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Western and Asian Perspectives

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Introduction

William Butler Yeats concludes his poem, "Among School Children," with the line, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (1973, p. 142). The answer this question seems to demand is that, indeed, there can be no dancer without a dance, and no dance without a dancer. While a *conceptual* distinction can be made between the dancer and the dance, in *ontological* terms, the two are one and the same. The same logic can be applied to the question, "How can we know the experiencer from the experience?" Western philosophy has historically tended to make a dualistic distinction between subjects who have experiences, on the one hand, and objects which are experienced, on the other. Asian philosophy, to the contrary, has been more comfortable with the idea of thinking about experience in non-dualistic terms (see Loy 1988).

In this essay the ideas of the American pragmatist philosopher, William James, will be compared with those of the Japanese philosopher, Kitaro Nishida, and Buddhist philosophy in general, to examine the relationship between pure experience and the ideas we construct about our experiences on the basis of discursive thought. The aim is not so much to provide a comparative or historical study, however, as it is to consider the relevance these ideas might have for contemporary philosophy in general and constructivism in particular.

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The construction of pure experience

Direct experience is immediate, or *unmediated*, that is, not mediated by any conceptual constructions. When we look at a sunset, listen to the song of a bird, smell a flower, taste an apple, or feel cold, wet rain on our skin, it may not be necessary for us to put our experience into words or to try to understand it. We simply *have* an experience, but do not try to conceptualize it. William James' radical empiricism characterizes this mode of experience as *pure experience*: "'Pure experience' is the name which I gave to the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories...a *that* which is not yet any definite *what*, although ready to be all sorts of *whats*..." (1976, p. 46).

Buddhism similarly speaks of *tathatā*¹ ("thusness," "suchness")—the way things are before the discursive mind (reason) begins to make distinctions and carve up our experiences into different kinds. Pure experience is what is *given* (in Japanese, *kono mama*, "just so"). As such, pure experience is the undifferentiated "one" out of which all our ideas, categories, and conceptualizations emanate. Our attempts to conceptualize experience, whether through science or philosophy, rest on the ability to differentiate what we experience into discrete "things," "qualities," "measurements," "relations," and all the rest.

The Japanese philosopher, Kitaro Nishida, who was familiar with James' writings, held a similar conception of pure experience, which, in its essentials, accords with radical empiricism:

To experience means to know facts just as they are, to know in accordance with facts by completely relinquishing one's own fabrications. What we usually refer to as experience is adulterated with some sort of thought, so by *pure* I am referring to the state of experience just as it is without the least addition of deliberative discrimination. The moment of seeing a color or hearing a sound, for example, is prior not only to the thought that the color or sound is the activity of an external object or that one is sensing it, but also to the judgment of what the color or sound might be. In this regard,

pure experience is identical with direct experience. When one directly experiences one's own state of consciousness, there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified. (1990, pp. 1–2)

The “state of consciousness” referred to by Nishida in this passage can be compared to the concept of *samādhi* (“concentration”), which is found not only in the Buddhist tradition, but also in the Hindu, Jain, and Sikh traditions. The goal of *samādhi* is to reach a non-dualistic state of awareness in which no conceptual distinction is made between an experiencing subject and the object experienced. In most cases, pure experience is neither a religious experience nor an extraordinary “mystical” state, but simply an ordinary experience stripped of all concepts: seeing a beautiful sunset before one makes the judgment, “This is a beautiful sunset.”

An even “deeper” level of *samādhi* is to be simply aware of one's own consciousness, with neither a “subject” nor an “object” in view. Some meditation practices, especially those associated with Zen Buddhism, involve focusing on nothing in particular, with the aim of experiencing *pure consciousness*, a state of awareness which does not involve the experience of anything “external” (no sunset, no birdsong, no flower, no apple, no cold, wet rain on the skin), but simply one's “internal” state of mind. At this level of *samādhi*, there are no concepts whatsoever and, moreover, not even the possibility of forming any concepts since there is nothing that is being experienced except consciousness itself.

