

January 2012

Is James's Pragmatism Really a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking?

Elizabeth Shaw
Catholic University of America

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.pacificu.edu/eip>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shaw, Elizabeth (2012) "Is James's Pragmatism Really a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking?," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Is James's Pragmatism Really a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking?

Elizabeth Shaw, Catholic University of America

Published online: 30 January 2012

© Elizabeth Shaw 2012

Abstract

Pragmatism may be the aspect of William James's thought for which he is best known; but, at the same time, James's pragmatism may be among the most misunderstood doctrines of the past century. There are many meanings of word "pragmatism," even within James's own corpus. Not a single unified doctrine, pragmatism may be better described as a collection of positions which together form a coherent philosophical system. This paper examines three interrelated uses of the term: (1) pragmatism as a temperament, (2) pragmatism as a philosophical method, and (3) pragmatism as a "humanistic" and "concrete" theory of knowledge and truth. Some critics infer that pragmatist truth is relative or subjective. This paper concludes with a consideration of James's responses to such critics. Though James maintains truth is something both "made" and "satisfying," he just as clearly affirms that as it develops, truth is ever constrained by the elements of extramental reality as well as previously vetted truths. This pragmatist truth is not a function of personal caprice, and the pragmatist is certainly not one who denies an objective order or bends the world to his wishes.

I

Pragmatism may be the aspect of William James's thought for which he is best known, both within and outside the philosophic world. Ironically, however, James's pragmatism may be among the most misunderstood doctrines of the past century, due at least in part to the fact that a number of other thinkers have appropriated the term for their own very distinct purposes.¹ Moreover, the terms "pragmatic" and "pragmatism" are often used in common parlance, which perhaps leads people casually to assume that they know what Jamesian pragmatism is all about—it's a simple doctrine that identifies truth with expediency, one that dismisses any notion of truth as universal or fixed, and that merely assigns the label "truth" to those ideas or beliefs that produce subjectively good results in the real world. "Whatever works" is what is "true." Such generalizations about Jamesian

pragmatism may be accurate, to a point, but they do not tell the whole story. Moreover, they lend themselves to serious distortions of James's thought.

Jamesian pragmatism deserves to be more carefully studied, and the generalizations about it made more precise, at the very least because its present distortions constitute a grave injustice to a man who spent many years trying to clarify his thought for the public. The subtitle of James's well-known volume *Pragmatism* is "A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking," and the present essay seeks to convey a sense of how James's pragmatism is indeed just that.

The set of lectures published together as *Pragmatism* is James's most comprehensive presentation of his thought on the matter. Another volume, *The Meaning of Truth*, is subtitled "A Sequel to Pragmatism" and, like *Pragmatism*, is set of lectures and essays. Published one year before James's death, it clarifies and reiterates key features of Jamesian pragmatism, and it also rebuts certain prominent critics. Here I consider these works together.

There are many meanings of word "pragmatism," even within James's own corpus. Not a single unified doctrine, pragmatism may be better described as a collection of positions which together form a coherent philosophical system. In what follows I examine three interrelated uses of the term: (1) pragmatism as a temperament, (2) pragmatism as a philosophical method, and (3) pragmatism as a "humanistic" and "concrete" theory of knowledge and truth. As a temperament, pragmatism steers a middle course between the hard-nosed empiricism of professional science that insists on material, sensory evidence and the religious sensibility that is open to immaterial, spiritual realities but that often flies off into metaphysical schemes and abstractions not grounded in or justified by concrete experience. People with this temperament are practitioners of the method, which measures terms and propositions in terms of their concrete, experiential "cash value." Moreover, this method gives rise to the humanistic and concrete theory of knowledge and truth, which maintains that truth is something made by us and that it is therefore both a function of our personal temperament and in some sense characterized as that which satisfies us.

On the basis of these notions of truth as made and truth as that which satisfies, critics tend to infer that pragmatist truth is relative or subjective. I conclude with a consideration of James's responses to such critics, in clarification and defense of his thought. Though he maintains truth is something both made and satisfying, he just as clearly affirms that as it develops, truth is ever constrained by the elements of extramental reality as well as previously vetted truths. Thus it is proper to understand that pragmatist truth is not a

function of personal caprice, and the pragmatist is certainly not one who denies an objective order or bends the world to his wishes.

II

Temperament. James begins Lecture I, “The Present Dilemma in Philosophy,” by noting the foundational significance of personal temperament in our intellectual lives. Our temperament directs our interpretation of the universe, “our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos.”² It ultimately determines for each of us the legitimacy of any evidence or premise and, in turn, the success or failure of any philosophical argument. Typically, a philosopher will downplay or even deny the role of this personal and seemingly subjective factor; indeed, he will prefer “to sink the fact of his temperament...[H]e urges impersonal reasons only for his conclusions.”³ Perhaps this is because it is difficult to establish the authority of any one temperament over another: Everyone has one, and for the most part everyone prefers his own, so to quest for authority in this realm is a fool’s errand. It is simpler to pretend that our own temperament isn’t there at all, or doesn’t play any determinative role, and to act as if our arguments were based on purely objective grounds. But, James asserts, in reality temperament is ever operative. In the life of any thinker, “his temperament really gives him a stronger bias than any of his more strictly objective premises. It loads the evidence for him one way or the other.”⁴ Among those who dispute its influence, “[t]here arises...a certain insincerity in our philosophic discussions; the potentest of all our premises is never mentioned.”⁵ Temperament can never be eliminated; James laments not this fact, but rather the disingenuousness of those who deny it.

