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Pure Experience and Knowledge by Presence: William James and Mohammad Hossein Tabātabā'ī on the Pre-Representational Ground of Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of "pure experience," developed by William James within his radical empiricism, and the *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* (knowledge by presence) of Mohammad Hossein Tabātabā'ī, a figure in the Shīʿī philosophical tradition of *al-ḥikma al-mutaʿāliya* (the Transcendent Wisdom) of Mullā Ṣadrā. Although the two thinkers come from very different intellectual backgrounds (American pragmatism and Shīʿī philosophy), both advance the same claim: that the basic level of cognition is pre-representational, an immediate mode of knowing that underlies and grounds conceptual, propositional, and representational cognition. The comparison goes beyond structural description in two directions. First, Tabātabā'ī's framework explicitly criticizes two persistent problems in James's account: the absence of a definite and stable mental subject, and the lack of a definition of the objectivity of knowledge. At the core of this critique lie the doctrine of *ittiḥād al-ʿāqil wa al-maʿqūl* (the union of intellect and intelligible) and the doctrine of *nafs al-amr* (the objective reality of the known). Together, these doctrines explain how presence (*ḥuḍūr*) yields truth (*ṣidq*) without any intervening representation. Second, the essay proposes a trans-cultural epistemological model for addressing the skeptical crisis: the Pre-Representational Foundation of Knowledge (PRFK). The model holds that the solution to the skeptical crisis lies in returning to the pre-representational level, where the fundamental epistemological relation is presence rather than correspondence, as it is in modern representationalism. Through this comparison, the paper shows that theoretical knowledge can advance through dialogue between Islamic and Western epistemologies, and that this dialogue bears directly on contemporary philosophy of mind and on the limits of computational representationalism.

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Introduction and Problem Statement

The dominant trajectory of Western epistemology since Descartes has been defined by a fundamental problem: if knowledge is always mediated by mental representations (ideas, concepts, sense-data, or linguistic structures), then the question of whether those representations accurately correspond to an external reality becomes, in principle, irresolvable from within the perspective of the knowing subject. This is the representationalist predicament, and its philosophical consequences have been extensive and largely corrosive. As Refinal et al. (2024, p. 1) observe, the epistemological divide between Western and Islamic thought frequently centers on this very question of mediation: whether knowledge is fundamentally a relation of correspondence between an inner representation and an outer reality, or whether a more immediate cognitive relation is conceivable. Skepticism about the external world, the mind-body problem in its modern form, the theory of ideas in Locke and Berkeley, Kant's thing-in-itself, and the twentieth-century debates between realism and anti-realism can all be traced, at least partially, to the assumption that cognition is essentially a matter of forming and manipulating internal representations of a reality that lies, by definition, outside the cognitive act itself. Syafaq et al. (2023, p. 241) have similarly argued that this representationalist inheritance continues to haunt contemporary epistemological discourse, generating the persistent tension between metaphysical realism and various forms of constructivism that characterizes much of modern and postmodern philosophy.

The responses to this predicament have been numerous and varied. Some philosophers, like Berkeley, collapsed the distinction between representation and reality entirely. Others, like Kant, sought to explain how certain structural features of representation could yield a priori knowledge of the phenomenal world while conceding ignorance of the noumenal. Still others, particularly in the phenomenological and pragmatist traditions, sought to question the representationalist assumption itself, arguing that there is a more primordial mode of cognitive engagement with reality that does not pass through the mediating layer of representation (Heft, 2017, p. 113; Stone & Altobrando, 2023, p. 6). It is to this latter family of responses that the thinkers examined in this essay belong, and it is against the background of this shared philosophical ambition that their respective doctrines must be understood and evaluated.

The comparison of these two thinkers is not merely an exercise in cross-cultural philosophical curiosity (Refinal et al., 2024, p. 3; Wang, 2026, p. 2). Both doctrines address a genuine philosophical problem, the problem of the pre-representational ground of cognition. Both offer sophisticated, internally coherent responses that illuminate different dimensions of that problem (Heft, 2017, p. 116; Murtaza, 2020, p. 31). At the same time, the differences between them are philosophically instructive and prevent any facile identification of the two positions. These differences are rooted in divergent metaphysical commitments, different understandings of the relationship between being and knowing, and different conceptions of the self (Kalin, 2004, p. 85; Karshinas, 2012, p. 98). James approaches the problem from within a naturalistic framework that is fundamentally resistant to any transcendent ontology. Tabātabā'ī's framework, by contrast, is inseparable from a robust metaphysics of being whose ultimate horizon is the nature of God as

pure, self-subsistent existence. These are not incidental differences, and their philosophical consequences will be a central concern of what follows.

Literature Review and Methodology

William James (1842 to 1910), working within the tradition of American pragmatism and developing what he called "radical empiricism," proposed the concept of "pure experience" as the ultimate ontological and epistemological substratum from which both the knowing subject and the known object are carved out as derivative abstractions (James, 1912; Krueger, 2016, p. 339). For James, pure experience is neither mental nor physical in any antecedent sense. It is the living, flowing, undivided stream from which all conceptual distinctions emerge. As Wang (2026, p. 4) has emphasized, this doctrine represents James's most radical departure from the Cartesian inheritance, dissolving the categorical dualism between mind and world into a single experiential continuum that is logically and ontologically prior to either term. Krueger (2016, p. 341) identifies the "double-aspect" character of pure experience as the central conceptual innovation of James's epistemology. This is the capacity of pure experience to function as both knower and known, depending on the relational context in which it is taken. The innovation anticipates key motifs in Husserlian and post-Husserlian phenomenology. Stone and Altobrando (2023, p. 7), however, have complicated this picture by arguing that James's account contains certain instabilities. In particular, it is unclear how the differentiation of pure experience into determinate subjects and objects can be explained without reintroducing a covert representationalism. This objection bears directly on the philosophical adequacy of the position and will be examined in detail in the body of this essay.

Mohammad Hossein Tabātabā'ī (1903 to 1981), the Iranian Shīʿī philosopher, Qurʾānic exegete, and intellectual heir to the al-ḥikma al-mutaʿāliya (Transcendent Wisdom) of Mullā Ṣadrā, articulated a sophisticated epistemological framework. In this framework, *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* (knowledge by presence) constitutes the foundational, non-inferential mode of knowing. The known object is present to the knower not through any mediating representation but in its very being (Kalin, 2004, p. 84; Murtaza, 2020, p. 30). Against *ʿilm ḥuṣūlī* (knowledge by acquisition or correspondence), which operates through the formation of mental forms, *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* is immediate, certain, and identical with the ontological presence of the known to the knower (Annuri, 2021, p. 172; Habib, 2018, p. 270). As Murtaza (2020, p. 33) explains, this distinction is not merely epistemological but ontological in its foundations. Ḥuḍūrī knowledge is possible precisely because being itself, wujūd, is not a predicate attached to an essence. It is the very actuality by virtue of which anything exists and is knowable at all. This commitment is inherited directly from Mullā Ṣadrā's doctrine of the primacy of being (aṣālat al-wujūd). Kalin (2004, pp. 85–87) has demonstrated that this ontological commitment distinguishes the Ṣadrian and post-Ṣadrian epistemological tradition from both rationalist and empiricist accounts in the Western tradition. It does so insofar as it grounds the possibility of certain knowledge not in the structural features of the representing mind but in the ontological constitution of being as such. Karshinas (2012, p. 98) has further argued that Tabātabā'ī's most original contribution to this tradition lies in his systematic treatment of self-

knowledge as the paradigmatic instance of ḥuḍūrī knowledge, establishing it as the evidential anchor of the entire epistemological framework.

