JAMES'S THEORY OF UNIVERSALS:
AN APPROACH FOR LEARNING

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ABSTRACT. Most philosophers and educators are not familiar with James's theory of universals, especially how it applies to learning concepts. His theory is an integral aspect of his epistemology, which is useful for understanding how children and adults learn and remember new concepts. James discusses and refers to his theory of universals throughout his career, but he never fully develops it. This paper defends the view that conceptualism is most consistent with his basic empiricism, developed from his *Principles of Psychology* and is his true position. Some critics argue that nominalism or Platonic realism are closer to his position, but this paper rejects those views as atypical or unrevised ideas of James's thought. Bruner's theory of concepts is also considered.

Keywords: concepts, conceptualism, realism, learning theory, universals, images

Most educators are unfamiliar with William James's contribution to educational and learning theory which is developed primarily in the classic *Principles of Psychology*. James's ideas concerning the existence of universals originate from his empiricist theory of knowledge and pragmatism first explained in the *Principles*. It occupied his attention throughout his life and has an integral role in his philosophy as a whole. His position on universals, though not well known, develops logically based on experience, and provides cogent perspectives for understanding new concepts. I shall show how his position somewhat changed, and also why it is applicable for classroom learning. Finally, one can see that James's conceptualism is the most useful theory of universals and enables us to better understand how people learn new concepts.

As an adamant empiricist, he argued that conceptualism is the most appropriate theory of universals consistent with the psychology in the *Principles*. Yet in his later *Pragmatism* he briefly suggests nominalism, though it is

not a definite position, and in his final unfinished book *Some Problems of Philosophy*, he suggests that realism is the best theory.[1] Some philosophers state that nominalism and realism are the only alternatives open but this is a false dichotomy. This paper argues that conceptualism was his true position with which he intended to integrate realism. For this reason, it is necessary to explain his two positions, starting with conceptualism, which holds that universals are only subjective or a function of consciousness and do not exist in external reality.

He defines his meaning of the term "universal" in relation to conception in the *Principles*. "An individual conception is of something restricted, in its application, to a single case. A universal or general conception is of an entire class, or of something belonging to an entire class, of things. The conception of an abstract quality is, taken by itself, neither universal nor particular."[2]

Concepts are mental representations which classify resembling entities or particulars, guiding and organizing experiences and thoughts. Conception is the relation between a mental state and what it signifies, or its function to give meaning to particulars. It is a conceiving *process*, not strictly a concept. Conceptualism holds that when one focuses on something from experience, understands and processes it, then a general conception (universal) is created in the mind. (Like most philosophers, James primarily uses colors for examples). The universal of red extends to or includes all particular instances of red, and the universal of triangle includes all similar instances or particular examples. The value and purpose of universals is to enable people to reason well about particulars.

However, consciousness is very fluid like a stream because it is always changing and never precisely the same. Every thought of a particular fact or idea is strictly unique and bears only resemblance to other thoughts of them. When the same fact or idea recurs, people will have a different point of view or understanding toward it because no two brain states can be identical. Here he agrees with Hume that an identical permanently existing idea is a fiction. The nature of brain states and our everyday experiences show that we always think of the same fact somewhat differently. For example, every experience each person has toward sunsets or a particular chair is slightly different than the last time, though we may that think they are the same; similarly, no two ideas are precisely identical. Indirectly, then, this also implies that the general conception of a subjective fact, such as *resemblance* to it. People then formulate a concept about it which may gradually change significantly over time. Moreover, to remain consistent, his conceptualism would deny that these universals have an objective real existence in the external world. This looks intuitive because all people share

at least some universals in common, but scientists disagree whether or not they truly exist objectively. This is true for perceptual universals such as colors and sound as well as other universals. The appearance of permanence, then, seems to imply a realist theory of universals, but in the "Stream of Thought" chapter in the *Principles*, James does not argue from this position.