This discussion of temperament is not some irrelevant or tangential psychologizing but rather a matter of serious epistemological import.⁶ Though they are eminently subjective and personal, temperaments are legitimately measured and compared. For James, one’s temperament serves to “put one in better or worse touch with the universe,”⁷ and so not all temperaments are equally valuable. According to James, along the temperamental spectrum, the basic divide is between what he calls “tender-mindedness” and “tough-mindedness.” The tender-minded are sometimes said to be rationalistic, intellectualistic, idealistic, optimistic, religious, free-willist, monistic, or dogmatical.⁸ In general, these are the devotees of abstract ideals and principles who are given to belief in an absolute force that creates and guides the universe. The tough-minded, by contrast, are referred to as empiricist, sensationalistic, materialistic, pessimistic, irreligious, fatalistic, pluralistic, or skeptical.⁹ Consider the modern devotee of scientism who absolutizes the role of observable facts and data while holding all else to be suspect or irrelevant. It is evident that at either extreme on this spectrum of types there is likelihood, perhaps certainty, that

reality is misperceived, and so, one ought to guard against either extreme. Most people fall somewhere between the two poles and can be persuaded of the virtues and vices of both. Herein lies the essence of the moderate, pragmatist temperament.

While most of us have temperaments falling somewhere between the extremes of tough-mindedness and tender-mindedness, James notes that the present age teems with individuals who prefer the tough-minded, empiricist approach. Though the empirical-scientific mode of thought may be dominant, there persists, as James observes, a need to philosophize, so to speak—a need, which is universal, to consider and take a position concerning the broader nature of the whole of reality, over and above its material, empirical details. In consequence, the tough-minded adopt a metaphysics that satisfies this need; they draw their metaphysical conclusions not on the basis of empirical-scientific evidence, but in order to provide a suitable backdrop for the empirical-scientific enterprise. In tandem with the progress of science, a materialist worldview takes hold in the hearts of empirical scientific practitioners.

For a hundred and fifty years past the progress of science has seemed to mean the enlargement of the materialist universe and the diminution of man's importance. The result is what one may call the growth of naturalistic and positivistic feeling. Man is no lawgiver to nature. She it is who stands firm; he it is who must accommodate himself. Let him record truth, inhuman tho it be, and submit to it! The romantic spontaneity and courage are gone, the vision is materialistic and depressing...You get, in short, a materialistic universe, in which only the tough-minded find themselves congenially at home.¹⁰

In James's view, the materialist metaphysics of the tough-minded renders man passive and impotent, a mere observer and recorder of the active forces of nature. Materialist, tough-minded men are blind to the possible efficacy of man's personal powers; therefore, a hasty and dismissive materialism may do serious injustice to reality, and indeed to the tough-minded themselves.

By contrast, the religious philosophies of the tender-minded turn away from this materialism and adopt metaphysical schemes that leave room for the affirmation of personal spontaneity, responsibility, and moral values. All the versions of this religious philosophy have notable shortcomings, however, for according to James,

[t]he more absolutistic philosophers dwell on so high a level of abstraction that they never even try to come down. The absolute mind which they offer us, the mind that makes our universe by thinking it, might, for aught they show to the contrary, have made any one of a million other universes

just as well as this. You can deduce no single actual particular from the notion of it.¹¹

These types of philosophies thus fail, though in a manner different from the failure of materialism. They do not satisfy the common religious needs of men, such as the desire for a personal God and a world in which one's own freedom to act is real, meaningful, efficacious; nor do they jibe with the generally tough-minded sensibility typical of the modern era. In their failure to make reference to the real world, they lose their credibility.

In short, these religious philosophies provide mere rationalistic models that smooth over the messy details of experienced reality. According to James, any such system

is far less an account of this actual world than a clear addition built upon it, a classic sanctuary in which the rationalistic fancy may take refuge from the intolerably confused and gothic character which mere facts present. It is no explanation of our concrete universe, it is another thing altogether, a substitute for it, a remedy, a way of escape.¹²

Hence philosophy's bad name, at least in the view of the generally empiricist modern man, who considers the world of facts to be "a thing wide open," to be observed and recorded, not artificially schematized. It is not proper to close off this open reality, which is precisely what philosophical systems do.¹³ Rationalist philosophy thus appears as mere artifice, and perhaps even as pretension. In any event, removed as it is from the world of experience, this sort of theorizing is something that cannot be countenanced by the empiricist modern man.

The preceding analysis points to the "present dilemma in philosophy" of which the lecture's title speaks: to date, all metaphysical schemes leave something to be desired. On the one hand, the materialist worldview that derives from tough-minded empiricism is fraught with "inhumanism and irreligion"; on the other, with the tender-minded, "you find a rationalistic philosophy that indeed may call itself religious but that keeps out of all definite touch with concrete facts and joys and sorrows."¹⁴ The "mixed" pragmatist temperament, which is in fact the temperament of most men, does not succumb to either horn of this dilemma. Indeed, the pragmatist temperament wishes somehow to split the difference. James summarizes,

What you want is a philosophy that will not only exercise your powers of intellectual abstraction, but that will make some positive connexion with this actual world of finite human lives.¹⁵

The pragmatist temperament incorporates the concerns of both the tough-minded and the tender-minded. It will never deny the value of empirical science and the importance of observable facts; moreover, it decries the sort of “vicious intellectualism” that abstracts from concrete experience.¹⁶ At the same time, however, it wishes to affirm the larger vision of the universe as something more than a mindless mechanism, as a setting in which our decisions and actions are real and significant factors. The pragmatist temperament will insist that the universe is a place where things like values, ideals, and God make sense.¹⁷ And they do so, it is important to point out, not as mere abstractions but only within the context of the world as we experience it; moreover, honest empiricists will be attuned to the experiential nature of such things—that is, they will recognize that metaphysical entities have meanings that are borne out in and justified through our experience. Believing in these things makes a concrete, observable difference in people’s lives and in the world. So the pragmatist temperament coherently integrates tough-mindedness and tender-heartedness: it is religious precisely because it is honestly empirical. James writes:

I offer the oddly-named thing pragmatism as a philosophy that can satisfy both kinds of demand. It can remain religious like the rationalisms, but at the same time, like the empiricisms, it can preserve the richest intimacy with facts.¹⁸

Pragmatism has a special mandate: it “preserves...a cordial relation with facts, and...neither begins nor ends by turning positive religious constructions out of doors—it treats them cordially as well.”¹⁹ Pragmatism mediates between the scientific and religious points of view,²⁰ satisfying the intellectual needs of those who are inclined to respect both science and religion. This view of the pragmatist temperament serves as background for understanding the development of pragmatist philosophy in general.

