Percept and Concept and Their Practical Uses

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William James (1842-1910) was professor of philosophy at Harvard University. He is the author of several important books, including "The Principles of Psychology" (1890), "The Will To Believe" (1891), "The Varieties of Religious Experience" (1902), "Pragmatism" (1907), "A Pluralistic Universe" (1909), "The Meaning of Truth" (1909), and "Some Problems of Philosophy" (1911).

Sensation and thought in man are mingled, but they vary independently. In our quadrupedal relatives thought proper is at a minimum, but we have no reason to suppose that their immediate life of feeling is either less or more copious than ours. Feeling must have been originally self-sufficient; and thought appears as a superadded function, adapting us to a wider environment than that of which brutes take account. Some parts of the stream of feeling must be more intense, emphatic, and exciting than others in animals as well as in ourselves; but whereas lower animals simply react upon these more salient sensations by appropriate movements, higher animals remember them, and men react on them intellectually, by using nouns, adjectives, and verbs to identify them when they meet them elsewhere.

The great difference between percepts and concepts is that percepts are continuous and concepts are discrete. Not discrete in their being, for conception as an act is part of the flux of feeling, but discrete from each other in their several meanings. Each concept means just what it singly means, and nothing else; and if the conceiving does not know whether he means this or means that, it shows that his concept is imperfectly formed. The perceptual flux as such, on the contrary, means nothing, and is but what it immediately is. No matter how small a tract of it be taken, it is always a much-at-once, and contains innumerable aspects and characters which conception can pick out, isolate, and thereafter always intend. It shows duration, intensity, complexity or simplicity, interestingness, excitingness, pleasantness or their opposites. Data from all our senses enter into it, merged in a general extensiveness of which each occupies a big or little share. Yet all these parts leave its unity unbroken. Its boundaries are no more distinct than are those of the field of vision.

1. In what follows I shall freely use synonyms for these two terms. "ideas," "thought," and "intellection" are synonymous with "concept." Instead of "percept" I shall often speak of "sensation," "feeling," "intuition," and sometimes of "sensible experience" or of the "immediate flow" of conscious life. Since Hegel's time, what is simply perceived has been called the "immediate," while the "mediated" is synonymous with what is conceived.

Source: William James, *Some Problems in Philosophy* (1911)
Boundaries are things that intervene; but here nothing intervenes save parts of the perceptual flux itself, and these are overflowed by what they separate, so that whatever we distinguish and isolate conceptually is found perceptually to telescope and compenetrate and diffuse into its neighbors. The cuts we make are purely ideal. If my reader can succeed in abstracting from all conceptual interpretation and lapse back into his immediate sensible life at this very moment, he will find it to be what someone has called a big blooming buzzing confusion, as free from contradiction in its "much-at-onceness" as it is all alive and evidently there.²

Out of this aboriginal sensible muchness attention carves out objects, which conception then names and identifies forever-in the sky "constellations," on the earth "beach," "sea," "cliff," "bushes," "grass." Out of time we cut "days" and "nights," "summers" and "winters." We say what each part of the sensible continuum is, and all these abstracted what's are concepts.³

The intellectual life of man consists almost wholly in his substitution of a conceptual order for the perceptual order in which his experience originally comes.

From Aristotle downwards, philosophers have frankly admitted the indispensability, for complete knowledge of fact, of both the sensational and the intellectual contribution.⁴ For complete knowledge of fact, I say; but facts are particulars and connect themselves with practical necessities and the arts; and Greek philosophers soon formed the notion that a knowledge of so-called "universals," consisting of concepts of abstract forms, qualities, numbers, and relations was the only knowledge worthy of the truly philosophic mind. Particular facts decay and our perceptions of them vary. A concept never varies; and between such unvarying terms the relations must be constant and express eternal verities. Hence there arose a tendency, which has lasted all through philosophy, to contrast the knowledge of universals and intelligibles, as godlike, dignified, and honorable to the knower, with that of particulars and sensibles as something

