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# Putnam, James and “Absolute” Truth

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- 1 Contemporary Pragmatism is often understood as taking either a “subjectivist” form (typically associated with Richard Rorty), or an “objectivist” form (most often associated with Hilary Putnam).<sup>1</sup> However, while most are happy to list C. S. Peirce as the originator of the comparatively objective form, William James’s position in this narrative is harder to place.
- 2 This should not be surprising, since the division between these objective and subjective versions of pragmatism tends to be most easily cashed out in terms of competing views about the nature of truth, and James’s talk of truth is notoriously, and deliberately, ambiguous. In particular, James takes our use of “truth” to pick out *both* “temporary” (or “subjective,” “relative” or “half”) truth, and “absolute” (or “objective or “ultimate”) truth.<sup>2</sup> As he put it in his 1908 Harvard seminar:

It is unfortunate that truth should be used, now for the temporary beliefs of men and now for a purely abstract thing that nobody may, perhaps, ever be in possession of. The pragmatist definition of truth applies to both. Since the word, however, is the same, I wish someone here present might invent distinct words for ultimate truth and temporary belief.<sup>3</sup>
- 3 Roughly, a claim is “temporarily” true if we are warranted in asserting it at the time, and “absolutely” true if it would continue to have such warrant even if inquiry were extended indefinitely. Depending on what sort of truth you focus on, James’s pragmatism will seem very subjectivistic or comparatively objectivistic. So, for instance, Rorty takes James to be primarily interested in *temporary* truth, with absolute truth only serving as an unrealized (and possibly unrealizable) ideal that plays a role similar to his own “cautionary” use of “true” – a mere reminder that the truths we take to be warranted now may be rejected by us in the future.<sup>4</sup> Putnam, by contrast, argues for an objectivist reading of James, one where he takes *absolute* truth to be the primary sense of the term.<sup>5</sup> Putnam argues that the ideal of absolute truth isn’t *merely* regulative for James, and that not only did James believe that some of our beliefs (such as his own belief in the pragmatic theory of truth)<sup>6</sup> actually were absolutely true: he also took the

best *explanation* of why some of our beliefs were warranted (i.e.: "temporarily true") to be that they were absolutely true as well.<sup>7</sup>

- 4 As against this reading, I'll be arguing here that James was much more ambivalent (indeed, even skeptical) about absolute truth than Putnam allows, and that James's departure from Peirce (and Putnam) was often more radical than Putnam suggests.
- 5 Of course, most philosophers don't see such an ambiguity in the word "truth." On the contrary, they assume that we *already* have two words that pick out what James calls "temporary belief" and "ultimate truth," namely "*belief*" and "*truth*." The "unfortunate" thing, according to such philosophers, is not that "truth" is used ambiguously in *English*, but rather that *James* uses the normally unambiguous word in such an ambiguous fashion.<sup>8</sup> However, James's position comes from his treating a theory of truth as starting with those things that are *taken to be true* (the "temporary truths"), and *generalizing* from those to get an account of the meaning of "truth" (at least in its "temporary" sense).<sup>9</sup> This is just a general instance of James's "method of attacking problems by asking what their terms are 'known as'."<sup>10</sup> He thinks that looking at our actual use of even a conceptually central terms like "true" can lead us to insights about it that mere *a priori* reflection on the concept cannot.
- 6 That said, even if James is entitled to suppose that there are two uses of "true," it can be very hard to tell which of the two types of truth he is talking about at any given point. Putnam claims that "James quite freely equates 'true' and 'absolutely true'; it is 'half-true' that always takes the qualifier."<sup>11</sup> However, an examination of James's talk of truth doesn't really bear this out. So, for instance, when James writes about belief revision he freely switches from the "previous mass of opinions" to the "older stock of truths," and claims that "the greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths" (James 1975 [1907]: 34). He clearly seems to have *temporary* truths in mind here, since the incompatibility that produces such enmity between truths cannot exist among absolute truths. In much the same way, his claim that "we have to live today by what truth we can get today, and be ready tomorrow to call it falsehood" (*ibid.*: 107) seems to require that "truth" be read as temporary rather than absolute, especially since the examples he gives right after (Ptolemaic astronomy, Euclidian space, Aristotelian logic, Scholastic metaphysics) are all examples of temporary truths for James.
- 7 Indeed, when he introduces the distinction between temporary and absolute truth in his 1908 seminar, temporary truths clearly seem to be his primary interest:
 

