Title: **What was James's Theory of Truth?**

Author: **Tom Donaldson**

Abstract: **In *Pragmatism,* James promised his readers a *theory* of truth. However, many of his readers (even those sympathetic with other parts of James's work) have concluded that James's "theory" was little more than a tangle of mistakes. In this chapter, I offer an interpretation and defence of James's theory of truth. I emphasize James's truth pluralism.**

Keywords: **James, William; truth; pragmatism; truth pluralism; alethic pluralism; buried secrets; neutral monism; radical empiricism; verificationism**

1. Introduction

In the second lecture of *Pragmatism,* William James promised his audience a "theory of truth" (P 1907*,* 32–33, 37). However, many of his readers have struggled to find James's theory among his various metaphors, his anecdotes, and his criticisms of his "intellectualist" rivals.[1] These quotations should give you some sense of the challenge that confronts a sympathetic reader of James's work on truth:

> (1a) Our account of truth is an account of truths in the plural … having only this in common, that they *pay.* (P 1907, 104)

> (1b) I am well aware of how odd it must be for some of you to hear me say that a belief is "true" so long as to believe it is profitable for our lives. (P 42)

> (2a) The "absolutely" true, meaning what no farther experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge.' (P 106–7)

> (2b) Truth absolute, (the pragmatist) says, means an ideal set of formulations towards which all opinions may in the long run of experience be expected to converge. (MT 1909, 143)

> (3) True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot. (P 97)

[1] Olin (1992) has collected some important early critiques of James's work.

(1a) and (1b) suggest that, for James, a belief is true just in case it is beneficial to the believer. But this seems hopeless. It may benefit a shy person at a job interview to believe that he is the best person for the job — even if he isn't. So a belief can be beneficial even if it is not true. Conversely, by memorizing the digits of the decimal expansion of $\sqrt{17}$ you can acquire many beliefs which are true but not beneficial.

(2a) and (2b) suggest that James had a somewhat more complex theory. In these passages, James seems to imply that all disagreements are temporary. In the long run, opinion will converge on a single consensus position, an "ideal set of formulations." A belief is true just in case it is an element of this ideal set.[2]

The standard objection to this proposal is the "buried secrets" problem, as follows. Consider:

(a) Richard III killed the princes in the tower.
(b) Richard III did not kill the princes in the tower.

It may well be that all the relevant evidence has been destroyed, in which case it will forever be unsettled whether Richard III was the murderer. In this case, neither (a) nor (b) is an element of the "ideal set of formulations towards which all opinions may in the long run of experience be expected to converge." In this case, James's theory seems to imply that perhaps neither (a) nor (b) is true — a surprising conclusion, to say the least.[3]

In quotation (3), James apparently claimed that a belief is true if and only if it can be verified. On this reading, James's account of truth will again have the perhaps objectionable implication that it may be that neither (a) nor (b) is true, since it may be that neither is verifiable.[4]

Even if we can find some way around the buried secrets problem, there remains the further problem that proposals (1), (2), and (3) apparently contradict one another: a belief may benefit the believer even if it is not verifiable; a belief may be verifiable *now* even if it in the future it will not be verifiable and so will not end up in the "ideal set of formulations" — and so on.

On the basis of considerations like these, many of James's contemporaries concluded that his "theory" of truth was just a dog's breakfast. James typically responded to his critics by protesting (with obvious frustration) that he had been misunderstood. For example, he vigorously insisted that he had *not* meant to say that a belief is true just in case it is useful to the believer (MT 1909, 126, 128).

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2 For a recent defence of a position of this kind, see Misak 2000.

3 The problem was first explained by Peirce (1878). This essay is reprinted in the first volume of Houser and Kloesel 1992.

4 It's worth noting that this "verificationist" position remains popular today, especially in the philosophy of mathematics. See for example Prawitz 1998.

These protestations did little to silence his detractors. In *Pragmatism* James really does *seem* to endorse the claim that a belief is true if and only if it benefits the believer. His later pronouncements to the contrary only added to the impression that his position was inconsistent and muddled.[5]

It seems to me, however, that we should not accept the conclusion that James's work on truth was a dog's breakfast unless we can first convince ourselves that no more charitable interpretation of the text is available. And so we face an exegetical challenge: *Can we find a charitable interpretation?*

I contend that *Pragmatism* should be central in discussions of James's theory of truth. James's earlier writings on truth are not as well-developed as *Pragmatism,* and his later writings on truth are largely responses to *Pragmatism*'s critics. In sections two, three and four of this chapter, I will give an (inevitably partial)[6] survey of Lectures V of VI of *Pragmatism*. In section five I consider the suggestion that it is a misunderstanding of James's project to say that he sought a theoretical account of the nature of truth. In section six I offer my own response to the accusation that James's theory was a dog's breakfast.