The scholarly literature on both thinkers has grown considerably in recent decades, yet the specific comparison this essay proposes remains largely unexplored. Within the scholarship on James, Heft (2017, p. 115) has situated pure experience within a broader ecological and field-theoretic context, while Wang (2026, p. 3) has argued for its continued relevance to contemporary philosophy of mind. On the Islamic side, Habib (2018, p. 268) has illuminated the illuminationist background of the ḥuḍūrī doctrine in Suhrawardī, while ʿAthiyyah et al. (2025, p. 5) have traced the broader synthetic achievement of Mullā Ṣadrā's Transcendent Wisdom, within which Tabātabā'ī's epistemology is embedded. More recent work by Kuntarto et al. (2025, p. 5) on Mehdi Haʾiri Yazdi, a student of Tabātabā'ī, has begun to open a dialogue between the classical Islamic framework and analytic philosophy of mind. Asyibli et al. (2025, p. 4) have examined the implications of this epistemology for Islamic educational philosophy. Yet what has not been attempted is a sustained, philosophically rigorous comparison of pure experience and ḥuḍūrī knowledge as two distinct but structurally analogous responses to the shared problem of representationalist mediation. It is this gap that the present essay addresses. The essay proceeds by first analyzing each doctrine in detail before turning to the comparative and evaluative dimensions of the argument.

Findings

James and the Doctrine of Pure Experience: Radical Empiricism and the Pre-Reflective Ground of Cognition

To understand James's doctrine of pure experience, it is necessary to situate it within his broader philosophical project of radical empiricism. James distinguished his empiricism from what he called "ordinary" or "intellectualist" empiricism by insisting that the relations between things are themselves experienced, just as the things themselves are. Ordinary empiricism, in his view, accepted Hume's analysis of experience as a collection of discrete, atomistic impressions and ideas (Hume, 1739/2000), but it then struggled to explain how these atomic elements are united in perception and in the continuity of consciousness. The relations between ideas (temporal, spatial, causal, and so on) appeared to be added by the mind itself, which led to the idealist tendency to invoke a transcendental subject or absolute to supply the connective tissue of experience. As Heft (2017, p. 112) has argued, this intellectualist tendency represents a systematic distortion of the actual character of lived experience, one that James's radical empiricism was designed to diagnose and overcome. Wang (2026, p. 3) has underscored the broader significance of this move. He observes that James's insistence on the experiential givenness of relations challenges the post-Kantian assumption that the synthetic unity of experience must be supplied by a subject standing, in some sense, outside experience itself.

James's radical move was to insist that relations are given in experience, that the flow of consciousness is experienced as a continuous stream, and that the conceptual distinctions drawn within that stream (including the distinction between subject and object, and between mind and

matter) are abstractions from a more fundamental, undivided experiential reality. In his essay "A World of Pure Experience," he writes:

My thesis is that if we start with the supposition that there is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff 'pure experience,' then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter. (James, 1912, p. 4)

This formulation has clear affinities with what would later be called neutral monism, the view that the fundamental constituents of reality are neither mental nor physical but neutral between the two. This position was associated in different forms with Ernst Mach, with Bertrand Russell in his middle period, and with elements of early analytic philosophy. James's version, however, is distinctive. It is not merely a metaphysical thesis about the ultimate constituents of reality but an epistemological thesis about the nature of knowing itself. Krueger (2016, p. 339) has rightly emphasized this point, which is frequently obscured when James is assimilated too quickly to the neutral monist tradition. Stone and Altobrando (2023, p. 5) further note that this epistemological dimension is what makes James's position philosophically generative beyond the confines of analytic metaphysics. It opens onto a broader set of questions about the pre-reflective conditions of cognitive experience, questions that would be taken up, in different registers, by the phenomenological tradition and by thinkers such as Nishida Kitarō.

James characterizes pure experience in several interconnected and philosophically precise ways. First, it is pre-reflective and pre-conceptual. In its pristine form, which James sometimes calls the "immediate flux of life," pure experience is not yet organized by the conceptual distinctions of ordinary thought. It is the "that" of experience before any "what" has been imposed upon it. As James writes in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*:

The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the 'pure' experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality, or existence, a simple that. (James, 1912, p. 23)

This characterization is philosophically significant because it locates the ground of experience at a level prior to the very distinctions (subject/object, mind/world, inner/outer) that generate the representationalist problematic. Wang (2026, p. 4) captures this point well when he argues that pure experience, so understood, functions as a kind of transcendental field in the non-Kantian sense. It is not a set of conditions imposed by a constituting subject but the living medium within which all subsequent distinctions, including the distinction between subject and condition, first become possible. Second, pure experience is neutral with respect to the categories of subject and object. The familiar duality of knower and known, or of mind and matter, is not given in pure experience itself. It emerges through a process of retrospective conceptual analysis. The same portion of pure experience can function as "consciousness" when taken in one relational context and as "object" when taken in another. James illustrates this with the experience of a room. As directly experienced, the room is one pure experience. It can function as the object of consciousness when related to one set of experiences (the history of the room, its physical properties), or as the consciousness itself when related to another (the biographical history of the person experiencing

it) (James, 1912, pp. 27–29). Krueger (2016, p. 341) identifies this as the "double-aspect" character of pure experience, its capacity to serve as both poles of the cognitive relation depending on the relational context in which it is embedded. He argues that this feature allows James to dissolve, rather than merely sidestep, the traditional problem of the relation between mind and world.

Third, and crucially for James's broader argument, pure experience is characterized by what he calls "conjunctive relations," the experienced transitions, continuities, and connections between different portions of experience. This is the heart of James's polemic against what he calls "vicious intellectualism," the tendency to substitute the static, discontinuous products of conceptual analysis for the living flow of experience itself. For James, the relations of contiguity, similarity, causation, and intentionality are not imposed upon an atomistic manifold by a transcendental subject. They are directly experienced as the "felt transitions" between different moments of the experiential flow (James, 1909a, pp. 283–285). Heft (2017, pp. 114–116) has situated this aspect of James's thought within ecological psychology and Gestalt field theory. He argues that the emphasis on the experiential primacy of relations anticipates later scientific and philosophical accounts of perception as a holistic, field-dependent process rather than a construction out of discrete sensory atoms. This situating of Jamesian pure experience within a broader intellectual ecology helps to clarify that James's critique of intellectualism is not merely a philosophical maneuver. It reflects a substantive claim about the structure of perceptual and cognitive life.

The anti-representationalist import of James's doctrine emerges most clearly in his account of knowledge and its grounds. For James, all forms of knowing are ultimately grounded in what he calls "knowledge by acquaintance," a direct, non-inferential familiarity with reality that precedes and grounds all "knowledge about," the propositional, conceptual, and inferential forms of knowledge that dominate scientific and philosophical inquiry. James borrows this distinction from Bertrand Russell but gives it a distinctive pragmatist inflection. Whereas Russell typically understood knowledge by acquaintance as knowledge of sense-data or universals given to a knowing subject, James's acquaintance is with pure experience in its pre-conceptual, pre-categorial form, prior to any subject-object articulation (James, 1909b, pp. 32–40). In James's account, the representative function of cognition, the capacity of a mental state to "mean" or "point to" something beyond itself, is itself explained in terms of pure experience. A thought or idea "knows" its object not because it mirrors or resembles the object but because it stands in a specific experiential relationship to that object. The stream of experience that begins with the thought leads, through a series of "intermediate experiences," to the same experiential terminus that the object itself would lead to. Knowledge, in this pragmatist account, is a kind of experiential conductivity rather than a mysterious correspondence between inner representation and outer reality (James, 1909b, pp. 12–26). Stone and Altobrando (2023, pp. 7–8) observe that this account is philosophically bold but not without difficulties. The question of how the intermediate chain of experiences is constituted, and what guarantees that it leads to the correct terminus rather than a subjectively satisfying but objectively misleading one, reintroduces a form of the representationalist problem at the level of the experiential chain itself. The problem is dissolved at the level of the individual cognitive act but reappears within the chain.

