

Rethinking Pragmatism

*From William James to
Contemporary Philosophy*

Robert Schwartz



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*In honor and memory of Nelson Goodman,
teacher and friend, whose influence on
how I see philosophy and think about art
has become entrenched.*

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Bibliographic Key

Works of William James:

- MT* *The Meaning of Truth*, in *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978)
- P* *Pragmatism*, in *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978)
- PP I/II* *The Principles of Psychology*, vols. I and II (New York: Dover, 1950)
- SPP* *Some Problems in Philosophy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996)
- WB* *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover, 1956)

Introduction

We live forwards, a Danish thinker has said, but we understand backwards.

William James endorsed Kierkegaard's idea and cited it often. I too endorse the view and adopt it as an exegetical strategy in rereading the work of the American Pragmatists and in rethinking pragmatism.¹ Obviously, to understand the writings of earlier authors it is necessary to keep in mind the intellectual environment of the time, the proponents cited, the opponents criticized, and the audience intended. But I also believe that an understanding of older works can benefit from reflecting on them in light of subsequent developments in the field. This does not require seeing the author as attempting to deal with the very same problems disputed in today's philosophical journals. Nor is it to suggest that there is profit in substituting a fictive author of the same name who could, would, or should have espoused positions on these issues. The point is that current tools and theories can often be employed to better elucidate the past. They provide a perspective that can help clarify what issues were really at stake, what unnoticed obstacles had to be faced, and why with the tools then available certain questions could not be answered and others not asked. At the same time, studying the history and evolution of issues of current interest can be edifying and liberating. It can help us better understand the nature of problems now being debated as well as provide a context in which to re-examine the assumptions underlying them. I believe a study of the Pragmatists' main theses about inquiry, language, and truth can have just such effects.

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Robert Schwartz.

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I have another reason for re-examining the ideas of these early pragmatic thinkers. Pragmatism has been called the only true American philosophy, and its original proponents Peirce, James, and Dewey were among the best and the brightest. James and Dewey, in particular, were widely known and studied by both professional philosophers and intellectuals within and outside academia. They each taught at prominent universities, and their writings reached large audiences abroad as well as in the United States. By the middle of the twentieth century, however, the Pragmatists and their core ideas fell off the analytic philosophy map, although their ideas did retain a committed following outside this mainstream.

In a paper entitled “Whatever Happened to Pragmatism?” I summarized the state of graduate studies in analytic philosophy departments in the mid-twentieth century:

To not know Russell, Moore, Schlick and Carnap would have been a scandal. To have run into James only as an aside in an introductory class as the proponent of some bizarre doctrine that if it is useful to believe P, then “P” is true, would not have been unusual. And even today . . . I would be surprised if one out of a hundred new PhD’s have read Dewey’s Democracy and Education in spite of the fact that the book probably had more influence and impact on our culture and institutions than any philosophical work by an American before or since.²

Now it is not unusual for the ideas of even the most eminent thinkers of one age to disappear from the scholarly scene over time. The Pragmatists, though, were eclipsed rather quickly. Russell, Moore, and other critics were thought to have shown that the Pragmatists’ positions were implausible, incoherent, or trivial. Logical positivist projects and programs came to rule the day, and the Pragmatists’ writings were mentioned less and less in analytic circles. Nevertheless, even in these circles Pragmatic ideas and theses remained dormant for a relatively short period. By mid-century they resurfaced in influential critiques of logical positivism, albeit with scant attention paid to the Pragmatists’ earlier work. James and Dewey, for example, had already provided reasons for rejecting propositions, the “museum of ideas” account of meaning, analyticity, and the given. Often unnoticed too were the actual arguments they gave for rejecting correspondence theories of truth, the quest for certainty, and rules of scientific discovery and confirmation.

With the publication of Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1979, the intellectual landscape shifted and the Pragmatists' work started to attract more attention in analytic circles.³ Their writings began to be read, talked about, defended, and disputed. Why, though, were their views so readily displaced by logical positivist doctrines that the Pragmatists' arguments seemingly undercut?

Part of the story is that their views were radical and not well understood by critics who took for granted the very assumptions about inquiry, language, and truth the Pragmatists sought to undermine. Two other factors that contributed to their work being ignored are also worth a brief mention. First, the Pragmatists insisted that any account of the nature of scientific inquiry required close examination of the "context of discovery" as well as the "context of justification." The distinction between these contexts was real, but they maintained the latter could not be adequately analyzed when divorced from the former. Projects that attempted to account for norms of inquiry independent of their history would distort both. A second factor was that the Pragmatists' style of writing tended to obscure the real force of their challenges to the doctrines that were displacing them. James and Dewey, the two most widely read Pragmatists, did not write in the technical, formal idiom of analytic philosophy that was being rapidly adopted. In fact, they thought that excessive logical rigor was replacing serious critical analyses of the very ideas their critics were attempting to formalize.

I believe, nonetheless, the Pragmatists' arguments and positions can be better understood when articulated with the help of the logical tools they abjured. So in keeping with the Kierkegaardian strategy announced at the start, I will frequently compare their ideas to that of post-logical positivist thinkers whose work is in the pragmatic spirit. I will look especially at the work of Quine and Goodman who wrote on many of the topics the Pragmatists explored and did so in terms more familiar to today's readers.⁴ My hope is that when the Pragmatists' views are put in more modern dress their ideas can be better explained and evaluated. In turn, when so understood I think that many of their positions do not look as peculiar and problematic as they are frequently taken to be.

For many, the Pragmatists' way of dealing with the "classic" problems in philosophy made and continues to make their analyses difficult to accept. The Pragmatists typically did not as much attempt to resolve these "timeless" problems as to dissolve them. They argued that unless the problems were recast pragmatically they either lack empirical sense or substantive

implications. And in wars of words there is no reason taking sides. Naturally those in the grip of a problematic feel shortchanged by this pragmatic response. They maintain that the Pragmatists either missed the real point of deep philosophical questions or that they did try to answer them and failed. For such critics, adopting the Pragmatists' dismissive analyses would, of course, be unsettling. It would be tantamount to admitting that a good deal of the philosophical work that interests them is for naught. It is not easy to adjust to this sort of intellectual Gestalt shift.

I had originally intended to write a book explaining the main themes of the classical American Pragmatists and exploring the implications of their work for contemporary issues in epistemology, language, and metaphysics. Several difficulties soon emerged. Although important defining ideas run through their work, the Pragmatists spelled them out and applied them differently. Peirce, in fact, came to think it best for him to eschew the "pragmatist" label. In a 1905 paper, he famously announced that in order to distinguish his pragmatic position from the others then on offer he was coining "the word 'pragmaticism' which is ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers."⁵ Thus, given the differences among the Pragmatists, weaving their views into a single picture would have required either an unwieldy tome or remaining more on the surface than I wished. For my purposes it seemed best to allow James to be their spokesperson. He was the intellectual pivot of the movement, looking back to Peirce and pointing ahead to Dewey. Moreover, James's particular accounts of belief, religion, truth, inquiry, and pluralism are often taken as the canonical statement of these positions and the form in which they are most criticized. An added benefit is that James is a most engaging writer and a real joy to read.

I soon realized, however, that a book on James's entire body of work itself had drawbacks for my overall project. During his long career James worked in experimental psychology, social psychology, education, epistemology, metaphysics, and religion. Along with many prominent scientists of his day, he also took seriously the study of psychical phenomena.⁶ This makes it difficult to find a single thread of argument and development of thought running from one book or paper to another. And like many productive theorists James's views changed over time, and his positions are not always clear and consistent.⁷ Fortunately, James suggested a solution to my expository problems. In 1907, near the end of his career, he published *Pragmatism* and says in the Preface that he intends it to be a summary statement of his core pragmatic convictions and positions.

In what follows I will use the chapters of *Pragmatism* as a scaffold for my attempt to rethink pragmatism. My rereading of *Pragmatism* may be thought of also as a commentary on the book. The commentary, however, looks ahead not back. It is an attempt to clarify pragmatic ideas concerning inquiry, language, and truth that resonate with present discussions of these issues. In a number of cases these ideas challenge present orthodoxies, and I am sure those under their sway will find much to criticize. I will not offer rebuttals to such challenges, other than when necessary to explicate the Pragmatists' positions. Although I am sympathetic with the Pragmatists' arguments and proposals, my primary goal in this volume is to explain and explore the implications of pragmatic ideas, not defend or criticize them.

This study, then, does not and is not intended to offer a comprehensive account of James's overall philosophy.⁸ When other of his writings are cited it will be primarily to enhance the understanding of theses found in *Pragmatism* rather than to square, compare, or contrast his views there with those he argues for elsewhere. In this I follow the approach Dewey takes in his review of *Pragmatism*, "What Pragmatism Means by 'Practical.'" Near the end of this article Dewey says, "I have attempted to review not so much James's book as the present status of the pragmatic movement which is expressed in the book; and I have selected only those points which seem to bear directly on matters of contemporary controversy."⁹

Pragmatism began as a series of lectures to a variety of audiences, and James says in the Preface, "They are printed as delivered, without developments or notes" [P, 5]. His writing tends to lack detail and rigor. James's arguments are not presented systematically, and his positions unfold piecemeal and recycle back on themselves as the lectures proceed. Although he mentions the names of contemporaries (e.g., Royce, Bradley, Spencer, Bergson, and Schiller) who either influenced or opposed his positions, he does little in this book to elaborate their specific arguments and ideas.¹⁰

For the purposes of rethinking James's pragmatism and exploring its relationships and implications for current issues, I find it more profitable to situate his work with respect to those philosophically oriented scientists (e.g., Ostwald, Poincare, Duhem, Pearson, and Mach) whose views of inquiry he wished to incorporate, accommodate, or challenge. While he mentions their names, once again James does not provide much in the way of the details of their arguments. Nor does he make explicit where he agrees or disagrees with these thinkers' individual analyses.

With some justification, those who know James's work may find my approach narrow. Little attention, for example, will be paid to a major

strand in James's philosophy, his thesis of "radical empiricism." I believe this omission is warranted. James says, and I concur, that "there is no logical connexion between pragmatism [and] . . . 'radical empiricism.' The latter stands on its own feet. One may entirely reject it and still be a pragmatist" [P, 6].¹¹ In any case, James does not defend radical empiricism, as such, in *Pragmatism*. Also the thesis is not central to the issues I wish to explore, and hence is less germane to my project.

It is impossible to read *Pragmatism*, or much else of James's writing, without being acutely aware that one of his deepest and constant concerns is to find an account of our place in the natural world that would engage his own spiritual sentiments and needs. The issue of belief in God pervades *Pragmatism*, and I will engage it as it arises. As in the case of radical empiricism, James allows that the positions he adopts here are not entailed by the tenets of pragmatism. The two can be kept apart. It is possible to be a pragmatist and not accept James's views on God, free will, and related matters. The situation is not symmetrical. James's arguments for and the defense of his meaning-of-life positions do depend on the pragmatic theses he brings to the table.¹²

I do not doubt that it is possible to find James saying things in different contexts, before different audiences, and with different purposes that may not comport with my reading. Given my goal to rethink the trajectory of the pragmatist movement, I lean toward adopting interpretations that are close to Dewey's expositions of James's ideas, as I think they are the most interesting from the standpoint of current philosophical interests. I believe, too, that my account fits well both with James's essays in *The Meaning of Truth* that were written in response to criticisms of *Pragmatism*, and with his posthumously published introductory text, *Some Problems in Philosophy*.

One final word of caution. The Pragmatists, especially James, said many things that on first and perhaps second reading seem puzzling if not implausible. The Pragmatists often responded to such criticism by claiming that their positions were being misunderstood and mischaracterized. I do not intend here to spend time apportioning blame between the Pragmatists and their critics. There is surely enough to go around. What I find more significant is that, when challenged, the Pragmatists did explain their ideas in ways that should have clarified and removed much of the ambiguity. But even when they were so presented, their opponents continued to reject their pragmatic theses.

The literature on James, pro and con, is large and written from diverse perspectives for diverse readers. Some focus on his religious theses, some on his place in intellectual history, some on his psychology, and even those devoted exclusively to his philosophy speak to different concerns. I have gained much from reading this literature, and I do not claim originality for all my interpretations of issues and passages. Still, I have not found discussions of James or the contributions of American Pragmatism in general that propose an understanding of pragmatic projects and ideas in quite the same way that I do.

Notes

- 1 I use of the label “Pragmatists” (with a capital P) as shorthand for Peirce, James, and Dewey. Where their positions do not readily cohere I use it more narrowly, and Peirce is most frequently the odd man out. I do not explicitly distinguish these cases unless it is relevant to clarify the issue under consideration and unclear from the context who is who.
- 2 R. Schwartz, “Whatever Happened to Pragmatism?,” in M. Murphy and I. Berg, eds., *Values and Value Theory in Twentieth-Century America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 41–42.
- 3 *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). See also R. Schwartz, [Review of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*], *Journal of Philosophy*, 80 (1983), 57–67. See M. Friedman, *Reconsidering Logical Positivism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) for a clarification and challenge to standard interpretations of the positions of logical positivists.
- 4 Morton White has explored a number of these links in several works. See his *Toward Reunion in Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956) and *From a Philosophical Point of View* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Quine and Goodman make sporadic references to the work of the Pragmatists, often trying to distance themselves from their positions. But as I hope will become clear, a closer look at the Pragmatists’ positions – the arguments they give, the actual examples they cite, and even the words they use – suggest the distance between the old and new pragmatism may be less than either Quine or Goodman presumes.
- 5 “What Pragmatism Is,” in *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 2: 1893–1913, ed. The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press), 335. Peirce’s disagreements with James began early and were many. I agree with Cormier, however, that on several crucial matters the disagreements are less important

than commentators maintain. H. Cormier, *The Truth is What Works: William James, Pragmatism, and the Seed of Death* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

- 6 W. James, "What Psychical Research has Accomplished," in *WB*, 299–327.
- 7 For a nice summary of some of the difficulties faced in trying to make all of his positions cohere, see R. Goodman's entry on James in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/james/> (accessed Sept. 8, 2011).
- 8 See, for example, G. Bird, *William James* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986) and C. Seigfried, *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990) for interesting and insightful books with such ambitions.
- 9 J. Dewey, "What Pragmatism Means by 'Practical,'" in *Essays in Experimental Logic* (New York: Dover, 1954), 328.
- 10 There are many works that do explore these relationships. See, for example, R. B. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964); B. Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860–1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); G. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); and T. L. S. Sprigge, *James and Bradley: American Truth and British Reality* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993).
- 11 See Cormier, *The Truth is What Works* for reasons to take James at his word on this claim.
- 12 For a discussion of the relationship between James's radical empiricism and his religious views see H. Brown, *William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

Background Themes

Although James maintained that Peirce was the founder of pragmatism, it was James who first popularized the idea. Peirce himself claimed to find intimations of pragmatic thinking as far back as Socrates and strands of pragmatic thought woven into the fabric of the works of many major philosophers thereafter. James agrees. The subtitle of *Pragmatism* is “A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking.” Dewey carried the movement forward and brought it to the attention of an even wider audience than Peirce and James had. Dewey both developed the positions and arguments of his two predecessors, and in voluminous publications expanded pragmatic analyses to topics in aesthetics, ethics, political theory, and more.¹

Peirce, James, and Dewey wrote at a time when science was making extraordinary theoretical and technical progress, and they were impressed by these achievements. Science was providing the best answers to pressing intellectual and everyday problems. The findings of science could not be dismissed; nor could its method be ignored. The scientific method had established itself as the most successful way to acquire knowledge, and until someone came up with a better method it should be adopted in every area of study. All inquiry, including philosophical inquiry, must be empirically constrained and pursued in an experimental spirit. The Pragmatists saw their own approach to inquiry to be essentially that of the scientific method and the scientific method to be the paradigm case of good thinking practices in general.

Of all the nineteenth-century scientific discoveries, Darwin’s theory of evolution probably had the most impact on pragmatic thinking and on the

culture at large. The Pragmatists largely accepted Darwin's account of the development of species. They were also keenly aware of the potential Darwin's work had for transforming the then prevalent understanding of our place in nature. For the Pragmatists any account of mind, intelligence, and action had to accord with the newly established biological facts.²

Another fixed point for the Pragmatists was A. Bain's psychology. Bain argued that in studying the mental more emphasis should be placed on behavioral consequences. This meant that research in psychology did not have to depend solely on data that could be gained by introspection. Introspection was a useful tool, but actions speak louder than words. Bain's approach, when combined with Darwin's account of evolution, suggests both the biological and the mental continuity of species. The Pragmatists urged that the study of human psychology should be set in this naturalist context.

Accordingly, the Pragmatists held that mental states should not be identified with conscious states; nor could they be reduced to attitudes taken toward ideas or propositions. This sort of "Cartesian" analysis is too shallow. Mental states are habits that shape and guide both cognitive and physical actions. For humans, cognitive doings are often the most important or only relevant activities of interest. The notion of a "habit" the Pragmatists employed did not have the negative connotations associated with it today. There are good habits and bad ones. Good habits are what enable us to function efficiently and in a timely manner. It would be hard to carry on life successfully without them.³

Linguistic competence is a case in point. Until we master a foreign language we are prone to make mistakes. Understanding and production require deliberation and often time-consuming processes of translating sentences back and forth into our native language. On the other hand, the skilled speaker is one who has developed linguistic habits that allow for effortless comprehension and use. Tennis-playing competence is another example. Novice tennis players have to pause and contemplate their every move. Skilled players are not so inhibited; their actions are guided by well-honed habit. They do not require step-by-step monitoring.

Beliefs, too, are to be understood as habits, cognitive habits that play a central, pervasive role in the economy of our thought and action. They allow us to confront the world efficiently and in a timely manner. Having a stock of settled beliefs means that we need not continually think through what we do before acting, and we are better off for it. The Pragmatists also held that a habit-based analysis of beliefs comported with the findings of

empirical research and offered the best account of their psychological functions. Psychological studies tell against the claim that entertaining ideas with propositional content typically precedes action or is the mark of the mental.

According to the Pragmatists, thinking occurs when habitual ways of responding are stymied or when no habit suitable for the task is available. The process of deliberate problem solving is what the Pragmatists in their technical sense call “thinking.” The problem confronted can be intellectual or one that raises an obstacle for effective physical behavior. Either way it causes unease that motivates deliberation. When the problem is solved, the discomfort that motivates inquiry recedes, and thinking about it can come to a rest.

Pragmatically speaking, Cartesian doubt is not actual doubt. It does not raise a problem that challenges our settled beliefs. It does not cause us to see them as unsatisfactory and in need of repair or replacement. Unless we run into actual problems that require us to alter our beliefs, we have no reason or motivation to doubt them and engage in deliberation. It is of course always possible to say “I doubt” or to put a question mark after any or all hypotheses, but such doubt is inert. Cartesian doubt may lead some to embrace skepticism or to become engaged in other epistemic controversies. For the Pragmatists such debates over what we do or can “really” know have no impact on what we actually end up believing. Unlike real doubt, Cartesian doubt will not overturn any of our established belief habits, and it will not alter our actions. The Pragmatists thought that there was no cognitive payoff to be derived from the deliberations such doubt inspired. The idea that “when you entered a philosophic class-room you had to open relations with the universe entirely distinct from the one you left behind” [P, 17] may be noble, but it turns its back on experience and provides no enlightenment of how things are in the actual world. If it were to be a serious form of inquiry, philosophy could not divorce itself from the empirical realities of life and science.

The Pragmatists had another reason for rejecting Descartes’ project. Cartesians aimed for the unattainable, namely certainty. For the Pragmatists no hypothesis is certain. It is always possible that new evidence will come along to overturn even the firmest of our present convictions. We can never take for granted that today’s truths will be tomorrow’s. The Pragmatists were through and through fallibilists. There are no principles or unrevisable intuitions that are or could be immune to challenge. Scientific inquiry is not a quest for certainty or for truths that can be certified

for eternity. To assume that it is results in a misleading picture of the nature and practices of inquiry.

Although the Pragmatists emphasized behavior and behavioral dispositions in their psychological theories, it would be a mistake to label them “behaviorists.” They did not endorse a stimulus–response psychology. The label “functionalist” better fits the bill. This is how they described their version of behaviorism, and “functionalism” was a term used by others to characterize their approach to psychology. James early on sketched his dissatisfaction with stimulus–response psychology in “Reflex Action and Theism.”⁴ A few years later Dewey wrote a more widely known, detailed, and penetrating criticism of stimulus–response theories entitled “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology.”⁵ Dewey presciently argued that it is not possible to explain action without taking into account the meanings the stimulus and response have for the subject. Neither James nor Dewey thought or assumed it important that mental state discourse should or could be replaced by discourse about observable behavior. They also talked of the “unobservable” mental activities involved in thought and speech as a species of action. Drawing inferences was one such form of cognitive behavior, and in many cases the only action directly reflective of a belief.

Unlike radical behaviorists, the Pragmatists did not denigrate the significance of conscious states or the possibility of studying them. Nor did they endorse associationist accounts of learning and mental processing. In *The Principles of Psychology* James discusses in detail his reasons for rejecting associationism. James is also explicit that mental states can be studied in two ways. He says in *Principles* that the first explores the inner nature of a state – what it is like, what sort of feelings accompany the state. The second way to study cognitive and physical actions is functionally, in terms of their history, conditions of production, and connections to action. This latter approach has more explanatory and predictive power, could be applied to animals as well as humans, and its claims were easier to submit to experimental test.⁶

Throughout his career James remained interested in studying the nature of subjective experiences and the role they play in perception, emotion, consciousness, and other areas of psychology. Of special interest to him were “transcendent” religious experiences. They were a genuine distinctive type of experience, they were pervasive in society, and they affected the lives of those who had them. To him as a psychologist they were clearly legitimate objects of scientific investigation. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James explored their diversity, qualities, roles, and significance.⁷ More

controversially, he refused to downplay their epistemic importance. James was convinced that these religious experiences were an indication of something deep (perhaps in the subconscious) of human nature and that they pointed to something “beyond.” This conviction provided a major impetus and justification for his religious beliefs, and it was not to be shaken.

This focus on the individual and on individual experience is not as prevalent in the works of Peirce and Dewey. They were concerned primarily with “public” phenomena. For Peirce it was mainly science and mathematics, and James’s attempt to expand application of the pragmatic method more widely was a source of disagreement between them. In Dewey’s case, the philosophical divide between his goals and James’s was smaller. Dewey’s Hegelian-inspired emphasis on the social, however, shaped his approach and provided a way for him to escape or to come to terms with many of James’s more individual-centered dilemmas. Dewey also expanded the realm of pragmatic analysis far beyond that of either of his predecessors.

James published his monumental two-volume *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890. This work has long been considered the founding doctrine of experimental psychology in the United States. It also contains some marvelous descriptions of conscious experience. The book maintained its influence well into the twentieth century and remains an outstanding source of information about psychological theories and their histories. In *Principles* James examines the function of the mind and mental states not only from a behavioral and phenomenal standpoint, but also from the standpoint of neurophysiology and philosophy. He explores in detail the underlying physical substrate and the experiential manifestations of belief and other mental states. James also elaborates and weaves his developing views on topics in epistemology and metaphysics that were to become central to his pragmatic philosophy and to shape his account of mind, reason, perception, language, and inquiry. Clarification and in-depth treatment of puzzling claims James makes in later writings can be found in this work. In *Pragmatism* he takes for granted many of the arguments and concepts developed in *Principles*.

Notes

- 1 See I. Scheffler, *Four Pragmatists: A Critical Introduction to Peirce, James, Mead, and Dewey* (New York: Humanities Press, 1974) for a concise introductory overview of their positions.

- 2 See J. Dewey, "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy," in *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997), 1–19.
- 3 Peirce was even willing to label physical laws "habits." James also had no qualms extending use of the term in ways that would now seem inappropriate.
- 4 "Reflex Action and Theism," in *WB*, 111–144.
- 5 "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology," in *The Essential Dewey*, vol. 2, ed. L. Hickman and T. Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 3–10.
- 6 Peirce expresses a similar view about there being two senses of belief in "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man," in *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 1, ed. N. Houser and C. Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 11–27.
- 7 *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Random House, 1999).

The Place of Values in Inquiry (Lecture I)

In Lecture I James sets the stage for the lectures to follow, situating his project with respect to what he takes to be deep concerns of his audience. James believes that questions about the meaning of life and one's place in the order of things are troubling and on the minds of many thoughtful people. He says the primary purpose of his lectures is to explore "what life honestly and deeply means" [P, 9] to each of us. James worries that such existential questions are no longer of central interest to academic philosophers. He also assumes that members of the audience may not be familiar with the positions and arguments of those who are. Thus James will attempt to avoid technical matters as best he can. He will be "dealing in broad strokes, and avoiding minute controversy" [P, 5]. He will, nonetheless, have to examine a number of philosophical assumptions and doctrines, since they stand in the way of solving the problems he will address.

Having presented his overall plan for the lectures, James then argues that answers to these important existential questions are influenced by an individual's philosophy. When he uses the term "philosophy" here James is not referring to a person's particular set of beliefs or principles but to his or her approach and attitudes toward the issue at stake. The claim that a person's philosophy has a major impact on judgment is a commonplace. We often explain and predict someone's views and decisions on the basis of such things as his or her judicial philosophy, economic philosophy, educational philosophy, or political philosophy. These "philosophies" affect how people describe the phenomena, how the problems are formulated, what evidence is taken to be relevant and what weight is given to the evidence.

James holds that the concepts brought to inquiry have an especially strong influence on the conclusions reached. First, they affect the way one divides and categorizes the domain under study, highlighting some groupings and ignoring others. Without such organizing schemes there is no way for inquiry to get off the ground. We cannot conduct inquiry absent a description and conceptualization of the domain to be studied. Second, even if organizing schemes pick out and highlight the same things, they may conceptualize them differently. In turn, the nature of the problem, the type of solutions sought, and the course of inquiry may diverge. It seems obvious that in current public debates in the United States it makes a difference if the tax law under consideration is called an “inheritance tax” or a “death tax,” or if the educational policy being examined is labeled “affirmative action” as opposed to “quotas.”

James is clear, however, that “philosophies” are not free from challenge. Some may have no legitimate or plausible justification from the start. Others do, but new evidence and new understandings can come along that undermine their grounds. A large part of *Pragmatism* is devoted to doing just this, criticizing “philosophies” that inform and shape philosophical claims he wishes to challenge. As a pluralist, though, James is willing to allow that there may be more than one acceptable solution to a problem, and that the conflicting “philosophies” that underpin the conclusions reached may each offer a legitimate approach to the issue.

To be influenced by a “philosophy” is not necessarily an indication of subjectivity or bias. One might in fact question the intellectual seriousness of a judge who has no overall conception of the law and its applications. Judges who harbor distinct judicial philosophies, however, will approach cases from different perspectives, will differ in what they see as the relevant precedents, and will evaluate the evidence accordingly. As a result they may reach conflicting decisions on the same case. Still, if they adhere to the epistemic standards and rules of judicial practice, their verdicts will have been objectively decided and justified. By contrast, judges whose decisions are influenced by race, color, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and the like have overstepped the norms and bounds of judicial fairness. One might wish to call these biases “philosophies,” but this does not mitigate the fact that verdicts so influenced are unjustified and not to be tolerated. As will become clearer further along in this study, the Pragmatists also held that the standards or norms of practice are not fixed. They evolve hand in hand with practice and are constrained by inquiry.

James calls the factors that characterize a philosophy “temperaments.” People of different temperaments have different philosophies that significantly influence which among competing theories and hypotheses they find convincing. James notes that the idea of temperament being a legitimate factor in the fixation of belief does not generally go down well with philosophers. They hold that “Temperament is no recognized reason . . . so [the philosopher] urges impersonal reasons only for his conclusions” [P, 11]. James argues that this view of objectivity distorts the actual nature of inquiry, including that of philosophy. “The history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of temperaments” [P, 11]. Dewey often echoes James’s warning that the tendency of philosophers to deny the influence of temperament, education, and history on their own positions has a serious negative impact on their work.

In arguing that there is a place for temperaments (or as he sometimes calls them “sentiments”) in inquiry, James does not believe that he is turning his back on reason and empirical evidence. Not all temperamental factors are legitimate influences on the fixation of belief. Being dour, bashful, greedy, generous, high-spirited, and temperamental are personality traits that have no place in conducting and evaluating inquiry. The temperamental factors that count must always be responsive to established fact and to sound practices of reason.

In order to get a better picture of James’s position on the influence of temperament on the acquisition and fixation of belief, I think it helpful to review some earlier writings where he elaborates his views. James holds that hypothesis acceptance is the work of the will, and he devotes a chapter of *The Principles of Psychology* to presenting an account of how the will operates. He writes: “we reach the heart of our inquiry into volition when we ask by what process it is that the thought of any given object comes to prevail stably in the mind” [PP II, 561]. In the *Principles*, James sees it as his business to explore subjective, pathological decisions as well as objective normal ones. For our purposes it is enough to summarize what he says about the latter.¹

James, along with the other Pragmatists, maintains that, strictly speaking, cognitive actions that are fully under the control of habit are not episodes of thinking. When all goes well we have no need to question belief habits that “prevail stably in the mind.” Thinking occurs when available habitual responses are not satisfactory for coping with a problem. Then it is necessary to deliberate, search for, and adopt a solution that can relieve the pressure. Once a satisfactory solution to the problem is found there is

no need to continue thinking about it. What counts as satisfactory, however, can differ from case to case, and there are alternative mechanisms by means of which the will settles on acceptable answers.

In many situations the will is passive. No noticeable deliberation takes place. The observational evidence is compelling and the belief appears forced. Your cat leaps onto your lap, and the will automatically endorses the hypothesis that there is now a cat present. The will is also passive in certain situations where actual deliberation does take place. In searching for a solution to a problem, we hit upon a promising hypothesis but realize immediately that it follows from firm beliefs previously adopted. Once this connection is recognized, the fund of established beliefs brings its force to bear, and the will cannot resist the pressure to accept the hypothesis.

James discusses a range of other types of decision-making in the fixation of belief. He is especially interested in cases where conflicting hypotheses are equally well supported by the available evidence. When this occurs it may seem that the only responsible thing to do is suspend judgment and await additional data. This is a standard practice in scientific inquiry. But sometimes it is not possible to adhere to this policy; a choice is needed immediately. It is necessary to make a decision and to turn the decision into action. James recognizes that there are many who feel decisions so made are in some sense not fully rational or are lacking in epistemic justification. They assume that once human preferences enter into the process the decision is no longer bound by the evidence and hence is not objective. James demurs. He is convinced that it is a psychological fact that the fixation of belief is in the end more a matter of “sensibility” than calculation. The hypothesis chosen is the one that feels right, the one the reflective will is most at home with.²

Cases where “sentiments” influence forced decisions are familiar phenomena. A person must choose between colleges, jobs, or houses, and the evidence available concerning the choice is not compelling. There are pros and cons to all the alternatives: one is better on this count another better on that. The decision deadline approaches. The worst anyone can do is to be tied in knots and make no decision at all. This is pathological behavior. Usually a decision is made. In the course of mulling over the college, job, or house options one choice surfaces as the best, and the person feels most comfortable with the solution. On occasion it may take a jolt for awareness of a preference to kick in. A person cannot make a decision and in desperation turns to flipping a coin – heads it is A, tails it is B. But when the coin

lands tails she is uneasy with the decision rendered: B just does not feel right; A seems the better fit, and she goes with and endorses A.

While sentiments have a say, these decisions are neither whimsical nor arbitrary. The available evidence eliminates a host of options right from the start, and established facts about the pros and cons of the remaining options must be taken into account. The comfort, ease, and sense of satisfaction required to justify a decision is that of a knowledgeable will, one constrained by evidence, reason, and principles of sound inquiry. There is a significant distinction between objective sanctioned decisions and subjective unacceptable decisions, even if the boundary between them is not sharp or well defined.

In an early paper, "The Sentiments of Rationality," James argues that in scientific inquiry, too, hypothesis acceptance is never solely a matter of evidence and logic. Other epistemic considerations have a say [WB, 63–110]. As a fallibilist, he assumes that no amount of positive evidence can warrant being certain about any belief. Moreover, in principle, there will always be competing hypotheses that fit all the accepted empirical evidence. Thus appeals to observation and reason alone will not be sufficient to sanction a unique choice between supported but conflicting hypotheses. Human factors must enter to tip the balance.

Human preferences for simplicity, conserving existing theory, wide scope, and cognitive economy have a significant effect on hypothesis acceptance.³ This does not mean that scientific inquiry is at root subjective or non-rational, rather there can be no fruitful inquiry independent of such preferences. James believes as well that a study of scientific practice shows that scientists do not always agree as to how they evaluate and order these preferences. Their "philosophies" differ, and there may be more than one legitimate weighting scheme, each favoring competing hypotheses. Sound scientific inquiry, like sound judicial inquiry, can justify alternative decisions. Nowadays factors such as simplicity, conservatism, scope, and economy are often said to be *epistemic* values or virtues and their indispensability is recognized in introductory philosophy of science texts.

In "The Sentiments of Rationality" James notes that Hume, in his analysis of induction, had already shown the need to recognize an ineliminable human element. Observation and reason alone cannot justify accepting the principle of the uniformity of nature. Our practice of predicting the future on the basis of past regularities is a preference we bring to inquiry. James sees nothing wrong in saying that we employ the principle as a matter of "faith." Many have argued that if induction is founded on faith, skepticism

inevitably follows. James thinks this is not the best way to understand matters. We should recognize that sentiments go into the construction of the standards of sound inquiry, rather than cling to traditional assumptions or intuitions about objectivity and rationality. Sentiments not only play a role in rational hypothesis choice; their influence cannot be ignored without distorting the nature of objective inquiry.

In another early, even more discussed paper, “The Will to Believe” [WB, 1–31], James offers an elegant but different critique of the claim that temperament should have no place in evaluating hypotheses. His target here is W. K. Clifford’s doctrine that the ethics of belief obligates us to take only impersonal factors into account. James argues that in practice this position is untenable. All judgments are fallible, so adding a belief to the corpus always entails risk. If we are unwilling to take some risk, inquiry comes to a halt. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. In the pursuit of knowledge, science seeks both to acquire truths and to avoid error. These desiderata, though, set off in different directions. Minimizing error would entail never moving beyond tautologies. Maximizing the number of beliefs accepted would encourage adding hypotheses to the corpus willy-nilly. Exclusive adoption of either strategy is not viable; nor can they simply be combined.

The fixation of belief requires compromise, tradeoffs between credibility and coverage, and there are no *a priori* or absolute standards for making these tradeoffs. Alternative compromises are reasonable. Scientists of cautious temperament will lean toward maximizing credibility; those of less cautious demeanor will lean toward maximizing coverage. Within limits both “temperaments” are rational, and both allow for conducting inquiry in accord with the dictates of the scientific method. Such intrusion of temperament in the decision-making processes of both science and everyday life does not mean the choices are unconstrained. The evidence must adequately support the hypothesis, and the new hypothesis must reasonably cohere with beliefs taken as settled. There will be only a restricted range of hypotheses that are reasonable to consider, and the assessments of the costs and benefits of each must be made in accord with the evidence. Everything does not go. Whether tolerance for risk is to be understood as an “epistemic” value may be debatable. What James feels is not debatable is that this and other factors of temperament are part and parcel of objective inquiry.⁴

In light of these features of the actual practices of inquiry James is convinced that there can be no rules for the direction of mind, decision

procedures, or formal principles of inductive logic for deciding which hypotheses to accept. "The absurd abstraction of an intellect verbally formulating all its evidence and carefully estimating the probability thereof by a vulgar fraction by the size of whose denominator and numerator alone it is swayed, is ideally as inept as it is actually impossible" ["The Sentiment of Rationality," in *WB*, 92–93]. It is also a mistake to assume that deductive logic is a fixed, eternal arbiter in the fixation of belief. Logic does constrain rational thought and decision-making, but the rules for evaluating even deductive inference itself can change. Today's logic is not the same as Aristotle's logic, medieval logic, or Boole's logic. Moreover, totally new patterns of reasoning may develop that sanction inferences not valid by the standards of any of these deductive systems. The Pragmatists were particularly impressed by the increasing use of statistical methods in science.⁵

James's defense of temperaments/sentiments in inquiry is central to many of his claims in *Pragmatism*, especially to his defense of God and free will. Note, however, that the reasons just given for adopting his account of the role of sentiments in inquiry do not depend on these additional claims. It is possible to accept a pragmatic analysis of the practices of inquiry without accepting all of the further uses James makes of it. Today I think it would be hard to argue that James's views concerning the role of human preferences in both the context of discovery and the context of justification are simply those of a romantic, anti-intellectual, or subjectivist defender of the irrational. Differences in "philosophy" do make a difference.

Examples abound in the sciences. Economists of the Chicago school are likely to reach different conclusions from Keynesians, although they may rely on the very same empirical data. In the social sciences, theorists favoring quantitative analyses frequently hold that qualitative research is uninteresting, its data not probative, and its findings of little value. Qualitative theorists adopt the same attitude in the opposite direction. Over the years controversies between behaviorist and mentalist approaches to the study of mind and language have shaped the nature of psychological inquiry. They have influenced the phenomena to be explained, the experiments run, the evaluation of evidence, and the psychological journals that would consider the work for publication.