2. Pragmatism and common sense

I begin this section with a discussion of James's metaphysics of pure experience — a view which he presented in a series of papers published around 1904,[7] and which is an important part of the philosophical backdrop of *Pragmatism*. Sadly, we do not have space for a thorough discussion, so a quick sketch will have to do. For more, see Cooper, Dunham, and Inukai's contributions to this volume.[8] Having looked at James's metaphysical views, we will consider James's discussion of the goals of inquiry in Lecture V of *Pragmatism,* "Pragmatism and Common Sense."

Let's start with a question: What is the difference between a physical ball and an imaginary one? One's first thought might be that they are made from different materials. The physical ball will be made of steel, or rubber, or wood, or some other physical stuff. The imaginary ball, one wants to say, can't be made of any

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5 For example, Moore (1907–8) wrote:

> But it by no means follows that because a philosopher would admit a view to be silly, when it is definitely put before him, he has not himself been constantly holding, and implying that very view. He may quite sincerely protest that he never has either held or implied it, and yet he may all the time have been not only implying it but holding it — vaguely, perhaps, but really.

6 In particular, I will have nothing to say in this essay about James's notorious claim that "(T)ruth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true" (P 97). For an excellent discussion of this aspect of James's position, see Schwartz 2012, chap. 6.

7 See in particular "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" (ERE 1904, 3–20) and "A World of Pure Experience" (ERE 1904 21–44).

8 For further discussion of this aspect of James's work, see Cooper 1990, Lamberth 1999, and Banks 2014.

such physical material, precisely because it is not a physical thing. Physical things are made of physical stuff; mental things are made of mental stuff.

James disagreed. He claimed that both mental and physical things are composed of the same "primal stuff or material" (ERE 4). Indeed, for James, there need be no *intrinsic* difference between a mental thing and a physical thing; what makes something mental, or physical, is not its intrinsic features, but how it relates to other things:

> [W]e find that there are some fires that will always burn sticks and always warm our bodies, and that there are some waters that will always put out fires; while there are other fires and waters that will not act at all. The general group of experiences that act, that do not only possess their natures intrinsically, but wear them adjectively and energetically, turning them against one another, comes inevitably to be contrasted with the group whose members, having identically the same natures, fail to manifest them in the 'energetic' way. I make for myself now an experience of blazing fire; I place it near my body; but it does not warm me in the least. I lay a stick upon it, and the stick either burns or remains green, as I please. I call up water, and pour it on the fire, and absolutely no difference ensues. I account for all such facts by calling this whole train of experiences unreal, a mental train. Mental fire is what won't burn real sticks; mental water is what won't necessarily (though of course it may) put out even a mental fire. Mental knives may be sharp, but they won't cut real wood. Mental triangles are pointed, but their points won't wound. (ERE 17)

For James, a thing can be both mental *and* physical. Suppose, for example, that you accurately see a cricket ball. Then the ball is at once a perception, a part of your mental world, and a physical thing which could cause a bruise if it struck someone's forehead. James's view therefore differs greatly from "indirect realist" theories of perception, according to which the things we perceive are mental copies of physical things. For James, the ball that you perceive is not a mental simulacrum of the physical ball; rather, the physical ball and the perception are one and the same.

James's word for the "primal stuff or material" from which both mental and physical things are made was "experience". The term has the potential to mislead, for it is natural to think that every experience must have a subject — a person who *has* the experience. But this was certainly *not* James's view. He wrote:

> … we at every moment can continue to believe in an existing beyond. It is only in special cases that our confident rush forward gets rebuked. The beyond must, of course, always in our philosophy be itself of an experiential nature. If not a future experience of our own

> or a present one of our neighbor, it must be a thing in itself in Dr. Prince's and Professor Strong's sense of the term… (ERE 1904, 43)

Strong's definition of "thing in itself" was this:

> By "things-in-themselves" I understand realities external to consciousness of which our perceptions are the symbols. (Strong 1903, chap. 10)

So James's claim was that there are things "of an experiential nature" which are nevertheless "external to consciousness" — i.e. there are "subject-less" experiences, experienCES without experienCERS. For example, consider a rock on some distant unpopulated planet. From a Jamesian point of view, this rock will (like terrestrial rocks) be composed of experiences. But if it happens that no sentient creature ever visits the planet, it may be that these experiences never have a subject.

At this point, it is tempting to complain that James's "pure experiences" shouldn't be called "experiences" at all — perhaps they should be called "basic objects" or something similar instead. Perhaps this is right, but I will stick to James's term.

James believed that the experiences of a newborn baby are a chaotic mess — a "blooming, buzzing confusion" as he eloquently put it (PP 1890, 462). James's goal in Lecture V of *Pragmatism* was to explain the components of the common-sense "conceptual system" (P 1907, 84) which we adults use to "[straighten] the tangle of our experience's immediate flux and sensible variety" (P 87).[9]

James thought that the newborn baby does not think of its experiences as experiences *of* physical objects that persist even when they are not perceived:

> A baby's rattle drops out of his hand, and it has "gone out" for him, as a candle-flame goes out; and it comes back, when you replace it in his hand, as the flame comes back when relit. (P 1907, 85)

As we get older, we learn to "interpolate" persisting physical objects between their "successive apparitions" (P 86). These physical objects can then be arranged into "kinds": some of the objects are balls, others are cups, others are trees, and so on (P 88).

