Book reviews


The Unity of William James’s Thought is a fairly extensive undertaking. Cooper posits a unified and coherent philosophical theory running through the great length of James’s corpus, and makes a very good case for his, at times, very inventive and novel solutions. The main tactic of the text is to introduce various alleged shortcomings and inconsistencies in James’s theories (predominately those presented by Richard Gale in his book The Divided Self of William James, but including a great range of commentators from modern phenomenologists, e.g., Bruce Wilshire, to such classic analytic figures as A.J. Ayer) and resolve them through a rather small but powerful number of interpretive concepts and textual analysis. Few theories or positions escape Cooper’s very perceptive eye, and though I may not agree with every argument Cooper puts forth, he has a rational and well-reasoned answer for most possible objections and counter arguments.

The main thrust of Cooper’s argument is that James’s theory of radical empiricism, rooted in his notion of pure experience, binds together all of his various positions over time. To bring out the theoretical unity present, Cooper utilizes several unique concepts, from “James’s Shoehorn” to “James’s Tie-Breaker.” However, the most useful, and central, tool is Cooper’s two-levels approach to James’s works: the empirical, physical, scientific level and the metaphysical level that deals extensively with pure experience and the construction of physical and mental reality. Each of these levels goes back to, and rests upon, pure experience, but they also provide the background for resolving most inconsistencies that commentators have pointed out in James’s texts. For example, a complaint that James’s belief in psychology as a strict science of cause and effect is inconsistent with his strong arguments for free will can be, and is, resolved quite nicely using this two levels approach to James’s thinking.

Another novel approach used by Cooper, and to great effect I believe, is his focus on The Principles of
Psychology as an interpretive gold mine for unifying James’s seemingly disparate thoughts over his many productive years. Early on, Cooper offers his reason to rely on The Principles: “The Principles is surely James’s magnum opus, the work in which he discusses issues for professional psychologists and philosophers at a level of argumentation and detail that is unrivaled elsewhere in his work. So when a later popular lecture, say, is liable to divergent interpretations, it makes sense to see whether the crucial concept or proposition in the lecture is examined in The Principles” (p34-35). This tactic is wonderful, not only because it succeeds in many instances but also because it puts forth The Principles (a largely ignored text in much discussion of James) as a central work related to the entire corpus, available as a resource to penetrate and illuminate even the latest texts.

Throughout the book, Cooper compares James’s views to several contemporary philosophers. While I do not fully agree with Cooper that finding continuity between James’s works and the “best” of contemporary philosophy provides the “best” evidence for the “best” interpretation of James (which he first intimates on p35), his comparisons (particularly with Nozick, as well as the use of Ramsey-sentence analysis in chapter 8) add a lot to possible interpretations of James. They also potentially interest groups of philosophers who have never before considered what James has to offer them, or what their theories might add to Jamesian scholarship—and I think that most things that expand the interest in James are for the best. Thought I might have preferred more positive comparison and examination of continental figures (if such a division really obtains any longer) in relation to James, this aspect of the text is quite commendable. All in all, I believe that this is an impressive and wide-ranging examination of the Jamesian corpus, of value to anyone interested in the “whole picture” that might unify James’s works, and potentially quite useful in a graduate course or upper-level undergraduate course on James.

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