



CHICAGO JOURNALS

HOPOS

The International Society
for the History of
Philosophy of Science

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Source: *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring 2015), pp. 154-166

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of the [International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/680374>

Accessed: 16/04/2015 14:08

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HATFIELD ON AMERICAN CRITICAL REALISM

Alexander Klein

The turn of the last century saw an explosion of philosophical realisms, both in the United States and in the United Kingdom. Gary Hatfield helpfully asks whether we can impose order on this chaotic scene by portraying these diverse actors as responding to a common philosophical problem—the so-called problem of the external world, as articulated by William Hamilton. I argue that we should not place the American realism that grows out of James's neutral monism in this problem space. James first articulated his position in response to critical attacks on the methodology he had employed in his psychological research. The direct topic of these criticisms was James's earlier claim that a scientific psychology must treat knowledge as an inexplicable theoretical primitive. If I am right, then we ought to hesitate about Hatfield's suggestion that American realism operated inside the same problem space as the early realism of British figures like Russell and Moore. James's neutral monism first emerged as a conception of knowledge by a psychologist, and it was designed to meet concerns about his scientific research that had been raised by other psychologists.

It is a slippery business trying to get hold of the many realisms that grew up in Anglo-American philosophy at the turn of the last century. Gary Hatfield (2015, in this issue) has performed a real service in bringing some order to this chaotic scene.

His central claims are these, as I read him. First, Hatfield thinks the problem of the external world (construed in terms of the mind's relation to the material world) set a common background for many self-described "realists" in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy. Second, William Hamilton's typology of potential responses helped define a shared so-

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HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science, vol. 5 (Spring 2015). 2152-5188/2015/0501-0003\$10.00. © 2015 by the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science. All rights reserved. Electronically published February 23, 2015.

lution space, and this typology was substantially informed by Reid's criticism of Locke. Third, what glues Americans like James and Sellars together in one distinctive subtradition inside this larger group of realisms is their insistence that, in solving the problem of the external world, mental capacities must be treated as biological functions of an organism adapted to its environment. Other intellectuals of the day may have drawn on biology in addressing philosophical problems, but James, Sellars, and several American colleagues were unique in bringing an evolutionary perspective into academic philosophy. And finally, the fact that American realists drew so unabashedly on biological results undermines a narrative (advanced by Daniel Wilson among others) according to which American philosophy was driven by a kind of inferiority complex with respect to science during this era. My remarks will focus on the first three of these claims.

It helps to begin by placing Hatfield's essay in the context of his recent research on the historical, philosophical, and psychological background of early analytic philosophy. His "American Critical Realism" brings together two themes from that recent work. One concerns the neutral monism of Mach, James, and Russell (Hatfield 2002, 2009). The other concerns the problem of the external world—particularly as it emerged in a debate between Hamilton and Mill—setting a common problem space for nascent British realisms in the early twentieth century (and for their idealist foes; Hatfield 2013a, 2013b).

Hatfield (2015, sec. 2) extends this latter work on the problem of the external world so that it covers not only British realism of Russell and Moore's variety but also the distinctive realisms (including James's neutral monism) that one finds in the United States around the same time. Hatfield invites us to see James, Sellars, Russell, Moore, and other realists as all responding in kindred although ultimately distinct ways to the same problematic as laid out by Hamilton in particular.

I am sympathetic with many aspects of Hatfield's account. We agree, for instance, that national boundaries are not necessarily intellectual boundaries. In seeking to unpack the intellectual context that informed James's and Sellars's respective work, there is no good reason to assume that only American interlocutors are relevant. Perhaps driven by the oft-repeated claim that pragmatism is America's first "homegrown" philosophical movement, too many commentators treat James's thought in particular as growing out of exclusive conversations with American peers like C. S. Peirce, Chauncey Wright, and John Dewey.¹

1. In fact, I myself have emphasized the importance of the British philosophical scene for James's early intellectual development, especially in the 1880s (Klein 2008). And by the way, I also agree with

So in principle at least, I applaud Hatfield's goal of trying to find a common context to help explain the remarkable, contemporaneous explosion of self-described "realisms" on both sides of the Atlantic during this era. His article helpfully asks whether all these diverse actors were responding to the same philosophical problem and, if so, whether we can articulate a common problem space in which they operated. Hatfield would answer yes to both questions.