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[9] James's discussion of the common-sense conceptual system in *Pragmatism* is brief, so in what follows I draw upon the *The Principles of Psychology*. One must be careful mixing quotations from these two books: there are large differences in opinion — as well as commonalities — between the two works. In particular, *The Principles of Psychology* assumes a *dualist* philosophy of mind, at odds with the metaphysics of pure experience which I describe in this paper. I hope to take advantage of the commonalities without being misled by the differences.

Common-sense geometry is another component of our common-sense conceptual system. James thought our "primitive perceptions of space" (PP 1890, 787) include perceptions of the sizes of different experiences. "[T]he entrance into a warm bath gives our skin a more massive feeling than the prick of a pin," he wrote (PP 776). What's more, our primitive perceptions of space include certain spatial relations — relations of distance and adjacency, for example.[10] However, James emphasized that these primitive perceptions are in many ways muddled and incomplete. We do not perceive distances between objects that cannot be perceived simultaneously. Less obviously, the perceptions of the different senses may conflict with one another: the cavity that remains after a tooth has been extracted feels enormous when explored with the tongue but looks small when seen in a mirror (PP 781). What's more, James thought, we do not directly perceive distances between experiences of different senses (PP 819). Thus, he wrote, "primitively our space-experiences form a chaos" (PP 819). However, as adults we learn to combine our space-experiences "into a consolidated and unitary continuum," (PP 819) a single "cosmic space" (P 1907, 87) which persists as physical objects move around through it.[11]

Our common-sense conceptual system also includes a temporal component. The newborn baby has experiences of duration and temporal order. However, the baby has to learn to think of events as distributed along a single timeline:

> That one Time which we all believe in and in which each event has its definite date, that one Space in which everything has its definite position, these abstract notions unify the world incomparably … (P 1907, 87)

I could continue with this exposition of James's account of our common-sense conceptual system — but I hope that the general outlines of James's theory are now sufficiently clear. James thought that our "primitive" experiences are "chaotic" or "tangled", and that we use the "conceptual system" of common sense to systematize the flux of sensations.

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10 On the philosophical significance of the claim that *relations* are among our "primitive perceptions of space", see Klein 2009.

11 It's fascinating to compare James's *psychological* treatment of this issue with the *logical constructions* offered by Russell in "The Relation of Sense Data to Physics," in his *Mysticism and Logic* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd: 1917). In a famous critique of such logical construction, Quine wrote:

> Why all this creative reconstruction, all this make-believe? The stimulation of his sensory receptors is all the evidence anybody has had to go on, ultimately, in arriving at his picture of the world. Why not just see how this construction really proceeds? Why not settle for psychology? (*Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, pg. 75)

I suggest that James "settled" for psychology eighty years before Quine recommended it! Having said that, there are also deep differences between Quine's approach and James's. On this point, see Klein 2018.

It is noteworthy that the account of common sense that James offers here is very similar to his discussion of philosophical and scientific inquiry in his "The Sentiment of Rationality":

> Our pleasure at finding that a chaos of facts is at bottom the expression of a single underlying fact is like the relief of the musician at resolving a confused mass of sound into melodic or harmonic order. The simplified result is handled with far less mental effort than the original data; and a philosophic conception of nature is thus in no metaphorical sense a labor-saving contrivance. (EP 35–36)

To help summarise all of this, I will introduce a new term. Let's say that an "experiential fact" is a fact that could possibly be perceived, independently of the conceptual innovations of common sense or science. For example, the fact that two particular experiences are adjacent would be an experiential fact. By contrast, *that there are two phones three inches apart* would not be an experiential fact — for the concepts *phone* and *inch* are part of our common-sense conceptual system. James's proposal, then, was that the goal of both common-sense and scientific enquiry is to *systematise* or *organise* the experiential facts, which otherwise constitute an unmanageable knotted mess.

3. James's critique of the copy theory of truth

James told his audience that "any dictionary will tell you" that truth means "agreement with reality." James accepted this dictionary definition, but then claimed (correctly, I think) that the dictionary definition is of little value in the absence of some further discussion of "agreement" and "reality" (P 1907, 96). James went on to say that one "popular" way of developing this dictionary definition is to say that a true idea is a *copy* of what it represents (P 1907, 96). I will call this the "copy theory" of truth. James presented his evaluation of the copy theory at the end of Lecture V and the beginning of Lecture VI of *Pragmatism*.

Our discussion in the previous section of James's metaphysical views, and his views about the goals of enquiry, should already lead you to expect James to reject the copy theory — at least as a fully general account of truth. For one thing, we have already seen that, for James, a perception is not a *copy* of something in one's environment: it *is* something in one's environment. For another, we have seen that, according to James, our beliefs about for example "cosmic space" are not a copy of anything found in experience; rather, they are a tool which we use to organize the otherwise chaotic "primitive perceptions of space."