Resistance to certain probability aspects of quantum theory is often cited as an example of the impact of temperament on theory choice in physics. It is said that Einstein's initial dissatisfactions with quantum theory were due in part to an "aesthetic" preference or "philosophy" summed up in a remark that God does not play dice. To recognize the legitimacy of

differences in “philosophy” today is not to deny that at a later date one “philosophy” and theory will be shown to prevail. The point is that at particular stages in inquiry alternative “philosophies” may be justified, and decisions that reflect these different philosophies can be equally rational and scientifically acceptable. In addition, there is usually no sharp line to be drawn as to when holding onto a “philosophy” goes from being a reasonable strategy to one of misplaced allegiance or stubbornness. The decision depends on informed “good sense.”

Convictions and commitments brought to philosophical inquiry also influence the issues to be explored and the tools of analysis employed. Until recently there has been a wide chasm between the “philosophies” that shaped work in continental and analytic philosophy. The problems, assumptions, and modes of analysis employed were not compatible. Even within the analytic tradition there has been no agreement as to the ground rules for inquiry. Some reject analyses that rely on necessity, essences, possible worlds, and the like. They feel that these notions are unclear, and the intuitions that underpin them not to be trusted. As W. V. Quine remarks in several places, he has an aesthetic preference for desert landscapes. For those with less stringent methodological standards a whole range of new problems and new solutions to ancient ones appear on the horizon.

Nelson Goodman expresses his view of such preferences as follows:

In the absence of any convenient and reliable criterion of what is clear, the individual thinker can only search his philosophic conscience . . . talk of conscience is just a figurative way of disclaiming any idea of justifying these basic judgments . . . If your conscience is more liberal than mine, I shall call some of your explanations obscure or metaphysical, while you will dismiss some of my problems as trivial or quixotic.⁶

I think that some of Thomas Kuhn’s claims about the influence of paradigms in the fixation of belief are akin to what James has in mind in highlighting the influence of “philosophies” on inquiry.⁷ Kuhn and other historians of science maintain that a study of the history of science indicates the widespread influence of informed “taste” and developed sensibility in choosing between hypotheses. According to Kuhn these tastes and sensibilities flow from paradigms. Paradigms, like James’s “philosophies,” are not themselves theories but approaches to a domain that set the concepts employed, the way problems are formulated, the evidence taken to be

relevant, and the weightings given to the evidence. Scientists have faith in the paradigms they work within and resist giving them up.

On the other hand, James is not committed to Kuhn's strong notion of incommensurability or to the idea that knowledge is non-cumulative. Such theses do not follow from James's accounts of inquiry, language, and truth. And although James will argue that certain religious beliefs are justified, he does not claim that religious beliefs and sentiments should be given weight in science or more generally in settling matters of empirical fact. In allowing room for preferences, tastes, sensibilities, and conscience, philosophic or otherwise, one must always be careful not to step over the line between those values, preferences, and temperaments that have epistemic legitimacy and those that do not. The line, though, is not set by a priori principles, nor is it fixed. Its boundaries emerge and change in the course of inquiry.

At times Kuhn and other proponents of the sociology of knowledge seem to deny the significance of this distinction, but they do so at considerable peril. Although it may be difficult to fix a sharp boundary between epistemic and non-epistemic values, those of religion, political party, power, and personal aggrandizement are out of bounds. The consequences of allowing them to intrude are dire, for then the important distinction between objective inquiry and subjective bias collapses. James believes that his own pragmatic theory of inquiry avoids falling into this trap. Many of his critics disagree. Be that as it may, for James, philosophies and paradigms are open to and should be subjected to criticism and critical evaluation. They can be challenged and overturned on rational grounds. If adopting them does not prove fruitful and enlightening, they should be given up. Faith, for instance, is no excuse for holding onto biblical notions of God and biblical stories about the creation of the universe or species.

So far I have been sketching the reasons James believes that temperament is a legitimate and non-eliminable influence on the evaluation of hypotheses. In Lecture I he more or less assumes but does not discuss or defend this thesis. I have tried to fill in some of the background. It is now time to confront directly what James does focus on in Lecture I. After introductory remarks about the goal of his lectures and the role one's "philosophy" may play in the positions a person adopts, James offers two lists of contrasting temperamental factors that he thinks exert significant force on inquiry. These "philosophical" differences are intimately connected with how one treats the meaning of life issues he wishes to explore, but they reflect influences on inquiry in general. James's lists are:

The Tender-Minded

Rationalistic (going by principle)
 Intellectualistic
 Idealistic
 Religious
 Free-willist
 Monistic
 Dogmatical

The Tough-Minded

Empiricist (going by facts)
 Sensationalistic
 Materialistic
 Irreligious
 Fatalistic
 Pluralistic
 Skeptical

James warns, though, that this dichotomous scheme is a simplification and an idealization. People come in all combinations and degrees of the factors listed, and it could be that no actual person manifests all the symptoms cited in characterizing either of the two types.

It can be argued that most of these factors seem reasonable and appropriate to employ in characterizing a person's cognitive temperament. Nowadays, and even among many scientists in James's day, it was thought obvious that religious preferences have no intellectual standing. They should have no say or influence in the conduct of inquiry. In opposition, James argues that in a certain set of narrowly circumscribed situations, it is not necessary to quarantine religious sentiment from intellectual endeavors. It is important to keep in mind, however, that in all his writings James does not equate being religious with religion. Being religious does not entail adopting or rejecting any particular religion or any particular religion's concept of God.

What James means exactly by the terms "religious" and "God" is hard to pin down, not only in *Pragmatism* but elsewhere in his writings. James sides with the tender-minded in having religious leanings, but he seems to identify these sentiments with a feeling of oneness with the world. He speculates that the origin of this religious need may lie in the unconscious, and this is the otherness we sense we are in touch with. In response to a questionnaire asking explicitly "What do you mean by 'spirituality'?" James responds, "Susceptibility to ideals but with a certain freedom to indulge the imagination about them. A certain amount of 'other worldly' fancy."⁸

In *Common Faith*, Dewey describes religious sentiment as "the idea of a thoroughgoing and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe (as a name for the totality of conditions with which the self is connected)."⁹ It is "the unification of the self through allegiances to inclusive ideal ends, which imagination presents to us and to which the human will responds as worthy of controlling our desires."¹⁰ Dewey believes that James is onto something that is pragmatically significant in calling attention to this

feature of human temperament and the role it plays in life. Dewey takes pains, though, to argue that these ideal ends and their unification in the self do not depend on a supernatural God for grounding. These ideals are human constructions, and the unification of them within the self is a wholly independent human undertaking.

James agrees that these ideals are human constructs, but he allows that in his own case the idea of a substantive God is part and parcel of his account of the process of self-unification. James's God, though, is definitely not a biblical God. God is "a combination of Ideality and (final) efficacy . . . He must be cognizant and responsive in some way."¹¹ James also holds that his own religious sentiments may rely on being allied with an unnatural or supernatural force. Nonetheless, his God is finite, not omniscient, and is not the creator of the universe. And James insists that it is necessary to leave room for one's conception of God to evolve when needed to better cope with experience. More will be said on James's God in later lectures.

At present, it is enough to note that James intends to defend the legitimacy of religious temperament in the fixation of belief, but only in very special cases and only in the way he understands the nature of the religious. He will argue that, so understood, it is not necessary to neutralize or eliminate its influences everywhere. Subjectivity is a threat only when temperaments irrelevant to the fixation of belief in question intrude or when relevant ones overstep their acceptable boundaries of application. Temperaments must be judiciously employed and constrained by observation, logic, and epistemic values. James continually stresses that religious factors are always to be employed in addition to, not as substitutes for, the other demands of empirical inquiry. He contends that his own religious sentiments meet these conditions and do not overreach their legitimate influence.

Although James titles his lists "The Tender-Minded" and "The Tough-Minded," he could equally well have adopted "Rationalist" and "Empiricist" in their stead. For my purposes I think the latter labels are more useful for laying out the Pragmatists' epistemic and metaphysical views. James has qualms with both rationalism and empiricism. When rationalism is pursued too robustly it ends in an untenable Idealism. When empiricism is pushed too far it ends in untenable materialism. On the whole, James along with his fellow Pragmatists look more favorably on the empiricists. The rationalist outlook encourages people to think that it is possible to gain knowledge merely by reflecting on ideas and concepts. The Pragmatists argue that it

is not possible to acquire knowledge by these means. They are convinced that the experimental method has proved to be the most successful and most promising way to acquire knowledge. Therefore inquiry must be grounded in experience as the empiricists insist.

James, nevertheless, finds much that is appealing in the temperament of the rationalists that is missing in the empiricists. The rationalists are defenders of free will, and they recognize more fully the extent of the human contribution in inquiry. They are also concerned with values, ethics, and spirituality. The empiricist's program, when taken to its "tough" extremes, results in a doctrinaire rejection of their cognitive significance. James characterizes tough-minded empiricism as a "nothing but" position. It holds that cognitively significant inquiry can be only about material objects, and all theory must be couched in materialistically acceptable terms. For all intents and purposes this leads these empiricists to ignore or at least not explore the meaning of life issues. They feel that such matters are unscientific, since the objects and concepts employed in these realms cannot be understood as *nothing but* material. James believes that such reductive or eliminative materialism makes it impossible to explore seriously issues that are of deep concern to him and his audience, "what life honestly and deeply means."

Although he is quite appreciative of some of the insights and aspirations they bring to the table, throughout *Pragmatism* James indicates his overall distaste of the rationalist perspective. Too often rationalism turns into a debilitating form of intellectualism. James feels that the rationalists he opposes are not constrained and do not see the need to be constrained by the scientific method or by empirical findings. Yet these thinkers feel free to propose and defend all-encompassing abstract theories about the nature of the universe and our place in it. For James, rationalist doctrines are often far worse than anything empiricism brings with it. Adopting a rationalist outlook can have quite pernicious consequences for the way we think about and treat others.

In Lecture I, without offering much argument, James dismisses a biblical Judeo-Christian God, sitting on high, creating the universe, and ruling over it. In light of Darwin's work and other developments in science, the biblical beliefs of traditional religions are in retreat, and their chances of making a comeback grow dimmer by the day. In opposition to religious traditionalists, many of James's contemporary rationalists do appreciate the need to come to terms with science and the negative implications it has for the biblical picture of God. Nonetheless, they continue to feel a need to appeal

to something of a higher nature, something beyond experience that unites the world and makes it whole. James has sympathies with their needs, but not with the way they attempt to meet them. The Idealists' solution is to posit the "Absolute," an abstract all-encompassing "One" or infinite Mind that structures, but has no direct contact with human affairs and the day-to-day conditions on earth. So conceived, James argues the Absolute cannot hope to provide solutions to meaning-of-life questions. James does not object to the Absolute on the grounds that it is an abstraction or an idealization. He believes that abstractions and idealizations have good use in sound inquiry. James's point is that the rationalists' postulated Absolute is not anchored in experience and fact. The main constraints on its construction are a given philosopher's intuitions or favored metaphysical commitments.

More troubling for James, belief in either a biblical God or the Absolute can lead people to adopt a "this is the best of all possible worlds" attitude. Since everything is well or at least as good as it can be, it is difficult to motivate people to undertake the work we need to and should do to improve the human condition. James thinks that all it takes to see that things are far from the best is to open one's eyes. He quotes a newspaper report by M. Swift detailing the horrible living conditions many people endure and the tragic consequences that follow their attempts to cope. The Idealists often turn their backs on these realities. They do not see and hence do not take into account life as it is actually lived. This attitude conflicts with James's meliorist commitment to engaging the world and making it a better place in which to live. The Absolute is an "intellectualist" construct that does not encourage such action.

In sum, James feels that many in his audience harbor meaning-of-life worries similar to his own. They cannot ignore science, but they have been led to believe that science is incompatible with the religious sentiments and aspirations they harbor. Like him, they yearn to find room for the spiritual, but when they turn to professional philosophers for help they are frustrated. The empiricists James opposes wish to steer clear of spirituality, values, and ethics entirely. They deny that there is an objective way to engage the issues. On the other hand, the rationalists are willing to talk about the topics, but in distancing themselves from the real world their proposals can make things worse. Neither tender-minded rationalism nor tough-minded empiricism will do. James believes that there is a viable mid-ground position that can address humanist concerns, pay proper attention to science, and adopt the scientific method. That is pragmatism.

Of course, it will not be possible to accept the compromise James will offer if one starts with a misconception about the nature of actual inquiry, especially as it occurs in science. James will argue that tender-minded rationalist and tough-minded empiricist programs both hit dead ends, because they are each based on faulty analyses of scientific practices. The rationalists' goal of certainty is unreachable. And simply dropping certainty as a goal will not set things right as long as the rationalists continue to think the deepest and most important truths are necessary and are to be uncovered by a priori or non-experimental inquiry. James rejects rationalism not because he finds it too *intellectual*. His complaint is that the rationalists' abstract approach is not how objective inquiry is or should be pursued. Their position substitutes *intellectualism* for the actual sorts of intellectual activities involved in sound inquiry.

James's complaint against the empiricists is quite different. He does not object to their setting scientific practice as the model for objective inquiry. He agrees with them on this. Their problem is that they assume that all science is logically derivable from observation and/or reducible to some set of basic material items. James will argue that efforts to deduce all theory from observation or to reduce all concepts and laws to those of physics or some other materialist base have failed and are not likely to succeed. James's opponents are wrong too in assuming that experimental science develops entirely independent of human preferences and interests. This is not possible. Objective inquiry depends crucially on epistemic values and temperamental factors in the fixation of belief. The philosophical claim that the norms of inquiry are eternal and can be studied ahistorically, independent of the "context of discovery," is mistaken.

Science does not and could not function adequately within the restrictions imposed by tough-minded materialist doctrine. The tenets of this form of empiricism are not those of science; rather they are a species of *scientism*. It will become more apparent in later lectures that the battle James wages against the materialist positivists of his time has much in common with the one waged against logical positivism in the last half of the twentieth century.

If the nature of objective inquiry is conceived pragmatically, James contends that he has a viable solution to "the present dilemma in philosophy." He will spend the rest of *Pragmatism* explaining and defending a position that lies between that of the tender-minded and the tough-minded. In Lecture I it is enough for him to suggest that his own empiricism does not require dismissing the legitimate influence of "philosophies" on the fixation of beliefs.

Notes

- 1 In discussing James's account of the will, there is a tendency for commentators to focus on his so-called "Will to Believe" doctrine. The sections of *The Principles of Psychology* where he examines the role of the will in the fixation of belief stand or fall independent of that doctrine. Neither here nor elsewhere does James hold that we can simply will our beliefs into existence. The will's role is not to wish for or to attempt to cause beliefs but to endorse them. It is also necessary to keep in mind that the term "fixation" does not entail that the belief is permanent or that its content is stagnant or immutable. More discussion of the issue can be found in Lecture VI. The term "endorse" can also mislead if it is given an overly mentalist analysis. "Adopt for use" or "work on the assumption that" are often better fits.
- 2 James is joined here by influential scientists of his time. For example, Pierre Duhem stresses the ultimate importance of "good sense" in scientific inquiry in *The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 216ff. Henri Poincaré adopts a similar stance with respect to mathematics and likens it to creativity in art: "It may appear surprising that sensibility should be introduced in connection with mathematical discovery, which it would seem, can only interest the intellect. But not if we bear in mind the feeling of beauty, of the harmony of numbers and forms of geometric elegance. It is a real aesthetic feeling that all true mathematicians recognize and this truly is sensibility" (*Science and Method* (New York: Dover, 1952), 59). See also his chapters, "The Selection of Facts" and "Mathematical Discovery" in the same book. For related comments on psychological influences of physicists, see A. d'Abro, *The Rise of the New Physics* (New York: Dover, 1951), 106–144.
- 3 Here, again, James's view is in accord with the opinion of many prominent scientists of his day.
- 4 More recent discussion of the distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic values can be found in the papers in Parts 5 and 6 in E. D. Klemke et al., eds., *Introductory Readings in the Philosophy of Science* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1998). The boundaries and significance of this distinction will loom large in understanding and evaluating the status of James's religious hypothesis.
- 5 James, though, somewhat churlishly admits regret at the growing use of statistical methods in psychology [PP I, 192].
- 6 N. Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, 3rd edn. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), 32–33.
- 7 T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
- 8 A good place to find a fuller picture of what James has in mind is the Conclusion and Postscript of *Varieties*. James's conception of God and the religious

has been of continued interest to theologians and philosophers of religion. For recent attempts to evaluate James's views see C. Taylor, *Varieties of Religious Experience Today* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) and W. Proudfoot, ed., *William James and a Science of Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

- 9 Dewey, *Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 19.
- 10 Dewey, *Common Faith*, 33.
- 11 *The Letters of William James*, vol. 2, ed. H. James (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press 1920), 213.

The Pragmatic Maxim and Pragmatic Instrumentalism (Lecture II)

Pragmatism is not a body of beliefs. It is a method for analyzing the content and significance of beliefs. More broadly, pragmatism seeks to provide an account of the nature of and warrant of those beliefs that flow from the practices of sound inquiry. As a psychological state, belief is not to be identified with contemplating or having an affirmative attitude toward a proposition or idea. In its full-bodied sense, belief is a functional state. The role of belief is to inform us of future experiences to expect and to prepare us to react cognitively and behaviorally in appropriate ways. In “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” Peirce explains the main principle of the pragmatic method, often referred to as the Pragmatic Maxim: “Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.”¹ According to Peirce, beliefs that have the same consequences are the same belief. “If beliefs do not differ in this respect, if they appease the same doubt by producing the same rule of action, then no mere difference in manner of consciousness can make them different beliefs.”²

Peirce goes on to offer an example of this claim. He presents two displays of dots, labeled “Fig. 1” and “Fig. 2,” that are the same in composition but are presented with a 90-degree difference in orientation. Phenomenally the figures do not look the same. Even with careful examination there is a strong pull to judge and assert that they are different figures. Nevertheless, Peirce maintains, “To believe any objects are arranged . . . as in Fig. 1, and

to believe that they are arranged as in Fig. 2, are one and the same belief; yet it is conceivable that a man should assert one proposition and deny the other.”³ The difference between them lies in the manner in which the belief content is expressed but not in the empirical content itself. Similarly, Peirce holds that hypotheses differing only in grammatical structure are the same. We might say then that he treats beliefs “transparently.” Substituting co-referring terms does not change the content or truth value of beliefs. It is not surprising that Peirce adopts this stance toward belief individuation, since he is primarily interested here in applying the Pragmatic Maxim to scientific or intellectual concepts, and in such contexts an extensional analysis may seem most reasonable.

Given his concerns about the personal aspects of each person’s actions and experiences, James tends to treat belief content more narrowly. For these purposes the way a thought is expressed makes a difference. Thus James adopts an intensional criterion of belief individuation. Substituting co-referring terms can render hypotheses with the same empirical content distinct beliefs. In addition, James does not intend to limit application of the Pragmatic Maxim in the way Peirce does. James will apply the Maxim to religious concepts, terms of evaluation, and non-scientific ideas in general. A number of the real and supposed conflicts between Peirce’s and James’s views can be traced to differences in the contexts and in how they employ the Maxim. When these differences are factored out, their analyses of belief and inquiry are often less at odds with one another than is frequently thought.

Peirce formulates the Maxim in a number of ways. The formulations are not meant to be explicit definitions, and they are not equivalent. There are also differences between his versions and that of the other Pragmatists, but the basic thrust is the same. Peirce comments:

William James defines pragmatism as the doctrine that the whole “meaning” of a concept expresses itself either in the shape of conduct to be recommended or of experience to be expected. Between this definition and mine there certainly appears to be no slight theoretical divergence, which, for the most part, becomes evanescent in practice; and though we may differ on important questions of philosophy . . . I am inclined to think that the discrepancies reside in other than the pragmatic ingredients of our thought.⁴

In “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” Peirce offers examples to show how the pragmatic method can and actually had been used to clarify scientific

ideas. He recounts several cases where application of the Maxim reveals that highly charged theoretical disputes (e.g., those about “force”) are no more than verbal disputes. The quarrels are non-substantive, since no possible difference in consequences follows from the adoption of one rather than the other of the competing hypotheses. The verbal expressions of the hypotheses may differ, but there is no difference between them in empirical content. In the *practices* of physics and chemistry they are the same belief.

In Lecture II, James begins his discussion of the pragmatic method with a homey example of the use of the Pragmatic Maxim to dissolve a debate. A man chases a squirrel around a tree, but the squirrel scampers fast enough so that the tree always remains between the squirrel and the man. The issue supposedly in dispute is whether or not the man goes round the squirrel. James argues that until the notion “goes round” is clarified in terms of the difference it would make to adopt one answer or the other the controversy is pointless. The “yes” and “no” answers are verbal differences that make for no empirical difference.

After presenting his introductory squirrel example, James turns immediately to a scientific case, the controversy concerning tautomeric bodies. The issue involved competing theoretical claims about atomic structure. Arguing along pragmatic lines, the renowned chemist Ostwald claimed that the problem is a non-issue. The supposedly conflicting positions were compatible with all the available evidence, and there is no difference in the consequences the competing theories actually predict. James seems to agree.

James says that he is primarily interested in showing how the pragmatic method can be used to handle philosophical controversies, and much of *Pragmatism* is directed at this task. He maintains that application of the Maxim can help clarify what, if anything, is at stake in these debates. He believes that, when examined pragmatically, the answer is often nothing. The opposing positions can be seen to imply no concrete differences in experience. The supposedly deep metaphysical problems are bogus. The pragmatic method does not suggest we take sides in such disputes. It urges us to turn our backs on them. The disputes, as usually understood, should be dissolved rather than solved.

For James, tender-minded rationalist philosophers are most vulnerable to pragmatic rebuke. The rationalists claim to tackle big questions. They conjure up grand universal principles about Matter, Reality, Mind, the Absolute, and much more. They also hold that their principles are not merely true, but are necessary. These truths are founded on reason and

justified by appeal to intuition or pure intellect. There is no need to search for empirical support for the principles, because they can be known a priori. By their very nature rationalist claims run into trouble when the Pragmatic Maxim is applied to them. Rationalist principles are not supported or constrained by established theory and observation. Nor do they actually confront and come to terms with real life problems facing individuals and society.

The empiricists suffer no comparable challenge, wedded as they are to the controlling force of experience. All useful concepts and hypotheses must have testable experiential consequences. Empiricism embraces experimentalism, and assumes that the scientific method is the correct way to conduct objective inquiry. Not only is empiricism compatible with the pragmatic method, but the Pragmatists embraced its core doctrine. James states over and over that he is an empiricist, but he also warns that he is not your typical one: "Pragmatism represents a perfectly familiar attitude, the empiricist attitude, but it represents it, as it seems to me, both in a more radical and in a less objectionable form than it has ever yet assumed" [P, 31].⁵

In *The Principles of Psychology* and elsewhere James argues that theoretical and empirical research does not support the atomistic, associationist, sensationalist, and reductive doctrines of the early empiricists. The phenomenal nature of sensory experience is itself always a function of both past experience and the sensory experiences that occur immediately before and after the current one. Consider the experience of thunder:

Into the awareness of thunder itself the awareness of the previous silence creeps and continues; for what we hear when the thunder crashes is no thunder *pure* but thunder-breaking-upon-silence-and-contrasting-with-it. Our feeling of the same objective thunder, coming in this way, is quite different from what it would be were the thunder a continuation from the previous thunder. [PP I, 240– 241]⁶

James goes on to argue that empirical conclusions cannot be founded or justified on the basis of a purified sensory given. In order for experience to be incorporated into thought, inference, and inquiry it has to be put in a discursive form. Sensations must be categorized (not necessarily in language) before they can enter into or play a role in thought and action. As Dewey pointed out in his critiques of stimulus–response behaviorism, we are creatures of *meaning*. Our experiences and responses are always suf-

fused with and mediated by the meanings we read into the stimuli. There is no “given” independent of how it is taken; the giving and the taking cannot definitively be split in two.

James’s view of a sensory given is somewhat obscured, because he does talk in places about there being a difference between “knowledge about” and “knowledge of” acquaintance. Knowledge by acquaintance is simply the having of an experience. It can only be had, not described. It is “known in a dumb way without *knowledge-about*.” But, James continues, “In minds able to speak . . . there is *some* knowledge about everything. Things can at least be classed, and the times of their appearance told” [PP I, 221]. And right after this he says that the distinction between knowledge-about and knowledge of acquaintance is a relative contrast: “the same thought of a thing may be called knowledge-about it in comparison with a simpler thought, or acquaintance with it in comparison with a thought of it that is more articulate and explicit still” [PP I, 221–222]. Or, as he maintains in *Some Problems in Philosophy*, “No one can tell, of the things he holds in his hands and reads, how much comes in through his eyes and fingers, and how much, from his apperceiving intellect . . . The universal and particular parts of experience are literally immersed in each other, and both are indispensable” [SPP, 107].⁷ As James was fond saying, “The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything” [P, 37].

James, like Peirce, offers several distinct, non-equivalent formulations of the Pragmatic Maxim. Citing these different explanations, critics accuse James of confusion, or worse still inconsistency. I think there is a more charitable account of what is going on. Remember, *Pragmatism* and many of James’s other works were written versions of lectures on a range of topics delivered to audiences of diverse backgrounds and interests, and James does not make any effort to present his position in formal, technical terms. None of the alternative explications of the Maxim are meant to be rigorous statements of necessary and sufficient criteria for its application. In the spirit of pragmatism James wishes to spell out how the Maxim *works*. His explanations are in everyday terms, and, depending on the topic and stage of his argument, the alternative formulations serve different purposes and are made with different emphases.

Some of the confusions in James’s discussions of the Maxim, however, are of his own making. For example, he applies the Maxim to objects, concepts, statements, beliefs, and truth, and in so doing appears to conflate issues seriously.⁸ In “What Pragmatism Means by ‘Practical,’” Dewey attempts to sort things out and remove some of the sting of this criticism.

According to Dewey, James's varied uses of the Maxim make more sense when understood as attempts to apply the Maxim in ways appropriate to the different notions he examines. James does not conflate these various ideas and domains; rather, he explores pragmatically how each functions in practice. What, say, do concepts, statements, beliefs, and truth each come to or mean when analyzed in terms of their consequences? What follows from parceling experience into objects? What role do concepts play in cognition? How is it that statements, not propositions, are the vehicles of inquiry? How does the difference between believing *P* is true and *P* being true play out in the practice of inquiry?

Many criticisms of James, though, are due less to the lack of clarity in his exposition than to misinterpretation of his positions. Throughout his writings James talks of the practical consequences that flow from adopting or rejecting an idea. Such appeals by James and the other Pragmatists to the "practical" have been a favorite whipping boy of their opponents. These critics assume the Pragmatists hold that the only consequences that count in evaluating the fruits of inquiry are those that are beneficial or harmful to someone or some group's subjective interests and desires. The Pragmatists' talk of the "payoff" of consequences and the "cash value" of ideas is taken to reaffirm this reading. James does not intend to ignore everyday consequences, but the Pragmatists' use of the term "practical" is not to be identified with or limited to these consequences. In many cases they are of little or no significance in assessing a hypothesis' worth.

By "practical" the Pragmatists primarily mean "having consequences" for some ongoing, worthwhile, and grounded inquiry. The inquiry does not have to be concerned with the daily commerce with the world. It can be highly intellectual and theoretical in nature, where the payoffs lie primarily in advancing prediction and understanding. In various places James emphasizes that the cognitive consequences of beliefs (especially inferential consequences) tend to be more important than behavioral consequences. At the same time, he does appreciate the impact of scientific findings on our lives: "But the scientific tendency in critical thought, tho inspired at first by purely intellectual motives, has opened an entirely unexpected range of practical utilities to our astonished view" [*P*, 91].

Dewey explains the "practical" in the following way:

the term "pragmatic" means only the rule of referring all thinking, all reflective considerations, to *consequences* for final meaning and test. Nothing is said about the nature of the consequences; they may be aesthetic, or moral,

or political, or religious in quality – anything you please . . . Mr. Peirce explained that he took the term from Kant, in order to denote empirical consequences. When he refers to their practical character it is only to indicate a criterion by which to avoid purely verbal disputes . . . It is not that consequences are themselves practical, but that practical consequences from them may at times be appealed to decide the specific question of whether two proposed meanings differ save in words.⁹

James and Dewey were puzzled and upset by critics like Russell who maintained that, as an American philosophy, pragmatism was allied in spirit with capitalism and its worship of the almighty dollar. Likewise, they thought that only obtuseness or inattention to what they actually said could explain critics' saddling them with promoting the principle that the ends justify the means. Dewey, sympathetic to socialism, a union supporter and an advocate for the economically less fortunate, had real difficulty seeing how anyone could think that he would champion a philosophy that ran counter to his life's work and commitments.¹⁰

James's use of the Maxim to criticize rationalist projects and proposals has led to another common misinterpretation of his position. Opponents assume James's rejection of rationalism stems from his unwillingness to countenance the abstract. This is not the case. James's criticism of the rationalists is that the idealizations and principles they propose are not constrained by much more than intuitions; they are not empirically anchored. The fact that the rationalists' concepts and hypotheses are abstract is not the issue.

There are good abstractions and bad ones. Good abstractions are founded upon experience and serve to organize, simplify, and make it easier to navigate the facts. They peel away distracting features of situations that unnecessarily complicate theory. They are non-eliminable features of sound theoretical science. By contrast, the rationalist's abstractions are imposed from on high. They are not constrained by observation, and they are not geared to handle the real problems confronting useful inquiry. This top-down approach leaves their abstractions free-floating and otherworldly, unable to serve to organize and simplify sound intellectual endeavors. In practice, rationalist abstractions neither engage theoretical issues of empirical inquiry nor help us better deal with the realities of daily life.

Another misreading of the Pragmatic Maxim is the assumption that it is essentially a version of latter-day verificationism or operationalism. Peirce did flirt with such a thesis. For example, in his paper "How to Make

Our Ideas Clear” he suggests that the meaning of the concept “hard” is given by a test procedure. Yet later in the very same article he rejects an operational identification of a concept with any single or non-theory-laden test. “One man,” he says, “may study the velocity of light by the transits of Venus and the aberration of stars; another by the opposition of Mars and the eclipses of Jupiter’s satellites; a third by Fizeau; a fourth by that of Foucault.”¹¹ And in a subsequent paper, he explicitly recants his operational account of hardness, saying it may be best to think of “hardness” as a property owing to underlying structure like “the high polymerization of the molecule.”¹²

James does appeal to the notion of “verification” in various places, but as his discussions of the problem of the One and the many in Lecture IV and of truth in Lecture VI make plain, the Maxim is not meant to be a reductive thesis. It does not insist that all acceptable concepts be defined in phenomenal or strictly observational terms. It requires only that hypotheses have empirically testable consequences. Thus in “The Pragmatist Account of Truth and Its Misunderstandings” James elaborates a number of prevalent confusions and conflation of his position, the “First misunderstanding [being]: Pragmatism is only a re-editing of positivism.” James links positivism with skepticism and agnosticism in that it assumes that the most we can possibly have is “relative or phenomenal truth . . . By skepticism this is treated as an unsatisfactory state of affairs, while positivism and agnosticism are cheerful about it, call real truth sour grapes, and consider phenomenal truth quite sufficient for all our ‘practical’ purposes” [MT, 266]. James insists that this is not how he sees things.

Unlike many twentieth-century logical positivists, James is not particularly interested in drawing a distinction between meaningful and meaningless discourse per se. Consideration of an example he discusses in his chapter “Conception,” in *Principles*, can indicate one of the differences between him and more hard-nosed empiricists on this matter. For them an idea or term such as “round-square” would be taken to be a meaningless concept and banished from cognitively significant discourse. Not so for James. He argues that there is no problem conceiving of a round-square. Those who think it impossible are misled, because they identify conceiving with imagining. Failing to be able to bring to mind a picture of a round-square, they claim it is impossible to conceive of one. James argues that images are only one type of conceiving; other representational systems can be used as well. In the case at hand there is an obvious linguistic representation available, namely the term “round-square.” Round-squares are not

inconceivable, and the term “round-square” is not cognitively meaningless. It is just that there are no such figures, and we have good reason to believe none will be found. In this the concept is no different from the concepts “unicorn” or “golden-mountain.” These ideas can be conceived, but the objects they purport to refer do not exist.¹³

James employs the Maxim primarily to distinguish real from bogus controversies. He says that he is most interested in applying the Maxim to “settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable” [*P*, 28]. His main goal is to dissolve meaningless debates, not separate meaningful concepts and propositions from meaningless ones. The controversies he cites about the squirrel and tautomerism are examples of employing the Maxim for this purpose. The competing hypotheses are not without meaning; the result of pragmatic analysis is that they do not actually conflict.¹⁴

The pragmatic theory of meaning that emerges from the Maxim is holistic. Ideas gain their empirical meaning from the body of beliefs in which they are embedded. All beliefs should be constrained by empirical evidence; however, single beliefs more often than not have no immediate, direct link to experience. The route from observation to theory can be complex and depend on accepted theoretical hypotheses. Consider Peirce’s treatment of the speed of light mentioned above. The tests cited can be justified only against assumed high-level background theories. Concepts need not be thought of as summaries of phenomenal experience or reducible to an observational vocabulary. The Pragmatists insist only that worthwhile discourse earn its keep in helping come to terms with experience.

The Pragmatists may be thought of as semantic “inferentialists.” Words have no meaning in isolation. No useful idea is in principle atomic, unanalyzable or lacking inferential links to other signs. Empirical meaning accrues by the inferential connections forged between beliefs. Meaning therefore is not static. Once a concept is introduced into a practice it takes on a life of its own, and there is no restricting or telling in advance what direction or directions it will take. Eternalizing initial meanings and hence their truth conditions is to capture only “the dead heart of a living tree.” In the practice of inquiry “ancient formulas are reinterpreted as . . . principles that our ancestors never got a glimpse of in their present shape” [*P*, 37].

Empirical meaning alters as the consequences a concept entails grow or shrink in response to ongoing inquiry. In the process some beliefs are added and others are deleted from the corpus. Findings that previously had no contact with a given hypothesis can become connected as theory develops.

Hence it is possible that what at one time was a pointless debate can turn out to have substance should the hypotheses as later understood make different predictions. As understanding of the world grows so does the meaning of the terms used to describe it, and vice versa. They change in tandem.¹⁵

The blurring of a fact/meaning distinction follows from the Pragmatists' account of the acquisition, development, and use of language. Consider the relationship between hats and the word "hat."¹⁶ On first learning the word a child may equate being a hat with something being hat-shaped. Initially this is all that the word "hat" means for her. Later she learns that hats are a piece of clothing. Being something people wear on their head becomes "essential" to the meaning of "hat." With time the child learns more about the protective functions of hats and other more esoteric uses of hats, say, as fans or to carry sand. All such implications flesh out the meaning of the word "hat." Undoubtedly some of this information will be more central to the use of hats and the word "hat" and will be more universally known than others, but this is a matter of degree, not a principled or sharp distinction. This pragmatic account of meaning does not involve any conflation of word and object. The word "hat" is not a hat. "Hat" is a term around which we consolidate what we know about hats. It functions cognitively to organize this knowledge perspicuously and embodies it in a form that is suitable for communication, thought, and the processes of inference employed in deliberation.

Although in principle inquiry is epistemically holist, James is well aware that in practice changes and additions to our corpus of beliefs are determined by those beliefs in the neighborhood. Most usually, knowledge grows in response to a local problem and is constrained by evidence closely related to that specific problem. It is unlikely, for example, that a finding in economic theory will influence theories of physics and vice versa. It is also the case that within a field such as physics, the findings in one branch of study may exert no influence on problems arising in another branch. Finally, since science is conservative, responses to new evidence that would cause wide disturbances and revamping of settled beliefs, local or non-local, tend to be strongly resisted.

In *Principles* James explores in detail other consequences that flow from adopting his pragmatic analysis of the relationship between meaning and inquiry. In chapter XXII, "Reasoning," he argues that concepts do not have essences. Any property thought to characterize a concept can, in principle, be dropped. New evidence and theory may come along to dislodge it. What

we think of as essential properties are just those that are hard to challenge within the context and confines of the project at hand. The supposed essentiality of essences is relative. It is a matter of interest and focus. “*There is no property ABSOLUTELY essential to any one thing.* The same property which figures as the essence of a thing on one occasion becomes a very inessential in another” [PP II, 333]. A property that is privileged in one context will be treated as accidental in another.¹⁷

The pragmatic rejection of essences has a rippling effect. It provides further support for a thoroughgoing fallibilism. It is no longer possible for rationalists to appeal to essences in arguing that there are a priori principles and truths. Empiricist efforts to explicate necessary truths in terms of meaning relations are also ruled out. It has often gone unmentioned that James explicitly denies there being an analytic/synthetic distinction that can underwrite such claims. He says:

Some readers may expect me to plunge into the old debate as to whether the truths are “analytic” or “synthetic.” It seems to me that the distinction is one of Kant’s most unhappy legacies, for the reason that it is impossible to make it sharp . . . There is *something* “ampliative” in our greatest truisms . . . The only sharp way of defining synthetic propositions would be to say that they express a relation between *two data* at least. But it is hard to find any proposition which cannot be construed as doing this. Even verbal definitions do it . . . The analytic–synthetic debate is thus for us devoid of all significance. [PP II, 661–662]¹⁸

One example James offers in his critique of essences is particularly resonant with current concerns. He says, “Readers brought up on Popular Science may think that the molecular structure of things is their real essence in an absolute sense, and that water is H-O-H more deeply and truly than it is a solvent of sugar or a slaker of thirst. Not a whit! It is *all* of these things with equal reality, and the only reason why *for the chemist* it is H-O-H primarily, and only secondarily the other things, is that *for his purposes of deduction and compendious definition* the H-O-H aspect of it is the more useful one to bear in mind” [PP II, 334–335]. James does not deny that there is a perspective from which it is possible to conceive of the relationship of water to H-O-H fixed, but adoption of this perspective is optional. It is useful and mandated in some contexts but not in others. “Only if one of our purposes were itself truer than another, could one of our conceptions become the truer conception” [PP II, 336].¹⁹

Similarly Dewey argues:

To take what is discovered to be reliable evidence within a more complex *situation* as if it were given absolutely and in isolation, or apart from a particular historic situs and context, is the fallacy of empiricism as a logical theory. To regard the thought-forms of conception, judgment, and inference as qualifications of “pure thought” . . . is the fallacy of rationalism.²⁰

A fuller treatment of this issue will have to await my discussion of Lecture VI in Chapter 6.