When practicing *samādhi*, thoughts arise naturally in the mind, of course, even if we are trying *not* to think about them, forming what James referred to as the *stream of consciousness* and what Buddhism calls *citta-santāna*. When thoughts do arise, however, they can be simply acknowledged and then dismissed, allowing one to return to a state of pure consciousness. Again, there is nothing “mystical” about pure consciousness, even though it can be very difficult to achieve. Most of us are unable to sit still for even one minute (ten seconds?) without thinking anything, and we tend to spend most of our waking life in a world of

concepts rather than in a world of pure experience. By engaging in *samādhi*, however, we are able to return to the world of pure experience and, at times, pure consciousness, even if only momentarily.

On the one hand, *samādhi* allows us to return to the thusness (*tathatā*) of experience, and, on the other, to see that our concepts themselves have no “real” existence apart from being thought. Through *samādhi* we become aware of the process by which concepts are created, which allows us to give up our attachment (*upādāna*) to them and, thus, to have a measure of control over them. By observing the process in which concepts appear and disappear during meditation, one is able to see them for what they are: ideas that simply flow into and out of one’s awareness. We are then in a position to become detached from our ideas and preconceptions, and not be imprisoned by them. “Emptying the mind” in this way frees up space for an awareness of experience before it has been conceptualized, as well as for creativity. An uncluttered mind enables us to look at the world in a completely different way.

Once we recognize that it is we ourselves who create the concepts we use for understanding our experience, we simultaneously realize that it is possible for us to reconstruct those concepts in ways that better account for our experience. Concepts are *constructs* which we do not need to hold on to as giving us “absolute truth” about reality. Rather, we are able to let go of them when necessary; we can create, use, revise, or abandon our concepts to the extent that they are useful to us. To appropriate a saying from the 9th century Ch’an (Zen) Buddhist sage, Ch’ing-yüan Wei-hsin (the original is cited in Suzuki 1953, p. 24), before we study Zen a mountain is a mountain (we are, as it were, epistemological realists who think that our concepts give us absolute truth about reality). When we have begun to study Zen, a mountain is no longer a mountain (we become poststructuralists who deny any connection between reality as it is and the concepts we construct of it). When we have mastered Zen, a mountain is a mountain again (we end up as pragmatists who see concepts as constructs that can still be put to practical use in helping us to understand reality better).

The construction of nonjectivity

Constructivism begins not with a substantival “I,” as Descartes did, but rather with experience itself. James denied the existence of consciousness as an *entity*, but nonetheless regarded it as a *function*, which makes knowledge possible. For James, what we take to be the subject, or “I,” is not antecedent to pure experience, but what follows when pure experience has been conceptualized in a particular way. Nishida makes a similar point: “It is not that there is experience because there is an individual, but that there is an individual because there is experience” (1990, p. 19). For Nishida, the “I” is not a substance, but is itself a concept. There is no dualism between “mind” and “body.” Pure experience is an instance of reality knowing itself.

This perspective accords with the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* (“no-self”), which holds that the concept of an “I” or “self” is something that arises out of discursive thought and has no substantive reality in itself. A related concept, *śūnyatā* (“emptiness,” “void,” *mu* in Japanese) expresses the idea of an ultimate nothingness that precedes both being and non-being. If the meaning of this term seems obscure, one may wish to think of *śūnyatā* as simply the empty “space,” or void, in which everything else, including all “somethings” and “nothings” in the ordinary senses of these terms, exists. *Śūnyatā* is similar to Nishida’s concept of *zettai-mu* (“absolute nothingness”; Nishida 1958, p. 130).

Pure experience from this perspective can be regarded as being neither *objective* or *subjective*, but rather *nonjective*.² While an analytical distinction can be made between an experiencer, on the one hand, and that which is experienced, on the other, in experience itself the two cannot be separated and are indistinguishable from each other, in the same way that there can be neither a dancer without a dance nor a dance without a dancer. While we may make a conceptual distinction between a person hearing a bell and the bell being heard, for example, there can be no experience unless both are present. Take away either the person or the bell and there is no longer any experience of a person hearing a bell. The Buddhist concept of *pratitya-samutpāda* (“dependent origination”) further suggests that causation is mutual and reflexive: all things both

cause and are caused by other things.

What we take to be “mind” and “world” can also be seen as co-determining each other. In the case of hearing a bell, the experience does not simply arise in the “mind” alone, but only in the relationship between “mind” and “world.” To state the idea in more physicalist terms, if there is no physical bell with a clapper in motion, no medium in which sounds waves can travel, no ear to hear them, and no brain to process the information, there is no experience. The experience of hearing a bell is not reducible to any one of these (and no doubt additional) components alone, but rather exists in the relationship between them.