But what is the use of talking about ultimate truth? It is such a purely abstract ideal that it only serves as a vanishing point. The only truths that men ever have anything practical to do with are those truths that they severally believe in, at any given time. Therefore, so far as pragmatism pretends to be a useful doctrine it establishes its utility far more by applying itself to the truths that concern us than it would by applying itself to an abstract ideal. (James 1988 [1908]: 434-5)
- 8 There are, of course, bare uses of "true" in James that seem more in line with the absolute reading as well, and one reason for the seemingly negligent way James has of flagging which type of truth he is talking about may be his view that "The pragmatist definition of truth applies to both" (*ibid.*: 434).<sup>12</sup> James may feel that there is no need to disambiguate his truth talk, since much of what he says is meant to work equally well on both readings. However, if James really thinks that "truth" is *ambiguous*, how could he claim that the same *definition* applies to both uses of the term?

- 9 Well, while James does take there to be two uses of "true," he certainly does not take the two meanings are completely independent of each other. In particular, his claim that the definition applies to both meanings of "true" in spite of the fact that these are *different* meanings can be explained by the fact that "absolute" truth is an *idealization* of our "temporary" truths.<sup>13</sup> That is, it is what we get if we indefinitely extend the norms that govern our movements from one temporary "truth" to another.
- 10 The respective roles of absolute truth and temporary truth would thus be very much like those traditionally seen between truth and belief, but absolute truth and temporary truth are not independent of each other in the way that belief and truth were traditionally taken to be. Constraints that determine our temporary truths are still there when we idealize, and so "subjective" factors that contribute to temporary truth can still be there when we get to absolute truths.<sup>14</sup>
- 11 Indeed, as Putnam notes, one thing that distinguishes James's pragmatism from Peirce's is that James's account of truth combines a broadly Peircean conception of the connection between truth and inquiry with "the un-Peircean idea that truth is partly shaped by our interests" (Putnam 2017 [1987]: 167-8). For James, if absolute truth just comes from the continuous reapplication of the norms governing our temporary truths, then different conceptions of those norms will result in different conceptions of what will make up absolute truth as well.
- 12 This is partially because James takes the process of inquiry to ultimately determine the referents of the expressions involved (rather than just determining the truth-value of independently meaningful propositions), and it is their constitutive contribution to what our expressions mean that allows our subjective preferences to contribute to even the "absolute" truth of our thoughts and utterances.<sup>15</sup>
- 13 For instance, while the evidence can make it clear that two of our commitments conflict, it may not tell us which of the two should be given up, and it is often *subjective* factors that will do this later job. These subjective factors thus ultimately determine whether the term has an extension in line with one commitment or the other (and thus which sets of commitments have the potential to be 'absolutely' true). So, for example, while the evidence may determine that the belief that whales are fish conflicts with the belief that "fish" picks out a natural kind, the evidence doesn't settle whether it is "whales are fish" or "fish are a natural kind" that needs to go. We chose to give up the former, but inquirers with different sets of subjective interests might have given up the latter leading "fish" to be a functional/commercial kind instead, and making "whales are fish" absolutely true.
- 14 In many philosophical cases (such as, say, "freedom" or "knowledge") we see a similar tension between the conditions in which the term is actually applied and the general assumptions we make relating to it, and in such cases which of the two we would ultimately give up may be determined in part by our subjective interests. If James is right, it will turn out that we may face precisely such a choice with the term "truth" as well.
- 15 But even if subjective factors contribute to what is ultimately "absolutely" true, why shouldn't we still simply (as Putnam suggests) tie the word "true" to the ideal associated with it? (Especially given that it is an ideal that we are very attached to.) This question leads to a major difference between the Jamesian and the standard "intellectualist" position, which ties us back to the earlier point that while the