James and Dewey believe that their non-static, pragmatic treatment of meaning suggests that it is profitable to conceive of ideas and theories as *instruments*. They are cognitive “tools” used in navigating intellectual and physical environments, and language is the preeminent vehicle employed for expanding our understanding of the world. Language enhances our ability to explain, predict, plan, and cope with the near and the far, the large and the small, the past and the future. Both everyday terms such as “hat” and scientific terms such as “H-O-H” function instrumentally. They provide organizing pegs around which to consolidate and integrate beliefs along inferential routes.

Dewey puts it this way:

There is nothing novel nor heterodox in the notion that thinking is instrumental . . . To conceive of thinking as instrumental to truth or knowledge, and as a tool shaped out of the same subject-matter as that to which it is applied is but to return to the Aristotelian tradition about logic . . . That the practice of science has in the meantime substituted a logic of experimental discovery . . . necessitates, however, a very different *Organon*. It makes necessary the conception that the object of knowledge is not something with which thinking sets out but something with which it ends.²¹

Pragmatic instrumentalism, then, is not an ontological thesis. It does not make claims about what sorts of things may or may not exist. It is, rather, a thesis about the development and use of concepts and the relationship of language to the world. The Pragmatists believe that their instrumental account of thinking provides the best explanation of the nature of inquiry and the best explanation of why the fruits of inquiry can guide thought and conduct successfully.

Although there are similarities between them, pragmatic instrumentalism is not to be confused with *anti*-realist instrumentalism. There are important distinctions between the two. The anti-realist assumes there is a firm boundary between observational and non-observational vocabularies

and/or a related divide between theoretical and non-theoretical discourse. For the anti-realist the items referred to in non-theoretical discourse are taken to exist “out there” in a full-bodied sense. They can be found in the world and interacted with causally. Theoretical or non-observational discourses are said to differ. They may be useful “instruments” for talking about the world, but they themselves do not purport to denote or refer to objects in the world.

Pragmatic instrumentalism does not assume or argue for there being such sharp bifurcations. This sort of anti-realism, in fact, is inconsistent with James’s and Dewey’s view that *all* concepts function instrumentally. What holds for supposed theoretical terms holds for terms that are closely tied to observation. The term “red” is no different from the terms “radish” and “radiation.” They all find their use and gain meaning as tools for organizing and dealing with worldly experience. Thus in *Pragmatism* and throughout much of his other works James talks of molecules, atoms, and a host of other “unobservables” without a pause or reluctance. Nor does he argue that there is a special problem about the status of theoretical terms or unobservable entities in general.

James frequently describes his instrumentalist position as being “realist.” For example, in response to claims that his theory of truth implied otherwise, he responds, “This is why as a pragmatist I have so carefully posited “reality” *ab initio*, and why throughout my whole discussion, I remain an epistemological realist” [“The Pragmatist Account of Truths and Its Misunderstanders,” in *MT*, 272]. He took it as given that there was no need to defend the reality of the external world against Cartesian doubt. Commitment to common sense physical objects was the starting point for our ontological convictions. But it was only the starting point. The instrumental needs such “posits” served are of a piece with the instrumental needs that lead us to posit the existence of theoretical entities. He spells out the details of this realist position on matters ontological in Lecture V.²²

James and Dewey’s instrumentalist analysis of thinking and concepts runs deep. As in physical undertakings, different instruments are needed for different tasks, and frequently more than one tool is available to handle a single task. Some work better than others, none are perfect, and all are subject to improvement. For certain tasks the available tools may be used together, each enhancing the working of the other. This, though, is not always possible. Use of one instrument may not be compatible with the simultaneous use of another. Most significantly, the Pragmatists argue that, as instruments of thought, concepts should not be understood to resemble

or mirror the world. As with physical tools, they are designed to cope with experiences and the problems thrust upon us. Concepts are fashioned to fit the tasks they are meant to confront. New theories, like new tools, develop when those on hand prove unsatisfactory. And in *Pragmatism* James maintains there is no reason to assume there must be only a single tool that is best for all the tasks being confronted. Pluralism reigns in the use of intellectual instruments, as it does in the employment of physical instruments.

Although James's instrumentalism is not the same as anti-realist instrumentalism, it is anti-realist in another sense. The Pragmatists do reject classical correspondence views of the relationship between words and objects. Their holist pragmatic account of the hook-up of language to the world does not fit readily with what nowadays are called "realist" semantics. What's more, the Pragmatists believe their instrumentalist accounts of inquiry and meaning raise major difficulties for correspondence theories of truth and the classical semantic assumptions that underpin them. The pragmatic theory of truth that emerges from their instrumentalist semantics is one of the features of pragmatism that opponents have and continue to find most objectionable. James notes that many of his critics simply identify pragmatism with his pragmatic theory of truth and assuming the latter intolerable pay scant attention to other aspects of his position.

James has much to say on all these topics throughout *Pragmatism*, and he devotes Lecture VI to the issue of truth. His examination of truth in Lecture II is largely a synopsis of discussions to follow. As in the case of the Pragmatic Maxim, James offers alternative, non-equivalent formulations of his conception of truth. None are meant to be strict definitions or provide explicit criteria of truth. His remarks are impressionistic, and in this lecture he gives hardly any rigorous argument to buttress his position. He does, however, provide critics with ample quotes to cite in deriding it. Among the most prominent are: "*ideas . . . become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of experience*" [P, 34]; "*truth is one species of the good . . . The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief*" [P, 42]; and "*what is better for us to believe is true unless the belief clashes with some other vital benefit*" [P, 43].

A more detailed explanation of why James makes these claims will be found in my account of subsequent lectures. A quick survey of his remarks in Lecture II can serve, however, to introduce his ideas. James begins by situating his conception of truth within the context of inquiry and his account of inquiry in the context of the science of the day. He mentions in

passing that his fellow pragmatists Schiller and Dewey offer accounts of truth that have much in common with his own. James also notes that many scientists were adopting a pragmatic instrumental approach to inquiry. He cites Mach, Poincare, Ostwald, and Duhem among other prominent thinkers as subscribers to the view.

According to James, these working scientists do not see their theories as attempts to decipher the eternal script of the universe handed down by God. Nor do they assume that the universe comes prefigured with “natural” boundaries discernible from a god’s-eye perspective. Theories are tools for categorizing and sorting out experiences in useful ways. They are instruments that humans construct to meet intellectual and practical needs. “No theory is absolutely a transcript of reality, but . . . any one of them may from some point of view be useful . . . They are only a man-made language, a conceptual shorthand, . . . and languages as is well known, tolerate much choice of expression and many dialects” [P, 33]. In much the same spirit, Mach claims “No point of view has absolute, permanent validity. Each has importance only for some given end.”²³ James believes his pragmatic account of inquiry and his instrumentalist conception of truth fit well with what he takes to be best current scientific practice.

James’s opponents are put off by his analyses of inquiry, truth, and the relationship he finds between them. They claim that if the goal of inquiry is not to discover beliefs that correspond to the independent world as it is, there will be no way to distinguish fact from fiction. Theories must keep in touch with Reality, and truth understood in realist semantic terms is the essential glue. The pursuit of truth, these critics claim, is what drives inquiry and insures that inquiry is carried on objectively. James does not deny that sound inquiry must be responsive to reality. The *realities* he has in mind, though, are experience and the stock of beliefs previously adopted. He does not see that responsiveness to such realities presupposes correspondence truth and the semantic assumptions that underlie it. Pragmatic instrumentalist considerations provide all the constraints that are actually needed.

Following Peirce’s lead, James abandons the “Cartesian” view that inquiry should or can be conducted in a state of overall doubt. Inquiry always takes place against a background of accepted beliefs. It is not possible to start with a clean slate. For the Pragmatists, real doubt arises when the corpus of beliefs “meets new experience that puts a strain on them” [P, 34]. Then one is moved to deliberate. The inquirer “seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions.” In doing so he tries as best he can to preserve “the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification.” James thinks

many who claim that pragmatism is subjective do so because they fail to see that the influence of older truths is controlling: "Loyalty to them is the first principle" [P, 35]. Conservatism is such an overriding principle that when phenomena encountered are "so novel that they would make for a serious rearrangement of our preconceptions [we frequently] ignore them" [P, 35].

Conservatism, however, does allow for the growth of knowledge. If conflicting data pile up and continue to resist explanation, change is in order. In determining the best way to make repairs, inquirers will be confronted with the problem of tradeoffs: "New truth . . . marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt and a maximum of continuity. We hold a theory true just in proportion to its success in solving [the] problem of maxima and minima." But there are no definitive rules for making such compromises. Different investigators will make different tradeoffs. "We say this theory solves it on the whole more satisfactorily than that theory; but that means more satisfactory to ourselves, and individuals will emphasize their points of satisfaction differently" [P, 35].

Although what counts as a satisfactory solution can vary from person to person and from task to task, the satisfactions James is interested in here are those relevant to the conduct of objective inquiry. Not just any satisfaction that happens to meet an individual's needs, desires, wishes, or whims has epistemic weight. A satisfactory solution is not one we find most pleasing or calculate is in our own best interests. It is a reasoned conviction that the hypothesis being considered satisfactorily meets the demands of inquiry and the problem we currently seek to solve. Observation and logic are major factors, but value and temperament are unavoidably part of the process. Only some human satisfactions fall within the range of sanctioned influences of inquiry; others do not. That a student is satisfied with the paper he turns in does not mean it is a satisfactory piece of work. Nonetheless, inquiry that is constrained by all of the sanctioned satisfactions may leave room for disagreement. There can be more than one conclusion that meets all relevant standards of objectivity. In conducting inquiry a plurality of legitimate positions is simply a fact of life and can be a beneficial one at that.

According to the Pragmatists, instrumental success and failure are what guide everyday and theoretical inquiry. Objective evaluations of success do not require the backup of *correspondence* truth. We are all aware, for instance, that some automobiles constantly break down and that the medical instruments available for certain surgery procedures may not be

satisfactory. There is reason to seek improvements. Such problems motivate inquiry and spur deliberation. Thought must be given to designing better tools for the tasks faced. If it looks like a new instrument promises to do the job sufficiently better than the old, a solution has been found to the problem. But it is not to be assumed that it is a final one. First, it is always possible to discover that the solution does not work as well as it was thought to work. Second, today's satisfactory solution is not an end, rather it sets the stage for new problems to arise for which new deliberation is required. Although James is a devout fallibilist, he is not a skeptic. The best we can do is the most we can do, but the fallibilist sees no reason to assume there may be something inaccessible that in principle the best inquiry must fail to uncover.

Now it does seem strained to maintain that what makes a physical instrument better is that it gets us nearer to the truth or to some eternal Platonic ideal. There is no "true" or Platonic automobile or surgical tool "out there" waiting to be copied or approached. Likewise, it seems strained to maintain that efforts to devise better automobiles and medical equipment are guided or kept on track by ideas of the eternally satisfactory instruments that will emerge when all the facts are in or inquiry ends. Unless one has mystical powers to look into the distant future, it would be impossible to know how or where to head. New instruments are developed and adopted because they are improvements over the stock of tools presently available, not because they correspond to some preconceived ultimate ideal.

The Pragmatists argue that it is enlightening to see scientific development in much the same way. Doubt arises when our corpus of beliefs is found inadequate for handling some intellectual or physical problem. We are motivated to find a solution. When a satisfactory solution comes to mind further experimentation and deliberation may come to a halt. Still, a halt is not a stop. Fallibilists can rest, but not rest assured. The end of one inquiry spurs further inquiry. A solution provides the last word in one stage of inquiry and the first word in the next. Objectivity in the fixation of belief does not require assuming or pretending that we have found "truth eternal," or that any presently accepted belief will be on the list of absolute Truths determined by a final complete science. It is enough for us to have sufficient empirical justification now for adding the belief to our corpus, for seeing it as an improvement from where we were.

Science seeks and is guided by instrumental success. Explanations of success are not dependent on claims about copying or on our getting closer

to Reality. We gain no further insight into the process of belief fixation by insisting that true hypotheses correspond to the world as it is or as it would be seen from a god's-eye view. Judgments about what works and does not work are sufficient to constrain scientific practice, and these facts about success and failure are not something we can simply make up. They are objective facts. The beliefs inquiry lead us to fix stably in our mind may conflict with our personal needs and desires, but for James this is not a legitimate reason for ignoring or rejecting them.

In Lecture II James says things about truth, inquiry, and reality that strike many readers as implausible, incoherent, or just plain wrong. His remarks about employing the pragmatic method to give legitimacy to religious beliefs raise many more qualms and provide his opponents with additional ammunition. I agree that these flourishes do not aid James's cause, but I think they are neither as egregious nor as damaging to core pragmatic theses as they are said to be. I think it is possible to accept the basics of James's analyses of belief, meaning, truth, and inquiry without extending their reach in all the ways he wishes.

My account of James's views is meant to clarify positions he espouses in Lecture II and to alleviate some of the anxiety to which his seemingly more worrisome claims give rise. I do not assume that my account can repair all the self-inflicted damage done in this lecture. My sketch of James's views, and my conviction that much more in Lecture II can be saved than discarded, do rely on my understanding of James's elaboration and defense of these positions in the remaining lectures.

As its title announces, James's goal in Lecture II is to present a characterization of what pragmatism means. In sum, it goes like this. The organizing principle of pragmatism is the Pragmatic Maxim. All the Pragmatists take it as their point of departure. The Maxim says that the content of a belief lies in its testable consequences. When James says that the consequences of a satisfactory belief must be "concrete" and "practical" he does not intend to exclude abstract or theoretical beliefs. Rather he is insisting that they have concrete consequences for some recognizably significant inquiry.

The Maxim is first and foremost a principle for understanding and assessing conflicts of belief. The Maxim is also the basis for a theory of linguistic meaning, one today characterized as "meaning holism." The Pragmatic Maxim and meaning holism lead James and other Pragmatists to propose that the concepts, theories, and language employed in deliberation serve as instruments, shaped over time to enhance our understanding and

our ability to cope with ever-changing physical and cognitive environments. In current discussions there is a tendency to label the Pragmatic position “anti-representational” as well as “anti-realist.” I think both of these labels are misleading. It is better to see the position as offering an alternative account of the nature of representation and the semantic considerations that in actual practice do link word to object.

Scientific inquiry, according to the Pragmatists, is not the quest for certainty, and it is not the pursuit of truth as usually conceived. Inquiry aims to develop improved intellectual and physical instruments to meet problems that available tools are unable to address satisfactorily. Inquiry can be characterized as aiming at truth, as long as we are willing to accede to a pragmatic analysis of inquiry. Pragmatic truth is the only truth needed to keep inquiry objective and “true to the facts.” For James, pragmatic truth has another important advantage. It is compatible with pluralism. It allows for the possibility that inquiry might have developed along alternative paths from the ones taken. And later we will see that James also believes it can accommodate useful systems of belief that are each justified yet in conflict.

Pragmatic instrumentalism is not to be identified with verificationist or operationalist programs. It focuses on the history of science and actual scientific practice to reveal the nature of inquiry. In doing so it blurs, but does not eliminate, the distinction between the “context of justification” and the “context of discovery.” There is a definite and acknowledged distinction between practices and the *norms* of such practices. James’s critique of the tough-minded empiricism of his day has much in common with later criticisms of logical positivist doctrines. One might say that James urges us to reject the “two dogmas of empiricism.”²⁴

Notes

- 1 C. S. Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” in *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 1, ed. N. Houser and C. Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 132.
- 2 Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” 130.
- 3 Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” 130.
- 4 C. S. Peirce, “Pragmatism,” in *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 2: 1893–1913, ed. The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 401. See also C. Hookway, “The Principle of Pragmatism: Peirce’s Formulations and Examples,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 28 (2004), 119–136 and C. J. Misak, *Truth and the End of Inquiry: A Peircian Account of Truth* (New York: Oxford

University Press, 2004), ch. 1 for further analysis of Peirce's use of the Pragmatic Maxim.

- 5 As indicated in the Introduction, I will not be considering how James's radical empiricism fits in with his empiricism.
- 6 Even more radically, James suggests that it is likely that no two sensory experiences can be exactly the same even when the stimuli are identical. The sensitivities, discriminatory powers, states, and habits of the whole system are constantly updated and altered. Stimuli never step into the same stream twice. Chapters XVII–XXI of *Principals* provide the details of James's view of sensation and perception.
- 7 Psychophysics is one important context where it is useful to adopt a know-about/know-by acquaintance distinction, and several chapters of *Principles* are devoted to discussions of this area of psychological research. Other than relative to specific purposes and tasks, psychophysics being one, James does not think it possible to factor out the perceptual from the conceptual. See also Dewey for an extensive criticism of Russell's views of immediate sense experience in "Propositions, Warranted Assertibility, and Truth," in *The Essential Dewey*, vol. 2, ed. L. Hickman and T. Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 201–212.
- 8 I. Scheffler, for example, raises such criticism in *Four Pragmatists: A Critical Introduction to Peirce, James, Mead, and Dewey* (New York: Humanities Press, 1974).
- 9 J. Dewey, "An Added Note as to the 'Practical,'" in *Essays in Experimental Logic* (New York: Dover, 1954), 330–331.
- 10 See S. Myer, ed., *Dewey and Russell: An Exchange* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1985).
- 11 Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," 138.
- 12 "Issues in Pragmatism," in *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 2: 1893–1913, ed. The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press), 356.
- 13 Quine and Goodman also discuss the status of the "round-square" concept, in much the same terms as James, and reach the same conclusion he does.
- 14 For further analysis of the differences between James and logical positivists see C. I. Lewis, "Logical Positivism and Pragmatism," in *The Collected Papers of Clarence Irving Lewis*, ed. J. Goheen and J. Mothershead (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970), 92–112 and M. White, "Logical Positivism and the Philosophy of William James," in *Pragmatism and the American Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 110–120.
- 15 Elsewhere James says concepts are unchangeable. I will explain in Chapter 6, especially in the Appendix, how to square these seemingly conflicting positions.
- 16 The "hat" example is derived from Dewey's account of the acquisition of the word in *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1944), 15ff.

- 17 One is reminded of Quine's attack on essentialism as exemplified in his discussion of a mathematical bicyclist. When focus is on his bicycling skills he is essentially two-legged, but when attention is turned to his mathematical skills he is essentially a rational animal (*Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960) 199).
- 18 See also M. White, "The Analytic and the Synthetic: An Untenable Dualism," in *Toward Reunion in Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), 133–147.
- 19 Throughout my discussion of James's and Dewey's views of language, meaning, and reference I will mention points of contact between their work and essentialist positions found in the current literature. It is important to keep in mind, however, that I do not wish to claim the Pragmatists were interested in the very same issues now being debated or that they were objecting to positions identical to those espoused today. But I do think their concerns are similar to those found in many post-positivist pragmatic challenges to essentialist theses.
- 20 J. Dewey, "Data and Meaning," in *Essays in Experimental Logic* (New York: Dover, 1954), 152.
- 21 J. Dewey, "What Pragmatism Means by 'Practical,'" in *Essays in Experimental Logic* (New York: Dover), 332–334.
- 22 See also J. Dewey, "The Realism of Pragmatism," in *The Middle Works*, vol. 3, ed. J. A. Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 153–157. For a nice summary discussion of various kinds of instrumentalism old and new see P. K. Stanford, "Instrumentalism," in *The Philosophy of Science: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 400–405.
- 23 E. Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations* (New York: Dover, 1959), 37.
- 24 On my reading Quine's work, arguments and language are much closer to the views of the Pragmatists than he seems to recognize. See, for example, his paper, "The Pragmatists' Place in Empiricism," in *Pragmatism: Its Sources and Prospects*, ed. R. Mulvaney and P. Zeltner (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1981), 21–39.

Substance and Other Metaphysical Claims (Lecture III)

Having presented the gist of the Pragmatic Maxim in Lecture II, James turns to explaining its application to classic metaphysical problems. He begins with an examination of the notion “substance.” James points out that the distinction between substance and attributes is built into the grammar of our language. Statements are taken to have a subject–predicate form, where the subject names an object and the predicates name the properties attributed to it. James does not question the grammatical analysis, but he believes it distorts. And this distortion, he argues, is an important reason why people accept the idea of substance.

James’s account of the faulty argument that leads people to adopt this position goes like this. First, it is assumed there must be something (the subject) in which all attributes (the predicates) inhere. Second, this something (the subject) must be an object whose nature cannot be fully captured by all the accessible attributes (the predicates) that can be assigned it. Therefore, the object has to be attributeless or to have attributes over and above those we can actually access. With physical properties the reified object is called “material substance.” With mental properties the reified object is called “spiritual substance.” James claims that application of the Pragmatic Maxim shows that these substance concepts have no work to do. All the consequences the postulated substances can have are to be found in the effects of the accessible properties that the predicates attribute.

James goes on to point out that similar missteps are responsible for the reification of attributes. We are led astray by “our inveterate human trick

of turning names into things" [P, 46]. He illustrates his point with an example: "The low thermometer to-day, for instance, is supposed to come from something called the 'climate.' Climate is really only the name for a certain group of days, but it is treated as if it lay *behind* the day, and in general we place the name, as if it were a being, behind the facts it is a name of" [P, 46].¹

James then explores various contexts in which the concept "substance" is employed. His initial example is the Eucharist, and his account can seem hard to fit in with the position he takes with some of his other cases. I think it may be easier to understand his treatment of the Eucharist if we return to it after examining the subsequent examples. Following his discussion of the Eucharist, James turns his attention to Berkeley's arguments against postulating material substance. On James's reading, Berkeley does not deny that there is an external world. Berkeley's aim is to challenge the idea that there is something lying behind all the attributes experience can reveal. James, like Peirce, sees Berkeley employing the pragmatic method to dismiss this claim. Berkeley's argument is that no discernible differences in the consequences flow from countenancing such mysterious, inaccessible stuff. Positing material substance does not advance understanding or offer additional explanatory or predictive power. It is not a useful abstraction or idealization. It leads to confusion, not the simplification or enrichment of theory.

James maintains that Locke and Hume, arguing along similar lines, show that there is nothing gained by postulating spiritual substance. Doing so has no empirical consequences and, pragmatically speaking, has no implications for the study of mind and personal identity. There is no work for the "spirit" to do. James admits that, although Locke's analysis undermines the significance of spiritual substance, Locke himself did not draw this conclusion. Hume did.

According to James, the rejection of substance raises problems for both empiricists and rationalists. Tough-minded empiricists espouse a "nothing but" position. There are only physical objects and their physical properties. The goal of science is to find the laws of nature that properly describe the physical world in strictly materialist terms. Accordingly, proponents of this "philosophy" go on to argue that mental states and mental phenomena must be conceived in a way that does not appeal to anything non-material. James thinks it unlikely that mentalist concepts and talk can in fact be reduced to a materialist base. In any case, he argues there is no warrant to assume a priori that it can or to assume that it is a postulate of empirical

inquiry. James also believes that when reductive materialism is coupled with determinist laws of nature it becomes impossible to accommodate satisfactorily the idea of free human actions. For these positions, when combined, imply that we live in what he calls a “block universe,” and in such a universe James maintains there could not be the sort of free will he wishes to defend.

Rationalists too find the tough-minded empiricists’ “nothing but matter” view of mind unacceptable. They believe it supports a repugnant view of the human condition. By reducing all that is human to crude matter, it distorts human nature and diminishes the status of humanity. Thought and action can ascend no higher than the laws of nature permit and predetermine. Mind does not soar above the physical fray; it is crassly mired in it. Rationalists are sure, however, that the movements of crude matter cannot explain the wonders of human life and experience. The mental cannot be reduced to the material. Hence the rationalists reject the empiricist thesis that the laws of matter are all that matter.

Instead, they put mind and rational principles in charge. Spirit dominates the merely physical and holds a higher, not subservient, place in the order of things. James argues that when conceived in terms of higher versus lower “Being” the debate between empiricists and rationalists is idle. There is no difference in the empirical consequences entailed. Both theses make the same concrete predictions, and with a little verbal tweaking each can accommodate the other’s picture.

James next turns to discussing the status of the ideas of “God,” “intelligent design,” and “free will.” He believes these concepts play an important role in how he and many in his audience attempt to deal with troubling meaning-of-life questions. Thus he is unwilling to abandon these concepts as his tough-minded empiricist colleagues urge. He also believes that a pragmatic analysis provides a tenable rationale for holding onto them. James’s attempt to deal with these issues is a central theme of *Pragmatism*, but his positions and arguments are not always clear or consistent. In addition, they are the hardest to fit in comfortably with the Pragmatists’ basic account of empirical inquiry. In what follows I will make an effort both to clarify James’s ideas and to explore how best to accommodate his position within the general pragmatic framework.

James’s themes and arguments in Lecture III are quite close to those he presents in earlier works such as “The Sentiments of Rationality” [WB, 63–110] and “The Will to Believe” [WB, 1–31]. He nowhere turns his back on science or the scientific method. Empirically established beliefs should

be controlling and should override beliefs that conflict with them. With little defense, James dismisses biblical treatments of God, since he thinks they are not compatible with scientific fact. He does not claim, however, that the biblical claims are meaningless. We understand how events are supposed to have happened according to the Bible. Taken literally, James claims these stories are simply false.

If continued talk of God is to be of any use, it must not entail anything about the past that does not accord with science: "It makes not a single jot of difference so far as the *past* of the world goes, whether we deem it to have been the work of matter or whether we think a divine spirit was its author" [P, 50]. Any legitimate God hypothesis must be compatible with what science tells us about what took place and why. The warranted explanations of science are controlling, and since today's future will become tomorrow's past, the picture science paints must prevail. Positing God does not add anything of explanatory significance to the accounts of the past that science offers. Claims that God was responsible for this or that happening have no independent empirical import. Although James does not raise the issue in this lecture, it is also the case that any God hypothesis must accord with objectively established predictions. We should accept what scientific inquiry warrants us to believe about the future empirical facts. He gives the impression that the only wiggle room for religious belief lies in the area where science does not take a stand.² Thus James argues that the only possible rationale for God talk lies in the consequences it may have for the future actions of those who adopt a God hypothesis. If we wish to breathe life into God, a conciliatory strategy must be adopted.

One such strategy might be to reinterpret the biblical accounts so that they jibe with the findings of science. For example, some theists today accept science's dating of the universe's age. They square things with the Bible by making up a story about the seven days God spent creating the universe. God's "days" are not 24-hour ones; they are equivalent to millions of years of human time. Reinterpreting the span of the Bible's "day" makes it possible for these theists to avoid conflict with the dating that science proposes. Likewise, reinterpretations are offered to square the claims of religion with the theory of evolution. But such reinterpretations have no epistemic significance. Trivially, it is always possible to introduce ad hoc hypotheses that have no empirical consequences beyond those of the theory on which they are tacked. The scientific method does not approve of such behavior. Occam's Razor and values of simplicity and systematization require eliminating such additions.

From the standpoint of the Pragmatic Maxim it would seem then that positing God has nothing important to offer. It is a redundancy. The religious hypotheses we are entitled to believe must not conflict with or have consequences that outrun established scientific knowledge. James agrees, but remember that he also holds that hypotheses with the same empirical consequences need not constitute the same belief. For psychological purposes beliefs can be individuated more narrowly. The differences show up in one's attitudes toward the world and in the actions that follow from these attitudes. For many of religious temperament the scientific picture of a determinist, entropic world engenders a depressing pessimism. Adopting a God hypothesis makes it possible for them to find meaning and purpose in their lives. James's own battles with depression are often attributed to the difficulty he faced squaring acceptance of science with the meaning of life problems it forced him to confront.

James says that Arthur Balfour expresses this dark view of the future better than he can, and quotes from his *Foundations of Belief*:

"The energies of our system will decay, the glory of the sun will be dimmed, and the earth, tideless and inert, will no longer tolerate the race which for a moment disturbed its solitude. Man will go down into a pit, and all his thoughts will perish . . . 'Imperishable monuments' and 'immortal deeds,' death itself, and love stronger than death, will be as if it had not been. Nor will anything that is, be better or worse for all that the labor, genius, devotion and suffering of man have striven through countless ages to effect." [P, 54]

The universe proceeds according to the laws of matter, and considerations of entropy indicate it will end in disarray. Eventually all we do or strive to do will be for naught; everything we have accomplished will unravel. In the larger scheme of things, our scientific, artistic, moral, and mundane efforts to make lasting contributions to the world will ultimately amount to nothing. James believes that, for people like himself, positing God allows them to adopt a more optimistic attitude. It gives them confidence that things need not turn out to be as bad as Balfour predicts. It allows them to think that they can accomplish something of real significance and that what they accomplish will last. Such faith in the possibility of better things to come makes it possible for them to engage in meliorist projects.

James says that for him the sole meaning of his concept "God" is the promise of a brighter future. The biblical stories of God's doings are not

to be believed, and God is not a being to be worshipped. For all intents and purposes the only justification for belief in God is that it encourages a more positive outlook toward the future. It holds out the promise that one's projects and accomplishments are not in vain. For those of a spiritual temperament, it helps motivate and give meaning to their lives. Feeling a sense of connection with, not alienation from, the universe is mentally healthy. It is better in the way of belief. This optimism, however, is only an optimism of possibilities. James is not predicting that the future will necessarily be better. We do not live in the best of all possible worlds. And James does not claim that we have evidence that the future will turn out for the best or even be better. Nonetheless, as James sees it, the possibilities are not merely logical possibilities. James wishes to promote meliorist attitudes. And he is convinced that if people work to improve the human condition there is no reason to rule out in advance their chances of success.

James realizes that many people see things differently. The prospect of eventual entropic chaos is not a worry. It does not make them gloomy, or if it does they seek ways to cope and to engage life that do not depend on any belief in God.³ Those who do find solace in James's religious hypothesis, moreover, must remain open to the idea that future inquiry may undercut their faith. "The exact features of the saving future that our belief in God insures will have to be ciphered out by the interminable methods of science" [P, 56]. "The truth of 'God' has to run the gauntlet of all our other truths" [P, 56]. A conception of God that is incompatible with the facts established by empirical inquiry cannot stand. When conflicts occur the only escape for those harboring religious sentiments is to devise a new conception of God that does fit with these truths. The concept of "God" is no more set in stone than the concepts of science. It evolves with experience and inquiry.

James believes that the rationalists' Absolute does not provide benefits comparable to those his own God hypothesis allows. The posited Absolute is too far removed from actual life to make a difference, and it can promote an unworldliness that leads to indifference. It can stand in the way of becoming engaged in meliorist undertakings. The most positive thing James has to say about the Absolute is that for some people it allows them to take "moral holidays." It gives them faith that they can on occasion shirk their responsibilities and not feel guilty. It is morally OK, for instance, to absent oneself every now and then from a hospital vigil or from work to overcome poverty in order to recharge one's batteries. James approves of moral holidays, but he argues there is no need to accept the Absolute in

order to take them. Pragmatists too can “grant ourselves moral holidays, they can only be provisional breathing spells, intended to refresh for morrow’s fight” [“The Absolute and the Strenuous Life,” in *MT*, 290].

James’s attempt to deal with intelligent design has much the same flavor as his effort to deal with the question of God. Right off, he claims, the standard argument from design has formal flaws. More significantly, Darwin’s theory of evolution has to be accepted. Science says this is how species came about, and there is no reason not to trust science. Postulating design or a designer does not provide any further insight into or understanding of the past. No matter how things have turned out, for better or for worse, defenders of design will be forced to accommodate. Design talk about the past is no substitute for the theory of evolution. It is explanatorily superfluous and, taken literally, it is false. We are not justified in believing claims about the origin of species that go beyond what the theory of evolution warrants. And again, since today’s future is tomorrow’s past, the scientific version must in the end prevail.

The difference between adopting design talk versus science talk can lie only in the difference it may have on one’s attitudes toward the future. For James, design talk, like God talk, enables those of a religious temperament to be more optimistic than is otherwise possible. It offers a vague cosmic confidence in the path evolution might take. It cannot and should not pretend to offer more, and future inquiry may show the optimism to be misplaced. Then belief in design would have to be given up or reinterpreted to accommodate the findings.

James’s discussion of “free will” takes a similar form. The past is what it is, and we should believe whatever science reports it to be and how it came about. The only advantage gained by accepting a free will hypothesis stems from the influence such a belief may have on attitudes toward the future. All positions on “free will” must make peace with established empirical facts and explanations of the past. They cannot be incompatible with the laws of nature sound inquiry reveals. James notes, as others have, that the main interest in free will is due to the implications the idea is taken to have in assessing human responsibility. We do not hold persons morally responsible if they have no free will in acting. Such assessments of responsibility do have concrete consequences for legal and moral practices. James doubts, though, that any significant difference in practice actually follows from the adoption of any of the standard competing positions on free will. In practice, hard determinists, compatibilists, and libertarians tend to treat a person’s actions as much the same.

Still, the idea that every single decision we make and every activity we undertake are fully determined by states and events of the world in the distant past is hard for most people to accept. We are convinced that in some sense what we do is up to us, and that we do not live in a block universe. How else would it be possible for us introduce spontaneity and novelty into the course of events? Even today many thoughtful people who see no bleak prospects in a world without God and reject design remain troubled by the thought that everything they do has been determined by the state of the universe long before they were born. The problem of free will is a worry not only for the tender-minded; it disturbs many of tough-minded temperament.

As long as the concept has real work to do, intuitions and debates over the existence of free will are unlikely to go away. People of tough and tender temperaments will search for ways to adjust or reinterpret their understandings of “determinism,” “responsibility,” and “motivation” to accommodate accepted legal and moral practices. Hard determinists will go one way, compatibilists another and libertarians a third. When pressed by facts they cannot ignore, each side will attempt to reconceptualize their analyses to fit both the evidence and the intuitions they are not prepared to give up. Temperamental differences will have a significant influence on which strategy one adopts.

James believes we do have free will in a substantive sense, but that none of the standard positions solves the problem. There are downsides to them all. In particular, James is worried that all three positions fail to provide sufficient room for novelty and in so doing hamper engagement in meliorist projects. Hard determinism promotes a pessimistic attitude. In a block universe people might very well feel that they can ignore the trials and tribulations of their fellow beings and not attempt to help. What’s the point? The laws of nature are responsible for determining how things go for better or for worse. James notes that a fatalist outlook would be less troubling if the past had been good, and we can expect beneficial outcomes to continue without our help. The problem is no uniformity of prevailing goodness is to be found in the evidence of the past.

James, like many others, feels that compatibilism does not in the long run remove the sting of the dilemma of determinism. He thinks its solution does not actually confront the real issue. Libertarianism too is not an answer, because on its account free will floats so free of the world that it eliminates responsibility. James’s own position is that we do not live in a block universe, and that we do have genuine options.

James does not deny that many people can live with the idea that all their decisions are determined without seeing their actions to be pointless. Nor does their meliorist motivation flag. There are hard determinists who are not depressed and who do good deeds. There are compatibilists who see no difficulty accepting both determinism and free will, and lead happy, productive lives. And libertarians too can be happy and productive. James, then, seems willing to admit that the help he offers is only for those who cannot find peace of mind in a block universe and need a mental crutch. James returns to the issue of free will in Lecture VIII.

I think we are now in a better position to understand James's somewhat puzzling claims about the Eucharist. The Eucharist is also one of the examples Peirce discusses in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," and there is a difference in the way he and James treat the topic. According to Peirce, the Protestants are merely speaking metaphorically when they say that the elements of the sacrament are flesh and blood. By contrast, the Catholics maintain that the wafer and wine are literally flesh and blood. The latter, Peirce argues, is "senseless jargon" since there can be no difference in the physical wafer and wine that can show up in sense experience. Taken literally, the Catholics' position does not survive application of the Pragmatic Maxim. What's more, to the extent that both religious hypotheses jibe with science they are the same belief in terms of their scientific content.⁴

Peirce, like James, admits that there are differences in mental attitude that depend on which characterization of the facts is adopted. But for him these differences in the tone, emotion, personal feelings, and action are not scientific or intellectual differences. They are not constitutive of the hypothesis' or belief's empirical content: "No mere difference in manner of consciousness can make them different beliefs."⁵

James's account of the Eucharist differs from Peirce's. James analyses the situation from a psychological standpoint. He is concerned with the mental states of individuals and how they affect action. James agrees with Peirce that as far as the physical manifestations of the material wafer and wine are the issue, there is no difference between the Protestant, Catholic, and scientific hypotheses. The empirical predictions about the sacraments will be the same for those who believe in the actual presence of Jesus and those who take the Eucharist as merely a metaphor. And neither version will be justified if it conflicts with facts established by empirical inquiry.

Nevertheless, for James these beliefs are not the same. The differences show up in people's religious attitudes, practices, and actions. In applying the Pragmatic Maxim James includes such consequences as part or consti-

tutive of the content of a belief. As noted above, Peirce and James often adopt different criteria for individuating beliefs. Yet in the end the difference in how they treat the Eucharist may be a case where, as Peirce says, he and James diverge theoretically but the difference may be “evanescent in practice.”