And indeed, James argued that the copy theory is not correct in all cases, though he was willing to concede that there may be some cases in which our true beliefs are copies:

> Our true ideas of sensible things do indeed copy them. Shut your eyes and think of yonder clock on the wall, and you get just such a true picture or copy of its dial. (P 1907, 96)

James continued his discussion of the clock by providing a simple counterexample to the copy theory:

> [Y]our idea of [the clock's] "works" (unless you are a clock-maker) is much less of a copy … (P 1907, 96)

Let's suppose, for example, that one of James's audience members believed, truly, that the clock was powered by a descending weight. Nevertheless, the audience member might have been completely unable to form an accurate visualization of the clock's mechanism. In this case, there is a true belief about the clock which is not a copy of the clock, except perhaps in some extended or metaphorical sense). This is a straightforward, compelling counterexample to the copy theory.[12]

Another one of James's objections to the copy theory is much harder to interpret. The objection first appears in "Humanism and Truth", an article which slightly predated *Pragmatism.*[13]

> As I understand the pragmatist way of seeing things, it owes its being to the break-down which the last fifty years have brought about in the older notions of scientific truth. … Up to about 1850 almost everyone believed that sciences expressed truths that were exact copies of a definite code of non-human realities. But the enormously rapid multiplication of theories in these latter days has well-nigh upset the notion of any one of them being a more literally objective kind of thing than another. There are so many geometries, so many logics, so many physical and chemical hypotheses, so many classifications, each one of them good for so much and yet not good for everything, that the notion that even the truest formula may be a human device and not a literal transcript has dawned upon us. (MT 1909, 40)

James's argument in this passage seems to be this. Modern science in some cases presents us with radically different theoretical accounts of a single subject-matter. Since these theories are radically different from

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12 Here is a further challenge to the copy theory. For an idea to be true, it does not suffice that it copy *something,* it must copy *its referent.* Thus, the copy theory is incomplete in the absence of a theory of *reference.* James was aware of this point, and discussed the theory of reference in detail. For a summary, see Jackman's contribution to this volume.

13 "Humanism and Truth" was originally published in *Mind* in 1904.

each other, they can't *all* be copies or duplicates of the reality that the represent — but even so they are true. And so truth is not duplication.

The argument is puzzling. A proponent of the copy theory may simply reply that the diverse scientific theories James has in mind are not true in the strict sense — though they may be in some sense approximately true.[14]

A slightly different version of the argument appears at the end of Lecture V of *Pragmatism*. James contrasted our common-sense *Weltanschauung* and the worldview of the hard sciences. James suggested that common sense and the hard sciences are incompatible. In particular, common sense tells us that secondary qualities (including colours) are real, but science disagrees. Science tells us that secondary qualities are unreal; what are real are "her atoms, her ether, her magnetic fields, and the like" (P 1907, 90).

James was cautious in responding to this problem. He expressed sympathy for a form of instrumentalism, according to which scientific unobservables are unreal.[15] However, James finished the chapter by tentatively recommending a more radical way of reconciling the common-sense and scientific worldviews. He wrote:

> The whole notion of truth, which naturally and without reflexion we assume to mean the simple duplication by the mind of a ready-made and given reality, proves hard to understand clearly. … It is evident that the conflict of [the scientific and common-sense worldviews] obliges us to overhaul the very idea of truth, for at present we have no definite notion of what the word may mean. (P 1907, 93–4)

This is another puzzling passage, but James's suggestion seems to have been this. The common-sense and the scientific positions are both true, even though they seem to conflict with one another. Since these two theories are so different from one another, they can't *both* be copies or duplicates of reality. So there must be something wrong with the copy theory. James finished his discussion of the point with a question, "May there not after all be a possible ambiguity in truth?" (P 1907, 94). Apparently, James was suggesting that there is more than one sort of truth — that is, he was recommending the position that is today called "truth pluralism". James returned to this theme at the beginning of Lecture VII:

> *The* Truth: what a perfect idol of the rationalistic mind! I read in an old letter — from a gifted friend who died too young — these words: "In everything, in science, art, morals, and religion, there *must* be one system that is right and *every* other wrong." How

14 For a discussion of closeness-to-truth, see Oddie 2016.

15 He wrote, "Scientific logicians are saying on every hand that these entities [i.e. scientific unobservables] and their determinations, however definitely conceived, should not be held for literally real" (P 93). He went on to praise Mach, Ostwald and Duhem, who were well-known opponents of atomism.

