

InPresence 0023: William James' Radical Empiricism with Jeffrey Mishlove

Video Transcript - *New Thinking Allowed* with Jeffrey Mishlove

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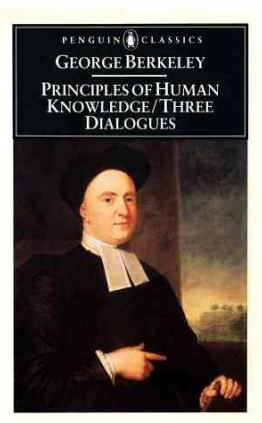
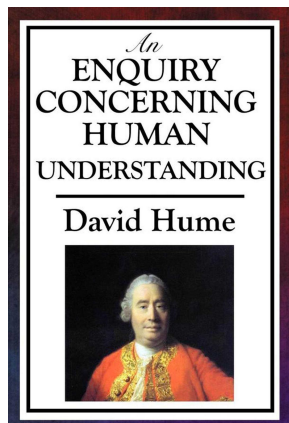
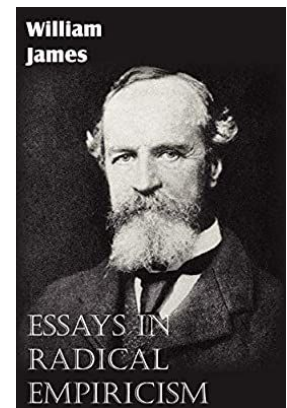
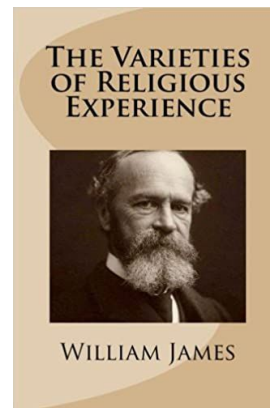
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(00:38) Hello, I'm Jeffrey Mishlove, and today I'd like to talk to you about William James' concept of "radical empiricism". And I'd like to encourage you, before watching this video, to make sure you also catch the earlier "In Presence" segment on William James. You'll notice at the very beginning of this video, you had the opportunity to click directly to a list that would link you to every single segment thus far in the "In Presence" series.

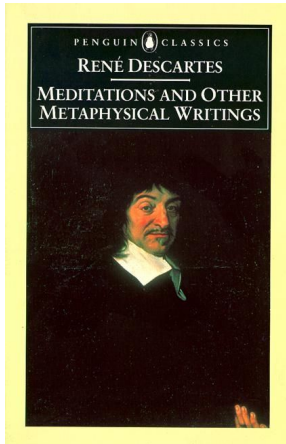
(01:13) Now, as I mentioned before, William James is really one of the great intellects of American consciousness, certainly one of my heroes, and someone with whom I seem to have something of a "synchronistic archetypal resonance" relationship. His theory of "radical empiricism" represents, I think, the culmination of his life work. In fact, he wrote five essays on the subject toward the end of his life. They were not even published until after his death. We have to appreciate that William James was a man of the 19th century, a period of rapid industrialization in the United States. A time of great progress in terms of mechanistic thinking. But, throughout his illustrious career, James largely stood against mechanistic thinking, and I think it's fair to say he flirted with mysticism. That's clear if you read his book *Varieties of Religious Experience*, for example.



(02:29) Now, he was trying, I think, in his philosophy of radical empiricism, to unite the two in some way, to come to a reconciliation with a deep mystical understanding that he was beginning to grasp with his modern, western, mechanistic thinking. How could he do that?

(02:52) Well, let's start with "empiricism". Empiricism is the fundamental philosophy behind science. It was

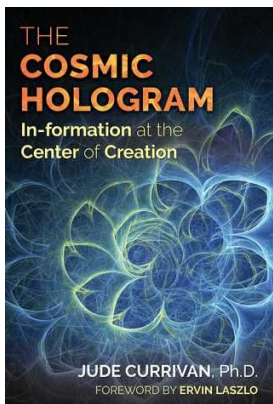
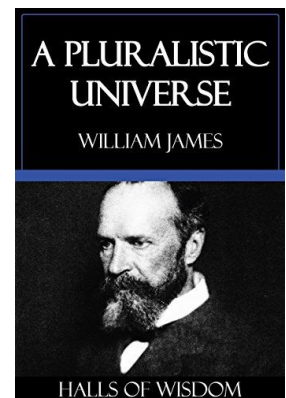
developed by philosophers such as George Berkeley and David Hume. The simple notion is that science must progress based on the experience that is accumulated through observation, through our senses.



We make scientific measurements through sensory observation. The empirical philosophers began to think of units of sensory observation as being distinct particles, like little atoms of experience. They also had this view, which goes back to the philosopher Descartes, that we have an interior world, a world of mind, and an exterior world of things, a world of matter, and that the interior world, through the means of the senses, perceives the exterior world. Now radical empiricism challenges all of that.

(04:13) You could say it emerges, to some degree, from James' early essay on the "stream of consciousness", in which he argued very strongly against an atomistic view of consciousness, but as his thinking evolved he began to challenge this very division that we hold so dearly between the world of the mind and the world of external reality. He began to suggest there's only one world that we can really speak of - it is the world of experience. Sometimes we experience reality as being solid, and sometimes we experience reality as being subjective and interior, but in both cases it's our experience.

(05:07) He began to feel that our experience itself is our most direct perception of reality, whether it's through the senses or whether it's a kind of interior feeling, apprehension, comprehension. In a sense, I think he saw reality as unified. In a sense, I think he would be in agreement with the great writers on cosmic consciousness and mysticism, who would say "all is one". And at the same time, he realized that within this magnificent oneness there was kind of a – he would call it a "pluralism" – that we're all distinct selves, we each have our distinct consciousness. I wake up every morning and I'm me, I'm not you.



(05:57) So, at the same time that I'm distinct, and I'm unique, I am part of the great fabric of reality itself, and that fabric is interconnected. So, I have the capability of direct apprehension – I would use that word – at a feeling level. That's where we get the idea of telepathy – feeling, pathos – and I'm able to apprehend everything. So, from that point of view, when you think of reality as indivisible, the idea that telepathy, remote viewing, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, all of these parapsychological phenomena that seem so incomprehensible from the mechanistic view, become more naturalistic.

(06:51) And why are they iffy? It's because we are tiny little drops in a great big ocean of reality. So, you might say – some people use the metaphor of the hologram – we are pieces of the hologram, and

a tiny piece of the hologram will reflect the entire cosmos, even the entire hologram, but the tinier the piece, the less perfect is the reflection, naturally.

(07:23) So, William James is really suggesting that we need to look at the world very, very differently. That's why he called it "radical" empiricism. You might think of it in terms of political radicalism. It's a very different way of thinking than, for example, Marxist thinking, which would say that, well, we are conditioned by the power structures around us. It is very different than physiological thinking, that suggests our consciousness is the product of our nervous system. What he's saying is that our nervous system is part of our experience and our experience is unified.

(08:11) Another way of saying it is this, and I'll leave you with this thought, that the entire universe as you know it exists within your experience. You, as you perceive yourself, your concept of yourself, your body, of the way in which you flow through the world, is part of your experience. But all of your experience, whether you experience yourself as a subjective being moving through the world, or you experience the world as a stage, it's all you, it's all you, every bit of it. You exist in relationship to every other bit of it, including me, including every other person. I'll leave you with that thought, and thank you for being with me. (09:12)

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