James’s adoption of a narrow criterion of belief individuation can make it seem that in discussing the Eucharist he is less dismissive of the idea of “substance” than he is when discussing its use in scientific and philosophic contexts. I think James’s argument goes the other way. As he says, the Catholic’s literal belief that the eucharistic elements are the body of Jesus presupposes that the accessible properties or attributes of the wafer are separable and distinct from its underlying substance. But there is no empirical justification for positing such an entity. The Catholic belief in the Eucharist conflicts with science’s rejection of the idea of “substance.” Their religious hypothesis is not objectively warranted and hence in that sense not *good* in the way of belief. James thinks his own “metaphysical” posits of “God,” “design,” and “free will” are scientifically unproblematic, and for many adopting them can result in good consequences. They may promote mental health, encourage engagement with the world, and motivate meliorist action.

James allows that theists may rightly think of him as an atheist. He rejects their God. In retrospect, I think James’s account of the nature of religious beliefs would undoubtedly have fared better in the generations to come if he had not used the term “God” in expressing his position. On the other hand, his doing so does fit with his views on the development and function of concepts. All concepts must adjust to the realities if they are to endure, and the Judeo-Christian perspective has no lock on the concept “God.” History and James’s own study of the varieties of religious experience show that the notion “God” is not univocal. The Western theist’s concept is no less parochial than those found in the practices of other cultures, and it too has evolved over the ages.

In Lecture III James demonstrates the application of the Pragmatic Maxim to metaphysical problems and in the process reveals several key features of his understanding of the pragmatic method. James is no verificationist, and the Pragmatic Maxim is not meant to distinguish meaningful concepts and discourse from meaningless concepts and discourse. Biblical beliefs about God or the Eucharist are not meaningless. We understand what they claim, and objective inquiry renders them no longer plausible. Religious beliefs about intelligent design can be understood, but these

claims do not compete satisfactorily with the theory of evolution. And belief in free will can be justified only if there is reason to believe that we do not live in a block universe. Like the concepts of science, if the ideas of "God," "design," and "free will" are to survive they must be plastic and responsive to the findings of inquiry. James is a pragmatist and a fallibilist, and there is no guarantee his or anyone else's metaphysical beliefs will be eternally useful. These concepts, like all others, cannot be static; they must be able to adjust to the times or die.

I find James's handling of all these "meaning of life" questions problematic in places, and my attempt to reconcile his position with those of Dewey and other pragmatic accounts of inquiry will have to await further elaboration of his position. I will return specifically to James's religious hypothesis in my comments on Lecture VIII (see Chapter 8). To set the stage for later elaboration, it will suffice to indicate some difficulties that arise in his treatment of the problems posed by the laws of entropy.

For the Pragmatists, beliefs are forward-looking. It is not enough that they accord with the past; they should provide useful information about the future. And sound, warranted predictions must be based on empirical inquiry. Hence if the science of James's day provided justification for belief in entropy and its bothersome implications of ultimate chaos, he has no epistemic grounds to reject these predictions. Personal preferences, mental health needs, and feelings of satisfaction do not justify belief in hypotheses science finds wanting. So if science has actually ciphered the future course of the universe and it is not of the saving kind James invokes, his optimism would appear unwarranted.

James cannot avoid this problem by citing the possibility that science may change its understanding of entropy or come to reject the entropic hypothesis. That could be said of any hypothesis; no hypothesis is certain. Alternatively, James might attempt to avoid the difficulty by claiming that the evidence available provides inadequate support for the entropic predictions. Or he could argue that the predicted consequences of chaos should not bother us. In *Pragmatism* James does not offer any serious challenge to the accepted scientific theory of entropy, nor does he argue that there is no reason to be pessimistic living in a universe that will come to an inglorious end. The out he takes in *Pragmatism* can seem like an act of desperation: "A world with God in it to say the last word, may indeed burn up or freeze, but we then think of him still mindful of the old ideals and sure to bring them elsewhere to fruition . . . shipwreck and desolation [are] not the absolutely final things" [P, 55].⁶

James may more readily avoid direct conflict with science in the case of design and evolution. Although science tells us to reject biblical creation stories and accept Darwin, the theory of evolution does not enable us to predict what course evolution will take. It does not tell us if the human species will progress, thrive, or die out. For all we know we may evolve in monstrous ways or encounter new conditions that challenge the continuation of human life as we know it. Still, the theory of evolution does not preclude the possibility of improvement in the human condition.

Critics of James's God, design, and free will theses often argue that all he shows is that we may legitimately have hopes for an improving future. He has not shown that we can have legitimately justified beliefs. After all, we can hope for things that we firmly believe will not come true. I think James is aware of this distinction and accepts it. It is difficult, however, to appreciate his response to the claim that he conflates belief and hope without a more detailed examination of the theory of truth he elaborates in subsequent lectures.

In sum, James's adoption of the Pragmatic Maxim leads him to adopt both meaning and epistemological holism. Concepts and language are instruments for organizing and dealing with experience, and they evolve along with the theories in which they are embedded. In serious inquiry, when a concept is not working satisfactorily it must be reinterpreted or fade from serious use. Empirical meanings are not stable. The concepts "God," "design," and "free will" are no exceptions, and should empirical inquiry challenge them they must adjust or be abandoned. The tough-minded are inclined to let them die. They find no need for James's posits in the practices of science. These concepts are misleading, and there is no rationale for saving them. James disagrees. For some people *how* facts are described does matter.

Consider, for example, an eight-ounce cup containing four ounces of water. It can be correctly said to be both half full and half empty. In this case there are no past, present, or future differences between the two hypotheses in terms of their empirical consequences. Epistemically, one description is as good as the other. Nevertheless, there can be concrete differences in thought and behavior that depend on which description temperament leads one to employ. A half-full cup is an optimistic view, and a half-empty cup is a pessimistic assessment. Being optimistic rather than pessimistic can affect one's mental health and outlook on life. So it can make a difference pragmatically which characterization one favors. Of course, for many people the different formulations will make for no

difference in their attitudes. They have no reason to prefer one to the other. The facts are the facts. For others there can be a rational reason to choose between them when considerations of motivation and mental health are taken into account. At the same time, optimists have no justification for believing the cup contains more than four ounces and the pessimist no justification for believing it has less.⁷

James, nevertheless, is adamant that there is a crucial difference between satisfying personal needs and satisfying the usual epistemic requirements of inquiry. The latter are what insure objectivity. Of course, evidence and reason are not the only factors that have a legitimate role in the fixation of beliefs. In both pure science and sound everyday inquiry, values, temperament, and taste exert a significant influence on decisions. As James says in Lecture VI:

Our theories are wedged and controlled as nothing else is. Yet sometimes alternative theoretic formulas are equally compatible with all the truths we know, and then we choose between them for subjective reasons. We choose the kind of theory to which we are already partial, we follow “elegance” or “economy” . . . but consistency both with previous truth and with novel fact is always the most imperious claimant. [P, 104]

By contrast, the influences of more personal satisfactions – political allegiances, traditional religious convictions, and the quest for glory or money – do distort objective inquiry. The scientific method attempts to prevent them from intruding. To the extent that there is a legitimate place for personal satisfactions to exert themselves, they must do so after empirical inquiry has done its job.

No tender-minded traditionalist will find James’s treatment of the metaphysical ideas of “God,” “design,” and “free will” satisfactory. Nor will many traditionalists be pleased by James’s claim that a conception of God is beholden to and constrained by the demands of science. Tough-minded critics, too, will not be enthusiastic about James’s position. They think that James’s willingness to tolerate old-fashioned religious ideas and terminology muddies the waters. It gives comfort to their tender-minded enemies who think knowledge can be gained via non-empirical means. The “toughs” also think that James unnecessarily opens space for believers to assume that biblical writings have something substantive to say about the world of experience. This makes it more difficult for them to face up to the realities and challenges that science presents for religion.

Nowadays those harboring tough-minded sentiments are likely to feel that the worries that motivate Lecture III and indeed much of James's project are passé, and his efforts to confront them of no significance. I do not wish to deny that his attempts to revive God are a throwback. Dewey certainly saw no need to follow James's path. Still, Dewey felt it important to address the tender-minded's meaning-of-life worries and the human need to seek solace in spirituality and community. And he does so in his book *Common Faith*.⁸

Times have changed, but James and Balfour's fears and uneasiness persist. They are nicely echoed in a recent book by Julian Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened Of*. Rather than attempt to summarize Barnes's thought, I will excerpt sections of a review that appeared in the *New York Times*:

Religious faith is not an option. "I had no faith to lose." . . .

So Barnes turns toward the strict regime of science and here is little comfort indeed. We are all dying. Even the sun is dying. Homo sapiens is evolving toward some species that won't care about us whatsoever and our art and literature and scholarship will fall into oblivion. Every author will eventually become an unread author. And then humanity will die out and beetles will rule the world. A man can fear his own death but what is he anyway? Simply a mass of neurons. The brain is a lump of meat and the soul is merely "a story the brain tells itself." Individuality is an illusion. Scientists find no physical evidence of "self" – it is something we've talked ourselves into. We do not produce thoughts, thoughts produce us. "The 'I' of which we are so fond properly exists only in grammar." Stripped of the Christian narrative, we gaze out on a landscape that while fascinating, offers nothing that one could call Hope. "There is no separation between 'us' and the universe." We are simply matter, stuff. "Individualism – the triumph of free-thinking artists and scientists – has led to a state of self-awareness in which we can now view ourselves as units of genetic obedience."⁹

Notes

- 1 It should be noted that although Peirce too wished to reject substance and other questionable metaphysical posits, he dismisses James's version of nominalism.
- 2 I take up this matter again in my discussion of Lecture VIII. Surely in papers such as "Is Life Worth Living?" [WB, 32–62] and "Human Immortality" [WB, Addendum 1–45], as well as in numerous remarks elsewhere, there is evidence

that James played somewhat fast and loose with the constraints science actually put on his speculations about the future.

- 3 Problematically, he suggests that those who feel this way are somehow shallow, but he offers no real justification for the claim. More importantly, as I will argue in Lecture VIII, James's own need for a firmer foundation is itself on shaky pragmatic grounds.
- 4 "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 1, ed. N. Houser and C. Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 131–132.
- 5 Peirce's views of religion and religious belief are complex. There is controversy over how to interpret them and what role they play in his philosophy. I do not intend to take a stance on these matters. Nonetheless, it is clear that Peirce was a believer and thought his beliefs were compatible with science. See C. S. Peirce, "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God," in *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 2: 1893–1913, ed. The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 434–450. See also M. Murphey, *The Development of Peirce's Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).
- 6 Likewise, in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: New American Library, 1958) James suggests that even if our world spins out in chaos, his belief in God allows for the possibility that things may in the end right themselves in another world. Also see S. Hook, *The Metaphysics of Pragmatism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996), 98ff. for an attempt to spell out how the problem of entropy might be handled by Dewey.
- 7 This analogy does not fully match up with James's idea. This matter will be further discussed in my treatment of Lecture VIII.
- 8 J. Dewey, *Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934).
- 9 G. Keillor, "Dying of the Light" [review of Julian Barnes's *Nothing to be Frightened Of*], *New York Times* (Oct. 3, 2008). The quotations in the extract are from Barnes's book.

Materialism, Physicalism, and Reduction (Lecture IV)

James begins Lecture IV restating, not defending, ideas and views expressed in the previous lecture. He says that the metaphysical beliefs discussed there “have for their sole meaning a better promise as to this world’s outcome” [P, 63]. “Be they false or be they true the meaning of them is meliorism” [P, 63]. These metaphysical beliefs do not tell us anything about the sensible world beyond what science and empirical inquiry discloses. The concepts “God,” “design,” and “free will” are abstract ideas that express ideals. Unlike scientific idealizations, however, they do not help systematize and simplify theory. Instead, they shape our outlook on established facts and give them a meliorist “spin.” This, however, does not give them a free ride.

The metaphysical beliefs of James, as a thoroughgoing fallibilist, are not permanently secure. If inquiry shows that an optimistic conception of a “better worldly outcome” fails to do justice to the realities of experience, James admits he would have to adjust. If the optimistic interpretation does not lead to mental health, commitment to meliorist projects, and other worthy satisfactions there is also no reason to adopt it. Finally, should inquiry show that the empirical “facts” that have been read optimistically are not facts at all, it would be pointless to continue seeking meliorist interpretations of them.

James does not deny that positing the Absolute can also have some beneficial effects (i.e., allowing moral holidays), but he thinks it is not a good idealization. It cannot compete and survive in the sensible world, and it often promotes an aloofness from the world that goes against the spirit

of meliorism. On the other hand, James believes that his own metaphysical beliefs are not challenged by experience and do support meliorist attitudes. Thus he argues that one has the *right* to take meliorist satisfactions into account in determining how the empirical facts are to be characterized.

James turns next to the main topic of this lecture, the application of the pragmatic method to the problem of the One and the many. He notes that this problem is unlikely to be on the minds of the non-philosophers in the audience. Nonetheless, it is perhaps “the most central of all philosophic problems” [P, 64]. James suggests that those of rationalist temperament tend to favor the One, while those of empiricist temperament tend to favor the many. He thinks that in spite of this significant difference between them, both positions turn out in the end to be problematic monist doctrines.

Before undertaking his analysis of the issue James offers a brief diagnosis of why the One/many problem has been so intractable. He believes that philosophers are overly fascinated with dichotomies. Everything must be black or white. There are typically only two sides to every story: only one side can be correct and philosophers must determine which is the objectively correct one. “‘The world is one – the formula may become a sort of number worship . . . but why is ‘one’ more excellent than ‘forty-three,’ or than ‘two million and ten?’” [P, 65].¹

James, and more so Dewey, hold that many of philosophy’s enduring problems are foisted upon us by seeing the world through dualist lenses – mind/body, fact/value, is/ought, analytic/synthetic, essential properties/contingent properties, realist/anti-realist, and so on. In numerous works they both argue that these dichotomies are artificial. Not only is it impossible to extricate the two sides from each other, but there are usually more than the two approaches worth considering. Unfortunately, once debates are framed in strictly dualist terms the problems become intractable, and studies of whatever genuine issues may remain are stymied. A major reason so many traditional philosophical controversies do not and will not go away is because the best ways to deal with them do not fit comfortably within the dualist options on offer. As a result, solutions that cannot be so pigeon-holed are rejected with little argument or dismissed as irrelevant. It is said that they either ignore the philosophically “deep” problems entirely, or are uninteresting since they fail to indicate which of the two possible options is correct.

The dispute over the One and the many is a case in point. James argues that there are no grounds for making the dualist assumptions that sustain

the controversy. He is aware that the pluralist approach he will defend goes against the philosophical grain. Pluralism is not even in the running as a solution, since it challenges the dualist assumptions that set up the problem in the first place.²

James begins his discussion of the One/many controversy expressing qualms about the very meaning of the terms in which the problem is couched. "The world is One – yes but *how* one? What is the practical oneness for *us*?" [P, 64–65]. In an effort to clarify matters, James offers eight interpretations of the supposed distinction then prevalent in the literature. He believes that when the ideas of the "One" and "many" are made precise and given substantive, strong readings, the claims of both parties to the debate are implausible. Alternatively, when they are given weaker readings the positions are not actually in conflict. The predicted consequences that follow from adopting them are the same. There is no need to choose between them, since nothing is at stake pragmatically.

Some of James's discussions of the One/many problem now seem out-dated. Some remain relevant to issues of current controversy, albeit the terminology and formulations of the positions have changed. I will focus on those issues still in vogue, particularly the realist theses associated with doctrines of materialism, physicalism, naturalism, supervenience, and metaphysical simples. For this limited purpose I do not think it necessary to examine each of James's eight interpretations or discuss them in the order in which they are presented.³

James admits that the rationalist notion of the One presents a pleasing, seemingly tidy picture of the state of things. The world is a unified, complete whole: it is one great fact. James argues, nonetheless, that attractive as this view may be it is untenable. It leaves inquiry with nowhere to go. The rationalists' one-great-fact premise by itself cannot entail other facts. It cannot yield information about the details of the sensible world we wish to describe, explain, and predict. Until conceptual boundaries are drawn within the whole, the inferential tools linking this singular fact to the rest of the facts are unavailable. Inferential relations depend on conceptually breaking the whole into pieces and placing the pieces under sets of related general terms or ideas. Without schemes for dividing the One into categories, the rules of logic cannot be applied, and inferential travel between the whole and its parts and between the parts is not possible. Hence there is no way appeal to the One itself can offer explanations, predictions, and theories for navigating the intellectual and physical environment. The splendid One remains in splendid isolation. For inquiry to progress the

One must be divided by concepts; otherwise it will have no useful link to the sensible world and no work to do.

Empiricism is in somewhat better shape. Empiricists do not premise an undifferentiated One. They insist that any proposed starting point be rooted in and explain the details of the sensible world. They tend to assume, however, that there must be some metaphysical or epistemic basic “things” that are constitutive of the world, and everything must be made of, reducible to, and/or explainable in terms of them. The empiricists do not claim that the foundational thing is “substance” – material stuff that is independent of all the properties attributed to it – but they do assume that one description of the world is privileged. Everything that is ontologically real is constituted or at least explained by the items so described. In this sense, tough-minded empiricists too are monists, and their “nothing but” monism runs into difficulties comparable to those confronting rationalist monism.

To make sense of the world we must construct theories, and theories depend on inference to get from here to there. Inference requires grouping things into kinds. Whether the foundational “atoms” are phenomenal or physical, microscopically small or big enough to see, it is not enough to posit only basic objects. The empiricist single generic kind, like the rationalist One, is isolated. Explanation and prediction require uniting members of the kind into categories that can be related one to the other. Otherwise the tools of logic are not applicable, and travel between parts and the whole or among the parts is again blocked. Therefore James concludes that adopting either an absolutist rationalist or empiricist view of a unique epistemic or metaphysical starting point is an error. By themselves each lacks the means to provide insight and understanding of the sensible world.

James goes on to note that proponents of both positions accept the dualist assumptions that underlie the One/many dichotomy. They presume that one of them must be right, for they see no other options. The rationalists, and in a sense the empiricists too, claim the world is one. Each posits metaphysical primitives – the totalized One or the atomic elements. These are said to be the ultimate constituents of Reality. They are the foundational facts that make up the world, as it is given or ready-made. James does not object to talk about “Reality” or “the world,” in everyday contexts. He argues instead that such verbiage has no significant implications for the practices of serious inquiry. The issue is not whether there is something we can call “Reality” or “the world”; his point is that there is no single characterization and organization of experience that is privileged: “Yes the world is One but *how?*” James argues there are many different and equally good ways the

world can be thought of as One, "But an infinite heterogeneity among things exist alongside whatever likeness of kind we discover; and our world appears no more distinctly a One than as a Many, from [a] generic point of view" [*SPP*, 128].

As just discussed, the rationalists and the empiricists must move off their starting places and develop richer, more refined sets of concepts to advance inquiry. If they are to do any work, both the solidified rationalist totality and the empiricist atoms have to be organized and categorized under an array of concepts. The former must split the One into useful pieces; the latter must bring together and group the primitive atoms. These organizational schemes are not found or discovered in the world. They must be forged in inquiry, and they will each have to be constructed to fit the tasks on hand. We construct concepts and fix their boundaries to meet the evolving demands of experience. In different contexts different starting points may work best. There is nothing special about theories that begin with the One versus those that begin with the many or for that matter *anything* in between. All successful theories can with equal justice be said to describe the world, and none has pride of place. James is a pluralist, and for him the items posited by any true theory, observable or theoretical, are as real as those posited by any other true theory.

While he is critical of both the rationalists and the empiricists, James says that each of these distinct monist tendencies does point to something significant. Each reflects impulses that are important features of good inquiry. In Chapter 1, I discussed why and how James argues that belief is not fixed by evidence and logic alone. Values play an ineliminable role. In Lecture IV James explains that unification is prominent among these values. The more phenomena that can be housed under one roof the better. Rationalist monism reflects this aim. By contrast, empiricist monism welcomes variety. It recognizes that in order to gain explanatory and predictive insight it is often necessary to begin with facts and theories of narrow scope. Empiricism prizes and is at home with a multiplicity of detail. James maintains that productive inquiry both unifies and divides, and it is a mistake to think the fruits of one are primary or more significant than the fruits of the other. James's pluralism reflects the important role these rationalist and empiricist values play in actual empirical inquiry.

Like the demands of credibility and scope, the demands of unification and detail push in opposite directions. Systematization is the overarching value. It is indispensable for serious thought. "Curiosity runs on all fours with the systematizing passion" [*P*, 65]. Typically, systematization requires

compromises. Tradeoffs have to be made between rationalist and empiricist pressures, and there may not be a single correct compromise to make. To assume that one value or set of values and weightings must always win out distorts how values function in inquiry and how beliefs actually become fixed.

In support of his analysis, James offers the example of the ongoing debates over whether the world is continuous or discrete. The rationalists claim that the world is one “continuous” whole. The empiricists counter that the world is a whole of “discrete” entities. James holds the dichotomy that underlies this debate is pointless. The world is both continuous and discrete. Some sciences find it profitable to adopt a continuous scheme; others find discrete schemes are better suited to the problems they wish to solve. Both continuous and discrete schemes of organization are useful. Neither can be said to describe the world *tout court* or to describe *the* world as it is given ready-made, for the very idea lacks empirical content.

There is no sense to claims that Reality comes primordially in continuous rather than discrete packages. It just *is*, and it does not announce *what* it is. Experience is organized with the aid of concepts that suit our cognitive and non-cognitive needs and curiosities. Some useful theories adopt continuous schemes; others find it profitable to adopt discrete schemes. Theories do not, nor can they correspond to preexisting boundaries or natural kinds sanctioned by God or nature, for there are none. As long as a categorization scheme helps us to cope with experience, it can be taken on board and added to our armament of intellectual instruments.

Discrete and continuous theories and the states, events, and objects they postulate are equally real. If a supervenience relation is discovered, it should be seen as just another fact about the world. That all physical things are composed of atoms or strings or some other substance may be true, but their being so is not a metaphysical, epistemic, or ontological precondition of objective inquiry. The assumption that in inquiry there are epistemic or metaphysically prior starting points leads only to fruitless searches, unproductive controversies, and unmotivated bogus philosophical projects that the pluralist would have us avoid. The terms and objects taken as primitive in one system will be defined and constructed in another. All systems must have primitives, but there is no single set of primitives that all systems must have.

Although James always identifies himself as an empiricist, he opposes positivist versions of empiricism that are committed a priori to reductive materialism. These empiricists tend to privilege one science, normally

physics, and the entities it postulates. They hold that these entities are the “really” real. James allows that when and where reduction is possible unification is fine and is to be valued. It would be nice if everything could be made to fit into a single comprehensive unity-of-science picture, but it may not be possible. Experience may be resistant to reductive unifications. James, in fact, is skeptical that a grand unification is possible. Theories are geared to deal with local problems by diverse means and under diverse constraints and, as he says, they “grow in spots.” There is little justification for assuming that all theories or other forms of cognitive discourse can be housed under one roof. There is even less justification for assuming that materialist reduction is a requirement or the ultimate goal of inquiry. To make this assumption is to fall prey to unsupported metaphysical bias.

In any case, James notes that failure of reductive programs will not bring closure for many empiricist monists. They think that all it takes to proclaim oneness is to combine the diverse theories into a single grand conjunction. Then they can identify *the* World with this single, all-encompassing conjunctive fact. James sees this as an uninteresting form of unification. Simply conjoining all true theories does not add anything to inquiry that is not already there. He argues that the only significant question is whether it is possible to move from one conjunct to the next in ways that provides insight and understanding of experience. “‘The world is One,’ therefore, just so far as we conceive of it to be concatenated, one by as many definite conjunctions as appear. But then also *not* one by just as many definite *disjunctions* as we find” [P, 73]. We are best off not assuming that there is some particular number that gets it right. The world is “neither a universe pure and simple nor a multiverse pure and simple. And its various manners of being one suggest for their accurate ascertainment, so many distinct programs of scientific work” [P, 73].

James thinks that a major reason for the unwillingness to consider, let alone accept his pluralist proposal can be traced to the prevalent practice of treating the word “World” as a name. Since it is not a vacuous name, there must be *something* it refers to. Whatever that is, is Reality, the one Reality or world to which all true beliefs and statements must correspond. James sees matters differently. There is no significant distinction between claiming that the things true theories posit are real and the claim that the real is whatever true theories posit. When the theories can be conjoined, the posited objects may be assigned to a single universe of discourse. Sometimes conjoining them provides no real gain. “They may be so unlike and

incommensurable, and so inert toward one another as never to jostle or interfere" [SPP, 125]. Advantages do accrue when the conjunction facilitates "travel from pole to pole without interruption" [SPP, 127]. In cases, though, where useful theories cannot be conjoined without contradiction, their ontologies must be housed in distinct universes of discourse. One is tempted to say that these distinct universes constitute ontologically different worlds.

James is not pushing the Cartesian line that there are two worlds, one composed of spiritual substance, the other of material substance. Nor does he rule out the possibility that there may be a supervenience relationship between useful schemes of categorization and organization. His point is that the failure to unify science or reduce the ontology of all theories to "nothing but" that of physics or some other materialist base has no disturbing or significant implications. Pluralism is not an anti-naturalist position. It only allows that nature may turn out to be best understood from many distinct perspectives.

Pluralism is itself a hypothesis that may not be correct. Only empirical inquiry can determine if it is true. James's main thesis is that there is no warrant for assuming that there are only two sides to the story and one must be correct. He is in fact convinced that we do live in a pluralist universe. There have been and are likely to be empirically justified theories that conflict and that cannot peacefully coexist. They cannot be conjoined within a single universe of discourse. "Our different purposes also are at war with each other. Where one can't crush the other out they compromise" [P, 70].

When conflict arises the best compromise, of course, would be to find some way to adjust and accept both theories without causing a loss of the explanatory and predictive power of either. Unfortunately, this often cannot be done. Removing those features of the theories responsible for the incompatibility may restore consistency; however, the cost of doing so will be steep – the loss of content. As individual theories are weakened by the excisions needed to make them compatible, their use and usefulness are diminished. The specific work they were designed to do will not get done, or will get done less satisfactorily. We will be forced to work with fewer or less robust intellectual instruments. Any gain in systemization or unification achieved by such deletions will be offset by greater losses in the scope, detail of coverage, and explanatory and predictive power. In addition, the contents jettisoned may very well be what is importantly distinctive of the theories, and what made them useful to develop in the first place.

James believes there is a better solution to the problem. It is to avoid conjoining them. Use each of the conflicting theories, but do not attempt to apply them at the same time. As noted above, this can be done formally by housing them in different universes of discourse. Consistency is restored without any real loss in coverage or explanatory and predictive capability. The only “cost” of adopting this strategy is giving up on monist doctrines, and this, James thinks, is all to the good. It is a worthwhile compromise.

For committed monists it may seem there is an alternative ploy they can adopt that will enable them to save monism. As James mentions, it is always possible to combine conflicting theories consistently by disjunction. This grand disjunctive totality might be deemed “the World,” “the whole of Being” or “Reality.” But why bother? Other than being able to claim a monist victory, nothing of significance is accomplished by disjoining them. Everything that it is important to say can be said without such a singleton Reality. What’s more, it will be necessary to dip into and assert the disjuncts separately when it comes time to employ them. The supposed unification disjunction achieves only covers up the inconsistency. On the other hand, assigning conflicting theories to different universes of discourse does not deceive. And it has the advantage of allowing us to retain the benefits of incompatible theories.⁴

James’s analysis of the One/many problem has repercussions for his conception of God. Previously, James dismisses belief in a traditional God on high who is all-knowing, a being who lays down both the laws nature follows and the moral laws humans should follow. Aiming to discover the structure and principles that God has imposed on us and nature is an empty gesture. It will get us nowhere. We are on our own in both domains. In Lecture IV James takes the claim one step further. It is not only fruitless to attempt to decipher the eternal mandates of God; it does not even make sense to try.

The most any standpoint can provide is a perspective from a given place, at a given time, for given purposes. Some perspectives are useful; some are not. Constraints on perspectives are not due to the finiteness of the human mind or to the fact that Reality lurks behind an impenetrable curtain. There simply is no coherent notion of a view having no point of view. The claim that the idea of a “god’s-eye view” is only an abstract idealization is no help, because it is not a very good one. Unlike the useful idealizations of science that build upon empirical evidence and theoretical needs, positing a special “neutral” place, attitude, or viewpoint distorts the actual practices and aims of inquiry. The idealization has no pragmatic use, and when put in play

misleads. The view from nowhere is nowhere to be found. It is a postulate with no link to the facts of actual inquiry. It is a remnant of the discredited idea that the goal of science is to formulate theories that correspond to a single, immutable, preexisting, and delineated Reality.

So for James, a theory from God's "god's-eye view" may be more comprehensive and better than any we can devise; nevertheless, it is from a perspective. There are no conceptionless theories. One might also ask why it should be presumed that God must settle on a single all-inclusive description of Reality. Might a super-intelligence find it best to employ a multitude of distinct schemes each providing true accounts. Might God too be a pluralist?

James's analysis of the One/many controversy suggests an approach to a number of current reductionist theses and realist controversies. For the Pragmatists, inquiry guided by the tenets of the scientific method *is* naturalism. Pragmatic naturalism does not demand an additional commitment to materialism, physicalism, or the elimination of the intentional. Indeed, it questions the significance and intelligibility of such projects when they are forced to confront and comprehend experience. The Pragmatists' position is to refuse to accept the dualist assumptions that enable the controversies to get off the ground. They do not claim that there are no interesting questions about consciousness, qualitative states, and the relation of the mental to the physical or to intentionality. James attempts to deal with these issues in *The Principles of Psychology* and in many of his other books and papers. The Pragmatists' complaint is that the metaphysical dualisms that underwrite these projects misconceive the nature of the genuine problems and raise others that are pragmatically or naturalistically bogus. Attempts to solve them do not clarify but mystify.

I am sure that, as in James's day, those who take metaphysics seriously will not be impressed. They will reject James's analyses outright or feel that he misunderstands the real nature of these philosophical controversies. They will insist that there is a story to tell, that it has two sides, and that only one of them can be correct. James recognizes the resistance his proposals will face. He remarks in the penultimate paragraph of Lecture IV, "absolute monism forbids [pluralism] being even considered seriously, branding it as irrational from the start" [P, 79]. I do not believe James and the other Pragmatists think they have a knockdown argument that will convince their opponents to see things their way. They expect resistance. For it is not easy to convince their critics that they have spent much time

and effort barking up the wrong tree. This may be another case where only differences in philosophic temperament serve to tip the balance.

Notes

- 1 See J. L. Austin's similar diagnoses of philosophical attitudes, "It is essential, here as elsewhere, to abandon old habits of *Gleichschaltung*, the deeply ingrained worship of tidy-looking dichotomies" (*Sense and Sensibilia* (London: Clarendon Press, 1962), 3). Likewise in his essay "Intelligent Behavior," Austin asks, "And why does the answer always turn out to be one or two, or a similar small well rounded philosophically acceptable number?" ("Intelligent Behavior," in *Ryle: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. O. Wood and G. Pitcher (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 48).
- 2 The term "pluralist" is ambiguous. Sometimes it is used to label those who favor the answer "many" as opposed to "One." When James identifies his own position as that of pluralism he means that there can be more than two options open, that more than one of the options may be acceptable, and that there may even be conflicting positions that can be legitimately adopted.
- 3 In chapters 7 and 8 of *Some Problems in Philosophy*, James provides more discussion of historical and then current conceptions of the One.
- 4 There will be more on this topic in Lecture VII.

Ontological Commitment and the Nature of the Real (Lecture V)

James begins this lecture, as others, with a brief summary of where matters had been left. He reminds the audience that the pragmatic method encourages a “let the chips fall where they may” attitude. We must “turn our face toward experience, toward ‘facts’” [P, 81]. Unconstrained relativism and wishful thinking are unwelcome intrusions and should not be permitted to influence empirical inquiry. In the previous lecture, the pragmatic method is applied to the problem of the One and the many. James finds that both the rationalists and the empiricists have things wrong. In their pure forms neither side makes much pragmatic sense. The rationalist claim that the world is inherently One is either unjustified or non-substantive. The empiricist monist assumption that there is a privileged kind of metaphysical or epistemic fundamental simple to which everything must be reduced or in terms of which everything must be explained is unjustified.

In his discussion of the One and the many James seeks to reorient conceptions of what might possibly be at stake in the controversy. Having said that he considers “it the most central of all philosophical problems” [P, 64], he attempts to dissolve, not resolve, the supposed dilemma. In actual inquiry the starting points of theories vary from one enterprise to another, and no single starting point is intrinsically primitive or prior. What is undefined or a premise in one system may show up as defined or a theorem in another. Although various reductions may be possible, no statement is intrinsically an axiom and no entity metaphysically basic. Pluralism should be the initial default position, and we are none the worse if it also turns out to be the final position.

James believes he has already sketched in Lecture III why and how he thinks it can be rational to hold onto a belief in "God." Doing so, however, requires denuding the idea of much of its traditional religious content. James claims as well that on his account of truth his God is not omniscient. "Some bits of information always may escape" [P, 81]. It is not that God is fallible or lacks epistemic power. Rather the very idea of an inquiry-independent, preexisting complete world of facts awaiting description and explanation is a myth. "New truths thus are the resultants of new experiences and of old truths combined and mutually modifying one another" [P, 83]. There are no ready-made, primordial facts for God to describe and explain. For different purposes God too might organize "the" world according to multiple schemes. Assuming that the world is inherently one, two, or 40,000 is no more required of God than it is of us. The world just is. James does not make much effort here to convince his audience of his claim about God's epistemic situation. For his current purposes it is not important to do so. His goal is to explicate the nature of human inquiry, and believers no more than non-believers claim that we mortals are omniscient.¹

James goes on to flesh out his web-of-belief model of inquiry and reiterate his support for epistemic holism. When new beliefs are added to the stock of the old, the young impinge on the old, and the old return the favor. Linkages are established, and in principle all beliefs can make an impression on all the others. Still, the mutual impact becomes more negligible as the inferential distance between them increases. In actual inquiry all present beliefs are neither at risk nor involved in assessing newly proposed beliefs. Change is always piecemeal; "knowledge grows *in spots*" [P, 82]. Most of our beliefs and theories are far enough removed from the spot of growth that their impact on one another will be negligible, if at all. In addition, science is deeply committed to conservatism. The standard practice is to make local changes and abandon as few old beliefs as possible. "We patch and tinker more than renew" [P, 83]. Sometimes the pressure to hold onto the old will be strong enough to lead us to dismiss the evidence marshaled in support of the new. Faced with conflict, we assume the evidence for the new must be defective in some way yet unknown. Values are allowed to trump evidence. It is a commonplace that in plotting curves we favor a straight line that may pass through none of the data points over a wandering line that passes through them all.

James, we saw, is a meaning holist as well an epistemic holist. According to the Pragmatic Maxim, the meaning of an idea is constituted by the

consequences entailed by its acceptance into a system. It follows that when a new belief is accepted, its own empirical content and the content of the beliefs with which it now comes into close contact are altered. Science is not static, and the concepts employed in its theories expand and contract along unpredictable paths. Over time, many tried and true concepts will fall by the wayside. Many, though, will flourish because they are able to change with the times and thus continue to have work to do.

James asks why in fact it is that so many of our everyday common sense concepts, such as “the same again,” “thing,” “object,” “cause,” and “possible” are still around? What gives these long-lived ideas their staying power? James suggests several reasons for their longevity. He thinks it probable that our common sense concepts were invented in ancient times to help our ancestors navigate their immediate physical and cognitive environments. By and large the everyday local problems and phenomena these concepts were devised to handle remain, and for these everyday purposes they still work pretty well. “Other stages of thought have grafted themselves upon this stage, but have never succeeded in displacing it” [P, 83–84]. The persistence of these concepts does not mean that they are innate, necessary, or preconditions of thought. They survive because constant use has embedded them in our language and has made them indispensable to thought. From today’s perspective it is hard even to imagine that these common sense concepts could be abandoned.

Like all concepts, common sense concepts are not inherent in the structure of the world. Experience thrusts itself on us, and it must be categorized and organized if we are to survive and thrive. Conceptual instruments are needed to bring order to the disorderly flow of experiences life presents. These intellectual tools of organization are not to be found either in Plato’s heaven or in the world. Nor does the world impose determinate shapes or fixed boundaries to the concepts we do devise. They are constructed by us to fit the job and should not be seen as corresponding to ready-made “natural” kinds. As James says, “Experience merely as such doesn’t come ticketed or labeled, we have first to discover *what* it is” [P, 84; emphasis added].²

This emphasis on “what” is important for understanding James’s view of ontology. In any interesting sense, ontology purports to tell us what there is. To be told only that Reality or the World exists does not tell us anything of interest. Nor do the notions “the ontology of Reality” or the “World’s ontology” have clear meaning. The only substantive ontological question is “*What* are the things that exist?” But as Quine pithily pointed out, there

is a simple, true, but uninformative response to this question, namely, "Everything."³ And even this answer tells us less than we may think it does. For if it is not stipulated in advance that there is at least one thing in the universe of discourse, "everything exists" does not entail "something exists."

