Wittgenstein & James's "Stream of Thought"

Richard Gale recently characterized James as "the major whipping boy of the later Wittgenstein,"[1] and his having this impression of the relation between James and Wittgenstein is certainly understandable. Reading Wittgenstein and his commentators can leave one with the impression that James is so badly muddled that there is little need to read his work, and so it should not be surprising that Wittgenstein's commentators tend not to have studied James.[2] There have been recent attempts to resist this trend,[3] but even these tend to focus on the affinities between the two philosophers and still accept the prevailing view that Wittgenstein was often critical of James, and that in such cases Wittgenstein was always right and James was always wrong. By contrast, I'd like to argue here that Wittgenstein's criticisms of James are often not as damaging, or even as extensive, as has often been assumed.

Wittgenstein's explicit remarks on James tend to focus on the chapter on the "Stream of Thought" from James's *The Principles of Psychology*.[4] Some of them, such as his discussion of James's views on the putative thoughts of the deaf mute Ballard, strike me as inconclusive,[5] while others, such as his criticism of James's analysis of the self seem to misrepresent what James's was attempting to do.[6] However, the passages that I will focus on here relate to what Wittgenstein refers to as the "if-feeling of James", since perhaps the most damaging effect of reading Wittgenstein and his commentators (at least *vis a vis* our understanding of James) is that it can leave one with the impression that James argued that the meanings of words like "and", "if" and "but" were the particular *feelings* that we had when we used these words.   Wittgenstein's arguments that (1) there were no such unique repeatable feelings associated with the use of a word like "if" and

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[1] Gale 1999, p.165.

[2] For a discussion of this, see Goodman 2003, p. 3.

[3] Most notably Goodman 2002.

[4] James 1890, hereafter referred to as "PP".

[5] Partially since James seems to take the question of whether there could be "thought without language" to be one of whether a thinker could have *particular* thoughts that were not linguistic, not one of whether there could be a *thinker* who had no language at all. (Hence James's lack of concern with the fact that Ballard was clearly able to communicate at the time with a non-oral language of sorts).

[6] In particular Wittgenstein takes James to task for providing a faulty account of "the meaning of the word 'self'" of "any analysis of such a thing" (Wittgenstein 1953 (hereafter "P.I.") 413), while James explicitly denies that he trying to do either (PP p.286).

(2) even if there were, they wouldn't capture the *meaning* of the word, seem completely persuasive. Consequently, if James really did defend the 'if-feeling-theory', then his views on the matter would seem to be conclusively refuted.

Fortunately for James, however, there is little reason to think that he was committed to anything like the 'if-feeling' theory of meaning for "if". Indeed, I'll argue below that there is some reason to doubt that Wittgenstein even *attributed* such a theory to James.

Now the passage that purportedly gets James into all his trouble with Wittgenstein runs as follows:

> We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*. Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use. (PP 238)

So, why should this passage, which does not *explicitly* endorse the if-feeling theory, be understood as committing James to it? Even commentators who attribute the view to James have admitted that the textual evidence for the attribution is inconclusive. As Goodman puts it:

> James does not actually say, although he suggests, that the *feeling* of "and" is the *meaning of the word* "and". In any case, this is the way Wittgenstein does take it, if not in *Philosophical Grammar*, then in *The Brown Book* of 1934-5, and Part 2 of the Investigations.[7]

However, when we are dealing with a theory as manifestly implausible as the 'if-feeling' theory, we should look for more than a *suggestion* before we attribute it to anyone. Especially with James, since there are good reasons for thinking that he could not have consistently endorsed such a theory. Furthermore, as we shall see, it is an open question whether Wittgenstein actually read him this way.

The if-feeling-theory is, after all, a species of what can be called the 'crudely empiricist' theory of meaning according to which our words are merely labels for the 'ideas' which constitute the 'meanings' of those words. There is, say, a fixed 'blue-idea' and "blue" is simply a label for that idea.[8]

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[7] Goodman, 2002, p. 75. See also Goodman 2003, p.4, where Goodman admits that "James does not say here that meaning is a feeling", but he still insists that "he comes close here and elsewhere".