He also opposes nominalism, which denies the existence of universals and holds that only particulars exist, e.g. *this* and *that* red, denoted by general words. George Berkeley's faulty position, referred to as "nominalistic Platonism", (which sounds like an oxymoron) denied the existence of abstract ideas that were held by Locke. James never really argues for nominalism, contrary to the claims of Charles Pierce. James's focus on the reality of particulars does *not* necessarily imply nominalism. Moreover, he rejects Mill's conceptualism which he says is weak nominalism in disguise, and argues it is fallacious in order to adopt his own theory of conceptualism. Here he tells us why. "But Mill and the rest believe that a thought must *be* what it means, and mean what it *is*, and that if it be a picture of an entire individual, it cannot mean any part of him to the exclusion of the rest. I say nothing here of the preposterously false descriptive psychology involved in the statement that the only things we can mentally picture are individuals completely determinate in all regards."3

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James holds that the image, *per se*, is the least important aspect of thought, unlike Piaget and Sartre's theory in *The Psychology of the Imagination*. These images of individual persons are not always determinate and fixed in all their aspects – they may be vague and abstract. However, as Bruner speculates, consider imagining a friend, Mr. Jones: which Jones would we picture in our minds? The older or younger – and how would he be dressed or undressed? He might be 25 and in great health or 70 in poor health. His appearance may have changed significantly over time, so that any of the images may be correct, and because of memory lapses, they could all be incorrect. Jones may change all his physical attributes and still be the same person. If this kind of concrete proper name noun has difficulties, more abstract examples will be much more challenging for an imagistic theory of meaning and learning,4 but still useful as this paper shows. Based on my experience, images are extremely important for learning and remembering in the long-term future. Words and letters can be imagined for spelling, and we can also conjure images of familiar concrete nouns from one's past. Although they may be fuzzy and unclear, it can be an effective method for remembering new words. For James, the sheer power to think things and

attributes, separate and drawn from the experience in which they appeared is the most indisputable function of thought.

To distinguish his position from Mill and Locke's conceptualism, he affirms that images and meanings can be distinct, and that the change in one's meaning of X is not connected to the change of the image. Instead, it is connected with the vague consciousness that surrounds the words and concepts.

Piaget argues that the image is an important aspect of the child's learning process; the word may be equivalent to an image. Merely because a child knows a word does not mean or imply that he understands it. In *The Early Growth of Logic in the Child*, he says,

Thus, the generality of a word (i.e., a noun or an adjective) may be very weak for a child, so that symbolically the word is closer to an image than a concept, or it may approximate to a true conceptual generality...the fact that a child calls a cat a cat does not prove that he understands the "class" of cats. The name is borrowed from the language of adults...but to a child, it may be the schematic equivalent of an image, which is halfway between the individual and the generic.5

He agrees with James that the child (and adults) classify and categorize objects, arranging them by resemblance with members of the same class and by dissimilarity. He then claims that because language is not the essential factor for building the child's cognitive logical structures, we should look toward their perceptual and sensorimotor functions which are prior to language development. James strongly claims, based on observation and speculation, that perception is prior and primordial knowledge. Research by philosophical epistemologists would be much more noteworthy by utilizing Piaget's empirical studies.

Interestingly, Bruner suggests that "the person knows he has learned the concept when he feels he is able to predict the status of new instances with a sufficiently high degree of certainty."6 However, this strategy varies by the person: some people continue to explore more attributes of an object, say members of an animal family or genus, while others are more easily satisfied. He is right that it is not always easy to know exactly how a person decides that he has learned a new concept. He uses the example of finding influential people by their common attributes, but there is no set number of successive attempts to determine whether a person is influential. Children will use various behavioral responses from their parent(s) and family members to decide whether they shall be rewarded or punished, and in this inductive method, try to predict future instances of their behavior. This Concept Attainment Strategy emphasizes the meaning or understanding of a concept rather than what it is called, as Boolware and Crowe state. "Using inductive reason-

ing, students are allowed to generalize to other similar and nonsimilar examples before the concept is given a name...students develop comprehension of words through the use of a structured thinking and reasoning process that involves confirming or altering their views in ways that are meaningful to them."[7]