As in Lecture IV, James argues that finding out what there is requires conceptual slicing, dicing, mixing, dividing, and uniting. There is no sensible answer to the question independent of a background category scheme into which the answer fits and gains meaning. Our creative contribution in forging concepts and theories cannot be eliminated. Definitions may start life as stipulations, but the stipulations cannot and do not remain binding on subsequent use. The shape and content of concepts are not encased in concrete at the time of their creation. The history of inquiry shows that most concepts will have to be cognitively reconstructed in light of new experience and theory. In principle, none of the properties mentioned in the definition of a concept are necessary, essential, or permanently fixed. Some may be more useful and central, but no property is sacrosanct. Concepts in use are alive and potentially always on the move.

James argues that our common sense concepts could have turned out to be different from those to which we now give allegiance. Indeed, our current everyday organizational schemes might never have been dreamed up, and were the environment or we much different, they might not have been of much help had they been. "It *might* be too . . . that such categories, unimaginable by us to-day, would have proved on the whole as serviceable for handling our experiences mentally as those we actually use today" [P, 84]. Humans could have hit upon equally successful conceptual schemes as those now in favor. Such organizational categories seem unimaginable today, because our present common sense conceptual scheme has become entrenched by use. "You may alter your house *ad libitum* but the ground plan of the first architect persists." There is no way to go back and start from scratch. The concepts and kinds that seem natural are not natural by nature. Their naturalness is due to their history of constant and continued use.

James is a radical pluralist, and, as noted, he believes his version of pluralism can make room for adopting schemes that offer distinct and sometimes conflicting conceptions of the nature of things. James cites the alternative regimentations of geometry to support this claim. "The identical figure which Euclid defined by intrinsic relations were defined by Descartes by the relation of their points to adventitious co-ordinates, the result being an absolutely different and more potent way of handling curves"

[P, 84]. When a task requires handling curves, we are inclined to prefer Descartes's formulation. It is simpler to employ and offers insights not readily available when working within Euclid's scheme. For other purposes, Euclid's geometry may be better. Both geometries are useful, and both are true. Pragmatic considerations help decide which is the best instrument to adopt for the problem at hand. The alternative geometries, however, cannot be conjoined. You cannot coherently adopt both conceptions of geometrical figure at the same time. Both systems remain useful tools, and there is no reason to abandon one of them. Better to keep each, but keep them apart by assigning them to different universes of discourse.

Among the fundamental concepts James examines in Lecture V, that of a "thing" heads the list. Experiences impinge on us from hither and yon, in no stable order and with no inherent regularity. As a rule they do not hang together; rather they dance about as they and we move from place to place over time. Useful order and organization require uniting disconnected experiences. In an effort to gain coherence and predictive control, we begin to organize the world in terms of things that endure over time and changes of place. We identify the thing now in view as the very same thing experienced before, and interpolate its constant existence when not in view. We *posit* the continuity. The concept "thing" is a cognitive instrument devised to fill in the gaps, and positing such continuing objects serves us very well.

James speculates that for a newborn "things" begin and end in the specious present. When initially employed, the "thing" concept functions more as a mass term than as a count noun. It amounts to "thing-ness now present," a circumscribed bit of the environment in sight. For the infant his referents are not infused with the continuity and coherence that characterize later conceptualizations of objects. They are not understood "as a permanent unit-subject that 'supports' its attributes interchangeably" [P, 88].

Elsewhere James says: "The minimum of grammatical subject, of objective presence, of reality known about, the mere beginning of knowledge, must be named by a word that says the least. Such a word is the interjection *lo! there! eco! voila!* or the article or demonstrative pronoun" [PP I, 222]. In time, a more full-blown "thing" concept is developed and we recognize items as "the same again" [P, 87]. As the child and the culture develop, more discriminative concepts are needed for successful engagement with the environment. It is important to group the things into kinds, and we invent concepts that serve as a basis for individuating their members. One might say these concepts function like count nouns, determining where one thing of a kind begins and ends. They characterize the *what*, in what there is.⁴

With the advent of language, these groupings of kind are paired with the terms they come to be known by. Our ability to master a language frees up and expands cognition. We are no longer conceptually limited to the near and observable. New ideas can be constructed that extend our reach into the more remote and removed. Our original common sense notion of a “thing,” though, is not precise and does not have determinate criteria for being applied to this expanded range of items. James asks, “Is a constellation properly a thing? or an army? or an *ens rationis* such as space and time a thing?” [P, 89–90]. The common sense concept “thing” is not equipped to answer these questions. The decision is left indeterminate by earlier uses and definitions. The path to be taken has to be worked out as new experiences and needs pressure inquiry to forge solutions. The rationalists’ account of the enduring nature of the concept “thing” points in the wrong direction. They eternalize the common sense notion of a “thing,” and assume it has an *a priori* fixed reference. Substance is often thought to be the only thing that fits the bill.

James’s account of the enduring nature of our common sense concept of a “thing” and associated kind concepts is different. He argues they hang on because they have become entrenched by use and are too useful to be dismissed. Nonetheless, as inquiry becomes more theoretical and hypotheses confront observation less directly our “thing” notion again proves inadequate. The practices of inquiry cannot be kept within the constraints they impose: “science and critical philosophy burst the bounds of common sense” [P, 91].

James does argue that there is a noticeable difference between the abstractions and posits of science and those found in philosophy. The new “things” of science not only lead to new predictions, but they often have more practical uses and technological payoffs. With few exceptions, the philosophers’ new “things” have little implications for prediction and action beyond those already entailed by the common sense picture and science. As James says in Lecture I, philosophy “bakes no bread.” In making this comparison James is not maintaining that philosophical ideas and theories have no utility. Clarity and systematization are values inquiry takes seriously, and philosophical analysis can be profitable when it contributes to the pursuit of these values.

James cites, for example, Hume’s reconception of causal connections as empirical regularities as an advance in our understanding. He also believes Berkeley’s phenomenalism is not without merit. Berkeley’s phenomenalist analyses, like Mach’s, do provide insights and raise issues likely to be missed

by physicalist approaches. James doubts, though, that all physical discourse can be reduced to a phenomenal base, but his pluralism allows him to value both physicalist and phenomenalist accounts.

James's account of the development of the scientific concept "thing" runs along the following lines. As common sense interpolates her constant "things" by positing continuity, "science *extrapolates* her world of 'primary' qualities, her atoms, her ether, her magnetic fields, and the like, beyond the common-sense world. The 'things' are now invisible and impalpable things" [P, 90]. Everyday objects emerge by *interpolation* to fill in the gaps and discontinuities found in experience. Theoretical concepts and entities, too, emerge to fill in gaps and discontinuities. The difference is that they are the products of analogical *extrapolation*. We are familiar, for instance, with planets revolving around the sun, and find it useful for explanation and prediction to posit unobserved atoms with similar propensities. James argues that in principle the objects thus posited by scientific extrapolation are as legitimate and as real as those posited by interpolation. *Everything* is a posit; posits are ubiquitous. Thus there is nothing in general wrong with positing "theoretical" entities other than that their distance from direct observation takes us further out on a limb.⁵

Some scientists of cautious temperament will think it unwise to stray far from the trunk. Until forced, they will resist countenancing anything that lacks palpable presence. Others, though, will find a theory so useful that in spite of their qualms they will make use of theoretical concepts but remain non-committal as to the ontological status of the theoretical entities the theory seemingly posits. Others will believe that the evidence for the theory is sufficient and of the right sort to make it reasonable to justify taking the theoretical entities it posits at face value.

James's treatment of the *real* is contrastive. As Austin says, "real" is a dimension word and "substantive hungry." It does not have a constant reference. "We can't just say of something 'This is real' . . . that is, we must have an answer to the question 'A real what?'"⁶ A substantive ontology must tell us what there is. In a section of his *Principles of Psychology* entitled "The Various Orders of Reality," James lays the ground for such an account of the "real." He asks us to think about what the concept "real" could mean for a newborn when a lighted candle comes into view. Will the infant believe that what he is seeing is real?

Suppose, moreover (to simplify the hypothesis), that the candle is imaginary, and that no "original" of it is recognized by us psychologists outside . . .

What possible sense (for that [infant's] mind) would a suspicion have that the candle is not real? What would doubt or disbelief of it imply? . . . When we, the onlooking psychologists, say the candle [the infant sees] is unreal, we mean something quite definite, viz that there is a world known to *us* which is real and to which we perceive the candle does not belong . . . It exists, to be sure, in a fashion for it forms the content of the mind's hallucination; but the hallucination itself, though unquestionable is a sort of existing fact, has no knowledge of *other* facts; and since those *other* facts are the realities *par excellence* for us, . . . the candle is simply outside of our reality and belief altogether. [PP II, 287–288]

The newborn “can spin no such considerations as these about it, for of the other facts, actual or possible . . . [the newborn] has no inkling whatever.” “It *is*, it is *that*; it is there” [PP II, 288]. For the infant the suspicion that the candle is unreal in our more full-blown sense is unintelligible.

The sense that anything we think of is unreal can only come, then, when that thing is contradicted by some other thing of which we think . . . Now, how comes it that one thing can be contradicted by another? It cannot unless it begins the quarrel by saying something inadmissible about that other . . . If I merely dream of a horse with wings, my horse interferes with nothing else and has not been contradicted . . . But if . . . I make inroad into the *world otherwise known*, and say, “That is my old mare Maggie having grown a pair of wings where she stands in the stall,” the whole case is altered. [PP II, 288–289]

For now what I assert is incompatible with what is known of the otherwise known world.

I think Austin nicely captures James's contrastive use of the “real” when he argues:

This, of course, is why the attempt to find a characteristic common to all things that are or could be called “real” is doomed to failure; the function of “real” is not to contribute positively to the characterization of anything, but to exclude possible ways of *not* being real – and these ways are both numerous for particular kinds of thing, and liable to be quite different for things of different kinds.⁷

We have no other clear and useful concept of reality at the ready, and we have no particular need for one.

In *Some Problems in Philosophy*, James says:

What is it to be real? The best definition I know is that which the pragmatic rule gives: “anything is real of which we find ourselves obliged to take account of in any way” . . . Philosophy must thus recognize many realms of reality which may interpenetrate. The conceptual systems of mathematics, logic, aesthetics, ethics, are such realms, each strung upon some peculiar form of relation, and each differing from perceptual reality in that no one of them is history or happening displayed. [*SPP*, 101–102]

“Reality is an accumulation of our intellectual inventions, and the struggle for ‘truth’ in our progressive dealings with it is always a struggle to work in new nouns and adjectives while altering as little as possible the old” [“Humanism and Truth,” in *MT*, 209]. For James the vocabularies developed for coping with experience vary from domain to domain, and there is no warrant for assuming one is privileged or that there is something metaphysically significant that hinges on reducing them all to those of a single area of inquiry. In turn, these “various orders of reality” render the idea of truth as “correspondence to reality” all the more suspect.⁸

James does not say much explicitly about the notion “thing” in Lecture V. He gives most of his attention to the relationship between common sense and science more generally. He sets his analysis in the context of his instrumentalism. Many have claimed that James’s instrumentalist stance makes him an anti-realist. As I have argued earlier, this is a mistake. James is a pragmatic instrumentalist. He is a *constructivist*, and constructivism of the sort the Pragmatists propound is definitely and defiantly not anti-realist. Pragmatic instrumentalism does not assume or depend on the claim that there is something mysterious, illegitimate, or essentially problematic with theoretical terms and the theoretical entities science posits. They are constructs, but then so is everything else we posit. James’s empiricism does demand that useful discourse be grounded in experience, but unlike his extreme empiricist opponents he does not try to or believe that all valuable concepts can be reduced to experience or reports of observation.

James’s epistemic and meaning holisms apply to all hypotheses and vocabularies. Observation reports are no exception. They are fallible, being subject to pressures both from other sensory experiences and from the network of beliefs in which they are embedded. In the context of inquiry the “given” is a myth. Before experience can function in inquiry it must be discursified. Treating language as an intellectual tool is no reason for questioning the significance or challenging the status of theoretical terms and entities per se. Common sense and science do have different ontologies,

but it is not necessary to choose or privilege one over the other. Each has work to do, and each is acceptable when it works. This is the lesson James's analysis of the One/many controversy teaches.

The anti-realist instrumentalist picture is different. There is only one world and there is an important distinction between those parts of the vocabulary that talk about the things in it and the theoretical vocabulary that does not to refer to constituents of the Real. The latter terms are "mere" instruments, useful in theory but not literally about the actual "furniture of the universe." James has good reason not to talk this way. It conflicts with his constructivist, pragmatic account of inquiry.

In Lecture V James seeks to bolster his position by claiming that many prominent researchers also champion views about the instrumentalist function of theories. These scientists argue we should give up long-held assumptions about the nature of experimental research and scientific discourse. The goal of science is not to formulate theories that mirror or copy reality. It is to organize experience in ways that are useful for explanation and prediction. Some of these scientists (e.g., Mach, Ostwald, and Duhem) go further and do adopt positions that at times seem to come closer to anti-realist theses. They argue that various posits found in the science of the day are unwarranted. Although the theories may work, not all the entities they talk about are real. They are only instruments that help in articulating the theory and simplifying calculations. James labels this approach an "as if" strategy. The fictional entities are treated as if they were real.

The fact is that in James's day opinions were split over the status of specific theoretical entities. The position a particular scientist adopted was undoubtedly influenced by epistemic and metaphysical ideas, but these differences in "philosophies" were not the only or main reason for the controversies. When James was writing there was much controversy, for example, over the atomic theory of matter.⁹ The idea that basic constituents of the world were unobservable atoms had been around since Democritus' time. That the posited entities were too small to see was not the central problem or the reason for challenging the theory. The primary criticism of the atomic theory was that it ran into serious empirical and theoretical roadblocks and in several places seemed internally inconsistent. Unless these obstacles could be removed, many scientists of the day thought it best to adopt an "as if" strategy and consider atoms useful computational devices rather than as spatial and temporal physical objects. The final ruling on the status of atoms remained to be settled by inquiry. Subsequent empirical findings, especially those associated with the work of Einstein

and Perrin on Brownian motion, led most scientists in time to abandon a fictionalist stance with regard to atoms.¹⁰

James has hunches as to how several ongoing debates will turn out in the end. For example, he mentions the heated controversy over the existence of atoms. Ostwald and other “energetic” thinkers adopt an “as if” approach. James says, however: “No one can fail to admire the ‘energetic’ philosophy. But the hypersensible entities, the corpuscles and vibrations hold their own with most physicists and chemists, in spite of, its appeal. It seems too economical to be all-sufficient. Profusions, not economy, may after all be reality’s key-note” [*P*, 93].¹¹ It is not the philosopher’s job to rule entities in or out. The truth about their status can emerge only from empirical inquiry. James’s free and unqualified reference to theoretical entities throughout his work supports this analysis.

A clear statement of this pragmatic view of theoretical entities can be found in Dewey’s reply to Reichenbach’s charge that he, Dewey, endorsed an anti-realist position:

The foundation of his criticism is the belief that my identification of the scientific object with *relations* . . . commits me to the doctrine of the “*non-reality*” of scientific objects . . . I certainly have never intended to say anything which could lead directly or indirectly to a belief that I hold a “non-realistic interpretation of scientific concepts.”¹²

Finally, Dewey notes that although some physicists such as Duhem “are content with interpreting physical objects symbolically rather than literally,” his own instrumentalist “view does not go as far.”¹³

There was a related but different aspect of the debate over the ontological status of theoretical entities that is best separated from those just canvassed. Some prominent theorists argued that our common sense, everyday ontology of objects characterized the *really* real. Some equally prominent scientists preferred to identify the real with atoms and with other theoretical posits of physics. For James the puzzles and controversy about whether common sense theories or those of science describe the really real has a simple solution. Both descriptions can be correct, and when correct both describe “reality.” “The real” need not name a single domain. From the standpoint of common sense, for example, the table is solid. From the standpoint of physics it is made up of atoms and contains more empty space than physical matter. Each of the theories will assert things the other denies, so they cannot be conjoined. The table cannot be said to be both

solid and not solid [see *PP* II, 665ff.]. For a Jamesian pluralist, there is no problem accepting both claims as long as the theories are not conjoined and put in play together.

James thinks it is neither necessary nor fruitful to make invidious distinctions. Common sense notions are interpolations of experience just as theoretical notions are extrapolations from experience. They are all *posits*. There is no reason to consider the former or the latter epistemically privileged or metaphysically basic or the only universe of discourse that deals with the real. Common sense and scientific theories each have a place, and to accept one is not to deny the usefulness of the other. Thus James maintains: "There is no *ringing* conclusion when we compare these types of thinking, with the view of telling which is the more absolutely true. Their naturalness, their intellectual economy, their fruitfulness for practice, all start up as distinct tests of their veracity." In different contexts and for different purposes each way of talking may have its advantages: "whether either be *truer* absolutely, Heaven only knows" [*P*, 93].¹⁴

Dewey takes a similar stance. In addressing the debate about the real table he argues that there is no reason to choose between the common sense version and that of atomic physics. Both characterizations are useful, but the two ways of talking must be kept apart. The relational properties that characterize our common sense notion of objects are not the relational properties that individuate the objects found in atomic theory.

There is then a great difference between the entities of science and the things of everyday life . . . [But] it creates no problem of conciliation, no need of apologizing for either one or the other. It generates no problem of the real and the apparent. The "Real" or true objects of science are those that best fulfill the demands of secure and fertile inference . . . They differ from the things of the common world of action and association as the means and ends of one occupation differ from those of another.¹⁵

As mentioned earlier, the Pragmatists at times described themselves as realists, and they were so described by others. On the other hand, as will be elaborated in the next lecture, they do reject the picture of thought, language, and inquiry their critics adopt, and they reject classical correspondence semantics and the copy/mirror theories of science that go with it. If this challenge to classical semantics makes some call James and Dewey "anti-realists," so be it. It is more important to keep in mind that their semantic "anti-realism" does not entail an ontologically significant

distinction between apples, automobiles, and atoms. In order to avoid such misunderstandings the Pragmatists at times characterized their position as “natural realism” or “conceptual naturalism.” These labels better reflect their belief that the realist–anti-realist debates are fueled largely by a bogus dualism. Neither a strong idealist nor a strong realist stance is tenable.¹⁶

James ends Lecture V claiming that if what he has said up to here is correct it “obliges us to overhaul the very idea of truth” [P, 94]. He indicates that the renovation will be extensive. It must be able to countenance his instrumentalist account of language and inquiry as well as his pluralist claim that it is epistemically OK to embrace alternative, possibly incompatible, theories. Many find this latter idea especially difficult to swallow. It clashes with intuitions of truth that they believe are impossible to abandon. James’s solution is to rethink the notion of “truth” and not give up his constructivism. In Lecture VI he will argue his case.

Notes

- 1 Compare M. Dummett, *Thought and Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Some of the similarities to James become more obvious in Lecture VII.
- 2 The term “discovery” here and elsewhere can be misleading. Discovery is a constructive process involving both finding and inventing, and the finding itself is theory-laden. Compare T. Kuhn’s discussion of the discovery/invention of oxygen in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), ch. 6.
- 3 W. V. Quine, “On What There Is,” in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 1.
- 4 Compare W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), chs. 2 and 3. See my “The Concept of an ‘Object’ in Perception and Cognition,” in P. Kellman and T. Shipley, eds., *From Fragments to Objects* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001), 2–17, where I argue that, contrary to accepted opinion, recent work on infant object perception does not overturn the basic thrust of either James’s, Piaget’s, or for that matter Quine’s account of the evolving nature of the concept “object.”
- 5 Compare W. V. Quine, “On What There Is,” 1–19 and W. V. Quine, “Posits and Reality,” in *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1966), 3–20.
- 6 J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (London: Clarendon Press, 1962), 69.
- 7 Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, 70.

- 8 For a rundown of the alternative interpretations of James's position on "reality" see E. Suckiel, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), ch. 7.
- 9 "Yet even at the end of the [nineteenth] century, the idea of submicroscopic particles in motion did not stay uncontested . . . Thermodynamics, as Ostwald saw it, appeared superior to atomism in that its second law of thermodynamics could explain irreversible processes while the concept of atoms in motion could not explain the difference between past and present" (H. Schutt, "Chemical Atomism and Chemical Classification," in M. Nye, ed., *The Cambridge History of Science*, vol. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 241). There were similar disputes over the status of forces and the ether.
- 10 For more on this see J. Stallo, *The Concepts and Theories of Modern Physics* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1900) and E. Meyerson, *Identity and Reality* (New York: Dover, 1962). See also Michael Liston, "Scientific Realism: What the Nineteenth Century Debates can Tell Us" (paper delivered at European Conference on Analytic Philosophy, Lisbon, Portugal) for an extensive investigation of the relationship between instrumentalism and realism.
- 11 For a somewhat different take on energetics, see James's *SPP*, 206.
- 12 J. Dewey, "Experience, Knowledge, and Value: A Rejoinder," in P. Schilpp and L. A. Hahn, eds., *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1989), 535.
- 13 Dewey, "Experience, Knowledge, and Value," 537–538.
- 14 Keep in mind, too, that James is not reluctant to treat idealizations as "real." Abstractions such as ideal gases, perfect vacuums, and frictionless surfaces help organize and simplify theories that enable us to encounter and causally interact with the world. Theoretically useful statements that characterize the properties and laws of ideal gases, frictionless surfaces, or physical particles subject to only mechanical forces are true and true of reality.
- 15 Dewey, "The Logic of Judgments of Practice," in *Essays in Experimental Logic* (New York: Dover, 1954), 436–437. As S. Morgenbesser commented, "the great pragmatists did not doubt the reality of scientific theoretical entities; they denied as it were their exclusive reality – the perceived encountered table was as real as the scientific one" ("Response to Hilary Putnam's 'Pragmatism and Realism,'" in M. Dickstein, ed., *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 54.
- 16 I think Goodman's label "irrealist" is meant to capture his own similar rejection of the substantive nature of the dispute.

Pragmatic Semantics and Pragmatic Truth (Lecture VI)

In earlier lectures James presents bits and pieces of his pragmatic theory of truth and indicates some of its implications. Critics tend to think that these early remarks in *Pragmatism* are pretty outlandish. By the time they finish Lecture VI, most are convinced that James's elaboration of his position digs him into a deeper hole. James believes his critics have both misstated his views and misunderstood his goals and arguments. They are challenging caricatures of the pragmatic theory of truth – a complaint his fellow Pragmatists made as well. James was wont to remark that if his views about truth were as silly as those attributed to him, he was at a loss to explain why his critics thought it worth their time to refute them. In Lecture VI he tries once more to straighten things out. His rebuttal is aimed primarily at philosophers, but, cognizant of his audience, he tries to avoid being overly technical in his presentation.

James states right off that pragmatists agree with everyone else that a belief is true if and only if it corresponds to reality: "Truth, as any dictionary will tell you is a property of certain of our ideas. It means 'agreement,' as falsity means their 'disagreement' with 'reality'" [P, 96]. Properly understood, James's account of truth is not in conflict with Tarski's condition of adequacy, "P" is true if and only P. Dewey and Bentley in their book *Knowing and the Known* say in fact: "Tarski's work is indeed like a breath of fresh air after the murky atmosphere we have been in."¹ They go on to praise Tarski's use of a meta-language in his analysis of truth "not as an esoteric facultive mystery but as a simple technical device," and they support

Tarski's abjuring "appeals to ideal entities [propositions] of which the meaning . . . seems never to have been made clear and unambiguous."²

Both James and Dewey had serious qualms with "propositions" considered as abstract, eternally fixed items that capture the shared meanings of statements. Propositions did not fit into their naturalist account of meaning. They were part and parcel of misguided "museum of ideas" theories of language. Appeals to propositions only obfuscated attempts to clarify truth: "A number of writers, as Mr. Russell himself, Mr. G. E. Moore, and others favor the unlucky word 'proposition,' which seems expressly invented to foster this confusion, for they speak of truth as a property of 'propositions'" ["Two English Critics," in *MT*, 317].³

The Pragmatists had another reason for focusing primarily on beliefs and secondarily on propositions or statements. Propositions and statements in and of themselves are inert. They have logical consequences, but it is beliefs that have consequences for thought and action. James goes on to express his particular dissatisfaction with the disconnect he sees between truth, belief, and action in the theories of Russell and likeminded philosophers:

Mr. Russell in his own trials to tell positively what the word 'truth' means . . . attempts this feat by limiting his discussion to three terms only, a proposition, its contents and an object, abstracting them from the whole context of associated realities in which such terms are found in every case of actual knowing. He puts the terms, thus taken in a vacuum, and made into bare logical entities, through every possible permutation and combination, tortures them on the rack until nothing is left of them . . . comes out with the following portentous conclusion . . . that some propositions are true and some false . . . that belief is a certain attitude towards propositions, which is called knowledge when they are true error when they are false – and he seems to think that once this insight is reached the question may be considered closed forever. [*MT*, 318]

The Pragmatists have no need to reject Tarski's criterion of adequacy for truth, and I think they would also be comfortable with a disquotationalist analysis of the correspondence relation. Formally speaking, it says all that can plausibly be said about the correspondents of true sentences. On the other hand, the Pragmatists do not wish to leave things here. Common sense slogans and Tarski's condition of adequacy may be fine as far as they go, but they do not speak to James's concern, namely, the "go" of truth. As Dewey and Bentley say, they wish Tarski had pursued matters further. "Lacking still is all endeavor to organize men's talkings to men's perceivings

and manipulations in the cultural world of their evolution.”⁴ Given that the Pragmatists want to pursue these issues, they see it necessary to say more than what a disquotationalist analysis has to offer.

James’s intends to explore the “go” of truth with the help of the Pragmatic Maxim. It is important to keep in mind that the Pragmatic Maxim is a method for making ideas clear; it is not a standard or criterion for definitions. What’s more, James has no need to seek a definition of truth. As dictionaries tell you, truth is “correspondence with reality.” The Pragmatists were convinced, however, that such definitions do not provide much enlightenment, for the concepts “correspondence” and “reality” are too obscure to explain the functions of truth in inquiry, cognition, and action. Much of the confusion surrounding James’s pragmatic theory of truth could be avoided if it is recognized that his use of the Pragmatic Maxim is focused on trying to give empirical sense to the unexamined idea of “correspondence with reality” and not to providing a definition of “truth.” Making the correspondence relation clear, however, requires considering the relations between men’s talkings, perceivings, and manipulations in the cultural world of their evolution. Intuitions about semantic correspondence are no substitute for more robust analyses of these factors.

James’s central question then is: “Grant an idea or belief to be true . . . what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone’s actual life?” [P, 97]. His analysis does not rest on conflating the ideas “true” with “believes true,” although his less than careful flipping back and forth in his use of the terms “concept,” “object,” “idea,” and “belief” can muddle his explications. Some of these conflations can be removed if one takes into account that he wishes to explain the various roles truth plays in inquiry. To do this he finds it necessary to approach matters from several different directions.

In Lecture VI James’s initial attempt to clarify how truth works is this: “*True ideas are those we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those we can not*” [P, 97]. Common understandings of these terms pretty much capture all he has in mind: (1) assimilate – to integrate a hypothesis into an already accepted body of true beliefs; (2) validate – to establish soundness of an idea or the evidence for it; (3) corroborate – to provide additional evidence in favor of the truth of a hypothesis; and (4) verify – to offer evidence sufficient to justify the claim that a hypothesis is true. Assimilation, validation, corroboration, and verification are epistemic activities employed in evaluating hypotheses. Individually or as a group they cannot be used to define “truth,” since appeals to truth are employed or presupposed in their definitions.

These truth tests pick out moments or stages of objective inquiry. They serve not only to provide evidence of correspondence; they are the very substance of the relation. The claim that a hypothesis agrees with reality amounts to no more than the claim that it corresponds with the evidence uncovered in inquiry. According to the Pragmatic Maxim, this is the only notion of “correspondence” that makes good sense. Our abstract intuition of words corresponding to objects has no additional significance, for it has no further empirical consequences.

Observation plus the demands of assimilation, validation, corroboration, and verification are the standards by which we evaluate hypotheses. These constraints are sufficient to insure objectivity in the fixation of belief. Indeed, they have to be, since there is no other epistemic perspective available that lies outside of scientific practice. The sanctioned practices of good inquiry are constitutive of objectivity – constitutive but nevertheless not necessarily fixed forever. These standards are not static. They too evolve to meet the demands of experience and the needs of inquiry.

Often James collapses the distinctions between these truth tests and simply refers to them all as processes of verification.⁵ To count a hypothesis verified does not mean it has been proven true or that we have direct evidence of its truth. For James, hypotheses count as verified as long as there are good evidential grounds to think that if tested things will turn out as the hypothesis says they will. “*Indirectly or only potentially verifying processes may thus be true as well as full verification-processes*” [P, 100]. In fact, the support for hypotheses is almost always indirect. The links connecting observational evidence to a hypothesis can be quite complex and involve inferences to and from both low-level and theoretical hypotheses.

In light of the weight Pragmatists assign conservatism in the fixation of belief, it is to be expected that our stock of accepted beliefs remains stable until or unless we encounter problems. It would be a waste of time and energy to constantly attempt to verify the unchallenged beliefs in our corpus. “Truth lives, in fact, for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs ‘pass’ so long as no one challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them” [P, 100]. James allows as well that many of our beliefs may have no real intellectual importance or practical value. Yet it is assumed that if put to the test they will pass. These untested, unneeded beliefs are tolerated, because they do no harm, and there is no telling when it may be useful to call upon them: “the advantage of having a general stock of *extra* truths, of ideas that shall be true of merely possible situations, is obvious” [P, 93].

Distinguishing truths from falsities is serious business and no place for the intrusion of personal desires or preferences. "We live in a world of realities that can be infinitely [cognitively and behaviorally] useful or infinitely harmful" [P, 98]. Beliefs, thoughts, and language serve in guiding our intellectual and physical activities in the world we inhabit. They predict what we should expect to experience and happen. True beliefs, therefore, serve better than false beliefs in preparing for the future. False beliefs tend to lead us astray intellectually and can put us in harm's way. James continually emphasizes that empirical evidence should be crucial in deciding what to believe. "Woe to him whose beliefs play fast and loose with the order which realities follow in his experience; they will lead him nowhere or else make false connections" [P, 99].

James's claim that true beliefs are generally more useful than false ones is not controversial. More problematic is his next step. He argues that, properly understood, the relation between truth and usefulness is symmetric. With equal justice, "You can say then either that 'it is useful because it is true' or that 'it is true because it is useful'" [P, 98]. Neither way of putting matters has epistemic or metaphysical priority. Elsewhere James's claims that "The *matter* of the true is thus absolutely identical with the matter of the satisfactory. You may put either word first" ["A Word More about Truth," in *MT*, 255].

James's critics find such claims baffling on their surface. "Truth" simply does not mean "useful" or "satisfactory." James would agree. The terms are not synonymous, and there is no need for him to claim they are. James is a constructivist, and the truth concept, like all other concepts, must be constructed. As he sees it, the idea of truth emerges initially from the everyday experience of finding some hypotheses better, more useful in the way of belief than others. This common sense division of beliefs into good ones to have and bad ones to have supplies the materials for constructing our idea of "truth." We start with the "trues," the individual beliefs we find satisfactory, and shape the concept "truth" to codify these judgments. We do not start with a priori principles or intuitions of correspondence. If no beliefs were found more useful than any others in coping with the intellectual and physical world, there would be no work for the concept "truth" to do. "True ideas would never have been singled out . . . unless they had been useful from the outset in this way" [P, 98]. "*Such simply and fully verified leadings are certainly the originals and prototypes of the truth-process*" [P, 99].

It is worth mentioning here that James's and Dewey's account of ethical concepts and norms is similar. We start with judgments that some states of

affairs are preferable or better than others. If no one found acts like murder disagreeable and acts like saving lives agreeable there would be no such thing as ethics. The fact is we do abhor some states of affairs and value others. These unreflective intuitions provide the materials and grounds for formulating ethical norms. We start with the descriptive, the desired, and guided by these initial preferences construct the normative, the desirable.⁶ Dewey offers the following general summary of the evolution of norms:

Validity of principles is determined by the coherency of the consequences produced by the habits they articulate. If the habit in question is such that it generally produces conclusions that are sustained and developed in further inquiry, then it is valid even if in an occasional case it yields a conclusion that turns out invalid.⁷

The Pragmatic approach of adjusting norms to practices and practices to norms does not rest on a conflation or on a failure to appreciate the difference between what is and what ought to be.

For the Pragmatists the descriptive and the normative are co-dependent. In formulating norms we must start with useful, satisfactory ongoing practices. The initial judgments found in such practices are then refined and their source and function clarified. On the basis of such review and rethinking, principles of best practice are articulated and take on the role of norms. Such standards are always constructed from within a practice by reflective refinements of the practice itself. As Dewey says: "In engaging in transactions, human beings are not first aware of the responsibilities that are implicit; for laws in the legal sense are explicit statements of what was previously only implicit in custom: namely, formal recognition of duties and rights that were *practically* involved in the acceptance of custom."⁸

One recurring complaint about the pragmatic theory of truth is that it cannot handle historical truths. The past is past, and Pragmatism only looks forward. Beliefs are understood and evaluated in terms of their future consequences. Yet the statement "Aristotle ate a tomato on his twenty-fifth birthday" must be either true or false, although it is doubtful we can now discover evidence in favor of or against it. The pragmatic response to this criticism is not difficult to imagine. And Peirce made it:

But I may be asked what I have to say to all the minute facts of history, forgotten and never to be recovered . . . To this I reply that in no possible state of knowledge can any number be great enough to express the relation

between the amount of what rests unknown to the amount known, yet it is unphilosophical to suppose that with regard to any given question (which has any clear meaning) investigation would not bring forth a solution of it, if it were carried far enough. Who would have said a few years ago, that we could ever know what substance stars are made whose light may have been longer in reaching us than the human race has existed?"⁹

All statements worthy of consideration have consequences, although the route back to the events, things, or states of affairs they describe may be indirect, long, winding and the goal never actually reached. The impossibility of returning to the past, however, in principle provides no grounds for assuming we cannot find out about it today. For example, Aristotle may have kept records of his diet, or evidence will be discovered proving that Aristotle never made it to the age of 25, or we may learn that there were no tomatoes around in his time. What's more, does anyone actually care about Aristotle's birthday lunch? When we do care seriously about the past we often succeed in constructing the means to find out about it. Possessed of an intellectual need to know what happened microseconds after the Big Bang, we devise conceptual and physical instruments to do so.

A related criticism of the pragmatic theory of truth is equally misguided. It is claimed that since truth depends on a belief's being propounded and incorporated into a theory, there could be no truths about things and events until relevant theories and concepts are formulated. But surely no one is so benighted as to deny, for example, that there were dinosaurs and stars around long before any cognitive beings proclaimed there were. Although this challenge is frequently put forth as a one-line disproof of pragmatic truth and the constructivist world-making thesis (to be discussed in Lecture VII), the argument is a non sequitur.

As we predict the future on the basis of the present, we retrodict the past on the evidence available at present. This does not require that anyone be present at or before the time a posited event took place. Dewey explains: "That the standpoint and reference [of a judgment] are future does not mean the *content* is future. Failure to note this simple distinction has been the cause of a lot of futile criticism of the pragmatic notion."¹⁰ Claims about the past are on a par with claims about the future – a future time when possibly neither we nor any cognitive beings will exist. Theories encompass and *retrodict* earlier states of affairs as they encompass and *predict* later ones. In both cases the verification is indirect. Our present accepted theories about dinosaurs and stars, in fact, entail that they existed

before human inquirers made an appearance on earth, and they would be false if this were not the case. All theories interpolate and extrapolate and in so doing posit things and locate them in time, be it past, present, or future.

Tho our discovery of any one of them may only date from now, we unhesitatingly say that it not only *is*, but *was* there, if by so saying the past appears connected more consistently with what we feel the present to be. This is historic truth . . . Tribolites were once alive, or all our thought about the strata is at sea. Radium, discovered only yesterday, must always have existed, or its analogy with other natural elements, which are permanent, fails. In all this, it is but one portion of our beliefs reacting on another so as to yield the most satisfactory total state of mind. ["Humanism and Truth," in *MT*, 220]

Perhaps the most damaging criticism of James's theory of truth concerns his claim that truth is mutable. James says that "Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events" [*P*, 97]. Even those sympathetic to a pragmatic account of truth find such claims beyond the pale. They clash with common sense, let alone the sensibility of philosophers. The concept "truth" does not tolerate mutability. If James's theory of truth entails the contrary, that is all the more reason to reject it. James is aware that his proposal conflicts with how most people think of truth. This is only to be expected, since by and large immutability is assumed to be a "necessary" or "constitutive" principle of truth. Nevertheless, James thinks that his account of truth mutable explains the "go" of truth better than theories that are committed to a static, rigid understanding of the notion.

I argued above that the Pragmatists would accept the claim that "P" is true if and only if P. In turn, they would have to be willing to assume immutability whenever Tarski's condition of adequacy is actually applied to a given sentence at a given time. The meaning of "snow" and the objects it denotes may change in the course of inquiry, but we require that no such shift be allowed when the term appears on both sides of the biconditional. More generally, James argues that for thought and communication to run smoothly we must *stipulate* whatever it takes to insure that meaning and truth values remain constant "for the duration." We cannot change horses in midstream. Thus in constructing a proof it is simply assumed or stipulated that predicates have the same meaning in the premises, derivation, and conclusion. Such agreement is also the default assumption adopted in normal communication, until the conversation gets off track enough to

question whether the people involved are talking past one another. Although the concepts constitutive of a belief may evolve and wander as inquiry continues, statements of the belief in argument and communication require us to conceive or idealize stability of content.