This means that the "gap" between representation and reality that generates the traditional epistemological problems (skepticism, the problem of other minds, and the problem of the external world) is, for James, a pseudo-gap created by the hypostatization of the products of conceptual analysis. There is no original gap to be bridged because, in pure experience, the known and the knowing are not yet separated. The separation is an artifact of reflection, not a datum of immediate experience. Wang (2026, p. 5) argues that this dissolution of the representationalist gap is James's most enduring contribution to epistemology. He notes that it continues to resonate in contemporary debates about enactivism, embodied cognition, and the extended mind. Yet the question remains, pressed with particular force by Stone and Altobrando (2023, pp. 8–9) in their analysis of Nishida's critical engagement with James: is the dissolution genuine, or does it merely defer the problem? If pure experience must eventually differentiate itself into subjects and objects, knowers and known, then the question of how this differentiation occurs, and what epistemic status the resulting cognitive relations possess, cannot be suspended indefinitely. It is precisely at this point that the comparison with Tabātabā'ī's doctrine of ḥuḍūrī knowledge becomes philosophically illuminating, as the sections that follow will argue. The Islamic framework offers a structurally different account of immediacy. It is grounded not in the pre-categorial neutrality of experience but in the ontological identity of being and presence.

Tabātabā'ī and knowledge by presence (*ʿilm ḥuḍūrī*): Ontological Presence and the Ṣadrian Epistemological Framework

To appreciate Tabātabā'ī's doctrine of *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī*, it is necessary to trace its roots in the Islamic philosophical tradition, particularly in the thought of Mullā Ṣadrā (Ṣadr al-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī, 1571/2 to 1640). His *al-Ḥikma al-mutaʿāliya fī al-asfār al-ʿaqliyya al-arbaʿa* (*The Transcendent Wisdom in the Four Intellectual Journeys*) represents the most ambitious synthesis of peripatetic philosophy, Illuminationist thought, and mystical metaphysics in the Islamic tradition. ʿAthiyyah et al. (2025, p. 4) argue that Mullā Ṣadrā's Transcendent Wisdom (al-ḥikma al-mutaʿāliya) is a genuinely novel philosophical achievement rather than a mere recombination of existing elements. It integrates the discursive rationalism of the Avicennan peripatetic tradition, the illuminationist ontology of Suhrawardī, and the mystical metaphysics of Ibn ʿArabī into a coherent and internally rigorous system. The epistemological implications of this synthesis are far-reaching. Kalin (2004, p. 83) has demonstrated that Mullā Ṣadrā's realist ontology of the intelligibles reconfigures the relationship between knowing and being, making epistemology inseparable from ontology in a way that has no precise parallel in the Western tradition. Hadi (2024, p. 44) has similarly emphasized that the Transcendent Wisdom is a complete philosophical worldview in which cosmology, psychology, and epistemology are unified under a single ontological principle, namely the primacy and gradational unity of being. Hadi argues that any adequate account of Tabātabā'ī's epistemology must be read against this broader systematic background.

The distinction between *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* and *ʿilm ḥuṣūlī* (knowledge by representation) was not invented by Mullā Ṣadrā or Tabātabā'ī. Its roots lie in the early Islamic peripatetic philosophers, al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, and particularly in the Illuminationist philosophy of Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (1154 to 1191). In his *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* (*The Philosophy of Illumination*), Suhrawardī

developed knowledge by presence as a fundamental epistemic category. The most paradigmatic case of knowledge by presence, for Suhrawardī, is the knowledge that a self-luminous light has of itself. This knowledge requires no intermediary mental form or conceptual representation. It consists simply in the presence of the known to the knower. Habib (2018, pp. 268–270) provides a detailed account of this framework. Habib argues that Suhrawardī's innovation was to shift the ground of epistemological certainty from the Avicennan theory of abstraction, in which knowledge consists in the reception of an intelligible form, to the more radical thesis that genuine knowledge requires no form at all in its most fundamental mode. Such knowledge is constituted by the ontological co-presence of knower and known. This illuminationist background is essential for understanding the later development of the ḥuḍūrī doctrine in Mullā Ṣadrā and Tabātabā'ī. As Annuri (2021, p. 171) notes, it establishes the basic conceptual vocabulary and philosophical problematic within which both thinkers operate.

Mullā Ṣadrā transformed this Illuminationist insight by integrating it with the doctrine of the primacy of being (aṣālat al-wujūd) and the gradational unity of being (tashkīk al-wujūd). In this view, being is not a static, homogeneous fact. It is a dynamic, intensifying reality that admits of degrees, from the weakest and most attenuated existence to the fullest and most intense being of the divine reality. Knowledge, in this framework, is not a separate faculty that somehow grasps being from outside. It is itself a modality of being: to know something is for it to have a particular kind of existential presence to the knower. The more intense the being of the knower, the more comprehensive its knowledge. Kalin (2004, pp. 85–87) argues that this ontological grounding of epistemology is Mullā Ṣadrā's most original achievement. It dissolves the traditional problem of the correspondence between mental form and external reality by making knowledge a matter of ontological participation rather than representational adequacy. Halilović (2014, pp. 21–24) similarly demonstrates that Mullā Ṣadrā's epistemology is inseparable from his broader metaphysical commitments. Halilović shows that the doctrine of existential gradation supplies the ontological infrastructure that makes non-representational, presence-based knowledge philosophically coherent rather than merely asserted. Nurkhalis (2011, pp. 182–184) traces the internal logic of this Ṣadrian synthesis. The doctrine that being is primary, against the Avicennan view that essence is primary, directly entails a reconceptualization of the knowing relation as an intensification of being rather than an acquisition of form.

Tabātabā'ī applies two doctrines inherited from this tradition with particular rigor. The first is the identity of the intellect and the intelligible (*ittiḥād al-ʿāqil wa al-maʿqūl*). According to the standard representationalist model, knower and known are not the same. The knower holds an image or form, while the known is the external thing that the image represents, and the two never meet. Radicalizing the Aristotelian claim that the intellect in act is the intelligible in act, Mullā Ṣadrā argued that genuine intellection is not a relation of resemblance between two separate terms. It is an ontological event that constitutes the very being (*wujūd*) of the known at the level of immaterial reality, so that knower and known are one in act (Kalin, 2010, pp. 115–125; Jambet, 2006, pp. 150–155). Tabātabā'ī takes this to mean that, in ḥuḍūrī knowledge, the soul is not related to itself as one term is related to another. The soul is identical with itself in the way it is identical

with its knowledge. The being of the soul and the being of its knowledge form one ontological act, or, put differently, the being of the soul in its very state of being (Halilović, 2014, pp. 21–24; Kalin, 2004, pp. 85–87). That is why ḥuḍūrī knowledge is categorically different from ḥuṣūlī knowledge, not only epistemologically but ontologically. In ḥuṣūlī knowledge, a mediating form connects two terms. In ḥuḍūrī knowledge, there is no gap between the two terms for a mediating form to fill.

Tabātabā'ī inherited and systematized this tradition in his philosophical writings, most notably in *Uṣūl-i Falsafa wa Rawish-i Riʾālism* (*The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism*) and in his extensive annotations to Mullā Ṣadrā's *al-Asfār*. His account of *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* has several distinctive and philosophically significant features that together constitute one of the most rigorous epistemological frameworks in the Islamic tradition. Murtaza (2020, pp. 29–31) describes Tabātabā'ī's project as a systematic attempt to establish realism on a foundation immune to standard skeptical objections. This is not achieved by refuting skepticism from within the representationalist framework. It is achieved by showing that the representationalist framework itself rests on a more fundamental mode of cognitive access, one that is by its structure prior to and independent of the skeptical problematic. This is a philosophically ambitious claim, and Murtaza's analysis provides the most detailed available account of how Tabātabā'ī develops and defends it.