In this way, Bruner's concept learning strategy is very consistent with James's conceptualist position in theory and application. James would agree that students (and non-students) should practice with concepts that are important to them in their lives, those words that make an actual difference, thus having "cash-value." After this comprehension, they should grasp the meanings of concepts and universals of less relevance and interest to eventually include a vast systematic array of knowledge. Boulware and Crowe focus on techniques for elementary education, but the theory can be applied at all educational levels, including abstract concepts (and universals) as well as concrete nouns. They note that gifted students and those with special needs among English language learners benefit especially from this strategy. The emphasis here, then, is on inductive generalizations from observation, rather than learning definitions of concepts.

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However, James's position on universals varied over the years and appears ontologically inconsistent. Moreover, he does not claim to understand totally the epistemological character of universal meanings. Since Plato, philosophers have tended to "worship" universals over particulars when the reverse should have occurred, he argues. Besides, James does not entirely decide whether universals are objective or subjective – merely a function of consciousness. Certainly, his argument implies that they are only subjective, but rather than clearly state his position, he skirts the question.

In his later radical empiricism, James also argues that percepts are the primary source of knowledge, and concepts are secondary and presuppose perception. As mentioned, concepts are learned from experience and in a secondary way from definitions. Moreover, sometimes concepts falsify and omit important content. People must experience parades or soccer fields to truly know their meanings, but obviously this does not apply to all new knowledge. (One should not experiment with firearms to know their potential danger.) In this way, some particular *this* or *X* is experienced, and merely thinking about a definition of a soccer field is insufficient. New concepts are created from older ones. A new concept of noisy parades arises from an earlier one, perhaps originating from talk about the subject. So, the more one relies on definitions for conceptual knowledge, the more one mistakenly removes oneself from real experiences. This faulty and uncritical habit is the source of intellectualism, he argues. Very abstract and abstruse concepts

become problematic when philosophers and others forget that they are merely words which do not refer to observable particulars. (See also Hobbes' *Levia-than*.)

Perceptions are primordial, then, but pragmatically, concepts guide our thinking to enable us to understand new knowledge. A youth's deeper appreciation of art, originally rather vague and general, when combined with positive personal experiences, motivates him to become a more sensitive and careful artist and student. As Kant said, concepts without percepts are empty and abstract, and percepts without concepts are shallow or meaningless. James states that both must work together like scissors and neither can function alone.

Furthermore, this paper contends that while the experience of particulars varies greatly, the name itself (red triangle) as a bare concept remains the same. In reality, this self-sameness may really be nothing in cases in which even the definition will not be in common among all the languages. If we disagree on the basic definition, then only the word in various languages remains and that is merely a linguistic universal without significant semantic denotation. A triangle is defined as a closed plane figure having three sides and three angles but this, in itself, cannot describe the variations of triangular shapes, and all the shades of red (or redness) must be imagined. An equilateral triangle is meant to represent all or any triangles as a general term. Generally, James rejects the classical empiricist positions because of their emphasis on mental images which he believes are unnecessary for learning concepts. From this empirical case, we might consider and compare the wide disagreement regarding the definition of justice or courage.

Although James does not refer to moral universals,[8] we can infer that imagistic thoughts of moral concepts may refer to broader and/or deeper ambiguous meanings than the specific image. Moreover, James believes it is possible to fix mental pictures that are fuzzy or indeterminate. A simple thought experiment confirms that. Picture yourself bravely dodging an oncoming car without thinking of its name, body shape, street, time of day, and other particulars. This idea represents the subjective universal virtue of courage without any real ontological status, existing solely as a shared concept. When a child witnesses a fire fighter going into a building, she will probably infer or *interpret* this act as courageous, possibly because she heard others say so. Someone else might not interpret this action as courageous, but rather simply as a man doing his job. Then she will retain that memory as an instance of courage, and use and include it in the future in her concept of this virtue. The moral feeling or emotion is physiologically based like all emotions, he argues, and bodily feelings are totally necessary for them to exist. Courage is the overcoming of fear (bodily feeling) and the cognitive

perception when faced with a frightening event or object. In fact, the empiricist's 'swarm of ideas' and their common universals can be translated into cerebral terms. Interestingly, he consistently identifies mental processes with physiological events, a sort of precursor to the Identity Theory and modern physicalism.