III

A Method of Settling Disputes. James begins Lecture II of *Pragmatism*, “What Pragmatism Means,” by setting the scene for a metaphysical debate, the resolution of which is an apt example of his pragmatist method at work. There are two players: a squirrel clinging to one side of a tree, and a man standing on the tree’s opposite side. The man, wishing to see the squirrel, moves toward the other side of the tree, but just as quickly as he moves, so does the squirrel. Thus the trunk of the tree is always between the two, and the man never catches sight of the squirrel. From this scene, James extracts the metaphysical question: Does the man go round the squirrel or not? Certainly he circles the tree, and the squirrel is on the tree, yet it is not so clear-cut whether or not he

circles the squirrel.²¹ How to answer this question? “Mindful of the scholastic adage that whenever you meet a contradiction you must make a distinction,”²² James says it is necessary to clarify the meaning of “going round” before we can settle on an answer. If “going round” means passing from the north of the squirrel to the east, then to the south, then to the west, and finally to the north, then certainly the man goes round him. But if “going round” means moving from in front of him, to the right of him, then behind him, then to his left, and returning to in front of him, then just as clearly the man does not go round the squirrel. This example draws out the essence of James’s pragmatist method, which is to resolve disputed questions “that otherwise might be interminable” by looking to what their terms mean in practice.²³

James uses the squirrel example to show that the pragmatist method quite simply and sensibly seeks to resolve questions by clarifying their terms. It does this by analyzing the terms’ practical import in order to ferret out the merely verbal or semantic disputes. The heart of the pragmatist method is “to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences.” Moreover, “[i]f no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle.”²⁴ Much of the work of the pragmatist method lies in exposing the so-called distinctions without differences, that is, those merely verbal or semantic debates, and lightening the philosophical load by setting them aside. As James writes,

It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence. There can be no difference anywhere that doesn’t make a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract truth that doesn’t express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon the fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere and somewhen.²⁵

Thus James intends to discount those logical and metaphysical debates that lack any experiential implications or consequences and so neither guide men’s actions nor help them understand their experience.²⁶ But importantly the method does not simply dismiss all metaphysical issues. Indeed, James’s conviction is that certain metaphysical ideas and realities are of the utmost importance in our lives, and so the questions about these things are crucial. He writes,

The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants in our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.²⁷

The pragmatist method will thus resolve philosophical questions in one of two ways: either by attempting to identify a specific answer grounded in practical experience, or by calling off the debate. In either case, the practical import of the question and its answer—the concrete impact on life and experience, or lack thereof—is determinative.

James maintains that this is no new method. He includes Socrates, Aristotle, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume among its practitioners.²⁸ He also notes the similarities between the pragmatist method and the classical empirical approach to knowledge. Both pragmatism and empiricism eschew rationalist models that fail to draw from and relate directly to human experience; both turn “away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, and pretended absolutes and origins...towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power.”²⁹ Pragmatism balks at the impotence and primitive nature of metaphysical schematizing, which seeks to quell the enigma of the universe by simply naming its principle, and which rests once a name has been assigned. Indeed, pragmatism pushes onward, not satisfied with mere names. The pragmatist method will take a name and seek to draw out “its practical cash-value” and then “set it at work within the stream of your experience.”

As James articulates it, the pragmatist method is open to any and all conclusions that human experience can affirm. It is not tendentious, biased, or preferential in any manner. It favors no particular theories or results but is rather simply “an attitude of orientation...away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and...towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.”³⁰ Notwithstanding this apparent affinity with empiricism, in practice the pragmatist may well be more consistently empirical than the ordinary empiricist. Whereas practitioners of empirical science often tend to be biased toward a materialist worldview and to favor only those results and conclusions that are coherent within that worldview, the Jamesian pragmatist is not so biased. Indeed, pragmatism “has no objection whatever to the realizing of abstractions, so long as you get about among particulars with their aid and they actually carry you somewhere.”³¹ Pragmatism has “no a priori prejudices against theology,”³² whereas empirical science quite often does. In sum, the theoretic hospitality of the pragmatist far exceeds that of the typical empiricist.

In Lectures III, IV, and VIII of *Pragmatism*, James applies his pragmatist method to a host of philosophical issues, including the understanding of God, the notion of substance, the question of design in nature, the free will versus determinism debate, and the problem of the one and the many. Here we see clearly the broad reach of James’s pragmatist method: “so far from keeping her eyes on the immediate practical foreground, as she is accused of doing, [pragmatism] dwells just as much upon the world’s remotest perspectives.”³³ Pragmatism does not neglect or reject intellectual abstractions, but in its

investigation of these it “shifts the emphasis and looks forward into facts themselves.”³⁴ The pragmatist method takes abstract concepts seriously; moreover, it insists that in order to do this, it is necessary to measure such concepts against practical, empirical experience. If they are real, things like substance and free will cannot be taken “in themselves, as something august and exalted above facts.”³⁵ Rather, if they are real, they must make some real difference in the world. Whatever conclusions we draw, in the operation of speculative intellect, the experiential import of the positions we hold are necessarily determinative.³⁶ Indeed, we will never affirm or deny a position, except through some reference to the concrete realm in which the notion may “break into life.” It is this real difference that makes it possible for us to know of them, and it is precisely this real difference that pragmatism tracks.

