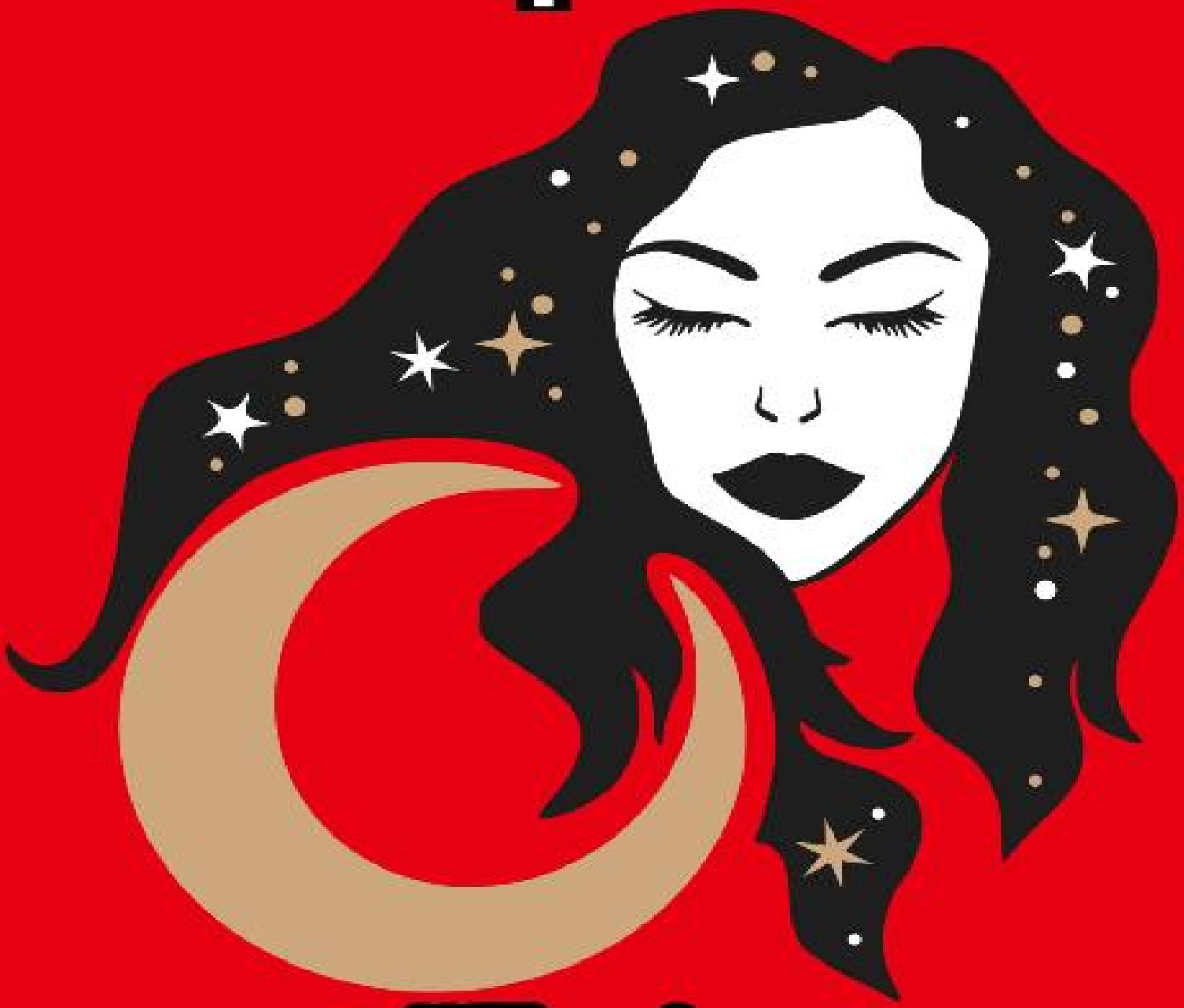
Essays in Radical Empiricism



William James

EDITOR'S PREFACE

The present volume is an attempt to carry out a plan which William James is known to have formed several years before his death. In 1907 he collected reprints in an envelope which he inscribed with the title 'Essays in Radical Empiricism'; and he also had duplicate sets of these reprints bound, under the same title, and deposited for the use of students in the general Harvard Library, and in the Philosophical Library in Emerson Hall.