Yet according to James, even moral concepts for which we may not have a particular emotion, originate from a nascent nerve process that might have a conscious fringe which would include all possible particulars of the class. His use of 'might have' suggests uncertainty or the possibility that the psychic fringe does not have a universal meaning. However, James does not realize that this physiological account cannot adequately explain the origin, meaning, and use of universals, including the moral kind. Indeed it may be impossible to hold a general mental image of a moral concept that is totally indeterminate.

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James's thought develops closer to realism in his final book. Curiously, he claims that the conceptual map, framed by the mind, has an independent existence. "The eternal truths it contains would have to be acknowledged even were the world of sense annihilated."[9] His radical position he calls logical realism which is inconsistent with his conceptualism. This is the view that eternal truths or universals still exist even without human sense perception of their objects or referents. It is likely that he was influenced by his friend, Charles Peirce, who first advocated realism in 1868, then developed it more fully in his Berkeley review, according to Max Fisch.[10] In the 22 years between this review and the publication of the *Principles*, it seems probable that James and Peirce discussed the merits of realism, even if Peirce was almost silent about it until 1890, according to Fisch. In this way, James would attempt to develop a bridge between their two philosophies.

Logical realism is true for conceptions and universals, but in *Some Problems of Philosophy*, he states that nominalism is consistent with pragmatism, and true only for objects of perception. In his ontological survey of pragmatism, Richard Prawat argues that "James was a hard-core nominalist, evidenced by his assertion that 'all experience is particular.'"[11] However, this assertion definitely does not imply or show that he endorses nominalism. James read and approved of John Boodin's interpretation of pragmatism in *Truth and Reality* (1911) where nominalism is totally rejected.

We can see that nominalism, in the bald sense of absolute disparateness, would make truth impossible. In such a world there could be no concepts and no inference, as each particular content must be taken as unique. Nor is it necessary to go the opposite extreme, and speak of universals or identities as existing prior to

the instances .... Nominalism, by confusing thought with language – reducing concepts to mere terms...makes thought seem artificial and arbitrary.[12]

It is unknown whose theory of nominalism that he is attempting to refute, but it is clear that this James protégé and friend strongly rejects it in itself and in conjunction with pragmatism. However, he appears to misinterpret the general idea of nominalism as it is usually understood. Certainly, nominalism does not make truth impossible, and I know of no interpretation which would exclude concepts and inferences, which are an integral aspect of thought.

Moreover, James is not a metaphysical realist either. He admits, rightly, that the combination of Platonic logical realism with radical empiricism might be regarded as eccentric. A.J. Ayer argues that this is an idle issue that doesn't amount to much, and is primarily a denial of extreme nominalism, which holds that things with the same quality predicate have nothing in common except their name. In *The Origins of Pragmatism*, he argues, "When he speaks of physical realities as being constituted by the various concept-stuffs of which they partake, I think that, in spite of the Platonic phraseology, he in fact means percepts, and that what the construction puts together is a set of sensory qualities."[13]

Nevertheless, because this ontological issue is basically unlike James's major ideas, it is not an idle issue at all and deserves closer understanding. Ayer reduces this seeming confusion to simply percepts or rather a set of sensory qualities. This set of qualities cannot be everything James refers to here because it would not explain why he uses such Platonic phrases. Some commentators will wish to ignore this Platonic (or Kantian?) thinking in order to reconcile their interpretation of James's ontology (or their own), but this would not be fair to him. Interpretation is made more difficult because James does not explain the term 'concept-stuff,' yet I assume he intends to include concepts, ideas, certain mental functions and some universals.