IV

A Theory of Truth. The pragmatist theory of truth emerges, in Lecture VI of *Pragmatism*, as yet another application of his pragmatist method. Confronted with the philosophical problem of understanding what truth is, the pragmatist begins by asking, “What difference does such a thing as ‘truth’ make in anyone’s life?” What is its “cash-value”?³⁷ Built into the very asking of this sort of question is the presumption that truth is something known only, and wholly, through our experience. “Truth” is our term, and so there cannot be anything about it that is inaccessible to us. The notion is capable of full articulation, and the reliable mechanism by which to analyze it is our simple, straightforward appeal to experience. The appropriate analysis of truth is necessarily a functional one; it pins down the answers to questions like: Why do people seek truth? What conditions are important in establishing truth? What consequences arise in association with truth? Apart from these sorts of questions, any account of truth will be not merely abstract, but artificial and indeed irrelevant.³⁸ As we have seen, for James, any philosophical problem or concept is meaningful only insofar as it conducts some business in the concrete, empirical realm. Thus, a good theory of truth must explain truth on this level. A good theory will reveal what truth is simply by uncovering what truth is “known as” by us. Indeed, to go beyond this level in an account of truth is to overreach—to speculate idly and to exceed our human capacity for knowing.

So, what difference does “truth” make in anyone’s life? What is truth known as? To begin, it is important to note that truth is something said of our ideas or beliefs concerning what is; these are, as it were, the substrate of truth, and “truth” expresses some relation between our thought and the world. In this regard James is in line with a traditional correspondence theory of truth, and yet he explicitly takes issue with such a theory. Though a correspondence theory is not necessarily incorrect, according to James,

is too abstract for him to accept. He is amenable to a correspondence definition of truth, namely, that “truth” in some way indicates the agreement between thought and reality, but he finds such a formulation rather simplistic and imprecise. Too often the talk about “agreement” is “offhand and irreflective.” For example, he notes the agreement-relation is sometimes described as the idea’s “copying” reality. Copying, he says, is inadequate to explain the relation between thought and thing, for in many cases we have true thoughts that are far from good copies of the things to which they refer. Most laymen, for example, will think of the inner mechanism of a clock in a primitive, nontechnical way that “is much less of a copy, yet...passes muster, for it in no way clashes with the reality.”³⁹ To summarize, pragmatist truth does indeed entail some agreement between thought and reality, but what distinguishes it for James is the effort to say more than just that.

Specifically, pragmatism pushes further and asks what it actually means for thought and reality to “agree.” When we speak of truth, we are necessarily referring to something that is not a disembodied abstraction but that is, rather, personally manifest, a feature of certain ideas held in someone’s consciousness. Truth is a property of certain of our beliefs and ideas, and so it is to these that we look in order to flesh out our understanding of truth. Importantly, functionality is what divides true and false ideas, according to James: “True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot.”⁴⁰ This statement is the kernel of James’s account of truth. The activities of assimilation, validation, corroboration, and verification are central to the pragmatist notion of truth. But James moves to still more novel and controversial ground in asserting that these activities are the very essence of truth.

[Truth] happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its veri-fication. Its validity is the process of valid-ation.⁴¹

Here James stakes his claim. Against the traditional intellectualist assumption that truth is a fixed and eternal entity that exists prior to and independently of any knower,⁴² James maintains that truth is not fixed and eternal but made, that truth comes into being in the very processes of verification and validation. Indeed, for James, there is no truth outside of these processes. Pragmatist truth exists dynamically and, in some sense, contingently in the life of the knower inasmuch as its very being is caused by the knower when she forms and verifies certain ideas.⁴³

If truth is an event or process in the life of the knower, what does it look like? How does verification proceed? How is truth made? Pragmatically, verification is bound up with satisfaction. Verification consists in certain practical consequences of my idea, specifically, the activity of using an idea or belief to navigate successfully through my

experience. In the process of its verification, my idea leads me—through my stock of other ideas and through my experience itself—to make certain agreeable connections and transitions in my life. This “progressive, harmonious, satisfactory” movement through experience is precisely the practical import of my true idea, and this practical import is precisely its pragmatist truth.

For example, when I think, “This aspirin relieves a headache,” and I proceed, on the basis of that idea, to take the aspirin and to have my headache relieved, my original idea is verified as I am satisfied—it is made true, known to be true, precisely as I am relieved and not a moment sooner.⁴⁴ My true ideas serve as important tools for action and life; I do not think them for their own sakes. They are not ends in themselves, but “preliminary means towards other vital satisfactions.”⁴⁵ They are means that have no significance apart from their functions and uses. Thus, there is an intimate relation between what is true and what is useful, as James writes: “True is the name for whatever starts the verification-process, useful is the name for its completed function in experience.”⁴⁶ My experience of truth is of truth as verified; that is, as an experience of the beneficial effects of true ideas, of their guiding me within my environment in ways satisfying to me.⁴⁷ Apart from these concrete, experienced satisfactions or “workings” of my ideas, I know nothing to be true.

In order more fully to draw out the novelty and distinctiveness of the pragmatist theory of truth, it is helpful to consider how James responds to two objections, namely, (1) that truth is not something made, and (2) that truth is not what satisfies us.