intellectualists think of truth as something out there waiting to be discovered, for James "the absolute truth will have to be *made*."<sup>16</sup> In particular, while we certainly succeed in making our temporary truths, there will be no guarantee that we *can* make absolute truths, and thus no way of being certain that any of our claims are (absolutely) true or false. This brings a degree of fallibilism about the *existence* of absolute truth that isn't as visible on most accounts. Indeed, James at times seems to display not only fallibilism, but also a good deal of *pessimism* about the existence of absolute truth. Remember that in our initial quotation from James's 1908 seminar, he described absolute truth as "a purely abstract thing that nobody may, perhaps, ever be in possession of," and famously claims that it "runs on all fours with the perfectly wise man, and with the absolutely complete experience; and, if these ideals are ever realized, they will all be realized together."<sup>17</sup> It often isn't sufficiently stressed just how pessimistic a thing this is to say. The perfectly wise man and the absolutely complete experience are ideals we do not expect to *ever* be realized, and if absolute truth needs to be realized with these two if it is to be realized at all, then we can be quite confident that no claim of ours will ever be "absolutely" true.

- 16 So why would James be skeptical of absolute truth in this way? Putnam considers two interrelated sources for James's skepticism about absolute truth, (1) his "nominalism," and (2) his conception of absolute truth as a unified whole, but argues that neither are enough to justify the Rorty/Lamberth reading where James sees absolute truth as *just* an ideal.
- 17 The first of these is James's purported unwillingness to understand the relation between absolute truth and inquiry in counterfactual terms. Peirce originally characterized truth in "How to make our ideas clear" as "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate" (Peirce 1992 [1878]: 139), but he famously moved from an indicative to a subjunctive understanding of the conditional involved in the pragmatist connection between truth and inquiry. He thus moves his theory to a focus on how extended inquiry *would* rather than *will* go,<sup>18</sup> but he took James to have a "nominalistic" commitment to staying with the indicative conditional on this matter. Putnam agrees that James would be unwilling to modify his account of truth in this way,<sup>19</sup> but while it may be the case that James is more wary of bare possibilities than Peirce,<sup>20</sup> one should not overstate this difference. While James does often tie truth to actual verification, he also insists that the "workings" by which we understand truth can be "*actual or possible*" (James 1975 [1909]: 7), and that most of our truths stay at the more "virtual" stage. For James, verifiability "is as good as verification" and "[i]ndirectly or only potentially verifying processes may thus be true as well as full verification-processes" (James 1975 [1907]: 99, 100). Consequently, even if James isn't simply willing to adopt Peirce's robustly realistic attitude towards possibilities, he could still understand absolute truth in something more like Peirce's "subjunctive" sense, where something is "virtually" absolutely true if it is what we *would* settle on if inquiry went to its ideal limit.
- 18 Another reason why one might think that James could be skeptical about absolute truth is that he often seemed to think of it as being *unified* in a particular way.<sup>21</sup> That is, if we only get absolute truth when we have reached the end of inquiry for *every* question, then we might think that we will never have it.<sup>22</sup> James's talk of absolute truth as running on all fours with the perfectly wise man and absolutely complete experience might encourage this interpretation, and Lamberth certainly takes it as one of the main

reasons for thinking that James was skeptical about absolute truth.<sup>23</sup> On this reading, when James talks of his account of truth being "an account of truths in the plural" (James 1975 [1907]: 104), these must be *temporary* truths, since absolute truth is always "one." Putnam, however, notes that there are some occasions where James seems to talk about individual claims or theories being absolutely true,<sup>24</sup> and while Peirce's own conception of truth has often been understood in terms of something like a global end of inquiry, it can also be understood in a more "piecemeal" fashion, so that an individual belief would be absolutely true if no amount of further inquiry would lead us to revise it.<sup>25</sup> Such an account would allow one to understand the truth of individual sentences on their own without any need to presuppose any "global" end of inquiry where all questions were settled. Thus, according to Putnam, even if James has an indicative understanding of the relation between truth and inquiry, he does not need to be a skeptic about absolute truth, because there are many questions for which we *have* reached the end of inquiry (that is to say, further investigation will not change our current answers to those questions).