In the *Principles* and later works, he argues that (bare) concepts are unchangeable. They can cease to be or remain static but there is no middle point. They form a discontinuous system that translates the fluctuating process of perception into a set of defined meaningful concepts. Each conception eternally remains what it is and cannot become another. The mind (consciousness) may change its states and meanings at different times; drop one conception and take up another, but the dropped conception can in no intelligible sense be said to change into its successor. The world of conceptions, or things intended to be thought about, stands stiff and immutable, like Plato's Realm of Ideas.[14]

This reference to Plato does not necessarily imply that the conception as a universal is truly eternal, but rather in the sense that the concept white cannot change into the concept black. Only the objects themselves change in consciousness as it focuses on a new object. Rather than adopting a Platonic theory, he argues, that concepts and universals are inferior to percepts, the true primordial ingredients of things. Concepts are as real as percepts, though they are static and schematic. But pragmatically, it is inconsistent to hold that eternal truths possess independent objective status because, arguably, those propositions would also possess an eternal sort of being and that seems counter-intuitive. "Cats and leopards are felines" is a true proposition but not ontologically eternal. Yet pragmatism holds that the meaning of truths is relative to the individual, situation, and practical consequences that follow. This is much closer to James' thinking than any Platonic type of truth.

If the truths are eternal, it is in the sense that those concepts are unchangeable *a priori*. Yet philosophers must wait on facts, not *a priori* truths. However, James never carefully defines this *a priori* truth or eternal notion of conception. Richard Gale confirms that he leaves the argument open-ended and unresolved. "James's waffling on the realism-nominalism question is only a special instance of his general waffling about the ontological status of Platonic abstracta."[15] In an earlier article (1996), Gale refers to James's attempt to reconcile his different world-views as Ontological Relativism which implies that no true final ontology exists; each one is relative to another but not unified together. This is a misleading term, however, because James's change of position does not imply relativism, nor would he agree that ontologies are equal in truth-value. Gale states, "In fact, James himself seemed to balk at drawing ontological conclusions from his concept empiricism in respect to both scientific objects and platonic abstracta. Scattered throughout his writings are remarks that seem to endow them with a self-subsistent existence... (and on the next page) there are unmistakable commitments to Platonism."[16]

This is an odd contradiction because a commitment suggests that it is at minimum a conclusion. If I am committed to a point of view, then I have concluded (or assert a conclusion) that this belief is likely true. However, stating belief in a position, such as realism, does not necessarily imply a commitment to it. James, and other philosophers, can maintain beliefs without firm commitments, and James was not committed to platonism. A philosophical commitment implies a strong actual defense, or at least willingness to defend, usually with logical argument. This is distinguished from the technical semantic sense of the word. Gale also claims that James was a "full-fledged mystic" in his last two books, *A Pluralistic Universe* and *Some Problems of Philosophy*. This peculiar statement, which I think is unsupported,

is partly due to Gale's highly (and excessive) analytical approach to James and metaphysics.

Furthermore, James's pragmatism avoids ontological relativism because it attempts to show that truth depends on its real consequences in the world. As J. Rosiek rightly states, "By putting an emphasis on the consequences of human belief – a position inspired by the success of the scientific modes of inquiry – James avoided advocating both epistemological and methodological relativism. Multiple beliefs are justifiable, but not all beliefs and modes of interpretations are equal, because their conceivable consequences are not all equivalent."[17]

This paper argues, as mentioned, that conceptualist thinking in and outside the classroom has more useful and practical consequences than realism or nominalism. Rosiek's pragmatic approach complements James's ontology. Rather than a language-game as Gale suggests, borrowing from Wittgenstein, James is attempting to reconcile at least two separate ontological views, which was a daunting challenge that he could not finish before his death. Nor did he distinguish between the different types of universals, and thus James's final conclusions about universals can only be inferred in his later work. Perhaps that was his intention in the unrevised *Some Problems of Philosophy*.