V

First Objection: Truth Is Not Something Made. James maintains that pragmatist truth is something made. It comes to be in and through the experience of the knower, as the verification of thoughts and ideas that lead us in fruitful ways through our experience. This understanding of truth as something made prompts the objection that “pragmatists put the cart before the horse.”⁴⁸ James summarizes the so-called rationalist objection as follows:

“Truth is not made,” [the critic] will say; “it absolutely obtains, being a unique relation that does not wait upon any process, but shoots straight over the head of experience, and hits its reality every time. Our belief that yon thing on the wall is a clock is true already, altho no one in the whole history of the world should verify it. The bare quality of standing in that transcendent relation is what makes any thought true that possesses it, whether or not there be verification...”⁴⁹

According to the critic, pragmatism fails by not recognizing that truth is antecedent to its verification. The critic says truth is “transcendent,” wholly independent of and unaffected by our knowing (or not knowing) it. Truth exists prior to verification, and verification is not identified with truth but follows from it. We do not make truth but discover it. True ideas are and have been true even before the processes of verifying them are completed.⁵⁰

James’s reply to the objection that truth is not something made but something that exists independently of the human knower begins with a simple restatement and clarification of terms. First, he lays out the basic structure of truth: it is a relation between two things, namely, (a) my idea and (b) reality. Next, he affirms that both ideas and reality are grounded in “the matrix of experiential circumstance.” Neither exists outside this world, which provides both the context and the matter for all sorts of truth-relations to be borne out.⁵¹ Properly speaking, “truth” is the truth-relation, but James also uses the term to describe certain of our ideas. An idea is said to be true because it is recognized as one side of a truth-relation, and truth-relations are accessible to us only within our concrete experience. Much of the confusion concerning the question of the priority of “truth” arises simply because of looseness in the way the term is used.⁵² Some use it to describe (b), the “objective reality” side of the truth-relation, but James prefers to use it to refer to (a), the “subjective idea” side. He justifies this preference by the following argument: any object is open to being the referent of false ideas, so why use the term “truth” to indicate the object? It will be better to use “truth” to indicate a property of some ideas about the object rather than the object itself.⁵³

To return to the objection, then: With regard to the truth-relation, James does not disagree that something is independent of human knowing; however, he will not call this independent something truth *per se*, for truth is the relation between my idea and reality—and thus much depends on me, the knower of truth. Indeed, “the ‘experience’ which the pragmatic definition postulates is the independent something which the anti-pragmatist accuses him of ignoring.”⁵⁴ So, for James, the background or source of truth, if you will—namely, our concrete experience, “this fundamentum of circumstance surrounding the object and idea”⁵⁵—is independent, while the truth-relation, which is what the term “truth” signifies, is not.

So how is it that truth—the truth-relation—is dependent and indeed made? Quite simply, the truth-relation requires a knower engaged in processes of verification that take place in concrete experience. Truth comes into being—that is to say, the truth-relation exists—precisely when a knower’s idea is experienced as comporting with reality, thereby informing him and providing him some benefit. Indeed, the truth-relation is known as an experience of beneficial effects: our ideas work, they prove out, they facilitate our

adaptation to the environment. As James puts it, “you cannot define what you mean by calling [ideas] true without referring to their functional possibilities”; otherwise, the relation between idea and reality is “mere coexistence or bare witness,” or some other sort of generically imprecise relation that does not properly capture the special nature of truth.⁵⁶ Truth as truth-relation entails experiencing our ideas and our relation with and through them to the realities of the concrete world.

Further, James’s offers a nuanced argument that not only rebuts the criticism but also lends support to his position by showing that the rationalist position is actually grounded in pragmatist principles. First, he notes that, owing to the regularities, similarities, and general predictability present in the world, we often use one verification process as a proxy for many others. Through our collective human experience we form concepts, rules, laws, and other sorts of generalizations—all having their origins in the direct verification processes of some individual’s experience—and, without necessarily directly verifying them ourselves, we use these as guides in our own lives. To the extent that there are no unexpected results when we use them, these thoughts are indirectly verified for us. Moreover, the pragmatist will say that, strictly speaking, in these instances the truth-relation is experienced while the verification is suppressed or implicit; truth in such cases consists not in the actual verification of these thoughts but rather in their verifiability or possible verification.

Now, according to James, the rationalist position regarding the priority of truth derives from the fact that so many of our truths are of this indirectly verified or verifiable type. He writes, “The quality of truth, obtaining *ante rem*, pragmatically means, then, the fact that in such a world innumerable ideas work better by their indirect or possible than by their direct and actual verification. Truth *ante rem* means only verifiability, then.”⁵⁷ This practice of working with indirect and possible verifications makes our lives much easier and more productive, since it relieves us of the time-consuming and intolerable, indeed impossible, burden of directly verifying all of our truths for ourselves. Yet because so often we do not engage in the actual verification processes that constitute the bulk of our truths—notwithstanding that these processes are the essence of the truths, the ultimate explanation of why they are truths—we may lose sight, as the rationalists do, of the fact that processes of verification are literally how our truths come into being.

James turns the tables on his rationalist critics. They insist that truth does not require a knower, that it is transcendent or independent of human knowing, that it exists before and after—indeed regardless of whether—it is actually grasped by someone. But to view truth in this manner is to err, according to James, with respect to the question of priority. He contends that the sort of “discarnate truth” which his critics so revere is in fact “static, impotent, and relatively spectral.” He writes:

Essential truth, the truth of the intellectualists, the truth with no one thinking it, is like the coat that fits tho no one has ever tried it on, like the music that no ear has listened to. It is less real, not more real, than the verified article; and to attribute a superior degree of glory to it seems little more than a piece of perverse abstraction-worship... Intellectualist truth is then only pragmatist truth in posse.⁵⁸

At the very least, this sense of truth is likened to a hypothesis or preliminary thought that has yet to be tested and verified in concrete experience. Thus it may be apt to say that, while not necessarily temporally prior to intellectualist truth, pragmatist truth is metaphysically prior in the way that act is metaphysically prior to potency.