The cornerstone of Tabātabā'ī's framework is the sharp distinction between *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* and ʿilm ḥuṣūlī. *ʿilm ḥuṣūlī* is "acquired knowledge" or "knowledge by correspondence." The knower forms a mental image, form, or concept of the known object. What is immediately present to the mind is not the external object itself but a mental form that represents it. As Murtaza (2020, p. 32) points out, this is precisely the structure that generates the traditional problem of the correspondence between mental representation and external reality. By contrast, *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* is knowledge in which the known object, or more precisely the being (wujūd) of the known, is directly present to the knower without the mediation of any representative form. There is no gap between knower and known, because what is known is not a copy or image of the thing. It is the thing's very existence in its immediate ontological presence to the knowing subject. Kuntarto et al. (2025, pp. 5–6) clarify this point by drawing on the work of Mehdi Haʾiri Yazdi, Tabātabā'ī's student. Haʾiri Yazdi developed an influential systematic account of ḥuḍūrī knowledge in dialogue with analytic epistemology, arguing that presence-knowledge is best understood not as a limiting case of representational knowledge but as a categorially distinct mode of cognitive relation that operates on entirely different principles. Annuri (2021, pp. 172–174) elaborates the implications of this distinction. It relocates the ground of epistemological certainty from the level of propositional justification, where the skeptical challenge operates, to the level of ontological presence, which is prior to and presupposed by any propositional act.

This relocation rests on the concept of *nafs al-amr*, the objective reality of the known as such, apart from any representing mind. In ḥuṣūlī knowledge, the mental form (ṣūra dhihniyya) is meant to match the nafs al-amr of the object outside the mind. But the correspondence can fail. The form may represent the thing inaccurately, and this potential discrepancy between form and nafs al-amr is what ultimately produces error and, at its extreme, skeptical doubt. In ḥuḍūrī knowledge there is no such form. The objective reality of the thing itself (the nafs al-amr) is directly present to the

knower (Haʾiri Yazdi, 1992, pp. 48–55; Murtaza, 2020, pp. 37–39). There is no copy. The original itself is present. This is the mechanism through which presence secures truth (ṣidq). Because truth is the ontological fact of the nafs al-amr being present, no intermediary is needed. No structural site exists at which error can enter, since no representation is available that could misrepresent. The infallibility of ḥuḍūrī knowledge follows from this. It is not a matter of empirical certainty in human cognition. It is a logical outcome of the ontological form of the knowing relation itself (Tabātabā'ī, 1986, pp. 88–105).

The most basic instance of *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* , and the one that carries the greatest philosophical weight in Tabātabā'ī's system, is the soul's knowledge of itself (ʿilm al-nafs bi-nafsihā). The self does not know itself through an internal representation of itself. That would generate a vicious regress, since the representing faculty would itself require a further representation to be known. Instead, the self is immediately present to itself as the subject of all its cognitive acts. Karshinas (2012, pp. 96–100) examines this dimension in detail, arguing that the self-knowledge thesis is the evidential linchpin of the entire framework. It provides the one indubitable case of non-representational knowing, from which the broader epistemological claims can be extrapolated and defended. Murtaza (2020, pp. 34–36) argues that Tabātabā'ī's treatment of self-knowledge is more sophisticated than the Cartesian cogito, with which it is sometimes compared. The cogito establishes the indubitability of the thinking subject. Tabātabā'ī grounds that indubitability in a positive ontological account of the self's mode of being, as a self-luminous, self-manifesting reality whose being and self-presence are one and the same. Beyond self-knowledge, Tabātabā'ī identifies knowledge of mental states (emotions, volitions, sensations, and imaginative representations) as further instances of ḥuḍūrī knowledge. When one feels pain, one does not first form a concept of pain and then apply it to one's current state. The pain is immediately present as what it is, without any mediating representational act. Habib (2018, p. 271) notes that extending the ḥuḍūrī category to the full range of inner experience is characteristic of the Ṣadrian tradition. This extension reflects the tradition's broader commitment to grounding epistemology in the ontological structure of the soul's existence rather than in the logical analysis of propositional knowledge claims.

A further and philosophically distinctive dimension of Tabātabā'ī's account concerns the relation between *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* and ʿilm ḥuṣūlī. Acquired knowledge is founded upon, and derived from, presence-knowledge. Knowledge through mental forms and concepts is possible and intelligible only because it is grounded in some more fundamental form of direct ontological acquaintance. The conceptual representation of an object ultimately traces back to an immediate experiential encounter with something real. The concept abstracts from that encounter and points back to an underlying reality that exceeds any particular conceptual determination. As Kalin (2004, p. 88) argues, this foundational claim gives the Ṣadrian framework its realist character. By anchoring conceptual knowledge in a prior mode of ontological presence, it ensures that the conceptual order is not self-enclosed but remains answerable to a reality it does not itself constitute. This distinguishes the Ṣadrian position from Kantian idealism, in which the conceptual order constitutes its objects, and from naive realism, in which the correspondence between concept and reality is simply assumed without philosophical grounding. Asyibli et al. (2025, p. 4) draw out the

broader implications of this foundationalist claim for Islamic epistemology. They argue that grounding ḥuṣūlī knowledge in ḥuḍūrī knowledge establishes a hierarchical structure. On this structure, sensory, rational, and mystical modes of knowing are ordered by their degree of ontological immediacy rather than simply juxtaposed.

The most philosophically consequential feature of *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* , however, is its infallibility and immunity to error. Because no mediating representation stands between knower and known, the representation cannot fail to correspond to the reality it is supposed to represent. Error (khaṭāʾ) is possible only in ʿilm ḥuṣūlī, where the mental form may fail to correspond to the external object it purports to represent. In *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* , such a gap cannot open, because the knowing relation is the ontological presence of the known to the knower, and this presence either obtains or does not. Murtaza (2020, pp. 37–39) analyzes this claim carefully. The claim does not commit Tabātabā'ī to the implausible view that all cognitive acts are immune to error. It is the more precise and defensible claim that the foundational layer of cognitive experience, where being is present to being, is structurally immune to the specific error that arises from representational misrepresentation. Syafaq et al. (2023, pp. 244–246) situate this claim within the broader context of Islamic epistemological reconstruction. They argue that the infallibility of ḥuḍūrī knowledge gives Islamic philosophy a distinctive response to the skeptical challenge. That response does not depend on the problematic Cartesian strategy of seeking certainty within the domain of mental representation. It locates certainty at the level of ontological presence, which is prior to and independent of the representational order. This claim, that certainty is achieved not by purifying representation but by descending beneath it to a more fundamental mode of cognitive engagement with reality, constitutes Tabātabā'ī's most significant and enduring contribution to epistemology. It will serve as the primary point of comparison with James's doctrine of pure experience in the analysis that follows.

Structural Homology and Metaphysical Divergence: A Comparative Analysis of Pure Experience and *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī*

Having outlined the two doctrines in their respective contexts, we are now in a position to identify significant points of philosophical convergence and divergence between James's pure experience and Tabātabā'ī's *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* . What emerges from this comparison is neither a simple identity nor a superficial resemblance but a philosophically illuminating structural homology: a shared orientation toward the primacy of immediate, pre-representational cognitive engagement with reality. This homology coexists with deep and revealing differences rooted in divergent metaphysical commitments. Taken together, these convergences and divergences suggest that the two doctrines engage, from within radically different intellectual traditions, a common set of philosophical problems, and that each offers resources that can illuminate and challenge the other.

The most fundamental point of convergence is the shared insistence that there is a mode of cognitive engagement with reality that is more primitive, more foundational, and more certain than the familiar structure of propositional or representational knowledge. Both James and Tabātabā'ī are anti-representationalists in a qualified sense. Neither rejects representation as such. Both reject the tendency to treat representation as the original and fundamental form of cognition, rather than

as a derived and secondary elaboration of a more immediate form of experience. This critical stance places both thinkers in productive tension with the dominant epistemological tradition of early modern Western philosophy, in which the mediating idea or mental representation was treated as the indispensable vehicle of all cognitive contact with the world (Rorty, 1980, pp. 45–69). The significance of this shared orientation should not be underestimated. It signals a common ambition to locate a stratum of cognitive life that lies prior to the problem of the external world, because it is a level at which the gap between mind and world has not yet opened.