Two years later Professor James published *The Meaning of Truth* and *A Pluralistic Universe*, and inserted in these volumes several of the articles which he had intended to use in the 'Essays in Radical Empiricism.' Whether he would nevertheless have carried out his original plan, had he lived, cannot be certainly known. Several facts, however, stand out very clearly. In the first place, the articles included in the original plan but omitted from his later volumes are indispensable to the understanding of his other writings. To these articles he repeatedly alludes. Thus, in *The Meaning of Truth* (p. 127), he says: "This statement is probably excessively obscure to any one who has not read my two articles 'Does Consciousness Exist?' and 'A World of Pure Experience.'" Other allusions have been indicated in the present text. In the second place, the articles originally brought together as 'Essays in Radical Empiricism' form a connected whole. Not only were most of them written consecutively within a period of two years, but they contain numerous cross-references. In the third place, Professor James regarded 'radical empiricism' as an *independent* doctrine. This he asserted expressly: "Let me say that there is no logical connexion between pragmatism, as I understand it, and a doctrine which I have recently set forth as 'radical empiricism.' The latter stands on its own feet. One may entirely reject it and still be a pragmatist." (*Pragmatism*, 1907, Preface, p. ix.) Finally, Professor James came toward the end of his life to regard 'radical empiricism' as more fundamental and more important than 'pragmatism.' In the Preface to *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), the author gives the following explanation of his desire to continue, and if possible conclude, the controversy over pragmatism: "I am interested in another doctrine in philosophy to which I give the name of radical

empiricism, and it seems to me that the establishment of the pragmatist theory of truth is a step of first-rate importance in making radical empiricism prevail" (p. xii).

In preparing the present volume, the editor has therefore been governed by two motives. On the one hand, he has sought to preserve and make accessible certain important articles not to be found in Professor James's other books. This is true of Essays I, II, IV, V, VIII, IX, X, XI, and XII. On the other hand, he has sought to bring together in one volume a set of essays treating systematically of one independent, coherent, and fundamental doctrine. To this end it has seemed best to include three essays (III, VI, and VII), which, although included in the original plan, were afterwards reprinted elsewhere; and one essay, XII, not included in the original plan. Essays III, VI, and VII are indispensable to the consecutiveness of the series, and are so interwoven with the rest that it is necessary that the student should have them at hand for ready consultation. Essay XII throws an important light on the author's general 'empiricism,' and forms an important link between 'radical empiricism' and the author's other doctrines.

In short, the present volume is designed not as a collection but rather as a treatise. It is intended that another volume shall be issued which shall contain papers having biographical or historical importance which have not yet been reprinted in book form. The present volume is intended not only for students of Professor James's philosophy, but for students of metaphysics and the theory of knowledge. It sets forth systematically and within brief compass the doctrine of 'radical empiricism.'

A word more may be in order concerning the general meaning of this doctrine. In the Preface to the *Will to Believe* (1898), Professor James gives the name "*radical empiricism*" to his "philosophic attitude," and adds the following explanation: "I say 'empiricism,' because it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience; and I say 'radical,' because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as an hypothesis, and, unlike so much of the halfway empiricism that is current under the name of positivism or agnosticism or scientific naturalism, it does not dogmatically affirm monism as something with which all

experience has got to square" (pp. vii-viii). An 'empiricism' of this description is a "philosophic attitude" or temper of mind rather than a doctrine, and characterizes all of Professor James's writings. It is set forth in Essay XII of the present volume.

In a narrower sense, 'empiricism' is the method of resorting to *particular experiences* for the solution of philosophical problems. Rationalists are the men of principles, empiricists the men of facts. (*Some Problems of Philosophy*, p. 35; cf. also, *ibid.*, p. 44; and *Pragmatism*, pp. 9, 51.) Or, "since principles are universals, and facts are particulars, perhaps the best way of characterizing the two tendencies is to say that rationalist thinking proceeds most willingly by going from wholes to parts, while empiricist thinking proceeds by going from parts to wholes." (*Some Problems of Philosophy*, p. 35; cf. also *ibid.*, p. 98; and *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 7.) Again, empiricism "remands us to sensation." (*Op. cit.*, p. 264.) The "empiricist view" insists that, "as reality is created temporally day by day, concepts ... can never fitly supersede perception.... The deeper features of reality are found only in perceptual experience." (*Some Problems of Philosophy*, pp. 100, 97.) Empiricism in this sense is as yet characteristic of Professor James's philosophy *as a whole*. It is not the distinctive and independent doctrine set forth in the present book.