VI

Second Objection: Truth Is Not What Satisfies. According to the pragmatist, I know my idea to be verified, and hence true, when I am aware that it satisfies me in some manner. Critics see this as no more than a subjectivist or relativist notion of truth. In this view, pragmatist truth, grounded in the satisfaction and verification of the individual knower, is no truth at all in any meaningful sense, for it is grounded in the individual and thus lacks objectivity, or is at least uncomfortably compatible with subjectivity.⁵⁹ The following explication of the Jamesian response to this sort of criticism will draw out three important yet often-overlooked elements of James's pragmatism. First, pragmatism is a theory of truth that presupposes objectivity in the traditional sense and is grounded in and measured by empirical experience. Accordingly, true ideas for the pragmatist are never the products of pure subjective preference, for such preference alone cannot guarantee that an individual is in good, working contact with reality. Second, the formulation of pragmatist truths is necessarily constrained not only by empirical experience but also by conceptual ideas and logical relations, as well as by a whole body of previously accepted truths. Finally, James's development of the notion of absolute truth helps moves the individual knower beyond epistemic solitude and underscores the need for progressively better, more objective, truths to be generated within and through the community. These elements of James's pragmatism, I argue, serve to rebut the charge of subjectivism that is sometimes leveled against it and to flesh out some overlooked aspects of the pragmatist account.

To return to the criticism: Is truth really something that depends on me and my assessments and satisfactions? No doubt I would find it satisfying to believe that I have \$100 million in the bank, but such satisfaction would have nothing to do with the truth of

the matter. Similarly, I may find it quite dissatisfying to believe that I am mortal, but here again, satisfaction and dissatisfaction are quite irrelevant to truth. It would be easy to think of countless examples of satisfying falsities and dissatisfying truths. To define truth in terms of personal satisfaction, as James does, thus seems problematic.⁶⁰ But is it really a problem?

James answers his critics by saying that they fail to grasp an important point, namely, that there is no satisfaction apart from verification—verification which binds us to an objective order. For the pragmatist, it is not the case that the satisfaction associated with an idea causes that idea to be true. Satisfaction does not come first. Rather, satisfaction is eventually a necessary consequence of the fact that the idea is verifiable—it coheres with an objective order and is not an ultimately frustrating delusion. For the pragmatist, truth is not a product of willfulness, wishful thinking, or caprice. On the contrary, the pragmatist, knowing truth through verification, is constitutionally guarded against such subjectivism. James writes:

Truth,...meaning nothing but eventual verification, is manifestly incompatible with waywardness on our part. 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 connexions.⁶¹

Grounded as it is in experience, pragmatist truth cannot flout the authority of the objective realm.⁶² Ultimately, only those ideas and beliefs that comport with that order will be verified, and, in turn, only those will prove satisfying to believe.⁶³ In other words, ultimately, there is no satisfaction without verification. This simple but key point is often overlooked or distorted, which moves James to clarify the position in *The Meaning of Truth*:

The pragmatist calls satisfactions indispensable for truth-building, but I have everywhere called them insufficient unless reality be also incidentally led to. If...reality...were cancelled from the pragmatist's universe of discourse, he would straightaway give the name of falsehoods to the beliefs remaining, in spite of all their satisfactoriness...[T]here can be no truth if there is nothing to be true about.⁶⁴

To believe what could never be verified is to be in contact with falsity, which is ultimately associated with “eccentricity and isolation...foiled and barren thinking...clash and contradiction.”⁶⁵ Though some truths might be unpleasant to face or own up to, such discomforts pale in comparison with the dissatisfactions associated with our falsities. For

James, we do not have unconditional discretion to construct, decide upon, or choose our truths. Quite the contrary, the way the world is ultimately limits pragmatist truth.

Further, against critics who have a problem with hinging a theory of truth on satisfaction, it is relevant to point to James's rather broad understanding of the notion of satisfaction. It would be a mistake to read him as defining satisfaction exclusively in terms of personal feelings and self-serving appetites. Rather, the satisfaction associated with truths is better articulated as "the maximum possible sum of satisfactions."⁶⁶ In addition to natural desires for what is immediately and personally gratifying, we also have desires that extend beyond our personal interests. The things that satisfy us are best understood as a family of factors pertaining to interests that are not only subjective or personal but also more objective—factors such as evidence, consistency, clarity, and theoretical elegance.⁶⁷ The satisfactoriness of our truths need not be construed as a wholly subjective affair, and so the criticism is deflated.

In addition to his articulation of a theory of objective truth grounded in empirical experience, James's "genetic" account of truth also argues against the charge of subjectivity. According to this account, when we formulate truths, we are constrained not only by the evidence of empirical experience but also by other abstract, purely conceptual and logical ideas and their relations. James writes:

Between the coercions of the sensible order and those of the ideal order, our mind is thus wedged tightly. Our ideas must agree with realities, be such realities concrete or abstract, be they facts or be they principles, under penalty of endless inconsistency and frustration.⁶⁸

He includes "the whole body of other truths already in our possession"⁶⁹ among those things that limit the formulation of new truths. Any newly formed true idea or belief must "derange common sense and previous belief as little as possible, and it must lead to some sensible terminus or other that can be verified exactly."⁷⁰ An individual's pure subjectivity has little room for maneuver in the formulation of truths. To use the language of correspondence, pragmatist truths must "agree" with all three sorts of realities: empirical facts, conceptual and logical relations, and previously accepted truths.⁷¹ In this way the pragmatist truth-relation exhibits the virtue of a sort of tensile strength. This agreement is a far more dynamic relation than that rather imprecisely suggested by a traditional correspondence theory.⁷²

Finally, James's development of the notion of absolute truth also argues against the claim that pragmatist truth is subjectivist or relativist. In contrast to all presently held truths, "the absolutely true" means, for James, "what no farther experience will ever alter...that

ideal vanishing point towards which we imagine that all of our temporary truths will some day converge.”⁷³ James does not assert that this absolute truth is the necessary, inevitable culmination of human truths, to be achieved at some point in the future; rather, it is simply something we might achieve. Here and now it is a “regulative notion” that emerges through the course of human experience when we recognize as false certain ideas and beliefs that we once believed to be true. Retrospectively recognizing the falsity of some of our ideas and, in turn, seeing our general fallibility, we tacitly acknowledge a higher standard against which we measure ourselves.