Since it is somewhat difficult to talk about pure experience in nonjective terms, we may opt to talk about it in either subjective or objective terms, even though in both cases we are talking about exactly the same thing. We can talk about the bell “as it is experienced” (subjectively) or the bell “as it is” (objectively). If we adopt one of these descriptions to the exclusion of the other, we end up with some form of idealism or phenomenology in the first case and some form of realism or positivism in the second.

The tendency to make a strong distinction between the subjective (what is experienced only by oneself) and the objective (what is potentially experienceable by others) is undoubtedly influenced by the fact that in many languages a grammatically correct sentence must always have a subject. In English, for example, the sentence “I hear a bell” allows the speaker to analytically identify a *subject* which is hearing and an *object* which is heard. Interestingly, in the Japanese language the subject may be omitted by simply saying *kane-o kikimasu*, which, literally translated, means “bell(s) hear” (Japanese grammar places the verb after the object; the *-o* after *kane* indicates that the word is being used as the object and not the subject of the sentence). Usually the context makes it clear “who” hears the bell, but if necessary one may add a subject for emphasis (i.e., a proper name or pronoun), such as *watashi-wa kane-o kikimasu*, literally “I bell hear” (the *-wa* after *watashi* indicates that the word is being used as the subject and not the object of the sentence).³

To give another example, the English sentence “I am hot” expresses a

subjective point of view (which may be true only for me), while “It is hot” (using *it* to refer to something other than oneself, such as “the room,” “today,” or “the coffee”) expresses an objective point of view (which is potentially true for others). In Japanese, however, one may simply say “*atsui desu*,” literally “hot is” (or even more simply, “*atsui*”—“hot!”), without stating, or even implying, “what” is hot (the object) or “who” experiences it as such (the subject). The point of view is neither subjective nor objective, but, to use our term, nonjective.

Moreover, the distinction, characteristically made in Western philosophy since Aristotle, between substances (objects) and properties (attributes) disappears. *Atsui desu* designates a property but no substance. In conventional predicate logic the sentence “*atsui desu*” should be rendered not as $(\exists x)Hx$ (“There is an x such that x is hot [H]”) but rather as $\exists H$ (“There is hot [H]”). The upshot is that it is considerably easier to think non-dualistically in the Japanese language than in English, a fact which supports the view that language influences, even if it does not determine, how we perceive and think about the world (a weak version of the Whorf–Sapir hypothesis).

Pure experience precedes both a subjective and an objective point of view, as well as the tendency to make a linguistic distinction between the two. It is the experience of hot before there is any conceptualization of an “I” or a “hot.” At the level of pure experience, no categorizations are possible. Our experience is ineffable, or *apophatic*.⁴ Pure experience functions like a reset button to erase all (or at least many) of the concepts that we may construct about our experiences, so that our attention is directed not towards the thoughts that we have about our experiences, but rather towards the experiences themselves.

By extension, apophaticism is also the *via negativa* that urges us not to confuse any thoughts we may construct about “reality” with “reality” itself. It is the way of silence, the view that ultimately nothing can be said about reality or our experience of it that captures “reality” exactly as it is. It bears repeating that there is nothing “mystical” about apophaticism, since all that it implies is that we empty the mind of its contents to simply allow reality and our experience of it to be whatever they are.

The construction of discursive thought

While it is possible to doubt the existence of a substantial “I” that experiences, the fact that we have experiences cannot be doubted. Once we attempt to give an explanation for *why* we have the experiences we do, however, we are obliged to enter the realm of discursive thought. Indeed, it would be pleasant to remain in the realm of pure experience, with its ringing bells and beautiful sunsets, but if we try to base our knowledge of reality exclusively on pure experience, we would not be able to know very much about either ourselves or the world. It is discursive thought that enables us to make a conceptual distinction between a “world in here” (the subjective) and a “world out there” (the objective), even though no such distinction can be made on the basis of pure experience alone (the nonjective).

What we normally call *consciousness* refers to those mental states that we have some awareness of, and includes, among other things, those mental processes associated with perceptions, emotions, volitions, and thoughts—in short all of the tools that the brain uses to try to make sense of and act in the world. For Nishida, all types of conscious mental phenomena can be regarded as pure experience when they remain unreflected on (1990, p. 13). A memory of a sad experience in the past may cause one to feel sad in the present, for example.