For James, pure experience is the "immediate flux of life" that precedes all conceptual determination. The distinction between knower and known, the duality of subject and object, and the dichotomy of mind and matter are all abstractions from, and therefore posterior to, the undivided experiential flow from which they are carved (James, 1912, p. 23). James's insistence on this point was not merely a psychological observation but a metaphysical and methodological proposal: if we wish to understand the foundations of cognition, we must attend to the level of experience at which conceptual determination has not yet taken hold. As James writes in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, "the instant field of the present is at all times what I call the 'pure' experience." It is only in retrospect, through the application of conceptual categories, that this field is divided into the mental and the physical, the subjective and the objective (James, 1912, p. 23). The philosophical import of this claim is that the representationalist problem, namely how a mental representation can accurately capture a mind-independent reality, is a pseudo-problem generated by an illegitimate abstraction from a more primordial level of experience in which no such gap exists (Putnam, 1997, pp. 175–185). For Tabātabā'ī, *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* is the immediate presence of being to being: the mode of knowing in which the known is present to the knower in its very ontological reality, prior to the formation of any mental image or representative form. In both cases, the conceptual and representational apparatus of ordinary cognition is seen as resting on, and deriving its intelligibility from, a more primordial, non-representational encounter with reality (Haʾiri Yazdi, 1992, pp. 155–170). Tabātabā'ī's formulation, drawing on the Ṣadrian doctrine of the unity and gradation of being, gives this anti-representationalist stance an explicitly ontological inflection that is absent from James's more phenomenological approach. Yet the underlying motivation, to identify a level of cognitive engagement that is immune to the skeptical challenges generated by representationalism, is strikingly parallel.

Both thinkers oppose the atomistic view of experience that modern philosophy had inherited from Hume. For Hume, experience consists of discrete, separable impressions and ideas. Relations among these elements are added by the mind's habitual associations and do not themselves constitute genuine experiential givens (Hume, 1739/2000, Book 1, Part 1, Section 4). This atomistic picture had far-reaching consequences for epistemology. It threatened to undermine the possibility of a unified, continuous experiential field and to reduce consciousness to a mere "bundle" of disconnected perceptions (Hume, 1739/2000, Book 1, Part 4, Section 6). James's response is to insist that relations, including the all-important relation of continuous transition, are themselves experienced and not merely inferred or constructed (James, 1890, vol. 1, pp. 243–290). The "stream of consciousness," a phrase James himself coined, is characterized by its continuity, its teleological

directedness, and its resistance to reduction to a sequence of discrete atomic units (James, 1890, vol. 1, pp. 239–243). This insistence on the givenness of relations and the continuity of experience is not merely a phenomenological observation. It is the foundation of James's broader metaphysical project of radical empiricism, which holds that "the relations between things, conjunctive as well as disjunctive, are just as much matters of direct particular experience, neither more so nor less so, than the things themselves" (James, 1912, p. 42). Tabātabā'ī's response to atomism, drawing on the Ṣadrian metaphysics of being, takes a different but structurally analogous form. The unity and continuity of conscious experience reflect an underlying ontological unity: the soul is not an aggregate of discrete mental events but a single, unified being (wujūd) whose various cognitive acts are unified by its underlying existential identity (Tabātabā'ī, 1995, pp. 188–200). In the Ṣadrian framework, the soul's unity is not a contingent psychological fact but a metaphysical truth grounded in the nature of being itself. Since being is fundamentally one and admits of degree rather than numerical multiplicity, the diversity of cognitive acts is always already unified by the single ontological reality of the soul (Rizvi, 2009, pp. 78–95). What matters for our purposes is that both thinkers hold that the unity of consciousness is an experiential or ontological given, not a construction imposed by the mind upon an originally fragmented experiential field.

Both James and Tabātabā'ī also regard self-knowledge as in some sense paradigmatic for their respective epistemological doctrines. For James, the "knowledge of acquaintance" that each person has of their own stream of consciousness, the immediate, non-inferential familiarity with one's own thoughts, feelings, and experiences, is the clearest case of the direct cognitive engagement that pure experience represents (James, 1890, vol. 1, pp. 221–230). The knowledge I have of my own headache, my own desire, or my own moment of insight is not mediated by any representation. The headache is simply present to me as what it is, without any intermediate mental form that "represents" it to consciousness. This observation connects James's epistemology to a broader tradition, stretching from Brentano's account of inner perception to the phenomenological investigations of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, that treats the first-person givenness of conscious states as philosophically foundational (Zahavi, 2005, pp. 15–30). For Tabātabā'ī, the soul's self-knowledge (ʿilm al-nafs bi-nafsihā) is the primary and most certain instance of *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* . It is the foundation for all other knowledge claims, the Archimedean point from which both the reality of the knowing subject and the reliability of other forms of knowledge can be established. That the self knows itself with absolute certainty, without any possibility of error or illusion, is not merely an interesting psychological fact but a metaphysical truth that grounds the entire edifice of epistemology (Tabātabā'ī, 1997, pp. 150–158). Haʾiri Yazdi (1992, pp. 48–55) compares this Ṣadrian doctrine of self-knowledge to Russell's distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description (Russell, 1912), and Nasr (2006, pp. 245–265) compares it to the Cartesian cogito. In both cases, however, the comparison reveals as much divergence as convergence, since neither Russell nor Descartes embeds self-knowledge within an explicitly ontological framework of the kind that characterizes the Ṣadrian tradition.

The structural parallel between the two doctrines extends to the general distinction both thinkers draw between immediate acquaintance and mediated or conceptual knowledge, and to their shared

insistence on the epistemological priority of the former. James's distinction between "knowledge of acquaintance" and "knowledge-about" parallels Tabātabā'ī's distinction between *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* and *ʿilm ḥuṣūlī* at a structural level (Haʾiri Yazdi, 1992, pp. 48–55; James, 1909b, pp. 32–40). In both cases, the mediating, propositional form of knowledge derives its cognitive content from, and is answerable to, a more immediate, pre-propositional form of experiential engagement. The practical and epistemological significance of this parallel is considerable. If the foundations of knowledge are not themselves propositional, that is, not themselves a matter of forming and applying concepts or representations, then the skeptical challenges that arise within representationalist epistemology lose much of their force. One cannot coherently ask whether the immediately present experience "really" represents what it appears to represent, because the question of representation does not arise at the level of pure experience or *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* . The skeptical worry presupposes the very representationalist framework that both thinkers reject. This point has been developed in contemporary epistemology under the heading of "epistemic disjunctivism" and related positions. These positions similarly argue that the most basic form of perceptual knowledge involves a direct cognitive relation to the fact known, rather than a mediated relation through a mental representation that could in principle fail to match its object (McDowell, 1994, pp. 3–23; Pritchard, 2012, pp. 1–30).

Despite these convergences, the two doctrines diverge in important and philosophically revealing ways that reflect genuinely different metaphysical commitments. The most fundamental divergence concerns the nature and status of the self or subject. For Tabātabā'ī, following Mullā Ṣadrā, the self (*nafs*) is a genuine ontological substance, a self-subsistent being (wujūd mustaqill) that is the real subject of all cognitive acts (Rizvi, 2009, pp. 100–120). The soul is not reducible to its experiences or cognitive acts. Rather, it is the being that has those experiences and performs those acts. The self-presence of the soul to itself (*shuhūd al-nafs li-dhātihā*) is the ontological ground of all *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* , and it is the presence of a genuine, metaphysically robust subject to itself. This view is articulated within Mullā Ṣadrā's doctrine of al-wujūd al-munbasiṭ (the effused or expansive being), according to which the soul participates in the universal order of being and its cognitive capacities are grounded in, and expressive of, its degree of ontological intensity (Jambet, 2006, pp. 130–155). James's position is significantly different. In his early work, particularly *The Principles of Psychology*, James defended a robust conception of the stream of consciousness as a unified, personal current of experience. In his later radical empiricism, however, James became increasingly skeptical of the substantive ego or self as a metaphysical entity over and above the stream of experience. The "self" that appears in experience is not a separate metaphysical entity that has experiences. It is itself a portion of pure experience: a functional center around which other experiences are organized, not a transcendent subject that stands behind or above them (James, 1912, pp. 1–38; Lamberth, 1999, pp. 88–115). This dissolution of the substantial self is one of the most radical and controversial aspects of James's later philosophy, and it marks a sharp departure from the Ṣadrian framework. For Tabātabā'ī, the infallibility and certainty of *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* are grounded in the ontological reality of a genuine self that is truly and immediately present to itself. For James, the immediacy of pure experience does not presuppose or require a substantial self.