19 However, James has another reason for his skepticism which Putnam does not address. In particular, even the non-nominalistic and piecemeal conception of absolute truth requires that there to *be* answers that we would converge on were we to investigate long enough, and James develops a picture of conceptualization and inquiry in which we have reason to doubt even the *possibility* of such long term convergence.

20 This pessimism is related to, and perhaps an extension of, the *instrumentalism* about scientific theories that James discusses in *Pragmatism* and *The Meaning of Truth*. According to James, the practitioners of the sciences of his day didn't take their theories to be *literally* true in the sense of capturing the structure that the world objectively has. As he puts it:

Up until about 1850 almost everyone believed that the sciences expressed truths that were exact copies of a definite code of non-human realities. But the enormously rapid multiplication of theories in these later 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 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 on us. We hear scientific laws treated as so much "conceptual shorthand," true so far as they are useful but no further. (James 1975 [1909]: 40; italics mine)<sup>26</sup>

21 It is important to note that this instrumentalism is not driven by the fact that we are faced with, say, empirically equivalent but ontologically divergent theories (that is, multiple theories that would all be equally true in the above Peircean sense of standing up to indefinite inquiry). Rather, we are faced with a plurality of theories each of which copes well with some parts of experience, but none of which can be made to fit with all of it (that is, *none* of which are candidates for absolute truth). James *generalizes* this instrumentalism about scientific truth to truth *tout court*, when he argues:

It is to be doubted whether any theorizer to-day, either in mathematics, logic, physics or biology, conceives himself to be literally re-editing processes of nature or thoughts of God [...]. The suspicion is in the air nowadays that the superiority of one of our formulas to another may not consist so much in its literal "objectivity," as in subjective qualities like its usefulness, its "elegance" or its congruity with our residual beliefs. Yielding to these suspicions, and generalizing, we fall into something like the humanistic state of mind. Truth we conceive to mean everywhere not duplication, but addition; not the constructing of inner copies or

already complete realities; but rather the collaborating with realities so as to bring about a clearer result. (James 1975 [1909]: 41)

- 22 Further, the problem that James saw with the competing scientific theories ("each of them good for so much and yet not good for everything") is seen by him as arising with our conceptual schemes at large.

There are thus at least three well-characterized levels, stages or types of thought about the world we live in, and the notions of one stage have one kind of merit, those of another stage another kind. It is impossible, however, to say that any stage as yet in sight is absolutely more *true* than any other. [...] Their naturalness, their intellectual economy, their fruitfulness for practice, all start up as distinct tests of their veracity, and as a result we get confused. Common sense is *better* for one sphere of life, science for another, philosophic criticism for a third; but whether either be *truer* absolutely, Heaven only knows. (James 1975 [1907]: 92-3)

- 23 Note that the quotation above ends with the question of *whether* any of the competing schemes are truer absolutely, not of *which* one is.<sup>27</sup> Inquiry into a question may never produce a stable answer, since there may be no stable framework for inquiry, and when we adopt, say, a scientific framework, many claims that were previously endorsed will be denied because their ontological presuppositions will be rejected (so even a "piecemeal" truth like "There is a chair in my office" will turn out not to be absolutely true, because in some contexts we will be working with a conceptual framework where there are not "commonsense" objects like chairs at all). If we are stuck moving between such "incomplete" conceptual schemes, our claims will end up being, as James put it above, only "relatively true, or true within those borders of experience" (James 1975 [1907]: 107).

- 24 Of course, one might think that this is only a *temporary* state, and that we should expect that eventually we would be able to find a single conceptual system in which we can explain everything. However, James seems at times pessimistic about the *status quo* changing, and his reasons for being so become clearer in the series of lecture he delivered a year after *Pragmatism*, lectures subsequently collected as *A Pluralistic Universe*. In that book (as well as his posthumously published *Some Problems of Philosophy*), James presents a picture of how our concepts work that might lead one to doubt that any claim that made use of them could ever turn out to be "absolutely" true.