Once we begin to reflect on experience, however, we pass from one form of consciousness, pure experience, to a different kind of consciousness, reflective or discursive thought, in which all judgments, discriminations, and categorizations take place. Rather than simply *have* an experience, we begin to *think* about our experience, indicating that it is possible to distinguish between pure experience as it is and pure experience as it is thought about or conceptualized.

The difference between hearing a bell and thinking about a bell is that one cannot hear a bell unless there is both a bell to be heard and someone to hear it, while it is entirely possible to think about a bell without actually hearing one. That is, while pure experience embraces both the object being experienced and the subject who experiences it, discursive thought requires only a thinking subject but not the actual presence of a

physical object, a fact which supports the conceptualist contention that ideas exist only in the thinking subject and not in an external reality.

We might think of pure experience as the “raw material” out of which our thoughts are constructed. As such, pure experience includes everything that we sense both externally (colors, sounds, tastes, etc. from the “outside world”) and internally (pains, emotions, desires, etc. from “inside ourselves”), devoid of any conceptualization. Collectively the contents of pure experience are often referred to as *qualia*, a term which expresses the qualitative aspects of our experience. Discursive thought, on the other hand, might be regarded as the process by which those “raw materials” are conceptualized, represented, categorized, and so forth.

Because pure experience is both undifferentiated and complex, we need to develop ways of differentiating between the various types of experiences we have and then classifying those types into relatively simple categories, which enable us to comprehend and make sense of our experience. It would be impractical for us to give a distinct label or name to each of the individual “things” we experience, so we construct categories into which we place those “things.” We do not, for example, give a separate name to each and every tree that we experience, but rather construct the category *trees*, which enables us to refer to each of the individual items in that category as a *tree*. If we lacked the ability to construct such categories, we would be simply overwhelmed by the vast amount of “raw material” which pure experience presents to us.

In Buddhism a distinction is made between *prajñā*, or wisdom, which D. T. Suzuki identifies with intuition and defines as “pure experience beyond differentiation” (1955, p. 101), and *vijñāna*, which is identified with reason and defined as “the principle of bifurcation and conceptualization” (1955, p. 93). Suzuki describes the difference between the two concepts as follows:

Prajñā goes beyond *vijñāna*. We make use of *vijñāna* in our world of the senses and intellect, which is characterized by dualism in the sense that there is the one who sees and there is the other that is

seen—the two standing in opposition. In *prajñā* this differentiation does not take place; what is seen and the one who sees are identical; the seer is the seen and the seen is the seer. (1955, p. 95)

Prajñā is the realm of pure experience described by both James and Nishida, in which no distinction can be made between the seer and the seen, the knower and the known (or the dancer and the dance), while *vijñāna* is the realm of discursive thought in which a distinction is made between the two.

The distinction between pure experience (the “foundation” of empiricism) and discursive thought (the “foundation” of rationalism) is itself a product of discursive thinking, of course, and there are various ways in which the distinction can be made. Nishida (1990, p. 4) quotes Wilhelm Wundt, who distinguished “immediate knowledge” based on pure experience from “mediate knowledge” based on discursive thought. James (1950, pp. 221–223) contrasted “knowledge of acquaintance” with “knowledge-about.” Bertrand Russell (1910–1911, pp. 108ff.) made a similar distinction between “knowledge by acquaintance” and “knowledge by description” (for a contemporary treatment of knowledge by acquaintance, see Chalmers 2010, pp. 285ff.), as did Henri Bergson (1955, pp. 21ff.) between “intuition” (experiential knowledge of a given reality, such as the understanding of Paris we get by actually going there) and “intellect” (conceptual knowledge of the same reality, such as the understanding we get by reading a guidebook or looking at a map of Paris). One point to be made here is that while pure experience can be achieved apart from any cultural constructions about how experience should be thought about, it is almost impossible to engage in discursive thinking without resorting to the use of modes of representation acquired from our respective cultures.