[8] As Locke famously put it:

> The comfort and advantage of society not being to be had without communication of thoughts, it was necessary that man should find out some external sensible signs, whereof those invisible ideas, which his thoughts are made up of, might be made known to others . . . . Thus we may conceive of how *words* . . . came to be made

The if-feeling-theory simply adds to the empiricists standard stock of meaning-constitutive ideas by claiming that words like "and", "if" and "but" are labels for a less salient sets of ideas that had previously been ignored because of our "inveterate" habit of recognizing only the "substantive" parts of experience. (PP 238)

While many have read James's claim that "We ought to say … a feeling of *if* …quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue*," as an endorsement of the if-feeling theory, the quotation only really suggests this if James *already* endorsed something like a crudely empiricist account of the meaning of "blue". But, as we shall see, James challenges just such accounts less than 15 pages before his putative endorsement of the if-feeling-theory.

Wittgenstein has been understood as critical of James when he argues that we have no reason to think that there is any *single* "if-feeling." He famously asks:

> Are you sure that there is a single if-feeling, and not perhaps several? Have you tried saying the word in a great variety of contexts? For example, when it bears the principal stress of the sentence, and when the word next to it does. (P.I. pp. 181-82)

However, Wittgenstein's negative answer to this question would hardly be news to James, who argues that there is no *single* feeling associated with "blue" or "cold" either. As he puts it:

> close attention to the matter shows that there is no proof that the same bodily sensation is ever got by us twice… What is got twice is the same OBJECT. We hear the same *note* over and over again; we see the same *quality* of green, or smell the same objective perfume, or experience the same *species* of pain. The realities, concrete and abstract, physical and ideal, whose permanent existence we believe in, seem to be constantly coming up before our thought, and lead us, in our carelessness, to suppose that our 'ideas' of them are the same ideas.[9]

It may be possible that over the next 13 pages James simply forgot all of this, or somehow thought that the crudely empiricist theory worked for "if" even though it *didn't* work for "blue", but it is more plausible to think that he took it to work for neither. On such a reading, just as James understood a set of experiences as 'red-experiences'

use of by men as the signs of their ideas; not by any natural connection that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain ideas . . . but by voluntary imposition, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea. (Locke 1975, Book III, Chapter II.)

Of course, when all else is considered, there are good reasons for thinking the Locke did not, ultimately endorse a crudely empiricist account of meaning.

[9] PP 225.

because they were associated with particular "concrete" and "physical" realities, he understood another set of experiences as "and-experiences" because they were associated with particular 'abstract' and 'ideal' realities. The meanings of the terms relate to the common realities that the experiences were experiences of, not (or at least not just) the experiences themselves.

It shouldn't be surprising that James denies that there were such repeatable experiences to serve as the meaning of either type of term. After all, the chapter that both James passages quoted above are taken for is called "The Stream of Thought" for a reason, and one of the main conclusions of that chapter is that there are *no* ideas of the sort associated with the crudely empiricist model of meaning. As James puts it:

> *There is no manifold of coexisting ideas*; the notion of such a thing is a chimera. *Whatever things are thought in relation are thought from the outset in a unity, in a single pulse of subjectivity, a single psychological feeling, or state of mind.*[10]

What we experience are things in relations, and we typically no more have a separate experience of things than we do of the relations themselves. In light of this, James's claim that "We ought to say … a feeling of *if* … quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue*," can be read as merely putting the two in the same group, and unless you think that the crudely empiricist account works for "blue", it won't lead you to think that it is meant to work for "if". Conversely, (and importantly for Wittgenstein), if you don't think that it will work for "if", you shouldn't endorse it for "blue".

The much-maligned 'if-feeling' passage thus presents the holistic claim that there is no unique (distinct/repeatable) blue-feeling rather than as the implausible suggestion that there is a unique meaning-determining feeling associated with "if".