I would answer no to both. I will argue that these diverse actors did not all see themselves as purposively responding to the same philosophical problem.² However, if what is at issue is the effect (rather than the intended purpose) of each actor's shift to realism,³ then what follows can be seen as an extension of Hatfield's interesting analysis rather than a competing account.

I will make my case by taking a closer look at James, who first developed his neutral monism in response not to Hamilton's problem but to critical attacks on the methodology he had employed in his psychological research. The direct topic of these criticisms was James's claim that a scientific psychology must treat knowledge as an inexplicable theoretical primitive.

Let me begin with Hatfield's evidence for a direct link between James and Sellars, on the one hand, and Hamilton, on the other. The 1969 passage Hatfield offers to support a Sellars/Hamilton link is certainly suggestive (see 2015, 137–38). But I think the case for a direct link between James and Hamilton is rather more sketchy. It is true that James was conversant in Hamilton's philosophy and psychology and in Mill's extensive criticism. Both Mill's *Examination* and Hamilton himself are cited throughout the *Principles of Psychology* (James 1890/1981). But curiously, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (James 1912/1976)—the collection of essays that gives the classic formulation of James's neutral monism—actually does not mention Hamilton, at least not by name. Neither does it mention either Dugald Stewart or James McCosh, both of whom Hatfield sees as important conduits of the Hamiltonian problem of the external world for late Victorian philosophers in America.

Hatfield (2002, 2009) that the American context is helpful for bringing British realism into focus in some respects as well (see Klein, forthcoming b).

2. I do think the demand for an explanation of the cross-Atlantic realism explosion is justified. But in my view, realists were united merely by a common opposition to the high tide of neo-Hegelian idealism, not by interest in a shared philosophical problematic. Hatfield acknowledges that idealists were a common enemy, calling this point "illuminating," but he continues that this opposition "does not fully reveal the archaeology of the new British and American philosophies circa 1900" (2015, 134). My response is that philosophers can make common cause without sharing a common archaeology, as I think the case of James vis-à-vis other realists of the day (particularly in Britain) shows.

3. I thank Steven Levine and David Stump for commenting on drafts of this article, and for pressing me about this distinction.

Hatfield cites language from *Essays in Radical Empiricism* that he takes to indicate a concern with Hamilton's problematic. For instance, James is wary of the "epistemological chasm" of the "transcendentalist" (James 1912/1976, 33), and James rejects the idea that experience is "representative" in a "quasi-miraculous 'epistemological' sense" (31). But in these passages, James was actually using language he elsewhere attributed to George Trumbull Ladd (James 1909/1978, 81), who himself characterized knowledge as involving a "leap to reality" (see James 1912/1976, 167n). Ladd and James had a history of epistemological opposition, as we will see below. Given that James explicitly associated this language with Ladd, not Hamilton, we should see the former and not the latter as the most direct source of the issues to which James alluded using the phrases that Hatfield quotes.

Could both Ladd and James have been responding to Hamilton? Perhaps. But the debate between Ladd and James was expressly about how a scientific psychologist should account for knowledge of the material world. In his critical review of the *Principles*, Ladd had complained that what knowledge of the material world amounts to is "difficult to understand as a matter of cerebral psychology. Professor James makes, on this point, little or no attempt to assist us" (1892, 42).⁴ In my view, the issue of what we should say about knowledge from the standpoint of "cerebral psychology" is not one that flows naturally from Hamilton's older, philosophical discussions. It is a problem endemic to the rise of empirical psychology, a field whose development exploded in the decades after Hamilton's 1856 death. Again, if the issue is what puzzle James *intended* to solve via neutral monism, then we do well to look to discussions more proximate to James than the Hamiltonian dialectic.

