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Essays in Radical Empiricism

William James

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The present volume is an attempt to carry out a plan which William James is known to have formed several years before his death. In 1907 he collected reprints in an envelope which he inscribed with the title ‘Essays in Radical Empiricism’; and he also had duplicate sets of these reprints bound, under the same title, and deposited for the use of students in the general Harvard Library, and in the Philosophical Library in Emerson Hall.
Two years later Professor James published *The Meaning of Truth* and *A Pluralistic Universe*, and inserted in these volumes several of the articles which he had intended to use in the ‘Essays in Radical Empiricism.’ Whether he would nevertheless have carried out his original plan, had he lived, cannot be certainly known. Several facts, however, stand out very clearly. In the first place, the articles included in the original plan but omitted from his later volumes are indispensable to the understanding of his other writings. To these articles he repeatedly alludes. Thus, in *The Meaning of Truth* (p. 127), he says: “This statement is probably excessively obscure to any one who has not read my two articles ‘Does Consciousness Exist?’ and ‘A World of Pure Experience.’” Other allusions have been indicated in the present text. In the second place, the articles originally brought together as ‘Essays in Radical Empiricism’ form a connected whole. Not only were most of them written consecutively within a period of two years, but they contain numerous cross-references. In the third place, Professor James regarded ‘radical empiricism’ as an *independent* doctrine. This he asserted expressly: “Let me say that there is no logical connexion between pragmatism, as I understand it, and a doctrine which I have recently set forth as ‘radical empiricism.’ The latter stands on its own feet. One may entirely reject it and still be a pragmatist.” (*Pragmatism*, 1907, Preface, p. ix.) Finally, Professor James came toward the end of his life to regard ‘radical empiricism’ as morefundamental and more important than ‘pragmatism.’ In the Preface to *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), the author gives the following explanation of his desire to continue, and if possible conclude, the controversy over pragmatism: “I am interested in another doctrine in philosophy to which I give the name of radical empiricism, and it seems to me that the establishment of the pragmatist theory of truth is a step of first-rate importance in making radical empiricism prevail” (p. xii)…

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