So why would Wittgenstein attribute the if-feeling theory to James? It is not as if Wittgenstein simply remembered James's claim in isolation from some lecture he attended as an undergraduate. Wittgenstein was actively engaged with James's book for at least a decade. At one point the two volumes of the *Principles* made up the entirety of his philosophical library, and one point he seriously considered using as the text for his

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[10] PP 268

course at Cambridge.[11] So what happened?   Why Wittgenstein would attribute the if-theory to James is an interpretive problem, and that problem would go away if Wittgenstein made no such attribution. Consequently, in what follows, I'll raise some doubts about whether the 'if-feeling' theory was every really attributed to James by Wittgenstein.

James is not, after all, mentioned in the discussions of the if-feeling in the *Investigations*, and Wittgenstein's earlier mention of James's discussion of the if-feeling in the *Philosophical Grammar* doesn't present it as a theory of the meaning of "if". Indeed, it does not seem critical of James at all.[13]

While James is not explicitly mentioned in the if-feeling sections of the *Investigations*, he does turn up in a similar set of remarks in the *Brown Book* that run as follows:

> We think of the meaning of signs sometimes as states of mind of the man using them, sometimes as the role which the signs are playing in a system of language. The connection between these two ideas as is that the mental experiences which accompany the use of a sign undoubtedly are caused by our usage of the sign in a particular usage of language. William James speaks of specific feelings accompanying the use of such words as "and", "if", "or". And there is no doubt that at least certain gestures are often connected with such words…. And there obviously are visual and muscular sensations connected with these gestures. On the other hand it is clear enough that these sensations do not accompany every use of the word "not" and "and" . If in some language the word "but" meant what "not" means in English, it is clear that we should not compare the meaning of these two words by comparing the sensations which they produce. … But we do not want to deny that the people who use the word "but" as "not" is used in English will, broadly speaking have similar sensations accompanying the word "but" to those the English have when they use "not". And the world "but" in the two languages will on the whole be accompanied by different sets of experiences. (Wittgenstein 1958, 78-9)

In this quote, Wittgenstein claims that James talks about the *existence* of the if-feeling, but he doesn't attribute to him any commitment to its being meaning determining. Furthermore, Wittgenstein doesn't even deny that there may be feelings typically associated with the use of such words. Wittgenstein may, then, not be so much *criticizing* James as *using* him. James argues in his chapter on the stream of thought that the

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[11]   For a discussion of the length and extent of Wittgenstein's engagement with the Principles, see Goodman 2002.

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[13] For a discussion of this, see Goodman 2002, p. 60. The passage in question reads: "A man who reads a sentence in a familiar language experiences the different parts of speech in quite different ways. (Think of the comparison with meaning-bodies.) We quite forget that the written and spoken words for "not", "table" and "green" are similar to each other. It is only in a foreign language that we see clearly the uniformity of words. (Compare William James on the feelings that correspond to words like "not", "but" and so on.)" (Wittgenstein 1974, 58)

dominant strains in both the 'empiricist' and 'intellectualist' traditions denied that there were *any* experiences of relations, and his main concern in those passages is arguing for the *existence* of such experiences, not for their meaning-determining role. The existence of such experiences is bad news for the crude empiricist, since his theory seems so implausible if extended to terms like "if" and "but". By tentatively accepting James's phenomenological claim, Wittgenstein can thus present the crudely empiricist position in as poor a light as possible. After all, consider the following passage from the Big Typescript:[14]

> What are we to understand by the "meaning" of a word? A characteristic feeling that accompanies the asserting (hearing of the word)? (The and-feeling, if-feeling of James.) Or are we to use the word "meaning" completely differently; and, for example, say two words have the same meaning when the same grammatical rules apply to both of them?

James can be read here not as offering an account of the meaning of the words in question, but as a source for the existence of a particular set of feelings for which the crudely empiricist account seems highly implausible. After all, Wittgenstein's question would have considerably less rhetorical force if he took his examples from the stock of cases considered by Russell,[15] as the following modification of the quotation immediately above should make clear.