> characteristic of the enthusiasm of a certain stage of youth! … the question "What is *the* truth?" is no real question … (P 1907, 115–6)

These are difficult passages, to be sure, so we must be cautious in our interpretation. My own tentative proposal is that James's suggestion was that there are several truth properties. Our common-sense beliefs have one truth property; the findings of the hard sciences have another. So understood, James's discussions of the copy theory of truth dovetail neatly with his discussion of the goals of inquiry, which I considered in section two. As I said, for James, it is the goal in both common-sense and scientific inquiry to *systematise* the experiential facts, which are otherwise an unmanageable knotted mess. In the passages just quoted, James suggested that common sense and science have reached two variant systematizations, which are individually useful but which cannot be combined. I will return to this theme presently — first, I would like to look at James's presentation of his positive account of truth.

4. Beyond the Copy Theory

James began his presentation of his theory with the following pithy statement, which I have already quoted:

> True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot. (P 1907, 97)

He then went on to explain his position in more detail. The claim just quoted, then, was not a presentation of James's final position — it is rather a "first pass" summary of the position which James presented to his audience to prepare them for the more detailed discussion that followed.

James explicitly distinguished "absolute truth" from "relative truth." He illustrated the distinction by listing cases of discredited theories: "Ptolemaic astronomy, euclidean space, aristotelian logic, [and] scholastic metaphysics" (P 1907, 107). These theories, he argued, were relatively true in their day, but have subsequently turned out not to be absolutely true. James also referred to the relative truths as "half-truths", which suggests that, for James, relative truths need not, strictly speaking, be truths at all — the relative truths are beliefs which one can reasonably *take* to be true, given one's evidence (Putnam 1997).

For James, relative truth and absolute truth are both important, though for rather different reasons. He stressed the remoteness of the absolute truth, saying that "[i]t runs on all fours with the perfectly wise man" (P 1907, 107); in consequence, our actions must be based on relative truths. "[W]e have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood" (P 107). The absolute truth, by contrast, acts as a "regulative notion" (P 107). "To admit, as we pragmatists do, that we are liable to correction," James explained, "involves the use on our part of an ideal standard" (MT 1909, 142).

Some readers find James's terminology confusing. Henry Jackman writes:

> [W]hether or not they accept James's gloss on the nature of absolute truth, most philosophers still insist that such 'objective' truth is the *only* kind of truth, and that James's insistence on referring to our temporary beliefs as *truths* of any sort is just perverse. A *temporary* truth is standardly taken to be no more a *kind* of truth than a *purported* spy is a sort of spy. (Jackman 2008)

Perhaps so — but this is a terminological complaint only, not a substantive objection to James's position.

In the remainder of this section, I will discuss James's account of relative truth, and then turn to his account of absolute truth.

James claimed that as we search for relative truths, we are subject to three constraints (he called them "realities"). First, our theories must be consistent with "the flux of sensations" (P 1907, 117). Second, James said, our ideas must be consistent with the "relations that obtain between our sensations or between their copies in our minds" (P 118). James stressed that these include "mutable and accidental" relations such as spatial and temporal relations, but he also included "relations of ideas" in something like's Hume's sense. He gave examples:

> It is either a definition or a principle that 1 and 1 make 2, that 2 and 1 make 3, and so on; that white differs less from gray than it does from black; that when the cause begins to act the effect also commences.[16] (P 1907, 100–101)

Third, James argued that in our theorizing we are constrained by previous theories. He claimed that we must create new theories by making *small* changes to existing theories:

> [O]ur theory must mediate between all previous truths and certain new experiences. It must derange common sense and previous belief as little as possible… (P 1907, 104)

James stressed that it is extremely difficult to find theories that meet these three constraints. "Between the coercions of the sensible order and those of the ideal order," he wrote, "our mind is thus wedged tightly" (P 1907, 101).

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[16] James discussed *a priori* truths more thoroughly in the final chapter of *The Principles of Psychology* (PP 1890, 1215–1280).

However, he thought that when we *can* find more than one theory that meets the three constraints, we should break the tie by appeal to pragmatic considerations:

> 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." Clerk Maxwell somewhere says it would be "poor scientific taste" to choose the more complicated of two equally well-evidenced conceptions; and you will all agree with him. (P 104)

In effect, James's claim was that finding relatively true theories is a constrained optimization problem. We must respect the three constraints, but otherwise we try to optimize our theory with respect to pragmatically desirable characteristics such as economy and elegance.[17]

Having discussed relative truth, James then explained what "absolute truth" is in the following words, which I have already quoted:

> The "absolutely" true, meaning what no farther experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge.' (P 1907, 106–7)

James's suggestion seems to have been this. It may be that *now* there are several inconsistent theories which accommodate all the available evidence and are tied with respect to all relevant pragmatic considerations. However, eventually, once enough evidence has been gathered and enough reasoning has been carried out, opinion will converge on a single ideal theory, which is superior to all competitors.