Discursive thought involves making *judgments* about experience. The moment one begins to make judgments about one’s experience, however, “it ceases to be pure experience” (Nishida 1990, p. 4). Judgments involve trying to understand a new experience in light of past experiences. When I say, “I hear a bell,” for example, I make a judgment that the sound I

am hearing is the sound of a “bell” based on my previous experiences of having heard bells and also on the fact that I am able to express this thought in a language I have learned as a result of having been socialized into a particular culture. While each of the experiences I have of bells is ultimately unique and the actual sounds I have heard may be quite different from each other (different bells have different tones, for example), I group all of these various experiences under a single category or concept: “bell.” I can then use the word *bell* both to organize my experiences and communicate them to others. When I encounter something that is totally new to my experience I must either learn how the new reality is conventionally classified (if others have already had a similar experience and classified it) or invent a new category for classifying it (if no one else has yet had a similar experience and classified it).

The construction of concepts

Given the complexity of both the world itself and our experience of it, if we needed to give a separate name to each of the phenomena that our senses present to us, our brains would soon be overwhelmed with concepts we could make no sense of. Constructs, or *schemata* to use Piaget’s (2001) term, allow us to create a conceptual grid through which our experiences can be filtered and sorted. The schemata we employ may be relatively *undifferentiated*, as when we look at a landscape and simply call it a “landscape,” or highly *differentiated*, as when we begin to group and sort the various items we see into particular kinds (“hills,” “meadows,” “trees,” “flowers,” etc.).

Further differentiations become possible when we begin to look at any of these items in closer detail—when we begin to identify the various parts of a flower, for example, or try to determine its molecular structure. In each case, however, we are creating a conceptual framework, or scheme, for pigeon-holing highly complex experiences into relatively simplified categories. In most cases, of course, we do not have to invent these categories since the various languages we speak already provide us with ready-made systems for categorizing our experiences.

Not all judgments are linguistic, of course. When riding a bicycle, for

example, we make all sorts of judgments about how to avoid hitting pedestrians and being hit by oncoming cars, which we do not put into words. Judgments cannot be talked about apart from using language, but if we try to describe all of the judgments we make when riding a bicycle, it becomes readily apparent that we have set an impossible task for ourselves. The same is true for *any* experience that we attempt to describe in language. Whenever we try to put our experiences into words, we can only do so by using the highly simplified and general categories provided by the languages we use. As a result, any descriptions we make of an immediate experience fail to convey the full richness of the experience itself. As Nishida writes, “Meanings or judgments are an abstracted part of the original experience, and compared with the original experience they are meager in content” (1990, p. 9).

In his comparative study of James’ and Nishida’s approaches to pure experience, Joel Krueger contends that for James “...the phenomenal content of embodied experiences *as experienced* outstrips our capacity to conceptually or linguistically articulate it” (2006, p. 7). We are capable of experiencing a nearly infinite range of colors, sounds, smells, tastes, and sensations, some of which we may not even know how to categorize or have words for. In contrast to the view that it is impossible to think or have an experience without language, it seems clear, as Krueger writes, that “...many of our basic experiences harbor *non-conceptual content*” (2006, p. 7). Every description that we give of a particular experience, therefore, is *always* a simplification, and thus a distortion, of the experience itself. In giving a description, we make judgments about which particular aspects of the experience we will focus on and which concepts we will use for describing it. Whatever conceptualizations we make are just that: conceptualizations and not the reality those conceptualizations purport to represent.

Nonetheless, concepts have instrumental utility in accordance with the purposes to which they are put—the central contention of pragmatism. We sort and organize the vast complexity of our experiences by constructing categories, often but not always linguistic, which enable us to make sense of and interact with the world, as well as to communicate

our ideas to others. Apart from any such concepts, we experience the world as babies might—in James' words as “one great blooming, buzzing confusion” (1950, p. 488). Indeed, as infants we enter the world possessing no concepts. While it may be the case that we are all born with brains which have the basic biological capacity to perceive the world and form concepts about it, the specific ideas we hold are only acquired either through our own direct experience or through mediated knowledge acquired from others.

By the time we become adults we have already learned to think about the world in particular ways as a result of our transactions both with the world (a point emphasized by Piagetian constructivists) and with others in society (a point emphasized by social constructionists). Our ability to acquire concepts considerably reduces the “blooming, buzzing confusion” we experienced as children, but is also one of the factors that makes it difficult for us to return to a state of pure experience. Nonetheless, once it is recognized that our thoughts about the world are constructs, rather than ideas that exist in the world itself, we are able to have a measure of control them. That is, we are capable of making judgments concerning how we think about the world on the basis of reflective thought.

