objective ‘content’ In a word, in one group it figures as a thought, in another group as a thing. And, since it can figure in both groups simultaneously we have every right to speak of it as subjective and objective both at once.*¹¹

PE is the feeling of being before the separation into awareness of our conscious mind encountering the content of the world. After that feeling moment of pure awareness, once we begin reflection, we move into thought and start putting labels on things. That’s when we recognize that we are a being-with-a-body and experiencing stuff outside our mind. We recognize that we live within a shared common world of stuff with other people just like us. James describes the experience as connecting consciousness and content, awareness of observing an object, and awareness of the object as observed.

We call the first collection the system of external realities, in the midst of which the room, as ‘real’, exists; the other we call the stream of our internal thinking, in which as a ‘mental image’, it for a moment floats.

[There are the external physical realities of stuff and our body; there is that ongoing inner stream of conscious thought that is our inner monologue recounting what we experience.] *The room thus again gets counted twice over. It plays two different roles...the thought-of-an-object, and the object-thought-of, both in one; and all this without paradox or mystery, just as the same material thing maybe both low and high...because of its relations to opposite parts of an enviroing world.*

*As ‘subjective’ we say that the experience represents; as ‘objective’ it is represented. What represents and what is represented is here numerically the same; but we must remember that no dualism of being and representing resides in the experience *per se*. In its pure state, or when isolated, there is no self-splitting of it into consciousness and what the consciousness is ‘of’ Its subjectivity and objectivity are functional attributes solely, realized only when the experience is ‘taken’, i.e., talked of, twice, considered along with its two differing contexts respectively, by a new retrospective experience, of which that whole past complication now forms the fresh context.*

*The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the ‘pure’ experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet.*¹²

The physical room can be ‘counted’ twice, once as the external to our body and thus external to our mind, a collection of physical stuff, and then the second count is our internal mental construct of how we understand our body being in that room. We live in two environments—a constructive mental and a

¹¹ (W. James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* 1912, 9-10)

¹² (W. James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* 1912, 22-23)

physical one.

If you mistake thinking of PE as a thing and not as an attempt to describe a feeling, you can misunderstand this idea of counting. In unpacking and reflecting on a PE event, we can point to an object existing in the physical room and the mental representation of the object that 'exists' in our mental recollection of that room. Those two 'objects' are not identical, and we will always be mistaken if we treat them as identical. Our mental object is hopefully similar to the physical object; thus, we can communicate to ourselves and others about that physical object.

For me, PEs, our precepts, are an attempt to point back to The Territory – the infinite physical universe of which we are both a part of and that we interact with and thus experience. All our concepts are maps that we make of the Territory. All maps are finite and static. Whereas the Territory is dynamically infinite.

James ends his essay *On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings* with a telling statement concerning the need for tolerance and humility.

And now what is it the result of all these considerations and quotations?...It absolutely forbids us to be forward in pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own; and it commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us. Hands off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands. Even prisons and sick-rooms have their special revelations. It is enough to ask of each of us that he should be faithful to his own opportunities and make the most of his own blessings, without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field.¹³

James is telling us that we cull out knowledge of our world from direct means, which he will elsewhere call knowledge-by-acquaintance or indirect means, which he will elsewhere call knowledge-about, and from those we build our maps of the Territory, that which is the totality of the Universe past and present. From our first-person biased perspective create our knowledge of the universe. Thus, we need to be tolerant of people who see things differently than we do. So long as both our working maps of the Territory have enough significant similarities so that we have an agreement as to what is going on, we can function harmoniously together in our shared physical universe.

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¹³ (W. James, Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals 1899, 129)

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Pure Experience and how it is used to Understand and Build our World

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