Still, exploring the “go” of truth requires paying attention to the way concepts develop and the implications this evolution has for understanding the individuation, content, and truth conditions of beliefs. To what, for instance, does any particular belief commit one in thought and action? And when do tokens of a belief expression have the same empirical content? James as well as his opponents admit, of course, that belief types that are ambiguous can fluctuate in truth value. “Today is Tuesday” is true today, but when these identical words are uttered tomorrow it is false. Such referential shifts, though, are not what James has in mind when he argues that truth is mutable. Instead, James wishes to challenge traditional semantic assumptions of referential stability that he sees as underpinning the immutability of truth doctrine.

The Pragmatists identify empirical meaning with consequences. As concepts and theory evolve, the empirical and theoretical consequences of hypotheses change. Therefore, the actual effective content of a belief, what it leads you to predict, expect, or prepare for, is not fixed. A current belief can ready you to think about and deal with the environment in ways not implied when the belief was originally propounded or adopted. Or yesterday the world may have been as the consequences of a token belief said it would be, but with subsequent additions to the set of beliefs in which it is embedded, new consequences emerge that may or may not confirm it. Since the empirical content of tokens can differ, it is not surprising that their truth conditions, the conditions under which they are assessed to be true or false, can vary. At one time, what a belief leads us to expect does “correspond” to the relevant realities. At another time, it may or may not jibe with experience and our settled body of beliefs. As the empirical content of a hypothesis changes or grows, so do its empirical truth conditions. What is to be expected if the statement is true can “mutate.”

The fundamental fact about our experience is that it is a process of change. For the “trower” any moment, truth like the visible area around a man walking in the fog . . . is an objective field which the next moment enlarges and of which it is the critic, and which then either suffers alteration, or is continued unchanged . . . But, owing to the fact that all experience is a process, no point of view can be *the* last one . . . [Critics] forget that this

standard perpetually grows up endogenously inside the web of experience . . . [and] carelessly go on to say that what distributively holds of each experience, holds also collectively of all . . . and in its totality owes whatever truth it may be possessed-of to its correspondence with absolute realities outside of its own being. ["Humanism and Truth," in *MT*, 220–221]

James grants that it is odd to say that a statement can be true at one time and false at another. He says that when new data and insight show that a hitherto accepted hypothesis can no longer be accommodated, validated, corroborated, and verified we usually say it is false and insist that it always was false. We assume or stipulate that the truth conditions of the hypothesis have been constant and assess its truth value accordingly. Such assessment, though, is done from our current perspective. If the formerly accepted hypothesis is understood in terms of today's assignments of content and truth conditions, it is false, and retrospectively it was always false. "We have to live to-day by what we can get by with to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it a falsehood . . . When new experiences lead to retrospective judgments, using the past tense, what these judgments mutter *was* true, even tho no past thinker had been led there" [*P*, 107].

People harboring strong correspondence intuitions adopt this strategy as matter of course and think it goes without saying. Truth conditions do not change; truth of "necessity" is immutable. Fluctuations in the assessment of truth values only demonstrate that in light of new evidence a belief that was previously confirmed can be overturned. This is no big news. No one doubts that confirmation is mutable and fluctuates with the evidence available, but this does not imply that the truth relation is relative. If a statement is true it is always true, if false it is always false. The truth conditions of an idea, proposition, or statement are immutable and eternal.

James resists endorsing this conclusion *as it is usually understood* and with good reason. The costs are too high. It would require him to sacrifice much of his account of inquiry, concept formation, and language. In turn, the explanatory advantages of treating beliefs, theories, and language instrumentally will be forfeited. James does not think the tradeoff is worth it. Maintaining the sort of confirmation/truth distinction needed to preserve the immutability of truth requires a sharp and substantive dichotomy between changes of meaning and changes of fact. Given James's account of inquiry, his denial of essences, necessity, and an analytic/synthetic distinction, this cannot be done.¹¹ There is no principled way to peel off constant meaning from shifting assessments of fact. As discussed

earlier, the meaning of the word “hat” develops in tandem with the facts we learn about hats. It is difficult to make the stable semantics that underlie a meaning/fact distinction cohere with the semantic fluidity appropriate to the instrumentalist model of inquiry, language, and conceptual development.

Nowadays many proponents of classical semantics attempt to secure immutability by appealing to a meaning/reference distinction rather than a meaning/fact dichotomy. They argue that even if empirical meanings are in constant flux the reference of belief tokens remain constant. Since truth is a function of reference, not meaning, as long as reference is fixed, truth conditions and truth values cannot change. Thus truth remains immutable. James, however, thinks that meaning and reference cannot be firmly split, and his reasons are akin to those that lead him to reject a sharp distinction between meaning and fact. It does not fit his epistemic and meaning holism and his instrumentalist account of representation. The idea of a determinate and permanent reference free from all influences of changing experience and theory is not tenable. Reference cannot be fixed independent of background beliefs.

The demonstrative “that” or “this” might seem like exceptions to the rule, but treating them so is to overlook their background stage setting. The spatial and temporal dimensions of an object of reference cannot be settled by ostension. Pointing may put you in the vicinity of an object, but it cannot set the spatial and temporal boundaries for individuating it. The same holds of names. Reference is responsive to assorted “outside” influences. There is no way representations can have a determinate reference completely independent of the web of beliefs in which they are embedded. The expansions and contractions of background theory can reset reference relations. Hence there is no guarantee the referents initially assigned to predicates or names are kept for life. Reference is more stable than empirical meaning, but if a term or idea is to survive as a useful intellectual instrument it must accommodate to challenges. New theories carve up the world differently and in so doing can alter both meaning and reference.

This account of the fluidity of reference is foretold in James’s account of “the real” canvassed in Lecture V. Think of the demonstrative scope of a newborn’s experience of an actual candle. Her “that” does not name or individuate the same “thing” our demonstrative use does. The candle we pick out has a history and future life that the newborn cannot conceive. According to James, for the infant “that” candle is merely a thing of the present. It does not have for her the spatial and temporal properties adults

have in mind when referring to “that” candle. *What* that is, what it refers to for the infant, is not what it is or refers to for us. The newborn’s “criteria of individuation” are different. When several days later both adult and infant see the burnt remains of the candle, only the former conceives of it as the end state of the numerically same candle.

In “The Meaning of the Word Truth” James elaborates his position:

You cannot get at either the reference or the adaption without using the notion of workings. *That* the thing is, *what* it is, and *which* it is (of all the possible things with that what) are points determinable only by the pragmatic method. The “which” means a possibility of pointing, or of otherwise singling out the special object; the “what” means choice on our part of an essential aspect to conceive it by (and this is always relative to what Dewey calls our own “situation”); and the “that” means our assumption of the attitude of belief, the reality-recognizing attitude. Surely for understanding what the word “true” means as applied to a statement, the mention of such workings is indispensable. Surely if we leave them out the subject and the object of the cognitive relation float . . . vaguely and ignorantly and without mutual contact or mediation. [MT, 284]

Dewey’s more technical treatment of these issues can be found most readily in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* and in *Knowing and the Known*. I will quote a smattering of his statements that are relevant to my reading of James. Dewey maintains that “Sign and thing designated are constituents of one inclusive undivided set of operations; any distinction drawn between them is a result of *post* or reflective operations.” Meaning and fact do not come packaged separately: “changes that take place in words *as* signs in conjunction with changes in socio-cultural activities will be bound.”¹²

Dewey, like James, explicitly rejects the claim that H₂O is the essence of water: “the much-mooted problem of the relation of scientific ‘objects’ to ‘objects’ of (sense) perception is *as ordinarily stated and discussed*, a thoroughly artificial one resting upon arbitrary postulates.” Yet Dewey goes on to say that “the distinction in what is designated in popular usage by *water* and what is designated by H₂O is not intrinsically counterfeit.”¹³ As the facts we learn about water get more integrated into science, some properties begin to loom large because they promote significant systematization. “H₂O” is a more refined linguistic instrument for organizing and grouping experience. It is a better label than others to serve as a peg on which to hang our accumulating scientific knowledge of water. There is no guarantee,

though, that future inquiry will sustain its position of prominence in science or that it must be taken as essential in other contexts and discourses.

Dewey's account of demonstrative reference seems also in tune with ideas recommended by James. Dewey says:

Suppose that in a given case, "this" is characterized by "Washington Monument." The act of pointing does not determine any "one" this rather than another, since everything in the line of pointing is pointed *at*. In the second place, even when we suppose the act of pointing happens to land, so to speak, upon one singular rather than another, it is only a group of sensible qualities that is indicated . . . The nub of any existential identification of a thing . . . as a such-and-such lies in the ground it offers for giving the object a description in terms of what is *not* then and there observed.¹⁴

Elsewhere Dewey notes that attempts to clarify *correspondence* in terms of causal relations, rather than mental "lassoing," is a step in the right direction, but not a suitable substitute for an experimental-behavioral analysis.¹⁵

We have seen that for the Pragmatists, although reference is not fixed, in specific contexts and for specific purposes it can be stabilized for the duration. But the stability of reference James and Dewey champion is not dependent on essences, causal connections, or natural kinds. That a term picks out a random assortment of items is no hindrance to intending that whenever it occurs in discourse it refer to the very same thing or things. Referential fixity is something that is *imposed* by our intentions, and it is not only useful, but it is necessary that we do so in various circumstances.¹⁶

James claims that an "absolutist," "eternalist," or "classical" view of semantic relations is a form of "vicious intellectualism." Proponents of this approach do acknowledge that terms have a history, but they assume that the paths traveled do not matter much. Classical semantic theorists think they can ignore what goes on between the start and endpoints of the journey. They assume that the study of semantics can exclude consideration of the "context of discovery" factors that shape conceptual development, for they assume that terms have a constant, determinate reference. Some proponents of classical semantics suppose that reference is fixed by initial baptisms, some suppose it is by causal connections, some suppose it is by necessary and sufficient conditions, and some suppose it is by Hegelian directives. Still others see it fixed by what science will claim is essential at

the completion of inquiry. James calls these sorts of semantic theories “saltatory” in that they ignore all the intermediary stages of inquiry that actually construct semantic relations. They intellectualize a fixed correspondence between word and object and mistake possibly stable resting places for unique and eternally determinate targets.

In contrast to this saltatory account of semantics, James offers what he calls an “ambulatory” theory of the development of meaning and reference. A concept’s future is not fixed eternally by the past, nor does the future beckon to the past and determine the place where it will ultimately end up. The semantic directions words travel evolve in the course of inquiry, and as in the case of biological evolution, the path of semantic evolution is constrained but not predetermined. Semantic relations develop over the course of time with pressure coming from the intellectual and physical environments. Moreover, there can be equally justified but incompatible referential paths the semantics may take. Monist assumptions are not warranted.¹⁷

Those concepts that cannot adjust to new conditions tend to die off. Among those that survive there is no definitive final stage of development or endpoint. If the intellectual and physical environments remain stable there may not be any change, but this is due to the facts on the ground, not to necessary connections between word and object. The Pragmatists are neither semantic realists nor anti-realists; they are semantic naturalists, semantic fallibilists, and semantic “irrealists.”

For many purposes, when inquiry requires adjustments in our corpus of beliefs, it will be best to treat the semantics as fixed and claim that worldly facts force a readjustment in truth value assignments. The previously accepted hypothesis is removed from our corpus of beliefs, because it is determined to be false. In other contexts, we can make better sense of the issues at stake by allowing the semantics to be less rigid. If we assume the truth conditions of tokens differ, we can avoid taking surface conflicts at face value. A charitable adjustment of the semantics enables us to resolve them. Where to draw a line between the two semantic strategies is itself mutable, and where it is drawn marks no epistemic or metaphysically robust boundary. Although strategies of semantic analysis are constrained, choices remain. In some contexts it is best to assume that reference is rigid; in other contexts we take it to be ambulatory. “Our meanings can be the same as often as we intend to have them so” [*SPP*, 105].

Either way the immutability of truth can be preserved. If we assign our current truth conditions to all belief tokens and there is conflict, the earlier

ones are assessed as false – false then, now and eternally. “Water” always referred to H_2O and “gold” always picked out elements with the atomic number 79. Alternatively, if we assign different truth conditions to old and new tokens, there is no longer conflict. We treat them as two different hypotheses making distinct claims. Today’s truth need not trump the tried and true. Both were true or false then, now, and eternally.

Debates between Kuhn and his critics over Newton and Einstein’s concept of “mass” provide a case study of the phenomenon. Kuhn claims that tokens of “mass” have different meanings for the two physicists. Kuhn’s opponents insist they have the same meaning or at least the same reference. They see no semantic incommensurability and no breakdown of communication. For them, many of Newton’s statements about mass are strictly false, always were, and always will be. Kuhn on the other hand argues that Einstein does not refute Newton, because the concept “mass” does not mean or refer to the same thing for both scientists. What Newton said about Newton’s mass is true, and what Einstein said about relativistic mass is also true. Their theories do not conflict.

From a pragmatic perspective there is no clear fact of the matter as to which description of the scientific developments is correct. One assignment may be more useful for certain purposes; a different assignment can be more appropriate for others. Those most concerned to trace communication, logical connections, and influences over time will hold that from its initial appearance (perhaps in antiquity) tokens of “mass” have had the same reference. Those wishing to stress discontinuities in the lives of concepts and “revolutions” in thought and theory will be tempted to assign the tokens different meanings and reference. Each semantic analysis is OK in its place, as long as we keep in mind how concepts actually develop in inquiry. Why assume that only one assignment can be correct? For what empirical evidence could possibly show which of alternative assignments is *the* right one? Semantic pluralism does not force a unique decision.¹⁸

Of course, such pluralism will not sit well with those wedded to the idea of a single eternal truth that is the goal and supreme value of inquiry. It will trouble, too, those who think a core concern of epistemology is to draw a distinction between true knowledge and justified belief. Pragmatists lack such commitments. For epistemic purists, if Newton’s beliefs are false, it may technically make him a physicist’s “know-nothing,” but why should anyone care? For pragmatic instrumentalists the fact remains that the theory he invented was the best tool around for coping with the known intellectual and physical environment. Newton’s theory was

valuable because it provided a tremendous increase in understanding. Nothing much hinges on whether it meets some epistemic criterion of “knowledge.”

If my interpretation of James’s ideas about truth are correct, many of the startling things he says about truth being made, growing, and being mutable do not seem all that peculiar or off base. Tarski’s biconditional can still be taken as the foundation of a formal semantic theory of truth. The Pragmatists did not deny that truths correspond to reality; they held that their pragmatic theory was the only one on offer that could plausibly explain the correspondence relation in naturalistic terms. Indeed, Dewey says: “These comments are intended to indicate both that I hold a ‘correspondence’ theory of truth and *the sense in which I hold it*” (emphasis added). He continues, “I hold that my *type* of theory is the only one entitled to be called a correspondence theory of truth.”¹⁹ For it explains the “go” of the correspondence relation.

I think there is another closely related way to think of the difference between Pragmatic and realist semantics that can shed light on the controversy. The fixity of realist semantics is what we turn to in giving a synchronic account of meaning and reference. It is an imposition, a piece with the stability we assign to terms in ongoing coherent argument, thought, and communication. And it is this semantic framework that is employed in the context of justification where inference and mutual intelligibility are a necessity.

By contrast, pragmatic semantics seeks to capture the diachronic or ambulatory nature of meaning and reference. It seeks to reflect the use and inherent instability of concepts in the context of inquiry. The Pragmatists do not find fault with assuming fixity when describing the assumptions that underlie the functions of a language for the time being. But they insist this immutability assumption is a transitory idealization that has no meta-physical or epistemic prescriptive force on past or future uses. It is the semantic realists’ failure to take into account the ambulatory nature of language that leads them to think otherwise.

The Pragmatists believe this failure is also responsible for the realists’ misguided view of truth and of the role truth plays in inquiry. Realists start with intuitions of fixed reference and explain inquiry with this in mind. The goal of science is the pursuit of *the* immutable truth, as characterized by a static semantics. Inquiry aims either to hit its semantically fixed target on the head or at least to get closer to it. But the pragmatists press for further explication of what these claims could possibly mean. The response

that inquiry succeeds when our beliefs correspond to Reality or gets closer to it, is no help.

The Pragmatists' approach to truth comes at the issues from the opposite direction. They start with the practices of inquiry and seek an account of truth that explains its use, role, and value in scientific development. They argue that the actual history of science provides no empirical basis for claims of semantic fixity. Realist semantics fails to capture satisfactorily the way concepts are constructed and unfold over time. The Pragmatists admit that realist semantics does give an idealized snapshot of semantic facts at a time, and it is good for so much. Nonetheless, skipping over the ambulatory intermediaries fosters a problematic account of the evolution of meaning and reference and with it a misleading view of inquiry and truth.

Without such intermediating portions of concretely real experience the pragmatist sees no materials out of which the adaptive relation called truth can be built up. The anti-pragmatist view is that the workings are but evidence of the truth's previous inherent presence in an idea, and that you can wipe the very possibility of them out of existence and still leave the truth of an idea as solid as ever. But surely this is not a counter-theory of truth to ours. It is the renunciation of all articulate theory. ["Professor Hebert on Pragmatism," in *MT*, 296]

James says something comparable in a note cited by R. B. Perry:

Unless we find a way of conciliating the notions of truth and change, we must admit there is no truth anywhere. But the conciliation is necessarily made by anyone who reads history, and admits that an [earlier] set of ideas . . . were in the lines of development of the ideas in light of which we now reject [them] . . . In so far as they tended to induce these they were true; just as these will induce others and themselves be shelved. Their truth lay in their function of continuing thought in a certain *direction*. Had they tended out of that direction they would have been false.²⁰

The realist undertakes an analysis of truth with certain unnegotiable intuitions about the concept, believes there can be only one truth idea, and it must satisfy his or her a priori assumptions. The Pragmatists believe that the most important thing to do is to make clear the "go" of the truth idea, and for this purpose it is best to sacrifice the realist's semantic intuitions. James does not deny such intuitions; he objects to how they are interpreted and what they are thought to imply.

Such abstract talk about cognition's results is surely convenient; and it is surely as legitimate as convenient, *so long as we do not forget or positively deny, what it ignores*. We may on occasion say that our idea meant *always* that particular object, that it led us there because it was *of* it intrinsically and essentially. We may insist that its verification follows upon that original cognitive virtue in it – and all the rest – and we shall do no harm so long as we know that these are only short cuts in our thinking. They are positively true accounts of fact *as far as they go*, only they leave vast tracts of fact out of the account, tracts of fact that have to be reinstated to make the accounts literally true of any real case. But if, not merely passively ignoring the intermediaries, you actively deny them to be even potential requisites for the results you are struck by, your epistemology goes to irremediable smash . . . Of such abstraction and one-sidedness I accuse most of the critics of my own account. [“A Word More about Truth,” in *MT*, 249]

The Pragmatists' rejection of propositions is part and parcel of the story just canvassed. For the realist, propositions are understood to have immutable timeless meanings independent of inquiry, and they are true when their content corresponds to facts. The Pragmatists' commitment to epistemic holism and their instrumentalist views of meaning and inquiry lead them to deny both claims. They have no naturalistically acceptable explication. Statements have no “intrinsic” content and no epistemic value in isolation. There is no way to assess a belief without knowing where and how it is used, for this determines what it says. Cognitive merit is earned by accruing epistemic values. These epistemic values are theory-relative, measured holistically, and not permanently fixed. Cognitive merit can be determined only in the course of inquiry, and evaluations will change as inquiry advances. Such relativity or mutability is not an indication of subjectivity. Evaluations of merit that are constrained by the practices and normative principles of inquiry are *ipso facto* objective. We have no better standard of objectivity.

Dewey puts matters thus: “*things and events* are the material and objects of inquiry, and propositions are *means* in inquiry, so that as conclusions of given inquiry they become means of carrying on further inquiry. Like other means they are modified and improved in the course of use.”²¹ Dewey and James allow that there are contexts where it is appropriate, even mandatory, to posit propositions having fixed content. “I do not say that for certain logical purposes it may not be useful to treat propositions as absolute entities, with truth and falsity inside of them respectively” [“Two English Critics,” in *MT*, 317]. “For the technical purposes of formal logic an

assumption that every proposition is of itself, or intrinsically, either true or false may not do harm. But it is the last view an empiricist can possibly take who is concerned with truth and falsity as having *existential* application.”²²

Pragmatism sacrifices immutable truth for a more realistic account of inquiry and the evolution of concepts and truth conditions. Representations are instruments for organizing the world, and “agreement” relationships are in continual flux, always subject to renegotiation when faced with recalcitrant experience. Conceptual content is ambulatory, not saltatory. And for the most part science itself proceeds apace unconcerned with the differences in semantic theory used to analyze its practice. According to the Pragmatists, there is no need to appeal to realist semantics or realist truth to explain inquiry and the successes of science.²³

Critics respond that pragmatic truth cannot possibly be a substitute for their conception of truth. There are facts that hold of “real” truth, truth proper, that do not hold of pragmatic truth. James’s position is that whatever is correct and significant in these common sense characterizations of truth can be captured in pragmatic terms. Consider briefly the following popular “counter-examples” and possible pragmatic responses.

CRITIC: There are many truths about the world that we will never know and have no way of finding out.

PRAGMATIST: We saw above that Peirce’s response to this is that the critic’s charge is “unphilosophical” and of no particular significance to inquiry. Undoubtedly, many possible beliefs will never be entertained but if proposed could have been verified. If there were no way in principle to find evidence pro or con a belief, it would be eliminated from consideration by the Pragmatic Maxim. Yet there is no way in principle to rule out the possibility of evidence being uncovered that supports those beliefs that do pass the Maxim’s scrutiny.

CRITIC: Some of our beliefs are false and will never be discovered to be so.

PRAGMATIST: All beliefs are fallible. Which will survive and which will be abandoned is a separate issue. Accepted beliefs are replaced when they are no longer found satisfactory. A false belief may be kept on because we have no reason to doubt it, or if we do, it passes all tests we employ to dislodge it.

CRITIC: If a belief is true, it would be true even if no one believed it.

PRAGMATIST: Countless relations obtain there which nobody experiences as obtaining . . . if we take the universe as “fitting,” countless coats “fit” backs, and countless boots “fit” feet, on which they are not practically “fitted” . . . In the same way countless opinions “fit” realities and countless truths are valid, tho no thinker ever thinks them. [“Pragmatic Account of Truth and Its Misunderstandings,” in *MT*, 276]²⁴

Some true beliefs will never be adopted, because they are never entertained (see response to first criticism) or because they are unsupported or incompatible with the best but fallible theories we do devise.

Realists find pragmatic substitute-truth analyses unsatisfactory. It does not capture principles their intuitions tell them are “constitutive” of real truth. Realists, James says, think “it impossible for truth to form itself authentically out of the life of opinion” (“Abstractionism and Relativism,” in *MT*, 311]. Pragmatists see no way of meeting all realist demands while providing a realistic explanation of the nature of language and inquiry. They admit that if you start off with a realist mindset, you will find a pragmatic construction of truth a non-starter. The Pragmatists think this mindset must be rejected, if one is to come up with a successful account of the “go” of truth.

In its actual employment, “*The true’ to put it briefly is only the expedient in the way of thinking . . . and expedient in the long run and on the whole course; for what meets expediently all the experience in sight won’t necessarily meet all farther experiences equally satisfactorily*” [*P*, 106]. “Of course if you take satisfactoriness concretely, as something felt by you now, and if, by truth, you mean truth taken abstractly and in the long run, you cannot make them equate, for it is notorious that the temporarily satisfactory is often false” [“Humanism and Truth,” in *MT*, 220]. James does allow that we do have use for an “abstract” notion of truth as an ideal. And as he explains in Lecture VII, he also agrees (with many current disquotationalists) that we have a use for this idea in stating generalizations about all the “trues.”

In the final paper of *The Meaning of Truth*, James brings his pragmatic account of language, truth, and inquiry to bear in questioning the substance and significance of the problems his critics pose. Below are excerpts from this piece.

ANTI-PRAG: . . . Do you say there is a truth even in cases where it shall never be known?

- PRAGMATIST: Indeed I do, provided you let me hold consistently to my own conception of truth. You [Anti-Prag.] also believe . . . that there is such a truth, even in cases where it shall never be known?
- ANTI-PRAG: I do indeed.
- PRAGMATIST: Pray then inform me in what according to you, this truth regarding the unknown consists . . . what relation does it bear to the reality of which it holds?
- ANTI-PRAG: How do you mean, "what relation"? It holds *of* it, of course it knows it, it represents it.
- PRAGMATIST: But I thought that we had agreed that no knower of it or any idea representing it was to be supposed.
- ANTI-PRAG: Sure enough!
- PRAGMATIST: Then I beg you again tell me in what this truth consists all by itself, this *tertium quid* intermediate between facts *per se* on the one hand, and all knowledge of them, actual or potential, on the other.
- ANTI-PRAG: . . . Isn't it enough that it *is true* that the facts are so-and-so . . .
- PRAGMATIST: . . . but I do ask you whether your phrase that "it is true that" the facts are so-and-so really means anything really additional to the bare *being so-and-so* of the facts themselves.
- ANTI-PRAG: It seems to mean more than the bare being of the facts. It is sort of a mental equivalent of them . . .
- PRAGMATIST: . . . may I ask where this truth is found?
- ANTI-PRAG: . . . There is no "where" – it simply obtains . . .
- PRAGMATIST: Not in anyone's mind?
- ANTI-PRAG: No, . . . no actual knower is to be assumed.
- PRAGMATIST: . . . But are you sure that no notion of a potential or ideal knower has anything to do with forming this strangely elusive idea of the facts in your mind?
- ANTI-PRAG: Of course if there being a truth concerning the facts, that truth is what the ideal knower would know . . . But it is not him first and then it; it is it first and then him . . .
- PRAGMATIST: But you still leave me terribly puzzled as to the status of this so-called truth . . . It looks to me terribly dubious . . . ["A Dialogue," in *MT*, 321–332]

It should be stressed that all the Pragmatists approve of treating truth as an ideal. Pragmatic fallibilism entails that any belief may be mistaken, and pragmatic anti-skepticism indicates there is no reason to preclude the

possibility we can correct mistakes and come up with something better. "To admit, as we pragmatists do, that we are liable to correction (even tho we may not expect it) *involves* the use on our part of an ideal standard" ["Abstractionism and Relativismus," in *MT*, 308]. "No relativist who ever actually walked the earth has denied a regulative character in his own thinking of the notion of absolute truth . . . Truth absolute . . . means an ideal set of formulations towards which all opinions may in the long run of experience be expected to converge" ["Abstractionism and Relativismus," in *MT*, 309].

James thought that Peirce's conception of absolute truth, as an ideal, was not much different from his own. Similarly, Dewey maintains Peirce's idea of convergence is not to be understood in terms of inquiry being directed or guided toward a fixed, pre-established Reality or in terms of any "allusion to the 'last man left alive'" but to "Peirce's definition of truth *in terms of continued inquiry*."²⁵ The further a problem is studied the more likely we are to find a satisfactory, perhaps permanently satisfactory, solution.

James thinks it a mistake to regard the "trues" in isolation, cut free from their place in theory. He recognizes, however, that for many it is hard to abandon their commitment to truth eternal and immutable. In *Pragmatism*, he offers them some solace: "absolutely true" can be pragmatically characterized as "what no farther experience ever alters, [it] is an ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine our temporary truths will some day converge" [*P*, 106–107]. At the same time, what James gives with one hand he takes back with the other. He mockingly says that absolute truth "runs on all fours with the perfectly wise man and with the absolutely complete experience" [*P*, 107]. The disembodied ideal observer with no interests and problems to solve is neither a good idealization in ethics nor in science.

James is also clear that "believes true" does not imply "is true." As a fallibilist, he recognizes that we are never in a position to gainsay the fact that today's truths are eternal. Absolute truth is an abstract idealization. In most contexts it may be enough to think of absolute truths as stabilized beliefs that we venture to suppose have permanent or eternal staying power – a prediction that they will not encounter experiences sufficient to overturn them. Nevertheless, James believes that pragmatic truth does all the work that actually needs to be done. As for the rest, he questions whether the additional tasks are anything but make-work. Proponents of classical semantic truth are seeking solutions to problems of their own making. Their goal may be lofty in purpose and intellectually pure, but it is actually

unrealistic. It is inspired by intuitions of truth and semantics relations that are neither found in nor necessary to account for empirical inquiry. Once these intuitions are unshakably in place, however, a pragmatic theory of truth must be seen as a failure.

In sum, James's response to critics of his theory of truth are the following: (1) he is not trying to define "truth," but to explain the "go" of truth; (2) his position is compatible with the everyday reading of the claim truth is correspondence with reality; (3) as firm as many of our intuitions about agreement with reality may be, they are otiose or too vague to be useful; (4) the "go" of truth suggests that it is not inappropriate to hold that truth "happens," "becomes," "grows," and is "mutable"; (5) if people find pragmatic truth intolerable, they can interpret him as not explicating their own favorite concept of "truth." "Since you love the word 'true' so, and since you despise so the concrete workings of our ideas . . . keep the word 'truth' for the saltatory and incomprehensible relation you care so much for, and I will of thoughts that know their objects in an intelligible sense that they are 'truthful'" ["The Existence of Julius Caesar," in *MT*, 288].

Dewey offers a similar summary of his views in a dialogue between a teacher and pupil:

Naturally, the pragmatist claims his theory to be true in the pragmatic sense of truth; it works, it clears up difficulties, removes obscurities, puts individuals into more experimental, less dogmatic, less arbitrarily skeptical relations to life; aligns philosophic with scientific method; does away with self-made problems of epistemology; clarifies and reorganizes logical theory, etc. He is quite content to have the truth of his theory consist in its working in these various ways, and to leave to the intellectualist the proud possession of a static, unanalyzable, unverifiable, unworking property.²⁶

The Pragmatists were aware that their efforts to convince opponents to come over to their side were and would continue to be an uphill battle. It is not easy to pry off the "philosophies" people bring to issues of deep concern. Thus James ends his "Dialogue" in true pragmatic spirit.

ANTI-PRAG: . . . Truth is truth: and never will I degrade it by identifying it with low pragmatic particulars in the way you propose.

PRAGMATIST: Well, my dear antagonist, I hardly hope to convert an eminent intellectualist and logician like you; so enjoy, as long as you live, your own ineffable conception. ["A Dialogue," in *MT*, 325]

Appendix: Necessary Truths

Given James's account of truth and his belief that all scientific hypotheses are contingent, it seems puzzling that in Lecture VI and elsewhere he talks of the important role "necessary truths" play in the conduct of inquiry. He says these hypotheses do not require sense verification, and they can be known a priori. Each of these claims appears on the surface to be not only strange, but plainly inconsistent with a pragmatic account of inquiry. For James, as a fallibilist, no hypothesis is certain, and any may be given up. In addition, James's epistemic and meaning holism leave no room for truths that are necessary because they are truths of meaning, and he explicitly rejects both essences and an analytic/synthetic distinction.

Is James simply inconsistent, or is there a way to read him that avoids contradiction? James thinks that his willingness to countenance necessary truths is not at odds or incompatible with his core pragmatic convictions. His "necessary truths" have, in fact, much in common with Peirce's "regulative assumptions" and Dewey's "leading principles." James's brief remarks about these special truths in *Pragmatism* do little at all to clarify his position. His account of them in Chapter XXVIII of *The Principles of Psychology* goes a long way to solving the puzzle. In brief, James thinks necessary truths are not necessary in any metaphysical sense; they are preconditions for applying intellectual schemes that have proven useful in categorizing and ordering experience.

Understanding James's account of this chapter, in turn, requires a closer examination of his discussion of the distinction he draws between concepts and conceptions. This he has provided earlier in Chapter XII of *Principles*, and even here his exposition is not straightforward. James's main goal in this chapter is to put distance between his own empiricism and associationist empiricist doctrines. Associationists claim that true beliefs reflect regularities in the order of experience and are acquired on the basis of our experiencing these co-occurrences. James argues that this is not possible. We must carve out regularities from an otherwise disorderly flow of experience. This requires us to interpolate, extrapolate, ignore, link, highlight, and in general "mold" experiences into usable groupings. Organization is not inherent in experience. The regularities we carve out are not regularities in the order of experience. They are patterns in experience that we find useful to isolate and highlight. Regularities emerge in inquiry and are dependent on our developing systems of categorization. "*The relations*

of resemblance or difference among things have nothing to do with the time- and space-order in which we may experience the latter" [PP II, 641]. Experience does not come prepackaged or categorized; rather we construct an array of intellectual tools to do the organizing.

In his discussion of necessary truths, James will try to show that their necessity in the end rests on judgments of comparison – comparisons of resemblance, similarity, sameness, and difference. Although such judgments are influenced by experience, they are not based on the orderliness of experience. James's attempt to ground necessary truths in terms of his account of comparisons is interesting, complicated, and not always convincing. For my purposes, it is not important to trace the route from comparison to necessity in order to understand James's account of necessary truths. I will focus instead on his account of the nature and function of concepts.

As recounted in my discussion of Lecture VI, James is committed to the idea that concepts are not static and evolve along no prefixed path. Yet in this chapter of the *Principles* and in other writings, he claims: "the world of conception, or things intended to be thought about, stands stiff and immutable, like Plato's Realm of Ideas" [PP I, 462] The two positions seem straightforwardly contradictory, until one pays attention to his distinction between conception, things *intended* by thought, and concepts. Strictly speaking, the fixity he sees is not in concepts, but in the way we use them in thought and communication. In such contexts, he argues, the mind not only can conceive of meaning and reference as fixed, but it must. During ongoing deliberation we assume stability; we commit ourselves to using a concept in a single way throughout. An assumption of language stability is also needed to communicate; otherwise we would constantly be at risk of talking past each other. There can be no coherent thought or talk if in the process of either a concept is taken to have a different meaning from one occurrence to another. Hence we must stipulate or impose fixity for the now, in order to engage in successful deliberation and communication.²⁷

James's distinction between the world of conceiving and the world of concepts is also central to his criticism of Hegel. Hegel, he says, does think correctly that concepts evolve, but for Hegel they unfold along predetermined paths. They follow a natural course of development. Their evolution, one might say, is "inherent in their genes." Concepts are constructed, but the lines along which they develop are prefigured. Their endpoints are predestined. Looked at teleologically, they do not change. James rejects this account of the development of concepts. For him, concepts evolve in the

course of inquiry and the path taken is underdetermined. When concepts change it is because we actively reshape them to meet new needs and insights. They are not propelled forward by an inner logic.²⁸

As he has argued in his criticism of associationists, in order to make our way in the world we must develop concepts that organize experience. James locates his necessary truths in the principles of organization so constructed. He insists, however, that these principles are not Cartesian innate ideas, the rationalists' *a priori* or Kantian categories. They are not necessary preconditions of perception or cognition, and they cannot be analytic truths. What then could they be? James's answer is that they are presuppositions for the employment of useful cognitive instruments of organization that are needed for the conduct of inquiry. There is no reason to think that such instruments will be useful everywhere and forever. And it would be sheer fantasy to think that if they can be employed successfully now, they will be the instruments of choice forever or in all possible worlds.

James offers examples of what he has in mind by sketching how such principles function in the application of systems of classification, logic, arithmetic, and geometry. Consider first the use of judgments of less and more in classification. If we find that A is more than B and B is more than C, then it can be known *a priori* that A is more than C. The conclusion does not depend on the meaning of the terms or on our experiencing past less or more regularities. Transitivity is a presupposition of the use of certain ordering schemes based on less or more comparisons. James, though, insists the judgment that A is more than C is necessary only as long as the principles underlying the particular ordering scheme remains constant, "*so long as we stick to the definite purpose in view*" [PP II, 649]. We do not compare things *tout court*; we compare them with respect to some feature or property of interest. Less or more classifications have proven themselves to be useful in cognition. It is the commitment to or stipulation of transitivity that is built into the comparison scheme that that generates the necessary truths.

Such necessary truths are not in any significant way epistemically or metaphysically privileged, nor are they analytic. We construct schemes to facilitate thinking about domains of interest. James's necessary truths are presuppositions of the fruitful application of the principles of organization of such schemes. In opposition to the rationalists' *a priori*, James's organizational schemes are not independent of experience. They are developed by us to cope with experience. They are human-made, but they work only if we pay heed to the requirements of their application. Their necessity

flows from our *intention* to employ a scheme according to its rules of application.

James turns next to the “pure” sciences of logic, mathematics, and geometry. In the case of logic, he argues that in order to apply the rules of inference certain restrictions must be placed on how the concepts and terms are employed. Their use has to conform to what he calls the principle of mediate subsumption: “The same can be substituted for the same in any mental operation.” “Apart from purpose, of course, no realities are absolutely and exactly the same” [PP II, 650]. In logical reasoning if a predicate M is taken to mean P in the premises, it must do so wherever it occurs in the derivation and conclusion. Such stability of meaning and reference must be assumed for the sake of argument.

The principle is not based on experiences of past regularities; rather it is a regulative principle of the practice. It is “necessary” in that within our system of inference we do not allow for exceptions to the rule. “Instead . . . of correcting the principle . . . by cases, we correct the cases by the principle . . . if the thing we named an M has not M’s properties, then we are either mistaken in calling it an M or mistaken in M’s properties; or else that it is no longer M, but has changed” [PP II, 650]. Adherence to the principle of mediate subsumption is a precondition for the application of our logic. It is not a truth of reason, language, or the structure of thought. It is a prerequisite of instruments of inference that we have constructed to help deal with experience.