The only summary of 'radical empiricism' in this last and narrowest sense appears in the Preface to *The Meaning of Truth* (pp. xii-xiii); and it must be reprinted here as the key to the text that follows.[1]

"Radical empiricism consists (1) first of a postulate, (2) next of a statement of fact, (3) and finally of a generalized conclusion."

(1) "The postulate is that *the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience*. (Things of an unexperienceable nature may exist ad libitum, but they form no part of the material for philosophic debate.)" This is "the principle of pure experience" as "a methodical postulate." (Cf. below, pp. 159, 241.) This postulate corresponds to the notion which the author repeatedly attributes to Shadworth Hodgson, the notion "that realities

are only what they are 'known as.'" (*Pragmatism*, p. 50; *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 443; *The Meaning of Truth*, pp. 43, 118.) In this sense 'radical empiricism' and pragmatism are closely allied. Indeed, if pragmatism be defined as the assertion that "the meaning of any proposition can always be brought down to some particular consequence in our future practical experience, ... the point lying in the fact that the experience must be particular rather than in the fact that it must be active" (*Meaning of Truth*, p. 210); then pragmatism and the above postulate come to the same thing. The present book, however, consists not so much in the assertion of this postulate as in the *use* of it. And the method is successful in special applications by virtue of a certain "statement of fact" concerning relations.

(2) "The statement of fact is that *the relations between things, conjunctive as well as disjunctive, are just as much matters of direct particular experience, neither more so nor less so, than the things themselves*." (Cf. also *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 280; *The Will to Believe*, p. 278.) This is the central doctrine of the present book. It distinguishes 'radical empiricism' from the "ordinary empiricism" of Hume, J. S. Mill, etc., with which it is otherwise allied. (Cf. below, pp. 42-44.) It provides an empirical and relational version of 'activity,' and so distinguishes the author's voluntarism from a view with which it is easily confused—the view which upholds a pure or transcendent activity. (Cf. below, Essay VI.) It makes it possible to escape the vicious disjunctions that have thus far baffled philosophy: such disjunctions as those between consciousness and physical nature, between thought and its object, between one mind and another, and between one 'thing' and another. These disjunctions need not be 'overcome' by calling in any "extraneous trans-empirical connective support" (*Meaning of Truth*, Preface, p. xiii); they may now be *avoided* by regarding the dualities in question as only *differences of empirical relationship among common empirical terms*. The pragmatistic account of 'meaning' and 'truth,' shows only how a vicious disjunction between 'idea' and 'object' may thus be avoided. The present volume not only presents pragmatism in this light; but adds similar accounts of the other dualities mentioned above.

Thus while pragmatism and radical empiricism do not differ essentially when regarded as *methods*, they are

independent when regarded as doctrines. For it would be possible to hold the pragmatistic theory of 'meaning' and 'truth,' without basing it on any fundamental theory of relations, and without extending such a theory of relations to residual philosophical problems; without, in short, holding either to the above 'statement of fact,' or to the following 'generalized conclusion.'

(3) "The generalized conclusion is that therefore *the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience. The directly apprehended universe needs, in short, no extraneous trans-empirical connective support, but possesses in its own right a concatenated or continuous structure*." When thus generalized, 'radical empiricism' is not only a theory of knowledge comprising pragmatism as a special chapter, but a metaphysic as well. It excludes "the hypothesis of trans-empirical reality" (Cf. below, p. 195). It is the author's most rigorous statement of his theory that reality is an "experience-continuum." (*Meaning of Truth*, p. 152; *A Pluralistic Universe*, Lect. V, VII.) It is that positive and constructive 'empiricism' of which Professor James said: "Let empiricism once become associated with religion, as hitherto, through some strange misunderstanding, it has been associated with irreligion, and I believe that a new era of religion as well as of philosophy will be ready to begin." (*Op. cit.*, p. 314; cf. *ibid.*, Lect. VIII, *passim*; and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 515-527.)

The editor desires to acknowledge his obligations to the periodicals from which these essays have been reprinted, and to the many friends of Professor James who have rendered valuable advice and assistance in the preparation of the present volume.

RALPH BARTON PERRY.

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS.
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FOOTNOTES:

[1] The use of numerals and italics is introduced by the editor.