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3. On the function of conception consult: Sir William Hamilton's Lecturer on Logic, chap. i; A. Schopenhauer, The World as Will, etc. Supplements 6, 7 to book ii; W. James, Principles of Psychology, chap. xii; Briefer Course, chap. xiv. Also J. G. Romanes: Mental Evolution in Man, chap. iii. iv: Th. Ribot: l'Evolution des Idées Claires; chap. vi; Th. Ruysseu, Essai sur l'Evolution psychologique des ârmen:; chap. vii; Laromlguite, Lecons de Philosophie, part 2, lesson. The account I give directly contradicts that which Kant gave which has prevailed since Kant's time. Kant always speaks of the Aboriginal sensible flux as a "manifold" of which he considers the essential character to be its disconnectedness. To get any togetherness at all into it requires, he thinks, the agency of the "transcendental ego of apperception." and to get any definite connections requires the agency of the understanding, with its synthetizing concepts or categories. "Die Verbindung (conjuncto) eines Mannigfaltigen kann überhaupt niemals durch... Sinne in uns kommen, and kann also sich nicht in der reinen Form der sinnlichen Anschauung zureichende mit enhalten reich; denn sie ist ein Actus der Spontaneität der Erlebnisskraft, and, des man diese, zum Unterschiede von der Sinnlichkeit, Verstand nennen muss, so ist alt Verbindung... eine Verstandeshandlung." K. d. r. V., etc, Aufg., pp. 129-150. The reader must decide which account agrees best with his own actual experience.
4. See, for example, book I, chap. il, of Aristotle's Metaphysics.
For rationalistic writers conceptual knowledge was not only the more noble knowledge, but it originated independently of all perceptual particulars. Such concepts as God, perfection, eternity, infinity, immutability, identity, absolute beauty, truth, justice, necessity, freedom, duty, worth, etc., and the part they play in our mind, are, it was supposed, impossible to explain as results of practical experience. The empiricist view, and probably the true view, is that they do result from practical experience. But a more important question than that as to the origin of our concepts is that as to their functional use and value; is that tied down to perceptual experience, or out of all relation to it? Is conceptual knowledge self-sufficing and a revelation all by itself, quite apart from its uses in helping to a better understanding of the world of sense?

Rationalists say, Yes. For, as we shall see in later places, the various conceptual universes referred to can be considered in complete abstraction from perceptual reality, and when they are so considered, all sorts of fixed relations can be discovered among their parts. From these the a priori sciences of logic, either in the way of making us think, or in the way of making us act. Whoever has a clear idea of these

5. Plato In numerous places, but chiefly in books 6 and 7 of the Republic, contrasts perceptual knowledge as “opinion” with real knowledge, to the latter’s glory. For an excellent historic sketch of this platonistic view see the first part of E. Lass’s Idealism und Positivismus, 1879. For expressions of the ultra-Intellectualistic view, read the passage from "Plotinus on the Intelect" In C. M. Bakewell's Source-book in Ancient Philosophy, N.Y. 1907. pp. 353f.; Bossuet, Traité la Connaissance de Dieu, chap. IV, ID V, vi; R. Cudworth, A Treatise concerning eternal and immutable Morality, books 111. iv.-“Plato,” writes Prof. Santayana, “thought that all the truth and meaning of earthly things was the reference they contained to a heavenly original. This heavenly original we remember to recognize even among the distortions, disappearances, and multiplications of its ephemeral copies. ... The Impressions themselves have no permanence, no intelligible essence, but are always either arising or ceasing to be. There must be, he tells us, an eternal and clearly definable object of which the visible appearances to us are the multiform semblance; now by one trait, now by another, the phantom before us reminds us of that half-forgotten celestial reality and makes us utter its name.... We and the whole universe exist only in the attempt to return to our perfection, to lose ourselves again in God. That ineffable good is our natural possession; and all we honor in this life is but a partial recovery of our birthright; every delightful thing is like a rift in the clouds, through which we catch a glimpse of our native heaven. And if that heaven seems so far away, and the Idea of it so dim and unreal, it is because we are so far from perfect, so Immersed in what is alien and destructive to the soul.” (“Platonic Love in some Italian Poets,” In Interpretations of Poetry and Religion, 1876.) This is the Interpretation of Plato which has been current since Aristotle. It should be said that its profundity has been challenged by Prof. A. J. Stewart. (Plato's Doctrine of Ideas, Oxford, 1909)

Aristotle found great fault with Plato's treatment of ideas as heavenly originals, but he agreed with him fully as to the superior excellence of the conceptual or theoretic life. In chapters vii and viii of book x of the Nicomachean Ethics he extolls contemplation of universal relations as alone yielding pure happiness. “The life of God, In all its exceeding blessedness, will consist in the exercise of philosophic thought; and of all human activities, that will be the happiest which is most akin to the divine.”

6. John Locke, In his Essay concerning Human Understanding, books I, il. was the great popularizer of this doctrine. Condillac's Traité des Sensations, Helvetius's work, De l'Hommes, and James Mill's Analysis of the Human Mind were more radical successors of Locke's great book.
knows effectively what the concept practically signifies, whether its substantive content be interesting in its own right or not.