Indeed, positing such a self would be an instance of the "vicious intellectualism" that substitutes a conceptual abstraction for the flowing reality of experience.

A second major divergence concerns the relationship between epistemology and ontology, between knowing and being. For Tabātabā'ī, following the Ṣadrian doctrine of the primacy of being (aṣālat al-wujūd), knowledge is fundamentally an ontological event. To know something is for the being of that thing to be present to the being of the knower. More precisely, the doctrine of ittiḥād al-ʿāqil wa al-maʿqūl holds that knower and known do not merely stand in a relation of presence but become ontologically unified in the act of knowing. James's framework, committed as it is to treating cognitive relations as functional rather than ontological, has no structural equivalent to this claim (Kalin, 2010, pp. 115–125). Knowledge is therefore not merely a functional relationship between portions of experience but a real, ontological relation of presence (Jambet, 2006, pp. 150–178; Rahman, 1975, pp. 180–200). This ontological grounding of knowledge has a direct consequence for the theory of cognitive development. The higher the degree of being (wujūd) of the knower, that is, the more ontologically intense or "luminous" the soul has become through existential intensification (tashkīk al-wujūd), the more comprehensive its cognitive grasp of reality (Kalin, 2010, pp. 115–140). Knowledge, on this account, is not merely a representational or informational affair. It is a transformation of being, a genuine ontological event in which the knower is elevated toward the level of the known. This ontological grounding of knowledge is largely foreign to James's framework. For James, "being" or "existence" as a substantive metaphysical category is suspect. It risks becoming another example of the hypostatization of an abstract concept into a substantial reality. The question "What is the ontological status of pure experience?" is, for James, less interesting than the question "What difference does it make in practice?" Pure experience is not primarily an ontological thesis about the ultimate nature of reality. It is a methodological and epistemological proposal about the right way to think about the foundations of cognition (James, 1909a, pp. 300–320; Rorty, 1980, pp. 719–738). This difference reflects a broader contrast between the two thinkers' philosophical orientations. Tabātabā'ī operates within a metaphysical tradition in which ontology is the queen of the sciences and epistemology is ultimately answerable to ontological facts. James operates within a tradition, continuous with British empiricism and anticipating later pragmatism and analytic philosophy, in which ontological questions are viewed with suspicion and the proper task of philosophy is the clarification of the conditions and consequences of human experience and inquiry.

A third divergence concerns the extension of the two doctrines to mystical or transpersonal forms of knowledge. For Tabātabā'ī, *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* is not limited to ordinary self-knowledge and knowledge of one's mental states. In principle, it extends to a form of immediate knowledge of divine reality, the *kashf* (mystical unveiling) of the Sufi tradition, which transcends ordinary conceptual knowledge and provides direct acquaintance with realities that exceed the grasp of discursive reason (Nasr, 2006, pp. 265–280; Jambet, 2006, pp. 178–210). This dimension of Tabātabā'ī's epistemology is inseparable from the broader metaphysical and theological commitments of the system. If being is graded from the most attenuated to the most intense, and if knowledge is a modality of being, then it is in principle possible for a soul whose being has been

intensified through spiritual practice to attain a degree of cognitive presence to divine reality that ordinary conceptual knowledge cannot achieve. Tabātabā'ī's integration of *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* with the mystical epistemology of the ʿirfānī tradition reflects the distinctly Shiʿi intellectual milieu in which he worked, where philosophy, theology, and mysticism were understood as complementary dimensions of a single pursuit of wisdom (Nasr, 1996, pp. 95–115). James, while deeply interested in mystical experience, as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* attests (James, 1902), does not incorporate mystical knowledge into his epistemological framework in the same structural way. For James, mystical experiences are genuine and important data for a philosophy of religion and for the empirical study of consciousness. They are not privileged epistemic events that reveal a transcendent ontological order. Rather, they are significant portions of the experiential stream whose cognitive significance must be evaluated pragmatically, by the fruits they bear in the life of the experiencer (James, 1902, pp. 370–420). This pragmatic assessment contrasts sharply with Tabātabā'ī's view that the highest forms of kashf constitute genuine and infallible cognitive access to divine reality. It reflects James's broader commitment to treating all cognitive claims, however elevated, as subject to experiential verification.

A fourth and final divergence concerns the question of error and illusion. Tabātabā'ī's insistence on the infallibility of *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* is a strong and philosophically controversial claim. Since there is no mediating representation in *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* , there is no possibility of the representation failing to match reality, and hence *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* cannot be mistaken (Haʾiri Yazdi, 1992, pp. 200–215). This argument is plausible when applied to self-knowledge in the narrow sense: the immediate awareness that one is in pain, that one is thinking about a particular problem, or that one desires a particular outcome. It connects with contemporary philosophical discussions of the "privileged access" that subjects have to their own mental states (Alston, 1971, pp. 223–241). It is, however, harder to defend when extended to the broader domain of mystical knowledge, where whether the intuitive vision accurately reflects divine reality remains genuinely open and has been contested within the Islamic philosophical tradition itself. James's account of pure experience does not straightforwardly yield a comparable claim to infallibility. For James, pure experience in its immediate form is neutral with respect to the question of error. Error arises only when we move to the level of conceptual judgment and propositional knowledge. But James does not claim that the field of pure experience is transparent or self-interpreting. Much of his philosophical work is devoted to showing how conceptual schemes can distort and misrepresent the living reality of experience. The correction of such distortions requires a return to experience, not the claim that experience itself is incorrigible (James, 1912, pp. 35–55). This difference is philosophically significant. Where Tabātabā'ī's epistemology culminates in a strong claim of infallibility for the foundational mode of knowledge, James's radical empiricism preserves a more modest and fallibilist orientation, consistent with his broader commitment to the view that all cognitive claims are in principle revisable in light of further experience.

In addition to revealing these differences, this comparison yields a more tangible philosophical conclusion: *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* can be read as addressing two weaknesses in James's account of pure experience. The first concerns the stability of the self. James's refusal to posit a substantial self,

his dissolution of the ego into a functional center within the stream of experience, leaves his epistemological framework structurally incomplete. Stone and Altobrando (2023, pp. 8–9) press this point: the distinction between different types of undivided experiential flux, between the particular and the universal, is itself the kind of stable, individual, persisting subjective identity that James sets out to reject. Pure experience, by itself, cannot give continuity and personal ownership to knowledge over time. It would have to bring back the substantial self that it has supposedly left behind. Tabātabā'ī's account of the soul as a truly self-subsistent being (wujūd mustaqill) fills this missing link. The Ṣadrian view is that the continuity of the soul is not an abstraction from experiences but an ontological fact grounded in the nature of being itself. The soul is a real, persisting entity, and its self-presence in *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* is a condition of its mode of being. This is what James's pure experience lacks: a philosophically defensible answer to the question of why the experiential stream coheres across time into the perspective of an identifiable knower.