I do think Hatfield has honed in on some telling language in James's discussion of neutral monism. But I suggest that the language actually testifies to the legacy of James's earlier struggles regarding the emerging science of mind. In fact, Ladd's review was one voice in a chorus of criticisms over the way James had dealt with knowledge in his psychology, and the story of those criticisms offers a more immediate source of concerns that pushed James to develop his neutral monism.

Interestingly, the epistemological criticism James faced (from Ladd and others) was part of a larger set of concerns over psychology's status as a natural science, and in particular over psychology's contested relationship to philosophy. One gets an inkling of this from the title of the essay where Ladd criticized the *Principles*' treatment of knowledge: "Psychology as So-Called 'Natural Science'" (Ladd 1892). James entitled his rejoinder, "A Plea for Psychology as

4. Ladd's lengthy review of the *Principles* did not mention Hamilton, McCosh, or Stewart.

a ‘Natural Science’” (James 1892/1983). That these epistemological criticisms were intimately tied to debates about psychology’s scientific standing distinguishes them from the Hamiltonian problematic. So let me (briefly) work backward from some of James’s earliest moves toward neutral monism, which come in response to a prominent criticism of the *Principles*’ vision of knowledge and of psychology’s scientific status.

James began adopting something like neutral monism at least a decade earlier than the 1904 paper (“Does Consciousness Exist?”) sometimes cited in this connection. It is crucial to notice that his in ovo neutral monism appeared in an address to psychologists—that is, in his 1894 presidential address to the American Psychological Association. James published this address a few months later as “The Knowing of Things Together” (James 1895, esp. 106–7, 109–10). The piece responded not to Ladd but to a related attack on the *Principles* delivered by G. S. Fullerton at the prior year’s American Psychological Association meeting (published as Fullerton 1894). Again, notice that the criticism and the response were both delivered by psychologists in front of an audience of psychologists.⁵

“The Knowing of Things Together” is important because it portrays the relationship between minds and bodies in a way that is awfully close to neutral monism.⁶ The essay distinguishes physical bodies from mental states in terms of whether an experience gets “referred to either of two great associative systems, that of the experiencer’s mental history, or that of the experienced facts of the world” (James 1895, 110n). I flesh out this in ovo neutral monism below. But first I want to offer some background concerning the challenge that apparently prompted James to write the article in the first place.

We get a good sketch of the challenge toward the end of “The Knowing of Things Together,” where James acknowledged that some aspects of his *Principles* had been “so vigorously attacked by our colleague from the University of Pennsylvania, at our meeting in New York a year ago,” alluding to Fullerton. James explained that in the *Principles* he had

5. It is true that American philosophers did not have their own professional association until 1901, and so they often attended meetings of the American Psychological Association (which had been founded in 1892) during the era (Wilson 1990, 108). Still, it is clear that Fullerton and Ladd both went after James as a psychologist; their worries focused specifically on James’s conception of how to theorize knowledge from a scientific standpoint, as we will see below.

6. I do not regard “The Knowing of Things Together” as articulating a full-blown neutral monism because, at this point, James surprisingly and uncharacteristically says he is accepting the “idealistic” account of material bodies (James 1895, 106)—“the stuff of which” all bodies are made is “thought-stuff” (107), rather than what he would later call “pure experience,” which is meant to be metaphysically neutral between mental and physical (James 1912/1976, 4).

proposed to simply eliminate from psychology “considered as a natural science” the whole business of ascertaining how we come to know things together or to know them at all. Such considerations, I said, should fall to metaphysics. That we do know things, sometimes singly and sometimes together, is a fact. That states of consciousness are the vehicle of the knowledge, and depend on brain states, are two other facts. And I thought that a natural science of psychology might legitimately confine itself to tracing the functional variations of these three sorts of fact, and ascertaining and tracing what determinate bodily states are the condition when the states of mind know determinate things and groups of things. (James 1895, 122–23)

This is a straightforward gloss on some notorious methodological remarks from the preface to the *Principles*. There, James had argued that all sciences must be granted some basic assumptions that they cannot take the responsibility of explaining. Psychology’s special assumptions include the existence of “(1) *thoughts and feelings*, and (2) *a physical world* in time and space with which they coexist and which (3) *they know*” (1895, 6). One upshot of this view is that the existence of knowledge is to be assumed rather than explained in the context of psychology. James accepted that it may be important to give a theory of knowledge—but the theory of knowledge must be pursued in “metaphysics,” which “falls outside the province of this book” (6).