This consideration has led to a method of interpreting concepts to which I will give the name of the Pragmatic Rule. 7

The pragmatic rule is that the meaning of a concept may always be found, if not in some sensible particular which it directly designates, then in some particular difference in the course of human experience which its being true will make. Test every concept by the question “What sensible difference to anybody will its truth make?” and you are in the best possible position for understanding what it means and for discussing its importance. If, questioning whether a certain concept be true or false, you can think of absolutely nothing that would practically differ in the two cases, you may assume that the alternative is meaningless and that your concept is no distinct idea. If two concepts lead you to infer the same particular consequence, then you may assume that they embody the same meaning under different names.

This rule applies to concepts of every order of complexity, from simple terms to propositions uniting many terms.

Does our conceptual translation of the perceptual flux enable us also to understand the latter better? What do we mean by making us “understand” Applying our pragmatic rule to the interpretation of the word, we see that the better we understand anything the more we are able to tell about it. Judged by this test, concepts do make us understand our percepts better: knowing what these are, we can tell all sorts of farther truths about them, based on the relation of those whats to other whats. The whole system of relations, spatial, temporal, and logical, of our fact, gets plotted out. An ancient philosophical opinion, inherited from Aristotle, is that we do not understand a thing until we know it by its causes. When the maid-servant says that “the cat” broke the teacup, she would have us conceive the fracture in a causally explanatory way. Nor otherwise, when Clerk-Maxwell asks us to conceive of gas-electricity as due to molecular bombardment. An imaginary agent out of sight becomes in each case a part of the cosmic context in which we now place the percept to be explained; and the explanation is valid in so far as the new causal that is itself conceived in a context that makes its existence probable, and with a nature agreeable to the effects it is imagined to produce. All our scientific explanations would seem to conform to this simple type of the “necessary cat.” The conceived order of nature built round the perceived order and explaining it theoretically, as we say, is only a system, of hypothetically imagined thats, the whats of which harmoniously connect themselves with the what of any that which we immediately perceive.

The system is essentially a typographic system, a system of the distribution of things. It tells us what’s what, and where’s where. In so far forth it merely prolongs that opening up of the perspective of practical consequences which we found to be the

7. Compare, W. James, Pragmatism, chap. ii and passim; also Baldwin’s Dictionary of Philosophy, article "Pragmatism," by C. S. Peirce.
primordial utility of the conceiving faculty: it adapts us to an immense environment. Working by the causes of things we gain advantages which we never should have compassed had we worked by the things alone.

The “rationalization” of any mass of perceptual fact consists in assimilating its concrete terms, one by one, to so many terms of the conceptual series, and then in assuming that the relations intuitively found among the latter are what connect the former too. Thus we rationalize gas-pressure by identifying it with the blows of hypothetic molecules; then we see that the more closely the molecules are crowded the more frequent the blows upon the containing walls will become; then we discern the exact proportionality of the crowding with the number of blows; so that finally Mariotte’s empirical law gets rationally explained. All our transformations of the sense-order into a more rational equivalent are similar to this one. We interrogate the beautiful apparition, as Emerson calls it, which our senses ceaselessly raise upon our path, and the items there refer us to their interpretants in the shape of ideal constructions in some static arrangement which our mind has already made out of its concepts alone. The interpretants are then substituted for the sensations, which thus get rationally conceived. To “explain” means to coordinate, one to one. the thises of the perceptual flow with the whats of the ideal manifold, whichever it be.⁸

We may well call this a theoretic conquest over the order in which nature originally comes. The conceptual order into which we translate our experience seems not only a means of practical adaptation, but the revelation of a deeper level of reality in things. Being more constant, it is truer, less illusory than the perceptual order. and ought to command our attention more.

There is still another reason why conception appears such an exalted function. Concepts not only guide us over the man of life, but we revalue life by their use. Their relation to percepts is like that of sight to touch. Sight indeed helps us by preparing us for contacts while they are yet far off, but it endows us, in addition, with a new world of optical splendor, interesting enough all by itself to occupy a busy life. Just so do concepts bring their proper splendor. The mere possession of such vast and simple pictures is an inspiring good: they arouse new feelings of sublimity, power, and admiration, new interests and motivations.