This is puzzling, because James gave no argument for the conclusion that there is such an ideal theory. What grounds have we for ruling out the possibility that there are several different theories which will be

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[17] We should ask whether, for James, these pragmatically desirable characteristics vary from one person to another. Could it be that what's relatively true for you is relatively false for me because we have, so to speak, differing theoretical tastes? The following passage from the Lecture II of *Pragmatism* suggests a positive answer to this question:

> New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity. We hold a theory true just in proportion to its success in solving this 'problem of maxima and minima.' But success in solving this problem is eminently a matter of approximation. We say this theory solves it on the whole more satisfactorily than that theory; but that means more satisfactorily to ourselves, and individuals will emphasize their points of satisfaction differently. To a certain degree, therefore, everything here is plastic. (P 35)

forever tied for the title 'best theory'? What's more, James's use of the definite article in this passage (*the* absolutely true) seems to conflict with his endorsement of truth pluralism.

I will return to these puzzles presently. For now, I would like to put this point to one side, to admire how neatly James's theory of absolute truth dovetails with his views about the goals of inquiry, which I described in section two. As I said, James thought that in constructing our belief-system our goal is to *systematise* the otherwise chaotic morass that is the "flux of our sensations". As inquiry advances, our systematizations improve. The limiting point of this process (the absolutely true) is the optimal systematization.

5. Did James have an account of the nature of truth?

Now that we've looked at the text, we can return to the exegetical puzzle presented in section one: can we find a charitable interpretation of James's work on truth, or are we stuck with the conclusion that it was a dog's breakfast?

In this section I consider two writers who have argued, in different ways, that the exegetical problem arises only because we mistakenly assume that James's goal was to give an account of the *nature of truth*, that is, an account of *what truth is* — when in fact James did not have this goal at all.

Denis Phillips argued that James's goal was not to explain what truth is, but rather to give us a method for finding truths:

> [Moore] failed to appreciate the problem James was concerned with: How do we come to *ascribe* truth to an idea, that is, what experiences lead us to recognize that an idea is true … James accepted the correspondence theory as a *definition* of truth, but … he also regarded this as fairly unenlightening. So, his interest was elsewhere; he wanted to establish a *criterion* of truth, to establish a procedure for identifying "true ideas." (Phillips, 1984, 424).[18]

There is something to this: in his discussions of *relative* truth, James *was* giving an account of "how we come to ascribe truth to an idea". However, when he gave his account of *absolute* truth as the "ideal vanishing point", James seems to have been attempting to explain what truth is, and not merely how it is recognized. James explicitly rejected Phillips' reading in "The Pragmatist Account of Truth and its Misunderstanders", in which he presented as one of the "misunderstandings" of his theory the claim that "Pragmatism explains not what truth is, but only how it is arrived at" (MT 1909, 108).

[18] See also Bybee 1984.

Richard Rorty's approach is rather different (Rorty, 1982, chap. 9).[19] Rorty claimed that many philosophers who have written about truth have supposed that truth has an *essence*, and that it is the goal of the philosopher to produce a *theory* which reveals this essence. However, for Rorty, James's goal in his discussions of truth was very different. According to Rorty, James believed that truth has no essence, and so there is no need for a *theory* of truth at all. James's goal was to redirect our attention away from pointless theorizing about the essence of truth and towards more fruitful topics. Rorty believed that James's critics have failed to understand this:

> Let me illustrate this by James's definition of "the true" as "what is good in the way of belief." This has struck his critics as not to the point, as unphilosophical, as like the suggestion that the essence of aspirin is that it is good for headaches. James's point, however, was that there *is* nothing deeper to be said: truth is not the sort of thing which *has* an essence. (Rorty 1982, 162)

What are we to make of this? An extended discussion of Rorty's claim that James had no "theory" of truth is liable to degenerate into aimless squabbles about what would count as a "theory." Suffice it to say that James himself said that he was presenting a "theory" of truth (Pragmatism, 32–33, 37) and there is no evidence that these remarks were meant ironically. The case for Rorty's claim that James was anti-essentialist about truth is stronger. James talked about the "essence" of truth only once in *Pragmatism,* and when he did so he was paraphrasing an *objection* to his own views (P 1907, 105). However, even if Rorty was correct on this point, we can hardly stop here. We have yet to figure out what to say about the problem of buried secrets, and we have yet to understand James's truth pluralism. So let's move on.[20]

6. What was James's theory of truth?

I would now like to present my own response to the exegetical challenge that I presented in section one. I start with a word of caution. In a couple of places in *Pragmatism,* James talked about providing a "definition" of truth (P 1907, 42, 96). Philosophers trained in the analytic tradition may infer that James's goal was to provide an "analysis" of the word "true", analogous to the mathematical definitions of words like "prime" or "square". On this view, James's account of truth would take the following form, where $\varphi(x)$ does not contain the word "true" or any word which is defined in terms of truth:

> Given any belief x, x is true just in case $\varphi(x)$.

[19] For related discussion, see Cormier 2001.

[20] For further discussion of Rorty's reading of James's work on truth, see Gale 1999, 155.