Arithmetic provides another example of what I think James has in mind when he talks of necessary truths. If a 50-pound object is added to a 100-pound object, the combined weight is 150 pounds. It sums according to the rules of arithmetic. By contrast, if we mix two liquids, one 50 and the other 100 degrees in temperature, the resultant temperature is not 150. Temperature does not sum according to the rules of arithmetic. This failure of temperatures to sum is an empirical fact, but not one that leads us to abandon or challenge the addition rule of arithmetic. Instead, we restrict application of arithmetic to quantities that behave according to its rules.

James offers further support for his position with an example from geometry. Euclidean geometry works, but only on the assumption that it is being applied to a Euclidean space. He notes that if space were warped and non-Euclidian, Euclidian geometry would not apply to it. Were there then no other use for Euclidian geometry, it would fall by the wayside. He believes, though, that it is highly unlikely it will be abandoned, since it will remain useful in everyday thought and action. Still, in those contexts in

which it is employed we must stipulate that the domain or universe of discourse in question is a Euclidian space.

James calls attention to other situations where useful theories are shielded from simple empirical refutation. Many fruitful theories are formulated in terms of idealizations. These idealizations do not hold strictly of the objects encountered in the physical world. Gases are not perfectly elastic. There are no frictionless surfaces, and there are no point masses free from all other forces in the way required for Newton's laws to hold strictly. These mismatches between the actual and the ideal are tolerated, because the idealizations simplify, organize, and smooth the rough edges. They play an important role in the development and application of theories, and we intend or stipulate idealized domains for them to apply to.

In fact, James thinks it is illuminating to see all the pure sciences as idealizations. These systems of organization can be employed only if the idealizations presupposed and embedded in their application are respected. James believes that this account of "necessary truths" is compatible with both his empiricism and fallibilism. "*If any real terms ever do fit [these] scheme[s], they will obey [their] laws; whether they do is a question as to nature's facts, the answer to which can only be empirically ascertained*" [PP II, 650].

Here is how James summarizes his position in "Humanism and Truth":

If now it be asked, if triangles, squares, square roots, genera and the like, are but improvised human "artefacts," their properties and relations can be so promptly known to be "eternal," the humanistic answer is easy . . . We can make them "timeless" by expressly decreeing that on *the things we mean* time shall exert no altering effect, that they are intentionally and it may be fictitiously abstracted from every corrupting real associate or condition. But relations between invariant objects will themselves be invariant. [MT, 218]

The truth itself meanwhile was originally a copy of nothing; it was only a relation directly perceived to obtain between two artificial mental things. [MT, 219]

To claim they are artificial, however, does not mean their development is unconstrained in practice. Mental conceptions are artificial, but only in the sense that all concepts and conceptualizations are constructions. Not any old constructed concept will be useful. The concepts worth constructing are those that organize experience and allow us to better confront the intellectual and physical environment.

Dewey's first principles play a similar role in his epistemology. Dewey assigns them a special place, although he too rejects necessity, essences, and

the analytic/synthetic distinction. He summarizes his own position in much the same terms as James:

The character of the generalization of the relation of “first principle” and conclusions (in mathematical and the physical science) may be illustrated by the meaning of first principles in logic, say of identity, contradiction and excluded middle. According to one view, such principles represent the ultimate invariant properties of the *objects* with which methods of inquiry are concerned, and to which inquiry must conform. According to the view here expressed, they represent conditions that have been ascertained during the conduct of continued inquiry to be involved in its own successful pursuit. The two statements may seem to *amount* to the same thing. Theoretically, there is a radical difference between them. For the second position implies, as has already been stated, that the principles are generated in the very process of control of continued inquiry, while according to the other view they are *a priori* principles fixed antecedently to inquiry and conditioning it *ab extra*.²⁹

Dewey goes on to say:

One of the more general demands to be met by inquiry is the following. “If anything has a certain property, and whatsoever has this property has a certain other property then the thing in question has this other property.” This logical “law” is a stipulation. If you are going to inquire in a way that meets the standards of inquiry, you must proceed in a way which observes the rule . . . A postulate is thus neither arbitrary nor externally *a priori*. It is not the former because it issues from the relation of means the end to be reached. It is not the latter, because it is not imposed upon inquiry from without, but as an acknowledgement of that to which the undertaking of inquiry commits us . . . While it is derived from what has been involved in inquiries that have been successful in the past, it imposes a condition to be satisfied in future inquiries, until results of such inquiries show reason for modifying it.³⁰

Notes

- 1 J. Dewey, with A. F. Bentley, *Knowing and the Known*, in *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 16: *1949–1952*, ed. J. A. Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1991), 39.
- 2 Dewey with Bentley, *Knowing and the Known*, 40.

- 3 In *Knowing and the Known* Dewey and Bentley offer a detailed examination of the use of the notion of a proposition in semantics along with criticism of the semantic theories of Russell, Carnap, Lewis, and others. See, especially, pp. 8–45.
- 4 Dewey with Bentley, *Knowing and the Known*, 42. Misak argues that Peirce too would have been comfortable with James's and Dewey's position: "Certainly he [Peirce] would go along with the claim that 'the earth is flat' is true if and only if the earth is flat. But he would quarrel with anyone who wanted to make such a thought the centerpiece of a substantive account of truth" (C. J. Misak, *Truth and the End of Inquiry: A Peircian Account of Truth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 127). What she says Peirce would also have found missing is a pragmatic elucidation of the relationship between truth and inquiry.
- 5 See K. Scharp, "William James' Critique of Intellect" (MA thesis, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 1998).
- 6 J. Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1960), ch. 10. For criticism see M. White, "Desire and Desirability: A Rejoinder to a Posthumous Reply by John Dewey," *Journal of Philosophy*, 92 (1996), 229–242.
- 7 J. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938), 13.
- 8 Dewey, *Logic*, 17. A look at Goodman's constructivist analysis of the relationship between inductive practices and the norms can, I think, help us to understand better the Pragmatists' position. For example, in discussing the nature of scientific laws, Goodman argues that a statement is lawlike if it is projectible, and projectible if it is lawlike. Lawlike generalizations are those we are in the habit of projecting, and we project those generalizations we take to be lawlike. It makes no difference which way you put it. "Projectible" and "lawlike" are not synonymous; but the ideas evolve together. Undoubtedly, the tendency to project some hypotheses and not others comes first temporally. In time, these inductive habits are modified, simplified, codified, and begin to serve as articulate norms. The process is ongoing. As inquiry develops we attempt to keep the cases and principles in balance, adjusting one to the demands of the other. See N. Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, 3rd edn. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill).

Goodman's account of the relationship between "natural kinds" and entrenchment takes a similar path. Kinds are natural because they become entrenched, and as they become entrenched they start to seem natural. The explication can go in either direction. "Natural" and "entrenched" are not synonyms; the properties feed off one another. John Rawls notes in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 20 that the picture is the same in the case of ethical norms. He says that his constructivist appeal to reflective equilibrium is of a piece with Goodman's account of the justification of the rules of induction.

- 9 C. S. Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 1, ed. N. Houser and C. Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 139–140.
- 10 J. Dewey, "The Problem of Truth," in *The Essential Dewey*, vol. 2, ed. L. Hickman and T. Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 129.
- 11 Readers are likely to be taken aback by his reference in this and elsewhere to constraints put on inquiry by "necessary truths," truths that do not depend on sense verification. In my discussion of the Appendix to this lecture I attempt to explain James's particular account of these truths and why he does not see them as incompatible with his pragmatic convictions.
- 12 "What is it to be Linguistic Sign or Name?" in *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 16: 1949–1952, ed. J. A. Boydston (Carbondale: Southern University Press, 1991), 304–305.
- 13 Dewey, "What is it to be Linguistic Sign or Name?" 306.
- 14 Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, 126.
- 15 "Propositions, Warranted Assertability and Truth," in *The Essential Dewey*, vol. 2, ed. L. Hickman and T. Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 211. A more in-depth examination and treatment of these matters can be found in D. Boersema, *Pragmatism and Reference* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), where he provides a detailed account of James's and Dewey's reasons for rejecting causal and related semantic theories that assume the fixity of reference divorced from theory.
- 16 In my discussion of the Appendix to this lecture I elaborate on James's views about the nature of semantic impositions by intention.
- 17 See M. Wilson, *Wandering Significance: An Essay on Conceptual Behavior* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) for an insightful, plethora of examples of such instability. See also M. Liston, "Externalist Determinants of Reference," *Protosociology* [special issue on Externalism] (1998), 173–215. There are also a number of less technical books and articles that, for example, discuss the changes in the concept "day," the evolving understanding of the concept "gene," and more recently what counts as an instance of the concept "planet."
- 18 Compare Quine's discussion of the changes in empirical significance of a sentence S in light of new information C. He asks whether such changes should be characterized as adopting C and keeping the meaning of S constant or "couldn't we just as well have said instead, that on acquiring C men have found it convenient to change the very 'meaning' of S . . . I suggest that we may say either; even historical clairvoyance would reveal no distinction, though it reveal all stages of the acquisition of C, since meaning can evolve *pari passu*" (*Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), 38). Or consider Howard Stein's take on the issue in "Yes, but . . . : Some Skeptical Remarks on Realism and Anti-Realism," *Dialectica*, 43 (1989), 57: "Why

- should we say that the old term 'ether' failed to 'refer'? – and that the term 'atom' did refer? What that is, except for the superficial reason that the word 'atom' is still used in text books and the word 'ether' not?"
- 19 "Propositions, Warranted Assertability, and Truth," 206–207.
 - 20 R. B. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 298.
 - 21 J. Dewey, "Experience, Knowledge, and Value: A Rejoinder," in P. Schilpp and L. A. Hahn, eds., *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1989), 573.
 - 22 Dewey, "Experience, Knowledge, and Value," 574.
 - 23 See Stein, "Yes, but . . ."
 - 24 The three criticisms are quotations from T. Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 30. Uncritical reliance on the idea that propositions and beliefs have fixed, timeless content, independent of their ambulatory evolution in inquiry often obscures the problematic assumptions underlying various versions of these criticisms.
 - 25 Schilpp and Hahn, eds., *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, 574.
 - 26 J. Dewey, "A Short Catechism Concerning Truth," in *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997), 164.
 - 27 It is not possible, nor obviously profitable, here to try to compare James's idea of stipulating fixity of concepts to current views of rigid designators. But it is worth mentioning that there may be some interesting connections between James's idea and a claim such as S. Kripke's that "A possible world is *given by the descriptive content we associate with it* . . . 'Possible worlds' are *stipulated*, not discovered by powerful telescopes" (*Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 44).
 - 28 It remains questionable whether the position James is criticizing is correctly attributed to Hegel.
 - 29 J. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938), 11–12. See also chapter 17.
 - 30 Dewey, *Logic*, 17. See also *PP* II, 635. For more on the Pragmatists' account of "necessary" principles see S. Hook, *The Metaphysics of Pragmatism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996), ch. 3 and E. Nagel, "Some Leading Principles of Professor Dewey's Logical Theory," *Journal of Philosophy*, 36 (1939), 576–581. The debate between Carnap and Quine over ontological tolerance, internal versus external questions, and the analytic/synthetic distinction may hinge on similar issues. Perhaps Carnap's frameworks can be thought of as the source analytic or necessary truths in the Pragmatists' sense elaborated above. Adopting a framework does not depend on seeing its presuppositions of application having some special metaphysical status due to essences or analyticity. The qualms Quine has with Carnap's account of analyticity within a semantic framework is another matter.

Worldmaking (Lecture VII)

In this lecture James explores in more detail claims he has made throughout *Pragmatism* that truth and reality are not ready-made, but emerge with and through inquiry. He relates his views to those of humanism, a position espoused by Schiller and one that James finds most congenial with his own.¹ Even those sympathetic to a pragmatic approach to truth and pluralism tend to jump ship when confronted with James's claim that we play a role in making reality. I myself do not shy from following this path, but my goal here is to explicate the Pragmatist's position, not offer detailed defenses.² I do think, however, that whether it is James's, Dewey's, or more recent versions of the world-making thesis, as for example Goodman's, much of the criticism misses the point of the claim. The misunderstanding results largely from conflating a pragmatic world-making thesis with various forms of Idealism and with more recent sociology of knowledge or social constructionist models of inquiry.

As in previous lectures, James begins by summarizing where he thinks the issues stand. He believes he has shown "that the question 'what is truth?' is no real question" [*P*, 115–116]. Yet in the very same sentence, he reiterates what he says in Lecture VI that *the* truth in the abstract is a useful notion. It can serve as an ideal – a reminder that our present views may turn out to be unsatisfactory and that with effort we may be able to do better. In Lecture VII, James explores another use of the truth idea. It provides a means to refer to all the "trues." *The Truth*, he says, functions as a summary of cases, as do the terms "*the* Latin Language" or "*the* Law." We have, for example, a large number of legal laws on the books and typically refer to

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them collectively as “*the Law*.” This does not mean that there is some singular thing the phrase names over and above the totality of laws. Accepted laws neither correspond to, nor is their development constrained by, a ready-made natural Law or the Law of God. Individual laws are constructed to handle important situations and problems we face living together in society. *The Law*, though, is not timeless or frozen in time. As society and societal conditions change, good law must change with them.

New laws are added to the system when the stock of those in force runs into trouble dealing with experience. Sometimes all that is needed to fix things is to tweak the old. Sometimes the old runs into such deep trouble that it must be scrapped, and sometimes the current laws just do not speak to the issues at hand. The distinction between when tweaking counts as amending a law and when it counts as adopting a new one under the old label is neither sharp nor of epistemic significance. Changes in *the Law* occur in response to new experiences and evolving conditions of life. Acceptance of a new law depends on its overall fit with the body of law now in force. Conservatism, in the guise of precedence, is of paramount importance. Once incorporated into *the Law*, the new and old interplay and additional consequences flow to and from each.

James offers a similar analysis of *the Truth*. We accept individual beliefs as true, because they are in tune with experience and satisfy our inquiry-based interests and the epistemic principles that are the norms of inquiry. *The truth* is not the name of an abstract entity, and the “trues” are not accepted because they correspond or get closer to *the Truth*. The trues are those beliefs that emerge successfully in the process of inquiry, in short, the beliefs that are found to work. When, however, a belief is challenged and serious doubt is raised, there must be a response. Sometimes the verdict is that the belief no longer works and it is accordingly labeled “false.” Sometimes the belief can be adjusted so as to survive and hence retain its status as a true.

“Truth grafts itself onto previous truths, modifying it in the process” [*P*, 116]. Acceptance depends on overall fit with the body of accepted beliefs. Once accepted into the system, new truths have consequences for the beliefs already there and vice versa. Thus the content of both new and old truths are modified. When an old truth is found unsatisfactory and cannot be repaired it is rejected and labeled “false.” When it remains on the books but is amended or applied differently, it makes little difference if the change is conceived as a rejection of the old or as an improvement to it. All this is the “go” of truth.

Many critics have no complaint with James's law-truth analogy up to this point, but they argue that there remains a most significant difference between *the Law* and *the Truth* that he ignores. Legal laws are humanly constructed. We do make them, and in that sense they are clearly mind- or response-dependent. They do not exist until formulated and adopted by a society. Truths are different. We propose theories as we propose laws, but what makes theories true and suitable to adopt is not up to us. As Mr. Bradley says, "true thought 'must correspond to a determinate being which it cannot be said to make'" ["Humanism and Truth," in *MT*, 210].

Truths are true whether or not they are formulated, accepted, or rejected. We have no say in their being true. Truth depends on correspondence to a mind-independent ontology, not to a reality we construct. By contrast, critics argue that James's humanism is a thesis of "wishing makes it so." We can make the world any way we would prefer it to be.³ If, however, the world is simply how people find it pleasing to claim it is, the idea of truth has no role to play in serious inquiry. For truth unconstrained and completely mind-dependent is not truth at all. Subjectivism would rule, and there would be no distinction between fact and fiction.

The Pragmatists deny that such disastrous results follow from their world-making thesis. That truth emerges from human inquiry and cognitive satisfactions is fully compatible with objectivity. The trues are constructed, but their construction is constrained because rational inquiry is constrained. There are resisting forces, and there are many. They are the realities James has adumbrated earlier: sensations (over which we have no control), the so-called "necessary truths," the body of accepted beliefs, and the epistemic values of conservatism, consistency, simplicity, and more. This resistance is all the "Reality" needed to prevent rampant relativism. Truths per se are not objective or subjective, they simply *are*. These predicates of praise or condemnation apply to inquiry, not beliefs and statements. Inquiry that follows the dictates of the established norms is objective. This is what in practice it means to be objective.

The claim that the operative constraints on hypothesis acceptance are imposed by Reality adds nothing significant. It offers no better explanation of scientific inquiry than would the claim that legal inquiry aims to uncover laws that correspond to the eternal *real* legal code – fully determinate, "out there," or in Plato's heaven. There is no clear notion of Reality as it is *given* independent of how it is *taken*. It is not possible to assign content to the former without the constructive help of the latter. What Reality is is a function of what we "make" of it. Reality may be "everything" that exists, but

“everything” is not a satisfactory answer to ontological questions. It is contentless and so can serve as neither the goal nor the guide of inquiry.

The Pragmatists all admit that there is a perfectly good, everyday sense of “making” that precludes our participation in world-making. Pragmatically what this means is

that if our own particular thought were annihilated the reality would still be there in some shape, tho possibly it might be a shape that would lack something that our thought supplies. That reality is “independent” means that there is something in every experience that escapes arbitrary control . . . it coerces our attention . . . There is a push, an urgency within our very experience against which we are on the whole powerless. [“Humanism and Truth,” in *MT*, 211]

The case is like a snowball’s growth, due as it is to the distribution of the snow on the one hand, and to the successive pushes of the boys on the other, with these factors co-determining each other incessantly. [*P*, 108]

Inquiry is constrained by the realities of inquiry. The Reality posit is superfluous, saddling us with metaphysical and epistemic problems that are better ignored than confronted.

In Lecture VII James offers constellations as example of what he means when he proposes that we participate in making the world.⁴ We look into the night sky and see a bunch of lights and matter. We pick out some of the heavenly stuff, certain stars, and group them into constellations. It is obvious here that we are involved in determining which stars are collected together and individuated as particular constellations. The world, for instance, did not come with just this set of seven stars grouped into the constellation the Big Dipper. That we see a dipper is partly owing to the heavenly location of the stars, partly because we mistakenly perceive all the stars to be on a plane, and partly because of our familiarity with kitchen utensils. Still, once we construct a constellation by conceptually linking these particular stars and naming the whole, we can stand back and let the truths about the constellation fall where they may. Statements about the total area, mass, location, age, and the number of stars in the Big Dipper are objective facts that are either true or false. These facts, however, are as much invented as discovered, since they emerge from decisions to group and label just these seven stars and not others as constituting the Big Dipper.

James’s construction of the Big Dipper by *intellectual* work is what he means when he claims that we “make” constellations. He is talking about

cognitive making, not physical making. We did not collect stars and place them in the sky in the shape of a dipper. James says explicitly that the Big Dipper, that arrangement of seven stars, existed long before we or anything else walked the earth. Likewise, the “trues” about the Big Dipper were “facts” about the state of the universe millions of years in the past. They were facts then and remain facts now. When we group heavenly bodies into constellations we do not assume that the constellations, as we delineate them, did not precede us temporally in being. Indeed, as explained in Lecture VI, we insist they have the history that astronomy has brought to light. If they did not exist way back then, our astronomical theory would not be scientifically satisfactory.

Take the “great bear” or “dipper” constellation in the heavens. We call it by that name, we count the stars and call them seven, we say they were seven before they were counted and we say that whether anyone had ever noted the fact or not . . . Were they explicitly seven, explicitly bear-like before the human witness came? Surely nothing in the truth of the attributions drives us to think this. They were only implicitly or virtually what we call them, and we human witnesses first explicated them and made them “real” . . . But the stars (once the mind considers them) themselves dictate the result. The counting in no wise modifies their previous nature, and, they being what and where they are, the count cannot fall out differently. It could then *always* be made. *Never* could the number be questioned, *if the question once were raised*. [“Humanism and Truth,” in *MT*, 222]

One typical response to James’s constellation example is to admit that the choice of which stars constitute constellations is mind-dependent and in that sense made. But, as the argument goes, this is a minor concession, since the stars themselves exist and have existed independent of any cognitive intervention. The world-maker’s rejoinder is that what goes for constellations goes for stars. The heavens are full of all kinds of matter, congealed or dispersed, visible or invisible, long- or short-lived. Which assemblage of stuff is destined to be *the* stars, however, is not found in the stars. We set the boundaries and constitution of stars as we contribute to setting the boundary and constitution of constellations. Pointing or causal relations do not and cannot determine the principle of individuation that fixes the denotation of the term “star.” To use a demonstrative and proclaim *that* is a star, by itself, does not tell us *what* in Reality counts as star matter and what physical and temporal stuff falls within its boundaries. The criterion for determining the specific heavenly matter that has a claim to starhood

emerges in the development of theory. We play a role in deciding what it takes to be a star, as opposed to a planet, a comet, or junk.⁵

Decisions concerning the categorization of heavenly bodies are not arbitrary. Some groupings are useful for theoretical purposes, and some for more down to earth endeavors such as navigation. Other ways of grouping are possible, but they will emerge and stabilize only if they are needed to solve a problem that inquiry and experience make us confront. Reality in the form of sensations, "necessary" truths, and our stock of accepted beliefs provides the resistance that prevents us from adopting just any heavenly categorization scheme. This is the "friction" that insures we are not just spinning our wheels. Theory and ontology are co-dependent. We can with equal justice claim that true theories describe the world's ontology or that the world's ontology is what true theories say there is. But the truth is, there is no having one without the other. Thus James asks rhetorically "Does the river make the banks, or do the banks make the river?" and responds: "Just as impossible to separate the real from the human factors in the growth of cognitive experience" [P, 120].

James then goes on to ask, "What shall we call a *thing*?" and answers, "It seems quite arbitrary, for we carve out everything, just as we carve out constellations, to suit our human purposes" [P, 122]. "Arbitrary" here does not mean subjective or whimsical. It requires skill and hard work to carve things up in ways that meet human intellectual and physical needs. The construction of facts is never unconstrained, and the sensations imposed on us by the environment are among the most important checkpoints. One might be tempted to claim that the sensory input at least is not mind-dependent, but as discussed earlier, for James there is nothing given to inquiry until it is categorized. "You can't weed out the human contribution" [P, 122]. To think otherwise is to buy into the "myth of the given."

Perhaps the most pointed criticism of James's "making" thesis is that it is trivial. It amounts to little more than the claim that concepts are human inventions and are not found in the world. Everyone, of course, agrees that we make concepts and arbitrarily attach words to them by convention. Concepts are clearly mind-dependent. James agrees, but he thinks the criticism misses the point. For the challenge to be damaging there would have to be a substantive distinction between the meaning of concepts, something we contribute, and the facts of the matter, something we have no say in. James's account of inquiry and concept development, and his instrumentalist view of theory and language, challenge the existence of such a sharp dichotomy. Meaning and fact cannot be prised apart. Like rivers and river

banks, meanings are constrained by fact, and facts are constrained by meanings. The two may be disengaged for certain purposes, but the division will be tentative and dependent on context.

James traces the dispute between him and those who try to trivialize his world-making thesis to a difference between how he and they treat the subject/predicate distinction. His opponents argue that we construct the concepts and predicate them of a mind-independent subject, an object in Reality's ontology. James, by contrast, says that we make both the subject and the predicate. When we predicate properties of a constellation (e.g., the Big Dipper), we are applying the predicates to *something* we helped shape. Which predicates truly apply depends on how we construct the subject; the two go hand in hand. Although the subject of such predications are physically "out there" in the heavens untouched by human hands, making just those bits of heaven into a determinate subject, into a *what*, depends on cognitive grouping and labeling. We play a role in turning portions of the undifferentiated sky into useful things or kinds of things, and it is these things, as constructed, that are the subjects of predication. There are no "natural" objects or "natural" kinds in any robust epistemic or meta-physical sense.

When philosophers maintain that truth is correspondence with Reality, they are assuming that the things in the ontology of Reality are determinate objects, and that we then invent concepts to describe or reflect Reality as "it" is. But what is this "it" that our concepts must capture or correspond to? James believes that those who think there is a determinate ontology independent of any conceptions of it will be forced in the end to posit the thing-in-itself, propertyless stuff, substance, Being, or the like as the subject of categorization and description. Hence James concludes, "altho the stubborn fact remains that there *is* a sensible flux, what is *true of it* seems from first to last to be largely a matter of our own creation" [P, 122].⁶

In an effort to counter the claim that *everything* depends on cognitive construction, critics often raise the following dilemma. We cannot make something from nothing. Something must be there antecedently to serve as the building blocks. Thus there must be objects or things that exist prior to and independent of our initial acts of construction. This "something" is Reality, untouched by human hand or mind. James would agree that you cannot make something from nothing, but he would deny that this truism entails there is a unique ontologically basic stuff or matter underlying all construction. That you cannot make something from nothing does not imply that there is some one thing everything is made of.

But is this not the globe, the elephant, the tortoise over again? Must not something end by supporting itself? Humanism is willing to let finite experience be self-supporting. Somewhere being must immediately breast nonentity. Why may not the advancing front of experience, carrying its own satisfactions and dissatisfactions, cut against the black inane . . . And if reality genuinely grows, why may it not grow in these very determinations which here and now are made? ["Humanism and Truth," in *MT*, 221–222]⁷

James's response here is foreshadowed in his discussion of the One and the many. According to James, in constructing reality you can start with the One, the world as a whole and develop concepts that carve it into useful pieces. Alternatively, you can start with the world of "basic" objects and develop concepts that usefully group these elements. In addition, any intermediate set of primitives may do. In all cases there is something to serve as the building materials; nothing is made from nothing.

Construction can start with what there is on any accepted conceptualization of what there is. Construction is always a process of *reconstruction*. We start with anything that at a given stage of inquiry we are warranted to posit and see what we can make of it. And there can be any number of such "its." They all emerge from and are individuated by inquiry; they are not Reality in the raw. James cites geometrical constructions as another example of this theme. Points, he says, can either be taken as primitive and lines defined in term of points, or lines can be taken as primitive and points defined as intersections of lines. Either way something is made from something. Where construction begins is determined by what a system takes as its primitives, not by things that are primitive by nature. There must be materials for every construction to work on, but there need not be one ontologically privileged material that is the starting point of all construction.⁸

James spends a good part of Lecture VII promoting pluralism. He does not adequately distinguish, however, between two forms of the pluralism. In Lecture VII the pluralism James focuses on is the less controversial one. He notes, for example, that what we call the Big Dipper is in other parts of the world named Charles Wain or the Great Bear. All of these ways of labeling these stars are allowable, and there is no strictly epistemic reason to employ one rather than the other. The three names may pick out the same thing, and in scientific or other extensional contexts they are freely interchangeable. Their predicted empirical consequences would be the

same. James has previously argued, however, that this does not mean there are no differences in the consequences that may flow from the adoption of the alternative names. Beliefs are individuated more narrowly. The label “Big Dipper” has an impact on how we perceive and conceive of this grouping of stars. We see them as outlining a kitchen utensil. Labeling them “Great Bear” makes it more likely that these stars will be perceived as outlining an animal. And if asked to group constellations into kinds, those using the former name are likely to ally the Big Dipper with other kitchen utensils, and those adopting “Great Bear” will think it best to ally the constellation with those of an animal kind. Such similarities are “made” in heaven, but not found there.

Pluralism that stems from substituting one coextensive or co-referential term for another is a weak form of pluralism. James, we have seen, also endorses a stronger version. He argues there may be alternative theories that handle the data equally well, but conflict with one another. Employed separately, they have work to do and they do work, but conjoining them leads to a contradiction.

There is nothing improbable in the supposition that an analysis of the world may yield a number of formulae, all consistent with the facts. In physical science different formulae may explain the phenomenon equally well, – the one-fluid and the two-fluid theories of electricity for example. Why may it not be so with the world? Why may there not be different points of view for surveying it within each of which the data harmonize, and which the observer may therefore either chose between or simply cumulate one upon another?⁹ [“The Sentiment of Rationality,” in *WB*, 76]

James believes that pragmatism offers the freedom to accept alternative and at times conflicting theories. Such tolerance, he believes, speaks in favor of, not against, his position. Others count this permissiveness as a major strike against James. It does not sit well with their intuitions about truth. Reality is unique. There cannot be alternative Realities corresponding to alternative but conflicting theories. James does not deny that, faced with inconsistency in the corpus of our beliefs, repair is mandated. It is intolerable to accept an inconsistent set of statements. He holds, though, that this does not preclude making use of both sets.

James’s example of alternative geometrical primitives, mentioned earlier, may help explicate his position. It is possible to develop a system of geometry that takes points as primitives or one that takes lines as primitives.

Both versions are acceptable. They must, however, be employed separately. They cannot simply be conjoined for then there will be inconsistencies. For instance, one version says points have parts; the other says points have no parts. In one, points are nothing but intersecting lines; in the other, lines are nothing but arrangements of points.¹⁰

Recent debates over what constitutes a planet can serve to highlight the way James's world-making thesis dovetails with his accounts of inquiry, semantics, and truth. Whether Pluto is a planet, *what* it is, is not an eternal determinate feature of Pluto or of Reality independent of our cognitive contribution. Criteria for planethood emerge when some way of grouping matter emerges that promises to be useful for theory. If that particular "planet" concept is to serve as an instrument of inquiry (in that theory), however, it is necessary that its presuppositions of application be honored. Once so conceptualized or *intended*, statements about the number, age, location, and composition of planets are objective. They state facts that are true or false in the same way that any other statement of science about the past, present, or future is true or false.

But new empirical inquiry suggests that there may be other potentially useful ways of individuating and grouping heavenly matter into planets. Unfortunately, if some of these newer criteria are adopted and *intended* in use, Pluto loses its status as a planet. Which of these conceptualizations of "planet" gets it right? Which places Pluto where it "belongs"? Is Pluto still a planet or was it never *really* a planet? Has the meaning of "planet" changed or have the previously accepted planet facts turned out not to be factual? James questions the sense of these questions as well as the assumption that there can be only one answer. Might there not be several good but incompatible "planet" concepts?

Sometimes when such conflicts occur the simplest solution is to drop all the alternatives but one. That one looks to be the most useful peg on which to hang all our accumulated knowledge. It seems to work the best now, rings the truest, and we conjecture that it has the brightest future. Another solution is to remove any outright conflict by excising those parts of the conflicting theories where incompatibility lurks. In some cases, neither of these compromise strategies may be the most fruitful way to proceed. It may be more profitable to hold onto the conflicting theories in their full-strength forms but employ them in different contexts. In the case at hand, perhaps for some astronomical purposes allying Pluto with the other planets is very useful, while for other astronomical purposes or dealings with the heavens it is better to deny Pluto the honor.¹¹

We may, in the case of planets, be able to sidestep the problem of inconsistency altogether, if we treat the term “planet” as ambiguous. Then we can keep both “trues” and avoid conflict. “Pluto is a planet” is false and “Pluto is planet*” is true. And the two statements can be conjoined without contradiction. Such a divide-and-conquer strategy for avoiding conflict, however, can be taken only so far.¹² Without objective constraints, the ambiguity ploy will undermine the very point and usefulness of the concept. For any statement about the planets can be made true relative to an arbitrary specification of the term’s meaning. Suppose the criteria for planet-hood in some far-fetched Theory A excludes any solid heavenly body smaller than earth, in Theory B a planet must contain organic matter, and in Theory C a planet must have at least two moons. Arbitrary as each of these planet concepts is, they all pick out sets of objects. The “trues,” or facts, about the number, mass, constitutions, and other physical properties of the planets will differ according to which theory is adopted. And for what it is worth they too could be conjoined without contradiction.¹³

What holds us back from adopting this strategy is that all these alternative planet concepts and the theories that adopt them are unlikely to prove useful. We want statements about the planets to be of use, and for such purposes it is not sufficient that they be true relative to any dreamed-up theory. Unlimited ambiguity can always resolve conflict, but the costs of doing so are serious. Unless constrained, the strategy will undercut the significance of the claim that the statements are true. If any statement about the planets can be made true relative to some theory, however crazed, we have not said much of substance in asserting them. What prevents us from trivializing truth by ambiguity is that we seek statements that are true within *true* theories, that is, within theories that work.

We want to know what the number and other properties of planets are according to a theory that is satisfactory in actual practice. The “real” truths about planets are to be found in pragmatically true theories. If two competing “planet” concepts pass epistemic muster, then the statement that there are only eight planets and the statement that there are untold planets may both be true within the schemes of their respective theories. All relativity is not eliminated, but it is not unbridled relativity, and it does not undercut objectivity. Subjectivism is blocked, because the trues we care about are those found in true theories, theories that provide insight and fruitful information in helping us cope intellectually and physically. These trues are objective in the only sense they could be. They are constrained by the realities of inquiry. Unbridled relativity would render the truth concept useless.

Truth, as Nagel correctly points out, is truth “full stop.”¹⁴ It is relative to a language, but only in the sense that the meaning and reference of words are always relative to the language or system in which they are asserted. This does not imply that the truth values of sentences are relative. As asserted they are true or false “full stop.” For the pragmatic pluralist, though, such fixity does require monist exclusivity. Even very exclusive clubs can have more than one member. According to the Pragmatists, utility in the development of theory constrains the construction of all substantive concepts – from “elephant” to “even number” to “evenings” to “electrons.” Constellations are a human imposition on stars; stars are a human imposition on clusters of matter; and the individuation of matter into air, fire, water, and earth or into atomic particles are impositions as well.

At various places in this commentary, I have noted similarities between James’s ideas and those of Quine and Goodman. I think a brief examination of the differences between them in their approach to pluralism can help us get a better grip on James’s position. Quine is a pluralist. He does not defend a unity-of-science thesis. In addition, he insists that there can be alternative useful and empirically satisfactory theories that conflict. Yet Quine seems to hold that although there is no first philosophy, there is a privileged perspective. Physics limns reality at its ultimate, albeit humanly conceived and imposed joints. Quine also endorses a limited supervenience doctrine. There can be no changes in the world without a change in physical states. Goodman is more attuned with James’s thinking. He does not see the need for defending a supervenience doctrine. There are multiple theories or world versions, serving different purposes and uses, and none need be thought of as privileged.

Goodman, like the Pragmatists, stresses the role of fiction, the arts, and non-linguistic signs in the conceptualization and organization of non-fictional fact. For example, we classify people as having an Oedipal complex, because the Oedipus myth led us to see a certain group of people as having something important in common. The world did not come with such people pre-grouped or designated as a “natural” kind. The Oedipus myth enabled us to invent/discover the fact, and continued use of the kind has made it natural. Of course, to say this is not to claim absurdly that these people’s problems were caused by the myth. Nor does it hold that no one had or could have had the personality features before the myth itself came into being. The term applies retrospectively as it applies prospectively.¹⁵

Quine and Goodman also split on how they wish to cope with acceptable theories that conflict. Quine says, “rival theories describe *one and the same*

world. Limited to our human terms and devices, we grasp *the* world variously.”¹⁶ He concludes, “What the indeterminacy of translation shows is that the notion of propositions as sentence meanings is untenable. What the empirical under-determination of global science shows is that there are various defensible ways of conceiving the world.”¹⁷ But if we ask Quine, “What is *the* one world that is variously described?” no significant answer can follow. On his own account of ontology “what there is” is what our true theories say there is.¹⁸

Goodman, like James, rejects Quine’s talk of “one and the same world.” When unification is not feasible, keep useful but conflicting theories at full strength and locate them in different universes of discourse. In a section of *The Principles of Psychology*, “The Many Worlds,” James says:

Every object we think of gets at last referred to one world or another . . . it reaches this state sometimes immediately, but often only after being hustled and bandied amongst objects until it finds some which will tolerate its presence and stand in relations to it which nothing contradicts. The molecules or ether waves of the scientific world, for example, simply kick out the object’s warmth and color out, they refuse to have any relations with them.
[PP II, 293]

Physical and phenomenal accounts are not aligned and may be at odds with one another, just as common sense descriptions and atomic descriptions of tables do not jibe. Where links between the two worlds can be found, that is all to the better. Failure to conjoin them or to reduce one to another, however, is nothing to fear. Both worlds are legitimate, and naturalism does not demand throwing one overboard.

The movement between talking of versions and talking of worlds is unproblematic, since there is no useful notion of *the* ontology of Reality or *the* World *simpliciter*. With equal justice we can claim our best theories correspond to reality, or we can claim reality is what our best theories say it is. There is no epistemic or metaphysical difference. The choice in setting the direction of dependence reflects no more than a decision where best to place emphasis for the purposes at hand. This claim does not rest on conflating concepts, versions, and theories with the objects to which concepts, versions, and theories apply.¹⁹ All are constructed. We make both subjects and predicates. The truth of any fact is manufactured, a combination of “man” and fact.”

The relation between versions and reality is like that between rivers and river banks; they are co-dependent. You cannot have one without the other. But just as the co-dependence of rivers and river banks does not entail conflating the two, the fact there is no unique direction of dependence between worlds and world versions does not mean they cannot be distinguished. The point is that a theory with no individuated objects to speak of is pointless, and objects without theory lose their identity. Ontologically speaking, we know not *what* they are, and they cannot speak for themselves. To paraphrase Quine, there is no entity without a version that engenders an identity. Goodman, like James, thinks it useful/correct to describe our contribution in forging versions as one of world-making. Quine rejects such talk.²⁰

Finally, should inquiry lead us to accept good but conflicting world versions, it might be seen to give flesh to the idea that if there is one world there may very well be many.