Thus, as James writes, in our attempt to make sense of our experience, “We break the flux of sensible reality into things...at our will” (2000, p. 111). Similar constructivist views have been advanced by other writers. Here is Ernst Cassirer: “The beginning of thought and speech is not this: we do not simply seize on and name certain distinctions that are somewhere present in feeling or intuition; on the contrary, on our own initiative we draw certain dividing lines, effect certain separations and connections, by virtue of which distinct individual configurations emerge from the uniform flux of consciousness” (1955, p. 280). And R. G. Collingwood: “...any system of classification or division, whether the things classified or divided are colors or things that happen of themselves, is a system not ‘discovered’ but ‘devised’ by thought. The act of thought by which it is laid down is not proposition but supposition” (1940, p. 196).

The construction of conceptual maps

It should be recognized that actually understanding a given object is different from simply categorizing it. When we ask a naturalist “What kind of tree is that?” and the naturalist replies, “It’s a *Quercus alba*,” we may be puzzled, but what we are puzzled about is the concept not the tree. When the naturalist offers the clarification, “A *Quercus alba* is a white oak,” we may nod our heads and say, “Oh, now I understand” simply because we understand the words *white* and *oak*. The “truth” of the statement “A *Quercus alba* is a white oak” consists solely in the fact that we have categorized the object correctly, but it gives us absolutely no additional “truth” about the tree itself. As Nishida writes, “Meaning or judgment...does not add anything new to the experience” (1990, p. 9).

Put differently, what we are understanding is the way the tree is categorized, not the tree *as it is*. To gain knowledge about the tree itself involves making further observations about the tree, perhaps even studying it scientifically. In the course of our study, we will undoubtedly make or utilize a variety of subcategories for understanding the various parts of the tree and how they function, but such categories are not the tree itself. Rather, the categories are aids we create to help us organize our perceptions of the tree in ways that make it understandable to us.

The problem is that we often think that the concepts we use to categorize our experience give us a complete and truthful account of the world as it “really” is. As a Buddhist proverb has it, “To point at the moon a finger is needed, but woe to those who take the finger for the moon” (cited in Suzuki 1953, p. 19). Or in Alfred Korzybski’s neat metaphor: “A map *is not* the territory it represents...” (1958, p. 58). While the various systems of classification we construct provide us with a conceptual “map” of what we take to be reality, the map itself is never the reality. For there to be a one-to-one isomorphic relationship between a conceptual map and reality would mean that the map itself would have to be exactly the same as the reality.

Maps, models, languages, and other systems of representation are thus always a simplification, even a distortion, of reality, although they may be useful in helping us to categorize, and thus to understand, reality.

The linguistic (and semiotic) turn in philosophy has undoubtedly given us a better understanding of how language (and signs) work, but in order to continue the dialectic, a post-linguistic turn (which would include a reexamination of the relatively older philosophy of experience examined here) is needed to make us better aware of the distinctions that can be made between how things actually are, the ideas we have about how things actually are, and the various ways in which it is possible to express those ideas in language.

Nonetheless, even though maps are drawn in various ways for different purposes (compare road maps with geographical survey maps), they must still correspond in some way to the reality they are attempting to portray (discounting, for the moment, maps of magical kingdoms found in works of fiction). How maps are drawn is not arbitrary but constrained by what the map is purporting to represent. Maps can be relatively accurate or inaccurate, even though they are not “true” or “false” in any absolute sense. Generally maps can be evaluated by their usefulness or utility. A sketchy map drawn on the back of an envelop may be more effective than a geographical survey map in showing someone how to get to the nearest post office, even though the latter is considerably more precise and detailed (maybe so detailed that it is difficult to find one’s present location on the map).

In the same way, all representations can be evaluated by the pragmatic criteria of how useful they are for particular purposes. It is at this point that James’ radical empiricism meets his pragmatism. When James (2000, p. 88) wrote about the “cash-value” of an idea, he wanted to know what practical consequences would follow if one idea rather another was accepted as “true.” What was regarded as truth in the past is regarded as falsehood today, and what we regard as truth today may be regarded as falsehood tomorrow—a point well-illustrated throughout the history of human thought. Probably there is no ultimate criteria for determining absolute truth. Nonetheless, the fact that we are able to get by in life, and even in science and philosophy, with ideas that are less than certain demonstrates the possibility that ideas may have “expediency” even if they are not absolutely true.