Ideality often clings to things only when they are taken thus abstractly. “Causes, as anti-slavery, democracy, etc., dwindle when realized in their sordid particulars. Abstractions will touch us when we are callous to the concrete instances in which they lie embodied. Loyal in our measure to particular ideals, we soon set up abstract loyalty as something of a superior order, to be infinitely loyal to; and truth at large becomes a ‘momentous issue’ compared with which truths in detail are ‘poor scraps, mere crumbling successes.”⁹ So strongly do objects that come as universal and eternal arouse

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8. Compare W. Ostwald: Vorluungen uuber Naturphilosophie, Sechste Vorlesung
9. J. Royce: The Philosophy of Loyalty, 1908, particularly Lecture vii, no. 5.
Emerson writes: "Each man sees over his own experience a certain stain of error, whilst that of other men looks fair and Ideal. Let say man go back to those delicious relations which make the beauty of his life, which have given him sincerest instruction and nourish-
our sensibilities, so greatly do life's values deepen when we translate percepts into ideals! The translation appears as far more than the original's equivalent.

*Concepts thus play three distinct parts* in human life.

1. They steer us practically every day, and provide an immense map of relations among the elements of things, which, though not now, yet on some possible future occasion, may help to steer us practically;
2. They bring new values into our perceptual life, they reanimate our wills and make our action turn upon new points of emphasis:
3. The map which the mind frames out of them is an object which possesses, when once it has been framed, an independent existence. It suffices all by itself for purposes of study. The “*eternal*” truths it contains would have to be acknowledged even were the world of sense annihilated.

We thus see clearly what is gained and what is lost when percepts are translated into concepts. Perception is solely of the here and now: conception is of the like and unlike, of the future, of the past, and of the far away. But this map of what surrounds the present, like all maps, is only a surface: its features are but abstract signs and symbols of things that in themselves are concrete bits of sensible experience. We have but to weigh extent against content, thickness against spread, and we see that for some purposes the one, for other purposes the other, has the higher value. Who can decide off-hand which is absolutely better to live or to understand life? We must do both alternately, and a man can no more limit himself either than a pair of scissors can cut with a single one of its blades.

**PERCEPT AND CONCEPT—THE ABUSE OF CONCEPTS**

Having now set forth the merits of the conceptual translation, I must proceed to show its shortcomings. We extend our view when we insert our percepts into our conceptual map. We learn *about* them, and of some of them we transfigure the value: but the map remains superficial through the abstractness, and false through the discreteness of its elements: and the whole operation, so far from making things appear more rational, becomes the source of quite gratuitous unintelligibilities. Conceptual knowledge is forever inadequate to the fullness of the reality to be known. Reality consists of existential particulars as well as *essences* and universals and class-names, and of existential particulars we become aware only in the perceptual flux. The flux can never be superseded. We must carry it with us to the bitter end of our cognitive business, keeping it in the midst of the translation even when the latter proves illuminating, and falling back...

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ment, he will shrink and moan. Alas! I know not why, but infinite compunctions embitter in mature life the remembrances of budding *joy*, and cover every beloved name. Everything is beautiful seen from the point of view of the intellect, or as truth, but all is sour, if seen as experience. Details are melancholy; the plan is seemingly and noble. In the actual world—the painful kingdom of time and place—dwell care, and canker, and fear. With thought, with the ideal, is immortal hilarity, the rose of Joy. Round it all the muses sing But grief clings to *names* and persons, and the partial interests of to-day and yesterday." (Essay on "Love")
on it alone when the translation gives out. “The insuperability of sensation” would be a short expression of my thesis.

To prove it, I must show: 1. That concepts are secondary formations, inadequate, and only ministerial; and 2. That they falsify as well as omit, and make the flux impossible to understand.

1. Conception is a secondary process, not indispensable to life. It presupposes perception, which is self-sufficing, as all lower creatures, in whom conscious life goes on by reflex adaptations, show.

To understand a concept you must know what it means. It means always some this, or some abstract portion of a this, with which we first made acquaintance in the perceptual world, or else some grouping of such abstract portions. All conceptual content is borrowed: to know what the concept “color” means, you must have seen red or blue, or green. To know what “resistance” means, you must have made some effort; to know what “motion” means, you must have had some experience, active or passive, thereof. This applies as much to concepts of the most rarified order as to qualities like “bright” and “loud.” To know what the word “illation” means one must once have sweated through some particular argument. To know what a “proportion” means one must have compared ratios in some sensible case. You can create new concepts out of old elements, but the elements must have been perceptually given; and the famous world of universals would disappear like a soap-bubble if the definite contents of feeling, the thises and thats, which its terms severally denote, could be at once withdrawn. Whether our concepts live by returning to the perceptual world or not, they live by having come from it. It is the nourishing ground from which their sap is drawn.