Like Ladd, Fullerton had pressed some criticisms of this view, criticisms that James apparently took very seriously. Fullerton made “an energetic protest against Professor James’ conception of consciousness as an unanalyzable, indivisible unit, a something in which no parts can be distinguished. How can such a consciousness represent any object not itself unanalyzable and indivisible? How can it represent two objects as two, or an extended thing as extended?” (Fullerton 1894, 176). James could not simply set aside the problem of explaining how mental states can know their objects, Fullerton contended. For some of James’s psychological theories about sense perception—in particular, his denial that there are complex mental states built out of atomic units (e.g., see James 1890/1981, 268n–269n; and Klein, forthcoming a)—rendered the problem of explaining how one mental state can gain knowledge of an organized collection of objects unanswerable, and unanswerable even for people working in the allegedly independent field of metaphysics. In short, Fullerton argued that first the *Principles* made the “knowing” relation mysterious, and then it promptly washed its hands of the mystery, leaving its solution to “metaphysics.”

James took Fullerton's demand (for a psychological account of "the knowing of things together") as a challenge to give a psychological explanation of "the synthetic unity of consciousness" (James 1895, 105). Although James had been at pains to set this Kantian issue aside in the *Principles* as a metaphysical and not a scientific problem,⁷ by the time of his 1894 presidential address he seems to have had a change of heart.

Thus "The Knowing of Things Together" concluded with a seemingly dramatic reversal. James wrote that his own "intention" to set aside the problem of knowledge in the *Principles*

was a good one, and a natural science infinitely more complete than the psychologies we now possess could be written without abandoning its terms. Like all authors, I have, therefore, been surprised that this child of my genius should not be more admired by others—should, in fact, have been generally either misunderstood or despised. But do not fear that on this occasion I am either going to defend or to re-explain the bantling. I am going to make things more harmonious by simply *giving it up*. I have become convinced since publishing that book that no conventional restrictions *can* keep metaphysical and so-called epistemological inquiries out of the psychology books. (James 1895, 124)

This is a notorious passage in the James oeuvre. It seems to give up the *Principles'* insistence that psychological inquiries, on the one hand, and "metaphysical" or "epistemological" inquiries, on the other, must always be kept separate. By 1894 James was prepared to accept that psychologists must take responsibility for giving a theory of knowledge, rather than simply "postulating" the existence of knowledge without explanation.

How does the in ovo neutral monism of "The Knowing of Things Together" help provide a psychologically acceptable theory of knowledge? James broke Fullerton's challenge to account for the "knowing of things together" into parts, acknowledging the need to give a psychological account of (1) *knowledge*, then of (2) *things*, and last of (3) *the knowing of things together* (James 1895, 106). It is in addressing the first two parts of the problem that James proposed the identity of the mental and the physical (109).⁸

7. This is an issue I give special attention to in Klein (2008), which offers a more extensive account of the *Principles'* scientific methodology.

8. James confessed that he could not yet see a fully adequate solution to the last problem (1895, 122).

Very roughly, “The Knowing of Things Together”’s psychological account of knowledge worked like this. James identified the phenomenon of knowledge with what we would today call intentionality. He sought separate explanations of how a mental state could point to a *distant* and a *proximate* object. The *distant* case got cashed out in terms of a mental state affording guidance through an intervening physical environment, guidance in helping the agent physically move to the distant object so that it can be handled fruitfully. For instance, my current thought is about tigers in India just in case that thought would (if I were to try) guide me from where I sit all the way to India, to interact with said tigers in an appropriate way (James 1895, 107–8).

In contrast, when a mental state points to a *proximate* object there is no intervening environment. So James explained this kind of immediate intentionality in terms of the identity of mental content and physical object. In such cases, “the thought-stuff and the thing-stuff are here indistinguishably the same in nature” (James 1895, 109). “To know immediately, then, or intuitively, is for mental content and object to be identical” (110).