However, we should not assume at the outset that James's theory took this form. James rejected the analogy between his theory of truth and the definitions used in mathematics (MT 1909, 148–9).[21]

This cautionary note aside, let's get started. As I noted in section one, there are passages in *Pragmatism* in which James seems to endorse the crude claim that a belief is true just in case it benefits the believer. However, in his later writings he adamantly denied that he had ever made this claim. What are we to make of this? A simple solution is available: we should conclude that in those passages in which he appears to endorse the crude claim (as in sentences 1a and 1b, above), James was speaking, loosely, of *relative* rather than absolute truth. I have already explained that I think we should not take at face value James's claim that "[t]rue ideas are those that we can … verify" (sentence 3, above; P 1907, 97) — this was a "first pass" statement of James's view only. I suggest, then, that James's core thesis was this, which I have already quoted several times:

> The "absolutely" true, meaning what no farther experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge.' (P 1907, 106-7)

Two challenges remain. First, there is the problem of buried secrets. Second, there is the problem of squaring James's apparent truth pluralism with his claim that there is a *single* "ideal set of formulations" towards which the opinions of humanity are converging.

I'll start with the problem of buried secrets. To repeat, it is natural to think that one or other of these statements must be true:

(a) Richard III killed the princes in the tower.
(b) Richard III did not kill the princes in the tower.

However, it seems entirely possible that all of the relevant evidence has been destroyed. In this case, the opinions of humanity on this topic will not converge on this question, and so neither (a) nor (b) will end up in the "ideal set of formulations". And so James's theory of truth seems to imply that perhaps neither (a) nor (b) is true — and this consequence of James's theory seems objectionable. In short: James's theory of truth seems to conflict with the principle of bivalence in a counterintuitive way.[22]

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21 On this point, see Schwartz 2012, pg. 94. and Lamberth 2009.

22 Cheryl Misak has found an elegant solution to the problem of buried secrets in the writings of C.S. Peirce (see Misak 2013, chap. 3). Robert Schwartz (2012, 110) in effect suggests that James *should* have responded to the buried secrets problem in the manner recommended by Misak's Peirce. Perhaps so — but I can find no textual evidence to support the claim that James *did* accept Peirce's solution.

I discuss a challenge to the Misak/Peirce approach in Donaldson 2014. For another take on Peirce's theory of truth, see Hookway 2004.

In "A Dialogue", in *The Meaning of Truth* (MT 1909, 154–9), James addresses a version of the buried secrets problem. The two interlocutors in the dialogue were "PRAGMATIST" (who presented James's views) and "ANTI-PRAGMATIST", who presented the following formulation of the buried secrets problem:

> [S]uppose a certain state of facts, facts for example of antediluvian planetary history, concerning which the question may be asked: 'Shall the truth about them ever be known?" And suppose (leaving the hypothesis of an omniscient absolute out of the account) that we assume that the truth is never to be known. I ask you now, brother pragmatist, whether according to you there can be said to be any truth at all about such a state of facts. Is there a truth, or is there not a truth, in cases where at any rate it never comes to be known? (MT 1909, 154)

One point that PRAGMATIST was anxious to stress in his reply is that truth is a property of *beliefs held by people*. James had no time for the suggestion that truth is primarily a property of propositions, conceived of as abstract objects which exist independently of thinkers. It is a consequence of this position that if nobody ever forms a belief about the relevant portion of "antediluvian planetary history," then there are no truths about it. However, PRAGMATIST agreed that we may still talk, counterfactually, about the truth-values that such beliefs *would have* if they were formed. This caveat aside, PRAGMATIST's response is as follows:

> There have been innumerable events in the history of our planet of which nobody ever has been able to give an account, yet of which it can already be said abstractly that only one sort of possible account can ever be true. The truth about any such event is thus already generically predetermined by the event's nature; and one may accordingly say with perfectly good conscience that it virtually pre-exists. (MT 1909, 155)

James's position, then, was that the truth-values of beliefs about an event in "antediluvian planetary history" are "predetermined by the event's nature." Note that James did not insist that beliefs about antediluvian planetary history can only be true if sufficient evidence remains. I suggest, then, that James's response to my Richard III example would have been that either (a) or (b) is true even if insufficient evidence remains to settle the question. But how can we square this with the rest of James's account?