2. Conceptual treatment of perceptual reality makes it seem paradoxical and incomprehensible; and when radically and consistently carried out, it leads to the opinion that perceptual experience is not reality at all, but an appearance or illusion. Briefly, this is a consequence of two facts: First, that when we substitute concepts for percepts, we substitute their relations also. But since the relations of concepts are of static comparison only, it is impossible to substitute them for the dynamic relations with which the perceptual flux is filled. Secondly, the conceptual scheme, consisting as it does of discontinuous terms, can only cover the perceptual flux in spots and incompletely. The one is no full measure of the other, essential features of the flux escaping whenever we put concepts in its place.

This needs considerable explanation, for we have concepts not only of qualities and relations, but of happenings and actions; and it might seem as if these could make the conceptual order active.10

10. Prof. Hibben, in an article in the Philosophic Review, vol. xix, pp. 125ff. (1910), seeks to defend the conceptual order against attacks similar to those in the text, which, he thinks, come from misapprehensions of the true function of logic. "The peculiar function of thought is to represent the continuous," he says, and he proves it by the example of the calculus. I reply that the calculus, in substituting for certain perceptual continuities its peculiar symbol systems as is,
Whenever we conceive a thing we define it; and if we still don't understand, define our definition. Thus I define a certain percept by saying “this is motion,” or “I am moving”; and then I define motion by calling it the “being in new positions at new moments of time.” This habit of telling what everything is becomes inveterate. The farther we push it, the more we learn about our subject of discourse, and we end by thinking that knowing the latter always consists in getting farther and farther away from the perceptual type of experience. This uncriticized habit, added to the intrinsic charm of the conceptual form, is the source of “intellectualism” in philosophy.

But intellectualism quickly breaks down. When we try to exhaust motion by conceiving it as a summation of parts, \textit{ad infinitum}, we find only insufficiency. Although, when you have a continuum given, you can make cuts and dots in it, \textit{ad libitum}, enumerating the dots and cuts will not give you your continuum back. The rationalist mind admits this; but instead of seeing that the fault is with the concepts, it blames the perceptual flux.

If we take a few examples, we can see how many of the troubles of philosophy come from assuming that to be understood (or “known” in the only worthy sense of the word) our flowing life must be cut into discrete bits and pinned upon a fixed relational scheme.

Example.\textit{ Knowledge Is Impossible}; for knower is one concept, and known is another. Discrete, separated by a chasm, they are mutually “transcendent” things, so that how an object can ever get into a subject, or a subject ever get at an object, has become the most unanswerable of philosophic riddles. An insincere riddle, too, for the most hardened “epistemologist” never really doubts that knowledge somehow does come off.

Example. \textit{Personal Identity Is Conceptually Impossible}. “ideas” and “states of mind” are discrete concepts, and a series of them in time means a plurality of disconnected terms. To such an atomistic plurality the associationists reduce our mental life. Shocked at the discontinuous character of their scheme, the spiritualists assume a “soul” or “ego” to melt the separate ideas into one collective consciousness. But this ego itself is but another discrete concept; and the only way not to pile up more puzzles is to endow it with an in-comprehensible power of producing that very character of manyness-in-oneness of which rationalists refuse the gift when offered in its

lets us follow changes point by point, and is thus their \textit{practical}, but not their sensible equivalent. It cannot \textit{reveal} any change to one who never felt it, but it can lead him to where the change would lead him. It may practically replace the change, but it cannot reproduce it. What I am contending for is that the non-reproducible part of reality is an essential part of the content of philosophy, whilst Hibben and the logicists seem to believe that conception, it only adequately attained to, might be all-sufficient. “It is the peculiar duty and privilege of philosophy,” Mr. Hibben writes, “to exalt the prerogatives of intellect.” He claims that universals are able to deal adequately with particulars, and that concepts do not to exclude each other, as my text has accused them of doing. Of course “synthetic” concepts abound, with subconcepts included in them, and the \textit{a priori} world is full of them. But they are all designative; and I think that no careful reader of my text will accuse me of identifying ‘knowledge’ with either perception or conception absolutely or exclusively. Perception gives “intension,” while, at the same time, conception gives “extension” to our knowledge
immediate perceptual form.

Example, *Motion and Change Are Impossible*. Perception changes pulsewise, but the pulses continue each other and melt their bounds. In conceptual translation, however, a continuum can only stand for elements with other elements between them *ad infinitum*, all separately conceived; and such an infinite series can never be exhausted by successive addition. From the time of Zeno the Eleatic, this intrinsic contradictoriness of continuous change has been one of the worst skulls at intellectualism's banquet.