Our presently held truths are ever subject to revision, and the process will proceed in accordance with the pragmatist criteria of verification and satisfaction. It may begin, at least in theory, with the truths formed and held by a single knower. Such ideas and beliefs will have been established insofar as they are both verified for that individual and consequently somehow satisfactory for him to hold. Now, in a world of many individual knowers, no single individual’s personal experience will ever be perfectly private or solitary. For this reason, the criteria of verification and satisfaction will necessarily play out within a context of interconnectedness, and they will necessarily involve considerations pertaining to the broader communal setting. What is verifiable and satisfactory for me necessarily takes some account of the needs, interests, and demands of other individuals and the whole community. True ideas and beliefs thus become “progressively more objective” as they prove verifiable and satisfactory in the experience of more and more individuals.⁷⁴ Moreover, any individual’s truths are unlikely to hold up well against the measure of future experience unless they are fortified by the experience of other individuals. This communal vetting of truths produces better truths, that is, ones less likely to be confounded by future experience; and the projected culmination of the process is absolute truth. In this doctrine James’s commitment to the objectivity of truth once again is visible, notwithstanding his insistence that truth can emerge only within the experience of a subject, the individual knower.

VII

This sketch of three uses of the term “pragmatism” has shown that the Jamesian pragmatist exhibits a sort of commonsense temperament that blends, in nonideological fashion, the tough-minded bent of empirical science and a tender-minded openness to spiritual realities and religious belief. In this perspective, pragmatism as a method for settling philosophical disputes disinterestedly seeks out the practical differences and consequences implicit in the meanings of the terms of any debate. Applied to the question of the nature of truth, this method arrives at a view of truth that is rooted in the concrete, experiential world of verification and satisfaction. What I know to be true is what is

verifiable, and hence what proves beneficial and indeed satisfying to accept as true. The pragmatist doctrine of truth emphasizes the mind's active role in the formation of truths; but, importantly, it is not freewheeling. It respects the constraints of reality, and the formation of new truths is always conditioned by previously held or prior truths that have been derived from the objective order of reality. James gives us a novel perspective and way of talking about the issues at hand, but he articulates a traditional epistemological attitude and structure of truth. *Pragmatism's* subtitle, "A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking," is well justified.

¹ For example, Susan Haack and Robert Lane present a collection of the main strands of "pragmatism" in their volume *Pragmatism, Old and New* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 2006). Louis Menand also provides a sense of the breadth of the term's usage in *Pragmatism: A Reader* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

² James, *Pragmatism*, 9.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See Hilary Putnam, with Ruth Anna Putnam, "William James's Ideas," in *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 228.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ James, *Pragmatism*, 13.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ James, *Pragmatism*, 15.

¹¹ Ibid., 16-17.

¹² Ibid., 18.

¹³ See *ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴ Ibid., 17.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See George Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 155.

¹⁷ To a certain extent, for the pragmatist there is evidential value in the mere fact that many people believe in these things. See, for example, *The Varieties of Religious Experiencer*. But perhaps subtler and more important is the pragmatist's recognition that holding these beliefs makes a concrete difference in one's life and the lives of others. See James's essay "The Will to Believe."

¹⁸ James, *Pragmatism*, 23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁰ Cotkin questions whether James is disingenuous in claiming that his pragmatism is a mediator between these points of view. While James will maintain that pragmatism is neither dogmatic nor an ideology that favors any one position over another, it is evident that in practice Jamesian pragmatism is not neutral with respect to particular philosophical positions. For example, it clearly sides with theism and pluralism over atheism and monism, and it also explicitly condemns abstract, rationalist modes of thought. See Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher*, 156.

²¹ James, *Pragmatism*, 27. James relates that this very question actually arose among a group of his friends while vacationing in the mountains.

²² *Ibid.* James does not give the provenance of the "adage."

²³ *Ibid.*, 28. There are evident and strong affinities here with the thought of Wittgenstein, who years later in his *Philosophical Investigations* underscores largely the same point, namely, the primacy of usage and context—the "language-games" of our terms—with respect to resolving philosophical questions. See Suckiel, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James*, 43.

²⁴ James, *Pragmatism*, 28. In this regard James may be echoing the Leibniz's principle of the identity of indiscernibles, one formulation of which states that entities x and y are identical if all of their properties are identical. Importantly, though, James insists that all such properties are manifest as the experiential upshots or "cash-value" of the notions in question. Compare G. W. Leibniz, "Discourse on Metaphysics" (1686), in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2d ed., ed. and trans. Leroy E. Loemker (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1969), sec. 9.

²⁵ James, *Pragmatism*, 30.

²⁶ See Suckiel, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James*, 43.

²⁷ James, *Pragmatism*, 30. I believe James here sidesteps the thornier issue of whether and how we may accurately determine what "makes a difference" for us. His point is simply that the proper methodology for examining any philosophical position entails an investigation of its practical implications for us in our concrete experience. This method need not guarantee success, but success requires it.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 40.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 62.

³⁴ Ibid., 63.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ This is not to say that the experiential import *makes* a proposition true; James's point, rather, is that it is a measure that necessarily guides people's truth-formation. Also, here we see the nonpreferential nature of the pragmatist *method*; it favors no particular results, and James even shows that it can be employed to justify contrary conclusions. As a *temperament*, however, pragmatism does incline toward specific positions in debates such as free will versus determinism, theism versus atheism, and so forth.

³⁷ Ibid., 97.

³⁸ For a good summary of this functional analysis, see Suckiel, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James*, 94 ff.

³⁹ See James, *Pragmatism*, 96. For further discussion, see also Graham Bird, *William James* (New York: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1986), 38 ff.

⁴⁰ James, *Pragmatism*, 96-7.

⁴¹ Ibid., 97.

⁴² Ibid., 96.