> What are we to understand by the "meaning" of a word? A characteristic feeling that accompanies the asserting (hearing of the word)? (The feeling-of-pain, or feeling-of-whiteness of Russell.) Or are we to use the word "meaning" completely differently; and, for example, say two words have the same meaning when the same grammatical rules apply to both of them?

If we stick to the standard examples like "blue" or "cold" the crudely empiricist theory *does* have a certain appeal, an appeal which disappears quickly when Wittgenstein helps himself to the broader palette of psychological phenomena found in James's *Principles of Psychology*. James's work serves as a remedy for the "one-sided diet" of examples that can make theories like crude empiricism tempting.[16]

There is reason for thinking, then, that Wittgenstein didn't explicitly criticize James, but perhaps he should have. Richard Gale has, for instance, recently argued that James

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[14] Cited in Goodman 2002, p. 76.

[15] See, for instance, fifth chapter of his *The Problems of Philosophy* (Russell 1912).

[16] "A main cause of philosophical disease – a one-sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example." P.I. 593.

endorsed a kind of 'content-empiricism' that brought with it a commitment to the possibility of just the sort of 'private language' that Wittgenstein is understood as attacking. In particular, Gale sees such a commitment to our language just picking out our own 'private' ideas in the chapter on "Conception" in *The Principles of Psychology*. In that chapter, James states:

> a fundamental psychical peculiarity which may be entitled "*the principle of constancy in the mind's meanings*," and which may be thus expressed: "*The same matters can be thought of in successive portions of the mental stream, and some of these portions can know that they mean the same matters which the other portions meant.*" One might put it otherwise by saying that "*the mind can always intend, and know when it intends, to think of the Same.*"[17]

Gale concludes from this that, for James, "each subject follows an in-principle private rule in determining which individuals count as instances of a given general concept. He and he alone knows whether he is following his intentions to call these experiences instances of this concept."[18] However, the passage above is better read as relating to the subject's ability to decide that he means the same thing by "white" today as he did yesterday, than it is as claiming that the subject has the ability to tell, or decide, whether a currently confronted individual falls under his concept of "white".

On such a reading, James is arguing here that we can always intend to apply, say, the same concept to a particular experience that we applied to another experience the week before. It does not, however, require that we be *correct* in doing so. Indeed, one might argue that it is precisely this doctrine that lets James account for error in a way that a traditional empiricist might not be able to. For instance, when I sincerely claim

(1) The piece of paper in front of me is white.

James can claim that my concept of 'white' is determined by me to be identical to the concept I applied last month, even if I can't remember precisely what experiences were had on those occasions. Indeed, someone who has better access to what I had applied the term to before might be better able to judge whether or not (1) was correct than I was. Without this ability to stipulate constancy of meaning, such mistakes would seem to be impossible. If I sincerely asserted (1), and what I meant by "white" at the time were limited to what I could either call up in memory or perceive in front of me, then it would be hard to see how I could be mistaken. So (*pace* Gale) James is not committed to

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[17] PP 434.
[18] Gale 1999, p. 164.

claiming that "only the speaker is able to determine whether he is *correctly* adhering to his own private rule" because "his paradigm of whiteness, which is a mental image private to himself, is not in principle accessible to anyone else."[19] James's "principle of constancy' does not require that we can somehow inspect past ideas and pull them up to our current thoughts unchanged. Quite the opposite. The constancy is more stipulative than resemblance driven, so, once again, the claim that what a speaker means by "white" is "is a mental image private to himself" has no real support from such passages from James. It would only come if one thought that constancy required the ability to pull up an identical (or at least extremely similar) experience in memory, and there is no reason to believe that James thought this.

In conclusion, in spite of the fact that James was one of the most frequently cited authors in the *Investigations*,[20] he was not one "a classical exponent of the tradition in the philosophy of mind that [Wittgenstein] was opposing."[21] There remain, of course, serious differences between the two philosophers, but in terms of what was central to their outlook, Wittgenstein and James were less far apart than has been commonly assumed.

2925 Words

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[19] Gale 1999, p. 165, italics mine.
[20] Behind only Frege and Augustine.
[21] Coope, Geach, Potts & White 1970, p.7.

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