This is not the place to enter into further analysis of “The Knowing of Things Together.” My point is that the problem that first pushed James toward something like neutral monism was different from the problem of the external world that philosophers were then battling about. James saw neutral monism as a way to give an account of knowledge that would be acceptable from inside a genuinely scientific psychology. Neutral monism was not hatched as a move in a long-standing philosophical dialectic over the external world.

Fullerton’s worry was not simply that James had advanced a deficient conception of the knower’s relation to her cognitive object. His worry ultimately targeted James’s attempt to draw a clear and stable division of labor between psychology and philosophy. This is why “The Knowing of Things Together” concluded not simply by reaffirming the value of epistemology but by relaxing James’s own former attempt to “keep metaphysical and so-called epistemological inquiries out of the psychology books” (James 1895, 124). He now conceded that psychology’s status as an independent science must not mean theoretical blinders—the psychologist in fact must accept some (at least limited) responsibility to theorize in a way that will not create insurmountable obstacles for neighboring disciplines.

So how does my analysis of James square with Hatfield’s? On the one hand, if I am right that James’s move toward neutral monism had less to do with the more speculative concerns one finds in Hamilton’s work than with concerns about how to demarcate psychology from philosophy, then we ought to hesitate about seeing James’s realism as driven by the same problematic as Russell’s and Moore’s. James’s neutral monism first emerged as a conception of knowledge by psychologists and for psychologists, in my view.

Still, there is a point of contact between my analysis and Hatfield's. For one might ask what kind of metaphysical considerations neutral monism in effect ushers into "the psychology books." And Hatfield may reasonably answer that James was being pushed to give an account (among other things) of the perceiver's cognitive relationship to its object—or in other words, to give an answer to Hamilton's problem of the external world. So again, I would say James was not purposefully addressing Hamilton's problem, but this does not preclude that he unwittingly ended up addressing it. And I hasten to add that, although James first hatched neutral monism in response to a challenge to his psychology, of course I do not deny that he would later develop neutral monism and deploy it specifically against philosophers like Moore and Paul Natorp (e.g., see James 1912/1976, 3, 5–6; 1988, 28).⁹

In any case, I now want to turn to Hatfield's third central point I identified above: this is the notion that what distinguishes the American realists from their British counterparts is "functionalism, in the biological sense"—that is, both James and Sellars are functionalists in the way they view "mind or mental capacities." Hatfield writes: James and Sellars "approached perception as the biological function of an adapted and adapting organism" (2015, 140). The claim seems to be that both figures want to define mental processes in terms of what tasks those processes are adapted to perform.

My concern is that this makes James and Sellars sound like what today we might call adaptationists—people who assume that any reasonably complex biological trait must have been the product of natural selection. In fact, much of contemporary evolutionary psychology operates under crudely adaptationist assumptions. But to me, there is something unsettling about finding James advocating views that sound like they would be at home in adaptationist, evolutionary psychology. So the question is—what, if anything, does Hatfield think distinguishes these older forms of evolutionary thinking about the mind from more contemporary evolutionary psychology?

To sharpen the question a bit, let me quote a few lines from James's "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence." James wrote that for Spencer, the function of a mental state is a matter of how that state contributes to "survival." But James rejected this view:

A furnace which should produce along with its metal fifty different varieties of ash and slag, a planning-mill whose daily yield in shavings far

9. I develop my own account of the theoretical foundations of James's neutral monism—and especially his rejection of consciousness—in Klein (forthcoming a).

exceeded that in boards, would rightly be pronounced inferior to one of the usual sort, even though more energy should be displayed in its working, and at moments some of that energy be directly effective. If ministry to survival be the sole criterion of mental excellence, then luxury and amusement, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Plato, and Marcus Aurelius, stellar spectroscopy, diatom markings, and nebular hypotheses are by-products on too wasteful a scale. . . . And every serious evolutionist ought resolutely to bend his attention henceforward to the reduction in number and amount of these outlying interests, and the diversion of the energy they absorb into purely prudential channels.