Rather than simply speak of a concept's *expediency*, however, it may be better to say that what we regard as a useful idea depends on our *purposes*, which run the gamut from navigating the practical concerns of everyday life to formulating better scientific and philosophical theories. While it has been customary ever since Aristotle to make a distinction between *theory* and *practice*, which is no doubt useful for some purposes, there is no particular reason for pragmatism to exclude the theoretical from the practical: concepts obviously have practical utility even when building theories. Nonetheless, neither the concepts we create nor our purposes for creating them are given in the world itself. It is we ourselves who decide how the world should be categorized and for what purposes.

What these considerations suggest is that our understandings and descriptions of the world are always an account that never quite captures reality as it is. We come to recognize the possibility that there may be a gap between how we think about the world and the world as it is. In contrast to apophatic experience, which is based on pure, immediate experience, we recognize that all attempts to mediate our experience through representations are at best *cataphatic*. Cataphaticism is the *via positiva* in which we attempt to use a sign, symbol, or word to represent something that is not a sign, symbol, or word. The idea behind cataphaticism is that any descriptions we give of reality are always partial, incomplete, limited, and in some sense false, simply because any representation is different from that which it purports to represent. Whereas apophaticism suggests that ultimately no description of reality is possible, cataphaticism suggests that any description we do try to give can never be the absolute truth.

Conclusion

As it turns out, we spend a great deal of time living not in the world of pure experience but rather in the world of discursive thought. One aim of constructivism is to help us recognize the difference between the two. If we are able to become aware of how discursive thought constructs what we take to be reality, we can avoid identifying the world as

we think about it with the world as it is. Constructivism suggests that a useful distinction can be made between the world as it is revealed to us in pure experience and the world as it is constructed in discursive thought. A failure to make this distinction means that we end up living more in a “virtual world” of representations than in the “real world” revealed by pure experience.

Notes

1 All Sanskrit terms in this essay are taken from Takakusu (1987).

2 The term *nonjective* was used by Richard Routley and Val Routley (1980) in the context of environmental philosophy to refer to a theory of value which is neither subjective (values are “in the mind”) nor objective (values are “in the world”). Value cannot exist independently from a relationship between a valuing subject and an object that is valued. As suggested here, the concept of *nonjectivity* can be extended beyond values to other areas of human experience.

3 A few additional observations can be inserted here parenthetically. One is that the Japanese language makes semantic distinctions not found in English between different types of bells: *kane* refers to large bells found at Buddhist temples, *suzu* to small bells, and *beru* (a loanword from English) to medium-sized bells, usually of the Western type. Moreover, English makes a clear distinction between whether “a bell” (the singular form) or “bells” (the plural form) is/are being heard. Since nouns in Japanese do not have singular or plural forms, the sentence *kane-o kikimasu* (literally “bell[s] [object] hear”) does not make it clear whether one bell or several are being heard, although a distinction can be made with the addition of more complicated grammatical constructions or explanations not normally used unless the communicative situation requires them. A further complication is that since the Japanese language does not have definite or indefinite articles, it does not distinguish whether it is “*the* bell” (this particular bell, indicated by the definite article) or “*a* bell” (any bell, indicated by the indefinite article) that is being heard. The distinction made by Russell (1905) between definite (“*the* so-and-so”) and indefinite (“*a* so-and-so”) descriptions is not one that would naturally arise in Japanese. It may also be noted that the Japanese language makes no distinction between countable (“*one, a few, many* bell[s]”) and uncountable nouns (“*some, a little, much* water”), as English does.

4 The concepts *apophatic* and *cataphatic* are derived from Pseudo-Dionysius (1980) and Eastern Orthodox theology (see Lossky 1976). The distinction is based on the notion that we, as humans, are unable to form any conception of God as God actually is. In apophatic, or negative theology, it is impossible to make any statement about God which is absolutely true because God transcends all human categories; all statements about God are ultimately false. In cataphatic, or positive theology, any statements we make about God must be regarded as metaphorical and not literally true. The terms *apophatic* and *cataphatic* can be applied, it might be suggested, not only to ideas about

God but also to the ideas we construct about experience and whatever is thought of as “reality.”

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Pure Experience and Constructivism

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