To answer this question, let us first recall that, for James, there are experiences that have no subject — experienCES without experienCERS. One this claim has been accepted, it is natural to accept in addition that there are experiential facts that are never observed. For example, consider a pair of adjacent subject-

less experiences. The fact that these two experiences are adjacent will be an experiential fact, in my sense, in my sense, even if no sentient creature has ever, or will ever, observe it.[23]

Now recall that, for James, the goal of both scientific and common-sense enquiry is to systematise the otherwise tangled mess of experiential facts. Our predecessors have given to us theories which systematize many of their experiences. Working together, we modify these theories to accommodate our own additional observations. We also make conceptual innovations, finding newer, more elegant systematizations of the experiential facts. As time passes, then, we find ever better systematizations of ever more experiential facts. The ideal limit point of this process is a best-possible systematization of *all* the experiential facts — including unobserved experiential facts. On this view, there will be truths about antediluvian rocks, and about whether Richard III killed the princes in the tower, even if these truths are epistemically inaccessible to us. Understood in this way, James's theory is not vulnerable to the buried secrets problem.[24]

Now let's turn to the challenge of squaring James's truth pluralism with his claim that there is a *single* "ideal set of formulations" towards which the opinions of humanity are converging. To see that there is a problem here, compare these two passages, which I have already quoted:

> The "absolutely" true, meaning what no farther experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge.' (P 1907, 106-7)

> The Truth: what a perfect idol of the rationalistic mind! I read in an old letter — from a gifted friend who died too young — these words: "In everything, in science, art, morals, and religion, there must be one system that is right and every other wrong." How characteristic of the enthusiasm of a certain stage of youth! … the question "What is the truth?" is no real question … (P 1907, 115–6)

As I said, the passages in which James defends truth pluralism are hard to interpret, and so our response to this exegetical problem must be somewhat tentative. My own view is this. I suggest that James *vacillated* on the question of whether there is a single optimal systematization of the experiential facts. When he spoke of "the" absolutely true, he assumed that there is one single "ideal set of formulations." In those passages in which he tentatively put forward truth pluralism, he was suggesting that there may be several different

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[23] I defined "experiential fact" by saying that an experiential fact "could possibly be perceived, independently of the conceptual innovations of common sense or science." It is crucial that the sense of "possibility" involved here is one that ignores certain practical limitations on what can be observed. There can be experiential facts that are so distant that nobody will ever observe them — in the same way that a substance can be water soluble even if (for some practical reason) it is impossible to put it in water.

[24] Note that on this reading James's theory was in effect an "impure coherence theory" in the sense of Ralph Walker (Walker 1989). It is an important question whether James's theory is vulnerable to Walker's "master objection". For discussion of the master objection, see Wright 1995.

ideal sets, each of which corresponds to a variety of truth. These different ideal sets are internally consistent, but they may contradict one another. For example, there may be a "common-sense" set, which includes the belief that ripe bananas are yellow, and a "scientific" set, which includes the belief that colours are illusory. If so, then the belief that ripe bananas are yellow has the "common sense" truth property but it lacks the "scientific" truth property.[25, 26]

7. James's theory of truth today

I conclude that James's theory of truth was not a dog's breakfast, and that the naïve objections to James's theory, presented in section one, all fail. At the same time, I don't expect contemporary philosophers to find James's theory attractive. As Lamberth has stressed (Lamberth 1999, 207), James's views on truth were intertwined with metaphysical views that are out of favour today. However, James's work on truth is not without significance for contemporary philosophy. I will wrap up by mentioning two questions for further research.

(1) Truth pluralism, the claim that there are several different truth properties, has been much discussed recently.[27] However, a reader of the contemporary literature could easily end up with the impression that truth pluralism was first discussed in the 1990s — though as we have seen James had defended truth pluralism almost a century earlier.

If I'm right about James's version of truth pluralism, however, it was in one respect *far* more radical than more recent versions. As we have seen, in some places James seems to have accepted instances of the following schema:

> φ has one truth property, and ¬φ has a different truth property.

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25 For further discussion, see Jackman 2008, 80–5.

26 Alternatively, one might propose that in the passages in which James endorses truth pluralism, he is concerned only with *relative* truth. On this interpretation, James is convinced that there is *one* best-possible systematization of the experiential facts — there is no 'tie' between optimal systematizations — though he adds that (for the moment) our *relative* truths may come into conflict with one another. I disfavour this interpretation, for two reasons. (1) I can find no *argument* in James for the bold claim that there is a single optimal systematization of the experiential facts. And it is far from clear what argument could be given for this claim. So this interpretation uncharitably attributes to James a strong thesis for which he had no justification. (2) There are passages which do not fit this interpretation. For example, in Lecture VII of *Pragmatism* James makes fun of the "rationalist" idea that there is a single "édition de luxe" of the universe, and then "various finite editions, full of false readings, distorted and mutilated each in its own way" (P 124). But on the proposed interpretation, this was James's own view!

27 Crispin Wright (1992) initiated the recent literature. For more recent work, see for example Lynch 2009 or Pederson and Wright 2013.

Thus, James's version of truth pluralism resembles dialetheism.[28] As far as I can tell, no recent writer on truth pluralism has discussed the very radical idea that two contradictory statements might both have a truth property. This is an important lacuna in today's literature on truth.

(2) To repeat, James's theory of truth is unlikely to appeal to philosophers today because it is entwined with his metaphysics of pure experience. It is an open question, however, whether James's theory of truth could be adapted to cohere with metaphysical views that are favoured today. Could there be, for example, a *physicalist* version of James's theory of truth?

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[28] See Priest 2006 for a recent defence of dialetheism.

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