Different universes of thought thus arise with specific sorts of relations among their ingredients. The world of common sense “things”; the world of material tasks to be done; the world of ethical propositions; the mathematical world of pure forms; the world of ethical propositions; the worlds of logic, of music, etc. . . . By those *whats* we apperceive all our *thises*. Percepts and concepts interpenetrate and melt together impregnate and fertilize each other. Neither taken alone, knows reality in its completeness. We need both, as we need both our legs to walk with. [*SPP*, 52–53]²¹

Notes

- 1 James explains that he and Schiller approach the issues differently: “I start from the object–pole of the idea–reality chain and follow it in the opposite direction of Schiller’s . . . I begin with the abstract notion of objective reality. I postulate it, and ask on my own account, *I vouching for this reality*, what would make anyone else’s idea of it true for me as well as for him . . . My account is more of a logical definition; Schiller’s is more of a psychological description” (“Professor Hebert on Pragmatism,” in *MT*, 298ff.). In the end, I believe Schiller promoted a more radical version of truth and world-making than I think James needs to defend, and it is this more limited version that I will explore.
- 2 On the other hand, in explicating James I find it useful to rely on views and terminology found in my papers: “The Power of Pictures,” *Journal of*

- Philosophy*, 82 (1985), 711–720; “I’m Going to Make You a Star,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 11 (1986), 427–439; “Starting from Scratch: Making Worlds,” *Erkenntnis*, 52 (2000), 151–159.
- 3 This view of things leads some like J. Searle to suggest that the impetus for such constructivist views is that “It is somehow satisfying to our will to power” (*The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 158).
 - 4 Compare Goodman’s use of the example of constellations in “Notes on a Well-Made World,” in *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 30–39.
 - 5 “We forget the infinite number of things we do not know about stars, or rather that what we call a star is itself the product of the elimination, enforced and deliberate, of most of the traits that belong to an actual existence” (J. Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1960), 270).
 - 6 Compare Goodman, “Identification rests upon organization into entities and kinds. The response to the question ‘Same or not the same?’ must always be ‘Same what?’ . . . Identity or constancy in a world is identity with respect to what is within that world as organized” (“Words, Works, and Worlds,” in *Ways of Worldmaking*, 8). Compare also W. V. Quine, “The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs . . . is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges” (“Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 42).
 - 7 See Schwartz, “Starting from Scratch” for further elaboration.
 - 8 Remember, James is not denying that physics may reveal that there is some kind of particle that all material things are made of. His claim is that this fact would be a fact of physics and does not confer any substantive epistemic or metaphysical privilege on these basic constituents of matter.
 - 9 “Cumulate” is ambiguous. It can mean combine by conjoining or combine by disjunction. In this context I think it is clear that when theories conflict the latter method is appropriate since conjoining conflicting theories results in inconsistency.
 - 10 See in this connection N. Goodman, *The Structure of Appearance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951) concerning alternative definitions of points and his proposal that structural isomorphism should be the criterion for systematic definitions. This does not preclude the possibility that both may be instances of some more general abstract concept of geometry. Nevertheless, they cannot be conjoined, and the way the two are articulated can matter. See M. Wilson, “The Double Standard in Ontology,” *Philosophical Studies*, 39 (1981), 409–427 for a discussion of the ontological implications of such cases.
 - 11 As previously noted, James gives one-fluid and two-fluid theories of electricity as an example of this phenomenon. The choice between treating light as a wave or a particle may be understood similarly. Also see H. Schutt, “Chemical

- Atomism and Chemical Classification,” in M. Nye, ed., *The Cambridge History of Science*, vol. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003), 237–254 for discussion of the choice between a chemical versus physical concept of an atom.
- 12 I have not found versions of this response in James’s own writings and do not claim he would endorse it. I think, though, it is a pragmatically correct one. For a suggestion along these lines see N. Goodman, “Rightness of Rendering,” in *Ways of Worldmaking*, 109–140.
 - 13 See N. DeGrasse Tyson, *The Pluto Files* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009) for a discussion of the options actually explored and adopted.
 - 14 T. Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 29.
 - 15 Goodman, as do the Pragmatists, also highlights the place non-linguistic representations have in inquiry.
 - 16 W. V. Quine, *The Pursuit of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 101 (emphases added).
 - 17 Quine, *The Pursuit of Truth*, 102.
 - 18 Over the years, Quine struggled to come to terms with the conflicts and inconsistencies that follow in the wake of his indeterminacy theses and pluralism. (For more on this matter see R. Creath, “Carnap, Quine and the Rejection of Intuition,” in R. Barrett and R. Gibson, eds., *Perspectives on Quine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 55–66.) In some of his last works he indicates that Davidson may have given him a way out: change the spelling of all the occurrences of the conflicting concepts in one of the theories. This move will restore formal consistency, but without limitations it incurs the same costs as escaping the problem via ambiguity elaborated above.
 - 19 For a contrary view see I. Scheffler, *Worlds of Truth: A Philosophy of Knowledge* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
 - 20 See W. V. Quine, “Otherworldly” [review of Nelson Goodman’s *Ways of World-making*], *New York Review of Books* (Nov. 23, 1978), 25. In this context, see also C. H. Haddock, *William James’s Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 161–164, especially n. 24.
 - 21 I think James’s many-worlds hypothesis is consonant with Goodman’s multiple-worlds thesis. All the world versions may work and have work to do, but they cannot be conjoined. It is necessary to apply theories within the world of the framework adopted. In this sense, different worlds emerge or must be postulated to fit the tools of organization employed.

Belief, Hope, and Conjecture (Lecture VIII)

Although the basic trajectory of James's position on the spiritual, what he often characterizes as his "religious hypothesis," is reasonably clear, his final landing place and the paths that take him there are often hard to pin down. It is not surprising that interpretations of James's position diverge widely, ranging from those of critics whose readings make his thesis absurd to those who take what he says to be true, but trivially so.¹ I think by now it is clear how James's defense of his religious hypothesis depends on his pragmatic account of belief and truth. James says, and I agree, that there is no contradiction in accepting pragmatism and rejecting his solution to the meaning-of-life questions he wants to confront.

Given my primary goal of explicating the Pragmatists' account of inquiry, language, and truth, I have attempted where possible to present James's epistemic and metaphysical views free from his religious claims. Nonetheless, even for these circumscribed purposes it would be a mistake to ignore James's arguments in defense of his religious hypothesis. For his writings on this topic have implications that extend to his epistemic and metaphysical views broadly conceived. Explaining these implications will be the focus of my remarks on Lecture VIII. I will offer what I believe is an attentive, some may feel overly charitable, reading of James's thesis. In Lecture VIII, James also returns to the problem of free will, and I will attempt to pick up loose ends concerning his responses.

On the whole, this final lecture of *Pragmatism* is less a detailed explication of James's religious commitments than it is a defense of adopting a pluralist attitude toward religious beliefs. To set the stage for his discussion,

James begins Lecture VIII quoting a poem by Walt Whitman. He comments that the poem can be given either a monist or a pluralist reading. As can be expected, James argues the pluralist case. He is dismissive of a monist traditional God or its philosophical replacement, the Absolute. These posits do not pass epistemic muster, and they can have deleterious effects on attitudes and action. James is also troubled by the response to spiritual concerns of a growing number of materialists. In an effort to distance themselves from non-scientific discourse, they adopt a “nothing but” stance that paints a bleak picture of our place in the world order. This can lead to despair and inaction. For James, neither unconstrained religious optimism nor materialist pessimism is good in the way of belief.

James, and many of those in his audience, search for a mid-ground between these options. They have difficulty coping with Balfour’s view of the human condition. Their spiritual temperament encourages them to seek a way to preserve cherished values and commitments while acknowledging modern science. Of course, the only way to investigate any issue objectively is to adopt the scientific method, and religious thought is no exception. Religious beliefs are justified if and only if they work. They are to be constrained by the “realities” of sensations, necessary truths, and our store of accepted beliefs. Personal preferences and subjective satisfactions must give way to empirical evidence. “Our *final* opinion about God can be settled only after all the truths have straightened themselves out together. Let us hope they shall find a *modus vivendi*!” [P, 56].

James thinks he has found such a *modus vivendi*, one that passes the scrutiny of the Pragmatic Maxim and passes relevant epistemic tests. Still, as a fallibilist, James recognizes that future inquiry may prove him wrong. He may be required to give up his religious hypothesis or reconstruct his “God” concept so it can retain utility. James is aware that for many people reinterpreting or rearranging religious talk to fit science is pointless. Scientific versions of the universe pure and simple are sufficient. The audience James wishes to reach is limited, as is the set of beliefs he will examine.

First and foremost, the only beliefs James will attempt to justify are those that remain unresolved in light of all the available evidence. Second, the issue at stake must be momentous, something of serious concern to the person. Finally, the decision facing those who are concerned must be a forced one. Delay is not possible, or delay may be tantamount to opting for one of the alternatives available.

In Lecture VIII James notes that he regrets characterizing his position as a “will to believe” doctrine, for this suggests we can and are justified in

willing our beliefs to suit our subjective preferences independent of the empirical evidence. This view is incompatible with a pragmatic account of belief and the fixation of belief, as well as with his views on the function of the will. James says it would have been better if he called his idea a “right to believe” [P, 124]. His position is that in certain quite constrained situations, when the evidence is neutral and there is no time to wait, we do have the right to allow more personal sentiments to influence which of several competing beliefs gets to be fixed. We are definitely not entitled to hang onto empirically undermined claims, because they are subjectively satisfying or because they make us feel more at home in the world. We have no such *right*. The right exists only when the hypothesis is epistemically viable, and the evidence available does not rule it out of contention.

In my account of related matters in Chapter 3, I offered an example of the option between believing that a cup is half full, as opposed to its being half empty. Psychologically they are different beliefs, although from an epistemic perspective it is a matter of indifference which description is employed. All the empirical consequences entailed are the same. On the other hand, “half full” casts the situation in an optimistic light, and “half empty” carries a negative connotation. The attitudinal differences embodied in alternative descriptions can and do affect how people think, feel, and are disposed to act, and it is a recurring theme in James’s writings that the way something is categorized can be important.²

Although my use of the half full/half empty example can clarify one aspect of James’s position, it does not capture other essential aspects of his right to believe doctrine. More must be said about three core features of the doctrine: (1) temperament, (2) transformation, and (3) truth. Right from the start of *Pragmatism* James explains that he has no problem allowing temperaments to have a legitimate influence on the fixation of belief. In fact, they are necessary. At the same time, he stresses that not all temperaments are to be accorded epistemic value. The optimist may be healthier, happier, and wealthier than the pessimist, but it would be out of place for such personal gains to trump empirical evidence when determining what to believe. Similarly, a scientist may be motivated to champion a hypothesis by the promise of fame, promotion, and money, but such rewards should have no weight in justifying it. The prospect of gaining more truths, by contrast, is a legitimate consideration. And scientists of different temperaments do differ in their evaluations of epistemic merit and in how far out on a limb they are willing to go in order to expand their corpus of beliefs.

James is concerned, though, with situations where adopting a belief can affect its truth value. This potential to affect truth value is what I mean in calling the fixation of a belief “transformative.” In his writings, James offers numerous examples of what he has in mind. The cases vary. The processes of transformation are to some extent different and in different situations they do not receive identical analyses. I will look at versions of two of the most cited cases he describes.

A person is in the mountains and finds himself in a dangerous situation. If he does not take action immediately he is a goner. The only escape route open requires him to leap from his side of a chasm to the other, and it is questionable whether he can do it. The evidence is equivocal. James contends a person in this situation has a right to believe that he will succeed. Confidence, faith in the hypothesis “I will make it,” can be transformative if it can increase the likelihood that the prediction of a favorable outcome will be true.

James’s second case involves trust in others as well as oneself. Robbers attempt to hold up a train. The robbers can be thwarted if all the passengers make a concerted effort to resist. James argues that in this circumstance the passengers have a right to put trust in their fellow travelers, believe the robbery can be stopped, and act accordingly. If everyone has faith in the hypothesis “The robbery can be prevented,” it is more likely the possibility will become an actuality. In both of these examples James maintains it is not simply the hope they can succeed that is transformative, it is confidence in the truth of the hypotheses that can do the trick. Hope may spring eternal, but confidence has its legitimate limits. If the gap between the sides of the chasm is, say, 200 feet, no amount of hope will make the success hypothesis true. The evidence is not neutral, and confidence in the truth of the hypothesis is misplaced. Foolhardy confidence is not confidence that is responsive to the realities.

Although there are problems with James’s analysis of these and other examples he offers, most critics do not question the claim that people who find themselves in tight circumstances, like those James describes, have a right to believe, and that the belief can be positively transformative.³ Yet it is argued that in these cases the right to believe depends on assessments of the non-epistemic profits and losses of acting on the hypothesis. But if such a straightforward utility-based analysis of the right were what James had in mind, he would not be putting forth a thesis at odds with the ethics-of-belief doctrine of his target opponent, W. K. Clifford.⁴

Clifford does argue that in situations where the evidence is insufficient to tip the scales, none of the competing hypotheses should be accepted. The decision should be postponed. This is the sanctioned practice of science. And James agrees:

All this strikes one as healthy, even when expressed by Clifford, with somewhat too much of robustious pathos in his voice. Free-will and simple wishing do seem in the matter of our credences, to be only fifth wheels to the coach. Yet if any one should thereupon assume that intellectual insight is what remains after wish and will and sentimental preferences have taken wing, or that pure reason then settles our opinions, he would fly quite directly in the teeth of facts. ["The Will to Believe," in *WB*, 8]

In James's examples the choices are forced. It is not possible to wait until things sort themselves out; action is required here and now. Clifford would agree that in the circumstances James describes people should not be prohibited from acting *as if* they believed a hypothesis. Not doing so would have serious negative consequences, and the ethics of belief need not require sacrificing everything in the pursuit of truth. In such cases, however, it really does not matter whether the evidence for the belief is neutral. If the losses are serious enough, the decision to act could be justified, even when the evidence speaks clearly against the truth of the belief. In deciding how to act, a combination of degrees of belief and utilities are to be taken into account. That the evidence goes against a hypothesis does not preclude that in certain circumstances considerations of utility may justify acting on it.

James, though, does not want to appeal simply to utilities, as such, to defend his right to believe thesis. He argues specifically that he will not take Pascal's route in defending his own religious hypothesis. Pascal claimed that when the utilities of possible gains and losses are taken into account, the only rational thing to do is act as if the hypothesis "God exists" is true. James maintains acting for the reasons Pascal recommends is neither an expression of religious faith nor belief in a God hypothesis, as he understands it. Going by the odds is not reflective of spirituality, a desire for community, and a need to promote meliorism. James's critics, nevertheless, claim that a utilities argument is the only way to make sense of his position. There are no other options. They believe James does not see the problem because he conflates "believes true" with "true." When all is said and done, they maintain James's position is either incoherent or it boils down to a degrees-of-belief, utility analysis of decision-making.⁵

Now I do not wish to deny that some of James's arguments make it seem that the decisions to be made depend simply on a cost–benefit assessment. But I think that there is a better way to understand his right to believe thesis – or at least one version of it – that can be found in his papers, “The Will to Believe” [WB, 1–31] and “The Sentiment of Rationality” [WB, 63–110]. In Chapter 1, I explained that James argues that scientific practices and standards themselves operate on something like a right to believe thesis. For example, he claims that the uniformity of nature principle is accepted on faith. Hume is correct there is no a priori or empirical proof that it holds. The evidence can be nothing but neutral. Yet we act on the assumption that the principle is true. Similarly, epistemic values of simplicity, conservatism, unification, and the like are adopted, although they too cannot be justified on the basis of the preponderance of evidence in their favor. Arguments purporting to show that hypotheses that meet these criteria are likely to be true tend to beg the question. Finally, Pragmatists to some degree always operate on faith in that they are fallibilists. Lack of certainty is no reason to doubt. We have a right to believe, have faith in a hypothesis, as long as it promises to handle real problems satisfactorily.

There is another related feature of scientific practice James urges us to look at in the papers just mentioned. And I find it the one that best accords with pragmatic analysis. Consider the attitude taken toward scientific *conjectures*. A problem confronts a scientist, and she is aware that as things stand, objectively speaking, the evidence does not favor her hypothesis, H1, over someone else's hypothesis, H2. The standards of scientific practice would preclude the publication of an article claiming that the truth of her hypothesis is established. Best to wait for more evidence to sort things out.

She, though, has an informed hunch or a conjecture that the correct answer is H1, and she adopts it as a “working hypothesis.” The other scientist has a different informed hunch or conjecture about which theoretical path will lead to success, and puts his faith in H2. Neither, of course, thinks it necessary to consider studying all the logically possible hypotheses that, in principle, fit the data. Instead, each scientist sets out on a research program that aims to show that her or his working hypothesis is true.

Some might claim that the state of mind that motivates and guides each scientist's research should be described as merely one of hope. Each hopes her or his hypothesis will triumph. This, James suggests, does not fully capture the attitude taken when adopting working hypotheses. The status of scientific conjectures is different. All inquirers may have a right to hope that some personally favored hypothesis will come true, and benefits will

accrue to them if it were true. And it would seem there is no reason to deny them the right to hope even if the evidence indicates their preferred hypothesis is probably false. What they do not have, however, is a right to adopt it as a working hypothesis when the evidence speaks convincingly against it. In scientific inquiry wishful thinking has no place, but conjecture does. In the case at hand, there is nothing epistemically amiss if the two scientists admit that the available evidence does not favor H1 over H2, and also think further investigation will prove their favored hypothesis to be the one that will triumph.

The proponents of H1 and H2 have informed and reasonable hunches, “sentiments,” and some degree of conviction that their own working hypothesis has a good chance of being correct. Without such confidence it is hard to account for their engagement and dedication to the particular experimental and theoretical research programs each pursues. Faith is what motivates and guides their scholarly research programs. The conjecture that their favored hypothesis will emerge on top is in a way a presupposition of the work they undertake. They assume, too, that justification for their hypothesis will not be forthcoming unless someone has enough faith in it to motivate exploration of the possibility.

Every philosopher, or man of science either, whose initiative counts for anything in the evolution of thought, has taken his stand on a sort of dumb conviction that the truth must lie in one direction rather than another, and a sort of assurance that this notion can be made to work . . . The only escape from faith is mental nullity. [“Sentiment of Rationality,” in *WB*, 93]

Examples of conjectures, similarly understood, can be found outside the context of scientific inquiry. Consider attitudes toward world peace. The available evidence offers no more grounds for believing that everyone will eventually live in harmony than it does for believing we will blow up the earth and all the inhabitants on it. Undoubtedly, those who work for world peace hope for the best, hope that the world will get better and not worse. Yet it is not simply hope that underlies their efforts. People who are convinced that we will blow ourselves up may hope for peace. The situation is different with peace activists. They assume that there is no evidence that precludes a world at peace, and they conjecture that there are means available to make it become a reality. They recognize, too, that the availability of means will not advance their cause unless someone puts the resources to work. It will take effort to make world peace an actuality.

Confidence that world peace is a live possibility provides motivation and guidance for such undertakings. It shapes proponents actions and the positions they take on political and social issues. Those who become engaged do so because they think that their work has a reasonable chance of helping world peace become a reality. This is their working hypothesis, and they have the right to believe it. James would not argue that peace activists have evidence that a world peace hypothesis is true or that they are warranted in believing they will succeed. Rather, they are justified in believing that the available empirical evidence does not preclude that their goal may be achieved with hard work. Established fact does not indicate that nothing can come of their meliorist project.

I think James's claim that he has a right to believe his God hypothesis can be understood along these lines. It is his "working hypothesis." The available evidence does not favor it; the evidence is neutral. It is a conjecture that may turn out to be mistaken, but there is nothing at present that makes it unwarranted to adopt as a working hypothesis. "Faith" he says, "is synonymous with working hypothesis" ["Sentiment of Rationality," in *WB*, 95]. "Faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible . . . one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a causes the prosperous issue of which is not certified in advance" [*WB*, 90]. To act on a working hypothesis is to act on faith. James believes that the actual betterment of the human condition is unlikely to emerge unless people make an effort to bring it about. But if people do not have faith that they can make a difference, the possibilities will not be investigated, let alone acted upon. People will not engage in the transformative activities that can turn their conjectures into truths.

Suppose then that James can distinguish hope from confidence in the terms just sketched. Does this show that people have a right to believe conjectures? Has James shown any more than that they have the right to act as if such beliefs were true? If someone admits that the evidence in support of her or his hypothesis is not conclusive, as an epistemic matter they do not have the right to accept it as true. They may have the right to act on it, but they are not justified in believing the hypothesis. Thus it would be inappropriate for them to assert or affirm its truth. Doing so would violate the ethics of belief.

For the Pragmatists, I think this analysis of the situation is not self-evident. It relies on adopting an account of belief that they find questionable. In particular, it relies on the assumption that belief is best understood as having a disposition to assert or assent to a proposition. Pragmatists are not

committed to this account of belief. For them “the test of belief is willingness to act” [“Sentiment of Rationality,” in *WB*, 90]. Actions speak louder than words. In keeping with their naturalist account of the mental, the Pragmatists do not take language to be the mark of the mental, and they find it useful to attribute beliefs to animals that cannot speak for themselves.

This, though, is not the place to get involved in controversies over the proper analysis of the concept “belief” in the philosophy of mind. Some theorists hold that only language-competent organisms can have beliefs. Others deny that language is a perquisite of belief, and hence claim animals can have beliefs. Intuitions clash, and I think this is just the sort of debate Pragmatists would be reluctant to enter. For the questions are formulated in terms of dualist assumptions they do not share. Peirce and James both say there are at least two useful ways to study belief. And application of the Pragmatic Maxim would indicate that the battles over which constitutes “real” belief are largely verbal and likely to remain so.

In any case, James could have avoided much of the hostility to his right-to-believe thesis had he been willing to go along with his opponents and adopt their intellectualist assumptions about the nature of belief, truth, warrant, and inquiry. He could define “truth” in terms of a proposition corresponding to reality, analyze “true belief” as a belief that corresponds to reality, and assume that justification for a belief requires certainty or indubitable evidence that it truly corresponds to Reality. For James, the problem of taking this route to mollify his critics would amount to abandoning the core of his pragmatism. A satisfactory treatment of the actual practices of objective inquiry requires that the notions “belief,” “truth,” “warrant,” and “inquiry” be understood instrumentally, and he believes an instrumental analysis of them is compatible with his right to believe thesis.

I have no illusions that this account of James’s right to belief doctrine will win converts; then again, nor was James very sanguine. I do hope, dare I say “conjecture,” that my discussion clarifies some of his position and indicates that many of the things he says are not incoherent or as implausible as critics maintain. Accepting James’s analysis of the right to believe conjectures and working hypotheses does not mean James is home free. Many, for example, will simply discount his reliance on religious experience to support his working hypothesis. They will deny his epistemic claim that “Our own more ‘rational’ beliefs are based on evidence exactly similar in nature to that which mystics quote for theirs . . . mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us . . . they are face to face presentations of what seems immedi-

ately to exist.”⁶ More generally, James must show that his God hypothesis clears Pragmatic Maxim scrutiny and meets the criteria required for falling under the protection of his right to believe principle. This is not an easy hurdle for him to get over.

Throughout his writing, no matter how passionately James promotes his right to believe doctrine, he remains guarded. He never says he has evidence or argument to convince the tough-minded that his God hypothesis is true. He only defends his right to adopt it as a working hypothesis when the evidence is equivocal. And he allows that future inquiry may show that at least in its present guise his hypothesis is untenable. James further diminishes the force of his God hypothesis in that it does not entail anything definitive about the future. It only commits him to the claim that there is no convincing evidence against the thought that resources are available, that if developed and used intelligently, might enable us to avoid things spinning into the bleak future Balfour describes.

Near the end of Lecture VIII, one can see the degree to which James is convinced but unsure of the proper characterization of his religious hypothesis and how much he leaves up in the air. He raises there the question whether his God is supernatural. If by supernatural one means what the traditionalist religious believer holds, James’s answer is a loud “no.” He acknowledges that it would not be out of line for theists to label him an “atheist.” Yet James also says that his working hypothesis does hold that he is not alone in the universe. Something is “out there” ready to join him and his fellow workers in their meliorist projects. In places he speaks of God as if God is a helpful member of the community. He says that it is the thought of God as a partner in meliorist enterprises that gives him the comfort and energy not to give up, but to push vigorously ahead.

There are many different characterizations of God to be found throughout James’s books and papers. For example, in “The Pragmatist Account of Truth and Its Misunderstandings” he says: “Even if matter could do every outward thing that God does, the idea of it would not work as satisfactorily, because the chief call for God on modern men’s part is for a being who will inwardly recognize them and judge them sympathetically” [*MT*, 269]. In *Some Problems of Philosophy* he says: “‘God’ means that you can dismiss certain kinds of fear” [*SPP*, 62]. His responses to questions put to him in an earlier mentioned letter give a good feel for his ambivalences.

Q: Do you so much *believe* in God as want to *use* Him?

J: I can’t use him very definitely, yet I believe.

- Q: Do you accept Him not so much as a real existent Being as an ideal to live by?
- J: *More as a powerful ally of my own ideals.*
- Q: If you should become convinced that there was no God would it make any great difference in your life – either in happiness, morality or in other respects?
- J: *Hard to say. It would surely make some difference.⁷*

In the next to last paragraph of the Lecture VIII James raises the possibility that it may be beyond our ken to achieve a satisfactory grasp of the nature of the Being or being “out there.” We may not be capable of answering the ontological question about *what* there is. He speculates that we may be in the position of dogs and cats. They live in our world, our community, but are incapable of understanding things from our intellectually more lofty perspective. Perhaps, he speculates, we too are in such a position relative to a higher intelligence. We are not equipped to understand the actual human condition in its fullest sense. I have trouble understanding how this position fits pragmatic doctrines. The thought is not meaningless. We get the picture, but I think it is not one that can readily stand up to the test of the Pragmatic Maxim.⁸

Lecture VIII also contains further thoughts on the problem of free will. In the end, I am not confident I fully understand James’s position on this topic, and have questions about its pragmatic credentials. James thinks a Judeo-Christian God is an obstacle to believing in free will. Such a biblical God is pictured as having a god’s-eye view of a world complete, down to its finest details. Much like Laplace’s demon, this transcendent “observer” can survey the entire past and future and know what the world is like from beginning to end. James believes that if this were so, we would live in a “block universe,” and in a block universe there are no live possibilities, or as he says, “no novelty.” Everything is eternally set. This he believes would undercut faith in our ability to make a difference and would stifle meliorist tendencies and actions. Fortunately, according to James, we do not live in a block universe.⁹

Neither God, the Absolute, nor Laplace’s demon can grasp the world complete in its totality. For the idea of a “complete” description of a “ready-made” totality waiting to be described lacks pragmatic content. The world is fleshed out in the course of inquiry. Positing an inquiry-independent, determinate world has no substantive function in empirical inquiry. Similarly, there is no ready-made moral world or Platonic ideal to set our sights

on. Reality is a work in progress. In both science and ethics there is nothing given in advance for us to land on or at least approach. We live in a world of entities, posited to help cope with the environment and experiences we confront.

In Lecture III, James rejects all the standard positions on free will. Hard determinism is simply false, since we do not live in a block universe. This might indicate that James is at home with libertarian views, since he thinks his denial of a block universe supports a thesis of indeterminism. Yet he declares that he does not accept the libertarian's picture, and is convinced that his own indeterminism is not of a piece with it. Libertarian indeterminism mysteriously removes us from the cosmic order. For libertarians free choice means a "*disconnexion pure and simple, something undetermined in advance in any respect whatever*, and a life of choices must be a raving chaos, at no two moments of which could we be treated as one and the same man" ["Abstraction and Relativismus," in *MT*, 304].

One might think, then, that James could ally himself with compatibilists, but he refuses to do so. He sees compatibilism as a dodge, not a solution to the problem of determinism. James seems to hold that determinism implies some form of fatalism. In a block universe nothing we do can make a difference: whatever will be will be. This charge is clearly unwarranted. Neither hard determinists nor compatibilists claim that our doings have no causal efficacy. Compatibilists, in particular, argue that casual efficacy requires determinism, and they too think the libertarian alternative is incoherent. Although the free-willist James has reason to reject hard determinism and libertarianism, his reason for dismissing compatibilism are less clear. Indeed, his pluralism would seem to give him a means to sidestep a central problem that leads many, including tough-minded materialists, to find compatibilism unsatisfying, even as they adopt it.

What James finds missing from the compatibilists' perspective is an account of novelty: "Free will' means nothing but novelty; so pluralism accepts the notion of free will" [*SPP*, 141]. Monism in either its rationalist or materialist form "rules out this whole conception of possibles, so native to or common sense. The future and the past are linked . . . there can be no genuine novelty anywhere" [*SPP*, 140]. Monism presumes there is a ready-made world, an existing totality that can be spelled out in advance of inquiry. Destiny calls. "But pluralism, accepting a universe unfinished, with doors and windows open to possibilities uncontrollable in advance, gives us less religious certainty than monism, with its absolutely closed-in world" [*SPP*, 141].

James argues that the idea of a determinist universe his opponents accept rests on a faulty understanding of causation:

The classic obstacle to pluralism has always been what is known as the “principle of causation.” This principle has been taken to mean that the effect in some way already exists in the cause. If this be so, the effect cannot be absolutely novel, and in no radical sense can pluralism be true. [*SPP*, 189–190]

James’s analysis of problems with the principle of causation is interesting, although I think in the end unconvincing.¹⁰ But the details of his account need not be explored here. It would seem open for James, as a pluralist, though, to argue his case for free will without reliance on challenges to the principle of causation. His position could be that there are alternative true accounts of our place in nature.

One version treats us as physical bodies obeying the determinist laws of nature. The second describes and explains our actions within the structure of the concept of rationality. James says as much when he remarks that each of these pictures provide causal explanations. Physical causes explain why events occur on the basis of prior states of the universe. Agent causes provide, what James calls “living reasons” that rationalize action. Living reason is not to be identified with material cause or logical necessity, “and compared to it material causes and logical necessities are spectral things” [*P*, 138]. Both types of “causal” explanations have uses, and they are on equal epistemological and metaphysical footing.

James follows Kant more closely when he says:

Fatalism, whose solving word is “all striving is in vain,” will never reign supreme for the impulse to take life strivingly is indestructible in the race. Moral creeds which speak to that impulse will be widely successful in spite of inconsistency, vagueness, and shadowy determination of expectancy. Man needs a rule for his will, and will invent one if one be not given him. [“Sentiment of Rationality,” in *WB*, 88]

An advantage James’s version has over Kant’s is there is no need to appeal to a noumenal world or transcendental deductions. The two worlds are actual, we live in both, and it is possible to have explanations of events in both domains. Autonomy is not an essential property of humanity. It may, though, be a “necessary” truth, in that it is a precondition for employing a living-reasons model as an instrument of explanation.

I am not sure why James does not consider this pluralist position. One reason, perhaps, is that in the end his objections to compatibilism are independent of the issue of metaphysical free will. For even if the compatibilist solution can provide room for metaphysical free will, it does not tell us what, if anything, we may be able to do with it. It does not provide the comfort James and others are seeking. The comfort they seek lies in a belief that the world is such that there are resources available that can be put to use in meliorist tasks. All their actions need not ultimately be in vain. Compatibilism does not take a stand on this matter. Hence, compatibilist metaphysical freedom is not a satisfactory solution to the meaning-of-life issues that trouble James. By itself, compatibilism does not offer any promise that our undertakings have an actual chance of success.

I think this account of James's position can help explain why in Lecture VIII his focus is on the relation he sees between free will and meliorist projects. The existence of metaphysical free will is not sufficient to support meliorism; it does not provide the motivation to become involved and to work to improve the human condition. James's positive account of free will involves an appeal to "possibilities," but the relevant possibilities are empirical, not logical or metaphysical. For James, the claim that there are such possibilities amounts to the claim that it is reasonable to conjecture that there are or will be sufficient resources available to accomplish what we set out to do. We would be unfree if the resources needed for achieving our goals are lacking. The situation, though, is not static. What is not possible to do today may be readily doable tomorrow, should resources become available. Here too, it would be a mistake to leave matters to chance. We can work to bring it about that sufficient resources do become available.

James thinks that he has a right to believe that the availability of the resources needed to undertake meliorist projects is not ruled out by science. There is no evidence that would warrant denying the possibility exists. As in the case of working for world peace, motivation for action presupposes belief that nothing precludes achieving success. James is convinced, though, that history shows that things will not get better on their own. We do not live in a world that is or is predestined to be the best possible world, and to think that we do will discourage us from undertaking meliorist tasks.

Dewey's approach to the problem of free will has much in common with this feature of James's account. For Dewey, metaphysical free will is too thin an idea to be useful, and narrow focus on it leads philosophers away from the work that needs to be undertaken. Dewey contends that the important issues concern specific freedoms such as freedom of the press, freedom of

speech, freedom of religion, freedom to assemble, and more, including some freedoms that will remain unknown until there is a need to construct them. Articulating, exposing their necessity and defending these freedoms brings us face to face with serious problems. They are problems, though, that can be formulated and explored, and we can actually do something about them. These projects are of real intellectual and practical interest. Dewey suggests the metaphysical question of free will might better be dissolved or let disappear, for it is not obvious that the Pragmatic Maxim sanctions its serious study.¹¹

James begins *Pragmatism* stating his intent is to address meaning-of-life issues that trouble him and many of those in his audience. Biographical studies of James have maintained that his deep concern over these matters was a major cause of his series of bouts of depression. He could not shake off these cosmic worries and sought a pragmatic escape route. Moreover, his constant mingling of these concerns with his straightforward philosophical theses has colored the reading of his work in ways that have hindered and continue to hinder appreciation of his forward-looking ideas on inquiry, truth, and language.

A curious thing about all this is that his worries themselves are somewhat at odds with the spirit of pragmatism. They are not local. They are cosmic, namely how to cope with the Balfour-like pessimistic view of the human condition in the great scheme of things. These fears come from worrying about the far off and the long run – the ultimate state of the universe and the thought that all our accomplishments will be for naught. Why build the bridge if it will eventually crumble? Why paint the picture if in future years it will fall from view? Why strive for justice when in time there will be no people alive to engage in communal action?

Admittedly, for the Pragmatists it is important to ponder what things will be like out there, well beyond the present. Pragmatism looks ahead to future consequences, and to where we are going. Nevertheless, pragmatism asks us to pay attention to the problems of the present and where we go from here. We conduct inquiry to improve the physical and intellectual tools needed to understand and improve conditions *now*, under the conditions that exist in the here and now. Inquiry grows in spots against a background of accepted beliefs. It can do no more. We should not look for cosmic answers to cosmic questions, but satisfactory answers to presently unresolved or unsatisfactorily resolved problems. This is the goal that in practice guides inquiry, and it is enough to motivate it.

I think James nicely spells out this pragmatic perspective in a letter he sent to comfort his despondent friend Thomas Ward:

For even at one's lowest ebb of belief, the fact remains empirically certain . . . that men suffer and enjoy. And if we give up all hope of seeing into the purposes of God, or give up theoretically the idea of final causes, of God anyhow as vain and leading to nothing for us, we can by our will, make the enjoyment of our brothers stand us in the stead of a final cause; and through a knowledge of the fact that enjoyment on the whole depends on what individuals accomplish, lead a life so active, and so sustained by a clean conscience as not to need to fret much. Individuals can add to the welfare of the race in a variety of ways.¹²

But in *Pragmatism*, James does not accept the comfort he offers Ward. In Lecture III he makes his position clear:

Even whilst admitting that spiritualism and materialism make different prophecies of the world's future, you may yourselves pooh-pooh the difference as something so infinitely remote as to mean nothing for a sane mind. The essence of the sane mind . . . is to take the shorter views . . . Well I can only say that if you say this, you do injustice to human nature. Religious melancholy is not disposed of by a simple flourish of the world insanity. The absolute things, the last things, the overlapping things are the truly philosophic concerns. [*P*, 55–56]

Pragmatically speaking, however, I think James's philosophy would have been stronger and more readily accepted if had he not focused on the absolute and last things, as he urged others not to focus on the Absolute and last truths.

Notes

- 1 J. Werham, *James's Will-to-Believe Doctrine* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987).
- 2 Consider the difference between calling something an "inheritance tax" versus a "death tax" or "affirmative action" versus "quotas."
- 3 As will be discussed below, some will question whether a person has the epistemic right to believe such hypotheses, although they allow that he or she does have the right to act on them.

- 4 Werham, *James's Will-to-Believe Doctrine*, 69–74.
- 5 See *SPP*, Appendix, 221–231 for further explication of James's account of the relationship of probability, belief, and faith.
- 6 W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: New American Library, 1958), 324.
- 7 *The Letters of William James*, ed. H. James (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), vol. 2, 214.
- 8 The idea of the possibility of there being worlds unseen or unseeable to us, as ours is to animals, is a theme he developed early on his “Is Life Worth Living?” [in *WB*, 32–62]. And the pragmatic credentials of this previous fuller elaboration of the idea are equally problematic.
- 9 James's most cited and detailed account of his position on free will is found in “The Dilemma of Determinism” [in *WB*, 145–183]. I leave analysis of the ins and outs of his arguments there for another time and place. I am not sure to what extent James's views on chance, indetermination, and the block universe were influenced by Peirce's tychism and his thesis of chance spontaneity.
- 10 See *SPP*, ch. 12 for more argument.
- 11 J. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2008), part 4, section 3.
- 12 *The Letters of William James*, vol. 1, 130.

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