I

DOES ‘CONSCIOUSNESS’ EXIST?[2]

‘Thoughts’ and ‘things’ are names for two sorts of object, which common sense will always find contrasted and will always practically oppose to each other. Philosophy, reflecting on the contrast, has varied in the past in her explanations of it, and may be expected to vary in the future. At first, ‘spirit and matter,’ ‘soul and body,’ stood for a pair of equipollent substances quite on a par in weight and interest. But one day Kant undermined the soul and brought in the transcendental ego, and ever since then the bipolar relation has been very much off its balance. The transcendental ego seems nowadays in rationalist quarters to stand for everything, in empiricist quarters for almost nothing. In the hands of such writers as Schuppe, Rehmke, Natorp, Münsterberg—at any rate in his earlier writings, Schubert-Soldern and others, the spiritual principle attenuates itself to a thoroughly ghostly condition, being only a name for the fact that the ‘content’ of experience *is known*. It loses personal form and activity—these passing over to the content—and becomes a bare *Bewusstheit* or *Bewusstsein überhaupt*, of which in its own right absolutely nothing can be said.

I believe that ‘consciousness,’ when once it has evaporated to this estate of pure diaphaneity, is on the point of disappearing altogether. It is the name of a nonentity, and has no right to a place among first principles. Those who still cling to it are clinging to a mere echo, the faint rumor left behind by the disappearing ‘soul’ upon the air of philosophy. During the past year, I have read a number of articles whose authors seemed just on the point of abandoning the notion of consciousness,[3] and substituting for it that of an absolute experience not due to two factors. But they were not quite radical enough, not quite daring enough in their negations. For twenty years past I have mistrusted ‘consciousness’ as an entity; for seven or eight years past I have suggested its non-existence to my

students, and tried to give them its pragmatic equivalent in realities of experience. It seems to me that the hour is ripe for it to be openly and universally discarded.

To deny plumply that ‘consciousness’ exists seems so absurd on the face of it—for undeniably ‘thoughts’ do exist—that I fear some readers will follow me no farther. Let me then immediately explain that I mean only to deny that the word stands for an entity, but to insist most emphatically that it does stand for a function. There is, I mean, no aboriginal stuff or quality of being,[4] contrasted with that of which material objects are made, out of which our thoughts of them are made; but there is a function in experience which thoughts perform, and for the performance of which this quality of being is invoked. That function is *knowing*. ‘Consciousness’ is supposed necessary to explain the fact that things not only are, but get reported, are known. Whoever blots out the notion of consciousness from his list of first principles must still provide in some way for that function’s being carried on.

I

My thesis is that if we start with the supposition that there is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff ‘pure experience,’ then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter. The relation itself is a part of pure experience; one of its ‘terms’ becomes the subject or bearer of the knowledge, the knower,[5] the other becomes the object known. This will need much explanation before it can be understood. The best way to get it understood is to contrast it with the alternative view; and for that we may take the recentest alternative, that in which the evaporation of the definite soul-substance has proceeded as far as it can go without being yet complete. If neo-Kantism has expelled earlier forms of dualism, we shall have expelled all forms if we are able to expel neo-Kantism in its turn.

For the thinkers I call neo-Kantian, the word consciousness to-day does no more than signalize the fact that experience is indefeasibly dualistic in structure. It means that not

subject, not object, but object-plus-subject is the minimum that can actually be. The subject-object distinction meanwhile is entirely different from that between mind and matter, from that between body and soul. Souls were detachable, had separate destinies; things could happen to them. To consciousness as such nothing can happen, for, timeless itself, it is only a witness of happenings in time, in which it plays no part. It is, in a word, but the logical correlative of 'content' in an Experience of which the peculiarity is that *fact comes to light* in it, that *awareness of content* takes place. Consciousness as such is entirely impersonal—'self' and its activities belong to the content. To say that I am self-conscious, or conscious of putting forth volition, means only that certain contents, for which 'self' and 'effort of will' are the names, are not without witness as they occur.

Thus, for these belated drinkers at the Kantian spring, we should have to admit consciousness as an 'epistemological' necessity, even if we had no direct evidence of its being there.