⁴³ Compare Charles Peirce, who writes: "Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then the whole of our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object." (Charles S. Peirce, *The Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, ed. Max H. Fisch [Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1986], 3:266.) Unlike his contemporary for whom concrete, experiential effects are said to be the very *meaning* of a sign, James makes experience the *test of the truth* of a concept. For James, concepts may be better or worse snapshot approximations of reality, and their truth is measured by the yardstick of experience. Chapter 4 discusses James's critique of concepts more fully.

⁴⁵ James, *Pragmatism*, 98.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Hence James's well-known characterization of truth as "only the expedient in the way of our thinking," a formulation which he later described as "unguarded language," regrettable for the misinterpretations and criticism to which it gave rise. See *ibid.*, 106, and James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 5 and 127-8, for example.

⁴⁸ James, *Pragmatism*, 105.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ For example, James considers James B. Pratt's worthy formulations of this objection in "Truth and Its Verification," *Journal of Philosophy* 4, no. 12 (June 1907): 320-4, and later in Pratt's *What is Pragmatism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909). Pratt calls into question precisely the status of the "workings" or verification processes of our ideas. He does not deny that these are associated with truth, but he maintains that they are insufficient to ground the truth-relation or constitute the very essence of truth. Several other critics point to James's claim that truth is something made by a knower as justification for describing him as antirealist or nonrealist in his epistemology. For example, see A. J. Ayer, *The Origins of Pragmatism* (London: Macmillan, 1968); Ralph Ross, *Makers of American Thought: An Introduction to Seven American Writers* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974); Morton White, *Documents in the History of American Philosophy, from Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); and John Wild, *The Radical Empiricism of William James* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1969).

⁵¹ James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 91-2.

⁵² See *ibid.*, 151, where James says that one of his critics "shifts universes of discussion" in his use of the term "truth," "applying it sometimes to a property of opinions, sometimes to the facts which the opinions assert." This shifting contributes to the present confusion; but it is necessary to be clear and consistent in usage. James prefers to use the terms "reality," "idea," and "belief," and to speak of "the truth of the idea or belief." Thus, as a matter of usage, "truth" refers to the "subjective" side of the truth-relation (*ibid.*, 151-2).

⁵³ See *ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁵⁷ James, *Pragmatism*, 105.

⁵⁸ James, "The Pragmatist Account of Truth and Its Misunderstanders," in *The Meaning of Truth*, 110-11. Here James does not name names, but as mentioned above James B. Pratt was prominent among his critics (see n. 96). See also the relevant correspondence between James and John E. Russell in "Controversy about Truth," *Journal of Philosophy* 4, no. 11 (May 1907): 289-96.

⁵⁹ For example, Bertrand Russell, "Transatlantic Truth," *Albany Review* 2 (January 1908): 393-410; Ralph G. Hawtrey, "Pragmatism," *The New Quarterly* 1 (March 1908): 197-210; G. E. Moore, "Professor James' 'Pragmatism,'" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* n.s. 8 (1908): 33-77.

⁶⁰ Graham Bird notes that, while critics like Russell and Moore make much of the "apparent equation of truth with usefulness or expediency," James early on dismisses the objection as superficial. However, owing to the persistence of such critics, he is compelled to address them in *The Meaning of Truth*, where he goes to great lengths to stress that the expediency he means is *in general* and *in the long run*. See Bird, *William James*, 37, as well as further discussion below.

⁶¹ James, *Pragmatism*, 99.

⁶² In *The Meaning of Truth*, James fortifies this position by highlighting the fact that independent and prior reality is the source of those verification processes and "workings" which constitute truth as we know it. As he writes, "Something else is there first, that practically makes for the knowing. . . . That something is the 'nature' namely of the [reality] . . . that operates to start the causal chain of processes which, when completed, is the complex fact to which we give whatever functional name best fits the case. Another nature, another chain of cognitive workings; and then either another object known, or the same object known differently, will ensue" (97).

⁶³ Again, it is important to note that James allows that direct experiential verification need not always occur for an idea to be (known as) true. In other words, verification does not always require an eye-witness. Many truths exist on a sort of "credit system," whereby they are assumed to be true: "Our thoughts and ideas 'pass,' so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them." Such ideas are true, and they prove beneficial or satisfying to believe in just the same manner that directly verified ideas do. See *Pragmatism*, 99-100. All such indirectly verified ideas either can be, will be, or are directly verified first-hand somewhere in someone's empirical experience. See *ibid.*, 103.

⁶⁴ James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 106.

⁶⁵ James, *Pragmatism*, 103.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 101. Granting, of course, that certain satisfactions may be inconsistent with one another. A maximum "net" aggregate of satisfactions may be a more precise formulation.

⁶⁷ On this point about satisfaction as an aggregate, see Suckiel, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James*, 101-6, and Bird, *William James*, 41-3. James maintains that the satisfaction of a truth is measured "by a multitude of standards, of which some, for aught we know, may fail in any given case; and what is more satisfactory than any alternative in sight, may to the end be a sum of *pluses* and *minuses*"; James, "Humanism and Truth," in *The Meaning of Truth*, 40.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁷¹ This point is reiterated in the essay “The Essence of Humanism,” which appears in *The Meaning of Truth*, where James writes, “If a novel experience, conceptual or theoretical, contradict too emphatically our pre-existent system of beliefs, in ninety-nine out of a hundred it is treated as false” (76).

⁷² In this respect James may be echoed in the Nicholas Rescher’s thought on coherentism. See Rescher, *The Coherence Theory of Truth* (1973; Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1982).

⁷³ James, *Pragmatism*, 106-7.

⁷⁴ Suckiel gives a good presentation of this “doctrine of degrees of truth” in *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James*, 106-15. Noting the “remarkable parallelism between James’s epistemology and his ethics” (106), she focuses on the role this doctrine plays in James’s ethical thought, wherein values and norms are understood as “progressively more objective” precisely insofar as they jibe with the experience and sensibilities of more and more members of the community.