Project Statement

Title: The Rise of Empiricism: William James and the Science of Mind
Applicant: Alexander Klein, Cal State Long Beach

Summary of Proposed Book Project

It has seldom been noticed that William James was among the earliest philosophers to call himself an “empiricist.” Philosophers now associate the term with 17th and 18th century British philosophy. But neither Locke nor Berkeley accepted this label, nor did Hume or even J. S. Mill. The concept of an empiricist tradition appeared prominently only in the late 19th century, typically in connection with a controversy over the aspiring scientific status of empirical psychology (Klein 2007, chs. 1 – 3).

As it was then conceived, “empiricism” was the view that philosophy should be closely connected with an empirical study of mind, a view Locke, Berkeley, and Hume were said to have pioneered (e.g., Huxley 1879, 48 – 51), and that the “new” experimental psychology of the era was said to advance. The young James sought to defend this approach, especially against the historical-philosophical criticisms of British idealists.

James’s empiricism rested on two pillars—a distinctive theory of perception and a controversial philosophy of science. My book project aims to show in turn how each pillar was shaped by the controversy over psychology. The story culminates in a presidential address to the American Psychological Association where James acknowledged a serious tension between the two pillars (James 1895/1978), a tension I shall outline below. He responded by taking early steps towards pragmatism, a view that associates meaning and truth with the way an idea is used rather than with the way it mirrors the world. Thus in short order, the story of empiricism’s early consolidation quickly becomes a story of that tradition criticizing itself from within.

Project Significance

Perhaps it is ironic to find that a key architect of empiricism was born in New York City and spent his professional career at Harvard. But James’s deserved status as an American intellectual icon has tended to obscure the fact that from at least 1878 on (when he began

1 A host of authors have argued that there is something illegitimate about the idea that there were two major schools in modern philosophy, rationalists and empiricists. The literature—which is especially critical of the idea that the Locke-Berkeley-Hume triad really constitutes anything worth calling a “tradition”—includes (Bracken 1977-1978, Kuklick 1984, Loeb 1981, Norton 1982, Popkin 1959, Norton 1981, Popkin 1964, cf. Ayers 1984, Wiener 1959). That literature is now dated, but the issue has lately been revived in (Van Fraassen 2002, 201-225, Gaukroger 2010, Haakonssen 2004, Daniel 2007, Vanzo 2013); the best treatment of these issues for my purposes is (Vanzo Forthcoming).

2 The key idealist texts I have in mind include (Green 1874/1894, Caird 1877, Green 1882a, b, Green and Bradley 1882). The notion that James saw himself as heir to the empiricist tradition has been emphasized in the secondary literature for a long time, especially in (Perry 1935). But Perry did not see that James helped create the very idea of an empiricist tradition. The one (brief) commentary I can find that acknowledges this point is (Kuklick 1984).
composing *The Principles of Psychology*), he was heavily engaged with British philosophy. During this period, the London-based *Mind* published a staggering 47% of James’s substantive output (305 total pages). The American *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* came in a distant second place with only 17% of his research (117 pages).

Today it is commonplace to treat members of the so-called Metaphysical Club, especially C. S. Peirce and Chauncey Wright, as formative for James’s intellectual development (e.g., in the Pulitzer-winning Menand 2001, and Misak 2013). But James did not owe his celebrity to the then relatively-provincial circles of American academia. He was incredibly cosmopolitan, counting some of Europe’s leading intellectuals as correspondents, interlocutors, and even champions. For instance, in the 1880s Charles Renouvier and François Pillon regularly translated James’s work in the *Critique Philosophique*, often with responses and rejoinders from the highest sources. And most importantly for my story, James became a member of the British philosophical club the “Scratch Eight” during an extended stay in Europe in the early 1880s (Klein 2008, sec. 3). Including James, there were nine club members who together contributed a quarter of all the articles and critical discussions in *Mind’s* early years (out of 170 total authors; see Staley 2009, 294). It should not be surprising to find that James both engaged and shaped the British philosophy of his era.

Today, most philosophical accounts of James focus tightly on his pragmatism—a “distinctively American” doctrine, as it is so often called (e.g., Brandom 2004, 7)—that he first unveiled in (James 1898). Rather than offering yet another analysis of this doctrine, then, my book takes readers up to the brink of James’s pragmatism. My goal is to explain how his engagement with British philosophy during the 1880s and 1890s convinced him that any self-respecting empiricism had to abandon any attempt to model truth in terms of mirroring. John Dewey, a fellow pragmatist traveler, once wrote that we do not solve philosophical problems, “we get over them” (Dewey 1910, 19). His attitude earned pragmatists a reputation as revolutionaries who are less interested in engaging with the past than with changing the subject. This reputation is particularly unfortunate in James’s case, because it has obscured the historically-rooted puzzles to which his pragmatism was originally crafted as a solution. My book thus portrays James in a less revolutionary, more evolutionary light.