But in addition to this, we are supposed by almost every one to have an immediate consciousness of consciousness itself. When the world of outer fact ceases to be materially present, and we merely recall it in memory, or fancy it, the consciousness is believed to stand out and to be felt as a kind of impalpable inner flowing, which, once known in this sort of experience, may equally be detected in presentations of the outer world. "The moment we try to fix our attention upon consciousness and to see *what*, distinctly, it is," says a recent writer, "it seems to vanish. It seems as if we had before us a mere emptiness. When we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue; the other element is as if it were diaphanous. Yet it *can* be distinguished, if we look attentively enough, and know that there is something to look for."[6] "Consciousness" (Bewusstheit), says another philosopher, "is inexplicable and hardly describable, yet all conscious experiences have this in common that what we call their content has this peculiar reference to a centre for which 'self' is the name, in virtue of which reference alone the content is subjectively given, or appears ... While in this way consciousness, or reference to a self, is the only thing which distinguishes a conscious content from any sort of being that might be there with no one conscious of it, yet

this only ground of the distinction defies all closer explanations. The existence of consciousness, although it is the fundamental fact of psychology, can indeed be laid down as certain, can be brought out by analysis, but can neither be defined nor deduced from anything but itself."[7]

'Can be brought out by analysis,' this author says. This supposes that the consciousness is one element, moment, factor—call it what you like—of an experience of essentially dualistic inner constitution, from which, if you abstract the content, the consciousness will remain revealed to its own eye. Experience, at this rate, would be much like a paint of which the world pictures were made. Paint has a dual constitution, involving, as it does, a menstruum[8] (oil, size or what not) and a mass of content in the form of pigment suspended therein. We can get the pure menstruum by letting the pigment settle, and the pure pigment by pouring off the size or oil. We operate here by physical subtraction; and the usual view is, that by mental subtraction we can separate the two factors of experience in an analogous way —not isolating them entirely, but distinguishing them enough to know that they are two.

II

Now my contention is exactly the reverse of this. *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*—the addition, to a given concrete piece of it, of other sets of experiences, in connection with which severally its use or function may be of two different kinds. The paint will also serve here as an illustration. In a pot in a paint-shop, along with other paints, it serves in its entirety as so much saleable matter. Spread on a canvas, with other paints around it, it represents, on the contrary, a feature in a picture and performs a spiritual function. Just so, 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. The dualism connoted by such double-barrelled terms as 'experience,' 'phenomenon,' 'datum,' '*Vorfindung*'—terms which, in philosophy at any rate, tend more and more to replace the single-barrelled terms of 'thought' and 'thing'—that dualism, I say, is still preserved in this account, but reinterpreted, so that, instead of being mysterious and elusive, it becomes verifiable and concrete. It is an affair of relations, it falls outside, not inside, the single experience considered, and can always be particularized and defined.

The entering wedge for this more concrete way of understanding the dualism was fashioned by Locke when he made the word 'idea' stand indifferently for thing and thought, and by Berkeley when he said that what common sense means by realities is exactly what the philosopher means by ideas. Neither Locke nor Berkeley thought his truth out into perfect clearness, but it seems to me that the conception I am defending does little more than consistently carry out the 'pragmatic' method which they were the first to use.

If the reader will take his own experiences, he will see what I mean. Let him begin with a perceptual experience, the 'presentation,' so called, of a physical object, his actual field of vision, the room he sits in, with the book he is reading as its centre; and let him for the present treat this complex object in the common-sense way as being 'really' what it seems to be, namely, a collection of physical things cut out from an environing world of other physical things with which these physical things have actual or potential relations. Now at the same time it is just *those self-same things* which his mind, as we say, perceives; and the whole philosophy of perception from Democritus's time downwards has been just one long wrangle over the paradox that what is evidently one reality should be in two places at once, both in outer space and in a person's mind. 'Representative' theories of perception avoid the logical paradox, but on the other hand they violate the reader's sense of life, which knows no intervening mental image but seems to see the room and the book immediately just as they physically exist.

The puzzle of how the one identical room can be in two places is at bottom just the puzzle of how one identical point can be on two lines. It can, if it be situated at their intersection; and similarly, if the 'pure experience' of the room were a place of intersection of two processes, which connected it with different groups of associates respectively, it could be counted twice over, as belonging to either group, and spoken of loosely as existing in two places, although it would remain all the time a numerically single thing.

Well, the experience is a member of diverse processes that can be followed away from it along entirely different lines. The one self-identical thing has so many relations to the rest of experience that you can take it in disparate systems of association, and treat it as belonging with opposite contexts.[9] In one of these contexts it is your 'field of consciousness'; in another it is 'the room in which you sit,' and it enters both contexts in its wholeness, giving no pretext for being said to attach itself to consciousness by one of its parts or aspects, and to outer reality by another. What are the two processes, now, into which the room-experience simultaneously enters in this way?