Is it not already clear to the reader's mind that the whole difficulty in making Mr. Spencer's law work lies in the fact that it is not really a constitutive, but a regulative, law of thought which he is erecting, and that he does not frankly say so? . . . If it be a law in the sense of an analysis of what we *do* think, then it will include error, nonsense, the worthless as well as the worthy, metaphysics, and mythologies as well as scientific truths which mirror the actual environment. (James 1878/1920, 56, 57)

What has this to do with Hatfield's analysis? Here it sounds like James rejected Spencer's notion that mental processes should be defined in terms of how they have aided in survival. Spencer claimed to be giving us a way to describe mental states—but what we actually got was a regulative ideal, for James, according to which mental excellence is a matter of that which helps us survive. The question for Hatfield is how to understand James's biological functionalism in light of his critique of Spencer's adaptationism. Does James's functionalism in the *Principles*, and in his later neutral monism, commit him to accounting for mental content in terms of a mental state's contribution to survival? If so, how does this sit with the earlier criticism of Spencer?

Here is one last question about James before turning to Sellars. Hatfield writes of his realists, "these anti-idealists rejected the mind dependence of the object of knowledge, its mental nature, and the conditioning of the object in being known" (2015, 134). This is what helps us make sense of how James's neutral monism is a form of realism—the object of knowledge is not mind dependent.

But just what does it take for an object of knowledge to be mind dependent, in this tradition? I ask because the James of the *Principles* (and perhaps he is not meant to be a realist when he is writing in a scientific capacity) characterized the real in terms such that the mind does appear to alter the object of knowledge. He writes that through the mechanism of attention,

The highest and most elaborated mental products are filtered from the data chosen by the faculty next beneath, out of the mass offered by the faculty below that, which mass in turn was sifted from a still larger amount of yet simpler material, and so on. The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. In a sense the statue stood there from eternity. But there were a thousand different ones beside it, and the sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest. Just so the world of each of us, howsoever different our several views of it may be, all lay embedded in the primordial chaos of sensations, which gave the mere *matter* to the thought of all of us indifferently. We may, if we like, by our reasonings unwind things back to that black and jointless continuity of space and moving clouds of swarming atoms which science calls the only real world. But all the while the world we feel and live in will be that which our ancestors and we, by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, like sculptors, by simply rejecting certain portions of the given stuff. Other sculptors, other statues from the same stone! Other minds, other worlds from the same monotonous and inexpressive chaos! My world is but one in a million alike embedded, alike real to those who may abstract them. How different must be the worlds in the consciousness of ant, cuttle-fish, or crab! (James 1890/1981, 277)

To paraphrase a criticism I once received when I sought to portray James as a realist—this is reality as Rorschach test. If what we come to know through perception is reality, it sure seems like we have done a tremendous amount of creative “filtering” in Jamesian perception—so in what sense is the real object mind independent, exactly?

Finally, my last question is about Sellars (maybe it is actually a question for Sellars, to be fair). I am not sure that I understand why Sellars’s view is not another version of representative realism. He distinguishes between an “object of awareness” and an “object of knowledge,” which he says are “numerically distinct.” The object of awareness is supposed to put us in touch, directly, with things in the world. But I do not see how adding the word “directly” moves this position away from representative realism. There is an object of knowledge out there in the world—and another numerically distinct object of awareness, presumably in our minds. And the latter puts us in touch with the former.

Sellars apparently pounds his fist and insists that objects of awareness directly put us in touch with physical bodies. But again, what could “directly” mean in this context?

In any case, let me end by saying that I find the variety of realisms in the early twentieth century downright dizzying, so I appreciate the way Hatfield's paper imposes order on a chaotic scene. One great service of his research—here and elsewhere, in the last few years—is to call attention to the explosion of philosophical realisms that apparently sprouted in quite different soil in the opening years of the twentieth century. Hatfield's challenge to those of us interested in making this explosion intelligible is how to account for what made different rays in this realist dawn different, while keeping in view what might have unified all these rays into one coherent pattern on the horizon.

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