**Book Structure**

Part One of my book explores the emergence of the very idea of an empiricist tradition, particularly among British Idealists and their more scientifically-inclined adversaries. Idealists (most notably Green 1874/1894) portrayed the new experimental psychology of the day as relying on a flawed philosophical picture of the mind that had been developed by Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. Hence they saw history of philosophy as a key way to expose the supposed defects of experimental psychology. This part of the book shows how the concept of an empiricist tradition was crafted as a weapon in this larger fight over psychology’s scientific status. Leading psychologists of the day like Alexander Bain, G. H. Lewes, and most

---

3 On Renouvier’s impact on James, see (Viney 1997, Dunham 2015).
4 In his classic biography, Perry in fact calls this group “the nucleus of James’s ‘philosophic society’” (Perry 1935, I.596).
5 Although neo-Hegelian Idealists have long been recognized as key adversaries of James, there is surprisingly little in the way of sustained scholarship on just what the fight was all about—though a few excellent studies worth mention are (Stern and Williams Forthcoming, Sprigge 1993, 2006, Slater 2014). I myself have treated this issue in (Klein 2008, 2009, 2012, 2007).
prominently William James, quickly claimed the mantle of this (newly baptized) tradition. I pay special attention to how this debate unfolded in the journal Mind, which was the main venue for such arguments over psychology and the empiricist tradition.

The next two parts of the book critically examine each of the two “pillars” on which James’s empiricism rests—again, his theories of perception and of scientific methodology. Part Two discusses the theory of perception. It begins with Green’s criticism of classically-empiricist accounts of spatial perception, a criticism he saw as undermining the very idea of a science of mind. James’s response involved rejecting a basic Humean assumption—that perceptions of extended areas are built out of so-called minima sensibilia, or psychological atoms. The claim that there are no psychological atoms is interesting because James supported it with experimental data rather than (as commentators typically suppose) merely with introspective description. James claimed to be the real descendant of British empiricism on grounds that his anti-atomic model of perception fortified what Green had most wanted to demolish—the prospect of using empirical, scientific methods in the study of mind (Klein 2009).

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of James’s theory of perception emerged from this work on how we perceive space—namely, his claim that every mental state is an inviolable whole. One can attend to a single aspect of a unified mental state—such as the redness of this apple I am perceiving. But that aspect is not like a stone that is salvaged from a demolished wall and later used to build a farmhouse. The feeling of redness cannot be removed from my current perception of the apple and then somehow inserted into a different perception, say of a red curtain, without qualitative change. At any rate, James offered some ingenious arguments in support of such perceptual holism. One upshot of these arguments is that he had to reject the well-worn distinction between sensations supposedly given by the senses alone and full-blown perceptions that are the product of cognitive enrichment (Klein 2009, Forthcoming).

Part Three explores the controversial scientific methodology James employed in his Principles of Psychology. That work was attacked for its unabashed reliance on a priori presuppositions—such as the presupposition that minds really exist inside a physical world that they know (James 1890/1981, 6). James argued that psychologists must not be asked to waste time defending this epistemological assumption if they are ever to have time for properly empirical research (James 1882, 186).

Ironically, the notion that sciences rely on presuppositions was actually borrowed from idealism. But while idealists claimed that such presuppositions could only be explained if we postulate the existence of a supernatural mind that stands outside of time and space, and that makes human perception possible in the first place, James offered a much more naturalistic account. Such presuppositions are merely stipulations, for James, and their proper function is to delimit where empirical investigation stops and philosophical analysis begins. In other words, these presuppositions are rational to adopt only insofar as they help solve a practical problem: how to divide intellectual labor between psychologists and their warring philosophical critics.6

6 James’s most notorious remarks on scientific presuppositions came in the preface to (James 1890/1981), and he subsequently expanded his account in (James 1892/1983); see (Klein 2008, Skrupskelis 1995). James long relied on the idea that scientists must accept some assumptions that either cannot be verified (such as regulative assumptions like the principle of the uniformity of nature) or that have not yet been verified (such as hypotheses one is entertaining in the course of a research program). This view is a cornerstone of his famous essay “The Will to Believe,”
When combined with his anti-atomistic theory of perception, though, James’s division-of-labor methodology opened him to searing attacks by psychologists and philosophers like G. S. Fullerton, G. T. Ladd, and C. S. Peirce, among others. A key problem was that if mental states have no parts, then one cannot model the *knowing of things together* as a correspondence between a unitary mental state and a collection of objects. Consider a collection of 8 marbles. If one thinks of truth as a matter of ideas mirroring or mapping onto their objects, then my *idea* of the marbles must have 8 parts in order to truly represent the actual *collection*. But that is not possible on James’s theory of perception, according to which mental states have no parts at all.

So the core criticism was that James’s theory of perception makes it difficult to see how a mirroring-theory of truth could work—and thus his plan of doing empirical work on perception while leaving the properly philosophical questions to others met with howls of outrage. Part Four of my book unpacks this criticism and shows that James’s pragmatism grew out of his attempt to respond, particularly in the 1894 presidential address mentioned above.

which defends religious faith by portraying it as epistemically similar to science in this regard; see (Klein 2015b); cf. (Misak 2015).

7 E.g., see (Ladd 1892, Fullerton 1894, Peirce 1891a, b). I discuss the Ladd and Fullerton pieces in (Klein 2015a); and I discuss the Peirce pieces in (Klein 2008).

8 One of the rare scholars to acknowledge the significance of this address is (Lamberth 1999, 73-81). I am sympathetic with Lamberth’s brief account.