One of them is the reader's personal biography, the other is the history of the house of which the room is part. The presentation, the experience, the *that* in short (for until we have decided *what* it is it must be a mere *that*) is the last term of a train of sensations, emotions, decisions, movements, classifications, expectations, etc., ending in the present, and the first term of a series of similar 'inner' operations extending into the future, on the reader's part. On the other hand, the very same *that* is the *terminus ad quem* of a lot of previous physical operations, carpentering, papering, furnishing, warming, etc., and the *terminus a quo* of a lot of future ones, in which it will be concerned when undergoing the destiny of a physical room. The physical and the mental operations form curiously incompatible groups. As a room, the experience has occupied that spot and had that environment for thirty years. As your field of consciousness it may never have existed until now. As a room, attention will go on to discover endless new details in it. As your mental state merely, few new ones will emerge under attention's eye. As a room, it will take an earthquake, or a gang of men, and in any case a certain amount of time, to destroy it. As your subjective state, the

closing of your eyes, or any instantaneous play of your fancy will suffice. In the real world, fire will consume it. In your mind, you can let fire play over it without effect. As an outer object, you must pay so much a month to inhabit it. As an inner content, you may occupy it for any length of time rent-free. If, in short, you follow it in the mental direction, taking it along with events of personal biography solely, all sorts of things are true of it which are false, and false of it which are true if you treat it as a real thing experienced, follow it in the physical direction, and relate it to associates in the outer world.

III

So far, all seems plain sailing, but my thesis will probably grow less plausible to the reader when I pass from percepts to concepts, or from the case of things presented to that of things remote. I believe, nevertheless, that here also the same law holds good. If we take conceptual manifolds, or memories, or fancies, they also are in their first intention mere bits of pure experience, and, as such, are single *thats* which act in one context as objects, and in another context figure as mental states. By taking them in their first intention, I mean ignoring their relation to possible perceptual experiences with which they may be connected, which they may lead to and terminate in, and which then they may be supposed to 'represent.' Taking them in this way first, we confine the problem to a world merely 'thought-of' and not directly felt or seen.[10] This world, just like the world of percepts, comes to us at first as a chaos of experiences, but lines of order soon get traced. We find that any bit of it which we may cut out as an example is connected with distinct groups of associates, just as our perceptual experiences are, that these associates link themselves with it by different relations,[11] and that one forms the inner history of a person, while the other acts as an impersonal 'objective' world, either spatial and temporal, or else merely logical or mathematical, or otherwise 'ideal.'

The first obstacle on the part of the reader to seeing that these non-perceptual experiences have objectivity as well

as subjectivity will probably be due to the intrusion into his mind of *percepts*, that third group of associates with which the non-perceptual experiences have relations, and which, as a whole, they 'represent,' standing to them as thoughts to things. This important function of the non-perceptual experiences complicates the question and confuses it; for, so used are we to treat percepts as the sole genuine realities that, unless we keep them out of the discussion, we tend altogether to overlook the objectivity that lies in non-perceptual experiences by themselves. We treat them, 'knowing' percepts as they do, as through and through subjective, and say that they are wholly constituted of the stuff called consciousness, using this term now for a kind of entity, after the fashion which I am seeking to refute.[12]

Abstracting, then, from percepts altogether, what I maintain is, that any single non-perceptual experience tends to get counted twice over, just as a perceptual experience does, figuring in one context as an object or field of objects, in another as a state of mind: and all this without the least internal self-diremption on its own part into consciousness and content. It is all consciousness in one taking; and, in the other, all content.

I find this objectivity of non-perceptual experiences, this complete parallelism in point of reality between the presently felt and the remotely thought, so well set forth in a page of Münsterberg's *Grundzüge*, that I will quote it as it stands.

"I may only think of my objects," says Professor Münsterberg; "yet, in my living thought they stand before me exactly as perceived objects would do, no matter how different the two ways of apprehending them may be in their genesis. The book here lying on the table before me, and the book in the next room of which I think and which I mean to get, are both in the same sense given realities for me, realities which I acknowledge and of which I take account. If you agree that the perceptual object is not an idea within me, but that percept and thing, as indistinguishably one, are really experienced *there, outside*, you ought not to believe that the merely thought-of object is hid away inside of the thinking subject. The object of which I think, and of whose existence I take cognizance