However, tentative conclusions from this final work can be stated. James clearly affirms that this empiricist view holds and that conceptual knowledge is inferior to the empirical type. Moreover, he states that a circle is always a circle, white, white always white. This meaning is a *bare* white in name only, not the white wall or white papers. All whites differ slightly, as nominalists and painters know, but the name or mere concept 'white' remains the same. This has an 'eternal' character. White, in a sense, is forever, like circles but perceptions of the color or shape will always change.[18] The concept becomes real after it is framed in the mind. If no one has perceived a particular object X, then it has no concept or universal, but after it is perceived several times, the concept gradually develops in the mind, is given a name and is remembered. From that point, this particular color, shape or physical relation exists indefinitely into the future. Thus, there will always be the idea of circle or white somehow even if there were no sentient beings. It is difficult to argue that circle or white exists without a knower, and James does not sufficiently develop his argument in that direction. This unknowable primordial world without humanity must remain a mystery, and James's realism possesses a strong epistemological skepticism. Skeptics should (and would) question the knowledge or meaning of this logically possible world. The view also seems counter-intuitive in that humanity would have *discovered* and not invented circles and color because they would have always existed. Oddly, this fuzzy view is a kind of cross between concep-

tualism and realism. Bruner disagrees with James on this ontological issue.[19]

James's Platonic realism is reaffirmed in "The One and The Many", where he compares water to the world of sensible facts, and the air to the world of abstract ideas. These real worlds interact only at their boundary.

We are like fishes swimming in the sea of sense, bounded above by the superior element, but unable to breathe it pure or penetrate it. We get our oxygen from it, however, we touch it incessantly, now in this part, now in that, and every time we touch it, we turn back into the water with our course re-determined and re-energized. The abstract ideas of which the air consists are indispensable for life...[20]

James would not easily emerge from this metaphysical swamp, this aporia. However, we can still hold that conceptualism is consistent with empiricism, as endorsed in the *Principles*, and is the best theory in that it explains the most, assuming ontological truths are not merely relative. With his early conceptualism, one need not succumb to Platonism in any way, nor are universals excluded from human mental life as nominalism maintains. Furthermore, universals hold a more important permanent status from his realist perspective. James knew that learning cannot occur without concepts, and universals are basically magnified concepts that are indispensable to thought. In this way we can more easily understand and apply the basic elements of human learning. This is a position I am prepared to defend in another paper.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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5. Piaget, J. (1977), "The Early Growth of Logic in the Child", in H.E. Gruber, J.J. Voneche (eds.), *The Essential Piaget*. New York: Basic Books, 364.
6. Bruner et al., 53.
7. Boulware, B.J., Crowe, M.L. (2008), "Using the Concept Attainment Strategy to Enhance Reading Comprehension," *The Reading Teacher* 61(6): 491–495.
8. James wrote only one work on ethics where he discusses his theory and shows that moral philosophy must be based on experience and not created in advance. People are the sole creators of morality on which all ethics depend. Moral truths never depend on *a priori* truths. He does not specifically discuss "moral universals" as such. "Surely there is no status for good and evil to exist in (sic) a purely sentient world. How can one physical fact, considered simply as a physical fact, be better than another?" James, W. (1962), "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," in *Essays on Faith and Morals*. New York: World Publishing, 90.
9. James, W., *Some Problems of Philosophy*, 74.
10. Boler, J. (2004), "Peirce and Medieval Thought" in C. Misak (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Peirce*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 74–75. See also Mayorga, R. (2004) "The Hair: On the Difference between Peirce's Nominalism and His Realism," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* XI(3): 435, 437. Mayorga writes that Peirce was a nominalist in the beginning (1865), as Fisch claims, but this "change to realism did not involve a fundamental change in ontology." Strangely, Peirce noted to himself that being a realist is one of the "horrid" things that I am.
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