The second, related issue concerns the objectivity of knowledge. James describes cognitive contact with reality as a thought knowing its object through "experiential conductivity": the stream of experience flowing from a thought leads to a terminus that corresponds to the terminus of the object (James, 1909b, pp. 12–26). But this account alone cannot guarantee that the intermediate steps leading to the terminus follow the proper object rather than a subjectively attractive but factually unconvincing terminus, as Stone and Altobrando (2023, pp. 7–8) note. Within the theory of pure experience, James has no criterion for distinguishing an experiential chain that tracks the truth from one that is merely satisfying. Tabātabā'ī's *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* addresses this problem by removing the mediating chain at the base level. Since the known is co-present to the knower in their being (wujūd), not through a chain of experiential intermediates but through co-presence, the question of whether the cognitive relation is directed at the right object does not arise. Such objectivity does not rest on causal or experiential reliability. It consists in ontological identity: the knowing relation itself is being to being. In this sense, *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* offers not only an alternative but also a more robust philosophical underpinning for the epistemological aspirations of pure experience, which, on the present analysis, cannot be wholly sustained within James's framework.

Philosophical Implications: Conceptualization, Skepticism, and the Philosophy of Mind

Both thinkers face a tension between the immediacy of pre-representational experience and the necessity of conceptual thought for any philosophical articulation of that immediacy. This tension is, in a sense, the central paradox of any philosophy of immediate experience: the moment one attempts to describe or analyze the immediate, one has already moved to the level of the mediated. James acknowledges this paradox explicitly. Pure experience, he notes, "can only be described by speaking of what it is not" (James, 1912, pp. 26–28). It is not yet conceptualized, not yet divided into subject and object, and not yet taken up into any particular cognitive framework. This negative or apophatic mode of description anticipates later reflections on the limits of linguistic articulation, particularly Wittgenstein's insistence that the mystical cannot be said but only shown (Wittgenstein, 1961, §6.522), and Merleau-Ponty's critique of intellectualism's failure to capture the pre-predicative engagement of the lived body with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, pp. 148–152).

Tabātabā'ī faces a parallel challenge. *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* , by definition, cannot be fully articulated in propositional or conceptual terms without becoming ʿilm ḥuṣūlī. The soul's immediate self-presence is not itself a proposition or a concept. Any attempt to express it in propositional form, such as "I know that I exist," is already a translation of the immediate into the mediated, of the present into the represented. Yet philosophical communication requires propositional form. Tabātabā'ī, like James, must therefore walk a difficult line between acknowledging the inexpressibility of immediate experience and providing a rigorous account of its nature and significance (Haʾiri Yazdi, 1992, pp. 220–235). This methodological tension reflects a broader cross-traditional recognition that first-person givenness resists complete third-person conceptualization. The point continues to animate contemporary debates about the explanatory gap and the nature of phenomenal consciousness (Chalmers, 1995, pp. 223–240; Gallagher, 2012, pp. 20–35).

The structural parallels between the two doctrines have significant anti-skeptical implications, although their argument structures differ markedly. For James, the skeptical worry that we are systematically deceived by our representations, that the external world may differ radically from how it appears in experience, is not refuted but dissolved. The worry rests on a false presupposition, namely that experience is essentially representational, and radical empiricism calls this presupposition into question. If experience is pure and pre-representational at its foundation, then there is no "gap" between experience and reality that could generate the skeptical worry in the first place (Lamberth, 1999, pp. 120–140). This pragmatic dissolution of skepticism aligns with later direct realist and disjunctivist epistemologies, which argue that perceptual experience, at its most basic, involves a direct cognitive relation to the world rather than an inference from internal states (McDowell, 1994, pp. 3–23). A knowledge-first approach makes a related point (Williamson, 2000, pp. 60–85).

For Tabātabā'ī, the anti-skeptical argument proceeds differently. The infallibility of *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* provides a fixed and certain foundation on which to build a more general epistemological framework. The existence of the knowing self, the reality of one's mental states, and the general reliability of the cognitive faculties can all be grounded in the immediate, non-inferential certainty of *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* . Skepticism about the external world, for Tabātabā'ī, arises at the level of ʿilm ḥuṣūlī, where the mental form may fail to correspond to external reality. It can be resolved by showing that *ʿilm ḥuṣūlī* is grounded in, and answerable to, the more basic *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* (Tabātabā'ī, 1986, pp. 88–105). This foundationalist strategy differs from James's pragmatic dissolution, but it shares with it a commitment to treating immediate experience as epistemically prior to representational mediation. That commitment has been revived in contemporary analytic epistemology through arguments for privileged access and the transparency of experience.

Both doctrines also carry important implications for the philosophy of mind, particularly concerning the nature of consciousness and self-awareness. James's conception of pure experience as the pre-reflective, pre-personal ground of consciousness anticipates several later developments in phenomenology and cognitive science. His description of the stream of consciousness, with its characteristic "fringe" of relations, its selectivity, its continuity, and its personal character, is often

cited as an influence on Husserl's account of the temporal structure of consciousness, on Whitehead's process philosophy, and, more recently, on Evan Thompson's enactivist approach (Thompson, 2007, pp. 200–230; Whitehead, 1978, pp. 43–80). Crucially, James's insistence that consciousness is not a container holding discrete contents but a dynamic, relational process resonates with contemporary enactivist and embodied cognitive science. That field rejects computational representationalism in favor of viewing cognition as emerging from organism–environment coupling (Varela et al., 1991, pp. 73–95; Gallagher, 2017, pp. 112–130).

Tabātabā'ī's account of the soul's self-presence in *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* resonates with the phenomenological emphasis on the pre-reflective self-awareness of consciousness. Husserl's account of "pre-reflective self-consciousness" in his lectures on time-consciousness, and Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of the pre-reflective cogito, both identify a level of conscious self-givenness that precedes and grounds explicit, thematic self-reflection (Husserl, 1991, pp. 75–110; Sartre, 1956, pp. xlvii–lx). The Ṣadrian insistence that the soul is immediately present to itself, in a way that cannot be reduced to having a mental representation of itself, is structurally parallel to these phenomenological insights. Moreover, Tabātabā'ī's ontological grounding of self-presence offers a metaphysically robust alternative to contemporary debates about self-knowledge, which often remain within epistemic or psychological frameworks. On this view, the soul's knowing itself is a manifestation of its degree of being rather than a representational act (Zahavi, 2010, pp. 15–30; Rizvi, 2009, pp. 130–148).

The connection between *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* and the study of modern consciousness extends beyond phenomenology. Computational representationalism, the view that consciousness is a function of information processing, of the construction and manipulation of internal representations, and of the modeling of external reality in internal states, is a core assumption of several dominant frameworks in philosophy of mind. Examples include Global Workspace Theory (Baars, 1988), higher-order theories of consciousness (Rosenthal, 2005), and predictive processing accounts (Clark, 2016). Contemporary cognitive science represents the most technically developed form of ʿilm ḥuṣūlī, and Tabātabā'ī's objections to ḥuṣūlī knowledge bear on it directly. If the self's knowledge of itself is the immediate self-manifestation of a unified being rather than the computation of an internal model, then computational accounts of self-knowledge are not merely incomplete. They would be misconceived at the root. This point bears directly on Chalmers's (1995) "hard problem" of consciousness, which asks how any physical or computational process could give rise to subjective experience. From the standpoint of *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* , phenomenal presence cannot be reduced to an information-processing equivalent, so the hard problem concerns not only how computation might produce experience but also why the ontological presence of consciousness should be expected to appear in the representational operations that cognitive neuroscience describes. James's account of pure experience anticipates the enactivist critique of representationalism that Varela et al. (1991) later develop, but it lacks the ontological structure needed to sustain that critique. The Ṣadrian metaphysics that Tabātabā'ī develops could supply that structure. It offers a systematic account of consciousness as a graded mode of being, which, on this view, cannot be explained wholly in third-

person computational terms. This account could contribute a non-Western perspective to ongoing debates about the limits of representational descriptions of mind.

Taken together, these structural parallels show that James's pure experience and Tabātabā'ī's *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* are not merely historical curiosities. They are philosophically significant resources for contemporary debates about perception, selfhood, and the limits of representation. Both doctrines converge on the need to locate a pre-conceptual stratum of cognitive life that resists atomization, grounds ordinary knowledge, and withstands skeptical doubt. Yet their divergent metaphysical commitments, James's anti-substantialist pragmatic empiricism and Tabātabā'ī's ontologically graded Ṣadrian realism, show that the same structural insights can support radically different philosophical projects. The comparative value of this analysis lies not in forcing artificial harmonies but in showing how cross-traditional dialogue can illuminate shared problems while preserving the integrity of distinct intellectual traditions. In an era when cognitive science, phenomenology, and analytic epistemology increasingly converge on the inadequacy of strict representationalism, James and Tabātabā'ī offer complementary paths for rethinking the relation between mind, world, and immediate experience.

Toward a Trans-Cultural Epistemological Model: The Pre-Representational Foundation of Knowledge

The comparative analysis developed in this essay makes it possible to formulate a theoretical proposition that neither James nor Tabātabā'ī explicitly announces, but that both thinkers explicitly authorize. The result of the schematic crossing of pure experience with *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* is not a mere list of parallels between traditions but the outline of a trans-cultural epistemological model, the Pre-Representational Foundation of Knowledge (PRFK). This model does not repeat the claim of either thinker. It brings their common commitments together in a statement that need not use the technical vocabulary of either, and that addresses the epistemological dilemma created by representationalism throughout the history of modern philosophy.

The model rests on three commitments. Each tradition supports them independently, and they are strengthened when the two traditions work together. The first is the epistemological primacy of "immediacy." James and Tabātabā'ī, from very different philosophical architectures, each hold that there is a mode of cognitive interaction with reality that precedes, underlies, and makes possible all representational, propositional, and conceptual modes of knowing. This mode is not a limiting case of ordinary knowledge but its condition of possibility, whether as the pre-categorial movement of pure experience or as the ontological co-presence of being to being. Neither thinker adopts this view as a cultural or religious preference. Each reaches it through sustained philosophical engagement with the problem of cognitive access to reality. The second commitment is that the seat of certainty in human thinking is pre-propositional. In representationalist epistemologies (Cartesian, Kantian, and modern computational), certainty is located at the propositional level: in the clarity and distinctness of ideas, in the synthetic unity of apperception, or in the reliability of information-processing systems. Any claim offered as certain therefore requires justification, and the infinite regress of propositional justification can be halted only by something that is not itself propositional (McDowell, 1994, pp. 3–23; Pritchard, 2012, pp. 1–30).

Both thinkers locate this non-propositional anchor in the same structural place: the immediate encounter with reality, which is not yet structured by any representational content and yet is already recognized as real. The third commitment concerns the source of contemporary skepticism. The skeptical predicament is no different from the predicament of knowing in general. It arises only within a representationalist framework in which the difference between the contents of the mind and what is actually out there is built into the natural form of cognition. The most primitive level of cognitive contact is not made through a representing form but consists in direct presence or acquaintance. The gap that generates the skeptical concern does not merely narrow; it never opens at all (Lamberth, 1999, pp. 120–140; Murtaza, 2020, pp. 37–39).

Returning to the pre-representational base is therefore not a retreat from philosophical rigor. Representationalism cannot itself be the coherent answer to a crisis that it has engendered and cannot resolve on its own terms. The skeptic's question cannot be answered from within the representationalist standpoint, whether by appeal to the clarity of innate ideas, the regulative conditions of possible experience, or the reliability of computational processes, because the fact that the question arises already presupposes that framework. The PRFK model holds instead that the proper response is to go deeper than the level at which the skeptical challenge operates, into the pre-representational level at which knowing is present rather than mediated by correspondence. In this sense, truth is neither a quality of a mental form nor the fact that the form corresponds to an external reality. It is the ontological reality of *nafs al-amr*, existing in itself for the knower or, in the Jamesian idiom, the given undivided reality of experience from which all distinction between subject and object arises as a secondary abstraction. In either case, the question of correspondence does not arise, and the skeptical concern need not be entertained. The PRFK model is neither a Western nor an Islamic model. It is a trans-traditional diagnosis of a structure of human cognition: all knowing is grounded in a stratum of pre-conceptual, direct contact with reality, and any epistemological theory that claims to explain this stratum away will face problems it cannot solve from its own resources, namely skepticism, the hard problem of consciousness, and the explanatory gap. The convergence of James and Tabātabā'ī does not prove the model, and no comparison could. It does, however, provide worthwhile cross-traditional evidence for it. Two thinkers, separated by country, language, religion, and philosophical tradition, and working with different problems and different intellectual resources, reached structurally similar answers to the question, "What is the basis of human knowledge?" Both answers agree that the basic epistemic modality is presence: immediacy and pre-representational acquaintance. This convergence is precisely what comparative philosophy, at its most rigorous, is uniquely placed to reveal.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that William James's doctrine of pure experience and Mohammad Hossein Tabātabā'ī's doctrine of *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* represent two independently developed but philosophically convergent responses to the problem of representationalism in epistemology. Both thinkers insist on the existence of a pre-representational, immediate mode of cognitive engagement with reality that grounds and makes possible the more familiar forms of propositional and

conceptual knowledge. Both identify self-knowledge as a paradigmatic instance of this immediate mode of knowing. Both critique the atomistic conception of experience and insist on the continuity and unity of the experiential field. Both also draw anti-skeptical conclusions from the primacy of immediate experience over representational mediation. That these convergences emerged independently, within intellectual traditions separated by geography, language, religion, and philosophical lineage, is itself philosophically significant. It suggests that the problems to which both thinkers respond are perennial features of reflective inquiry rather than parochial concerns of a particular tradition.

At the same time, the two doctrines diverge in philosophically important and revealing ways. Tabātabā'ī's *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* is embedded in a rich ontological framework, the Ṣadrian metaphysics of being, which gives it a robust metaphysical grounding that James's more nominalist and pragmatist account of pure experience conspicuously lacks. Where Tabātabā'ī can explain the infallibility of foundational knowledge by appeal to the ontological identity of knower and known at the level of being, James must rest content with a more modest claim: pure experience is prior to the representationalist problematic, but it is not thereby immune to all forms of cognitive failure. Tabātabā'ī's account of the self as an ontologically grounded reality contrasts with James's dissolution of the substantial ego into the flowing stream of experience. Likewise, Tabātabā'ī's extension of *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* to mystical knowledge reflects a theological and metaphysical ambition that is structurally foreign to James's more empirical orientation. These divergences are not incidental. They reflect the internal logic of each thinker's broader commitments, and they are what make the comparison philosophically instructive rather than merely decorative.

The broader significance of this comparison lies in what it suggests for the future of cross-traditional philosophy. The dialogue between Islamic philosophical psychology, with its rich resources in the Illuminationist and Ṣadrian traditions, and the pragmatist and phenomenological traditions of Western philosophy remains philosophically productive and far from exhausted. Particular promise attaches to comparing *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* with phenomenological accounts of pre-reflective self-consciousness, with the enactivist and embodied cognitive science critique of computational representationalism, and with the contemporary revival of direct realism and epistemic disjunctivism in analytic epistemology. The framework developed in this essay, which synthesizes the shared anti-representationalist orientation of James and Tabātabā'ī into the PRFK model, offers resources for advancing each of these conversations and, more broadly, for a philosophical reckoning with the limits of representationalism as such. The PRFK model does not belong to either tradition. It belongs to the problem that both traditions, working independently, were trying to solve. Ultimately, both thinkers point toward something that every reflective person can recognize: a level of knowing that precedes and underlies all conceptual schemes and propositional frameworks, a pre-representational ground of cognitive life that is the condition of possibility for all more explicit and articulate forms of understanding. Whether one calls it pure experience or *ʿilm ḥuḍūrī* , this immediate ground of knowing deserves the serious philosophical attention that James and Tabātabā'ī, each in their own way, brought to it with remarkable rigor and depth.

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