<sup>28</sup>

- 25 According to James, concepts emerged "in the interests of practice essentially and only subordinately in the interests of theory,"<sup>29</sup> and our most fundamental concepts<sup>30</sup> evolved to serve the most basic of these ends. However, a conceptual system that emerged this way may not be well suited to provide the kind of consistent *theoretical* account of reality that absolute truth requires. Indeed, James's infamous rejection of the "logic of identity" in *A Pluralistic Universe* is best understood as a rejection not so much of logic itself, but of the assumption that the inferential structure of our basic concepts matches the structure of reality at a more "global" level.
- 26 James argues that, if extended beyond the practical contexts in which they emerged, our concepts can eventually misrepresent the realities they normally help us cope with, and this problem is not limited to the concepts of common sense.<sup>31</sup> James seems to suspect that it will be a problem with *any* conceptual system, since *conceptualization itself* misrepresents the "continuous" nature of reality.<sup>32</sup> Concepts (at least as James understands them) require sharp boundaries, and while the imposition of models of the world where things are sharply defined has tremendous practical value, James takes it

to inevitably misrepresent the richness of reality, and thus such models may be unable to get to a point of absolute truth. The pinch will always be felt, and thus no stable rest to inquiry will ever be reached.

- 27 In this sense, James understates just how radical his pluralism is when he writes to Dickenson Miller that

The world *per se* may be likened to a cast of beans upon a table. By themselves they spell nothing. An onlooker may group them as he likes. He may simply count them all and map them. He may select groups and name these capriciously, or name them to suit certain extrinsic purposes of his. Whatever he does, so long as he *takes account of them*, his account is neither false nor irrelevant. If neither, why not call it true? (Letter to D. S. Miller, Aug. 5, 1907, quoted in James 1920, vol. 2: 295-6)

- 28 Putnam quotes this passage approvingly,<sup>33</sup> but there is a serious problem with the metaphor, one that becomes clear when Putnam starts to explain it with the claim that "the 'beans' are bits of pure experience."<sup>34</sup> The cast of beans certainly does represent experience, but for James, experience is expressly not broken up into "bits" at all, and its continuous nature is something that he consistently stressed from his critiques of the atomistic nature of associationist psychology in his *Principles of Psychology* (James 1981 [1890]), to his last writings on percepts and concepts (James 1979 [1911]).
- 29 Putnam credits James with being the "first post-cartesian philosopher to completely reject the idea the perception requires *intermediaries*,"<sup>35</sup> but this divergence between percepts and concepts, with the former being continuous and the latter discrete, is one reason why James would have trouble extending the sort of "direct realism" that he has about the perceptual realm to the conceptual. Putnam sees James's failure to do so as mistake, and thinks that just as "James decisively rejected the interface conception of perception" (Putnam 2017 [1987]: 186-7), he should have posited a more "direct" connection between conception and reality. However, James takes percepts and reality to both have a "continuous" structure, so the identification of the two makes sense for James, but since he sees concepts as having a completely different sort of ("discrete") structure, the identification is much harder to make.
- 30 It is thus not surprising that James, unlike Peirce, draws a fairly sharp distinction between truth and reality.<sup>36</sup> This gives us reason to doubt Putnam's claim that absolute truth has an "explanatory" role for James in that a belief's being absolutely true is often the best explanation for it being temporarily true. According to Putnam, the fact that it is (absolutely) *true* that, say, Franklin Roosevelt was president of the United States in 1940 is *no different* from the fact that Franklin Roosevelt was president of the United States in 1940, and *that* fact is the best explanation of all the evidence we have that he was, evidence which in turn explains why we believe that he was (and thus why the belief that he was president in 1940 is temporarily true).<sup>37</sup> Now it may be the case that if reality really can be broken up into "facts" that mirror the structure of our concepts, then those facts (and the absolute truths that express them) would best explain why many of our beliefs are warranted. However, it is just this conception of reality that James questions in his later work, and while a belief of our's may be warranted because it fits reality better than any other, that "fit" may still not be tight enough for what it is fitting to be considered a fact that makes it "absolutely" true.
- 31 So what should we say if the "pessimistic" conclusion that James imagines actually turned out to be the case, and the regulative ideal that our use of "true" aspired to was unsatisfiable?<sup>38</sup> Of course it would then follow that nothing was "absolutely" true, but it



seems less clear that we should conclude that nothing was *true*. After all, we should, with James, consider the possibility that the failure of absolute truth should lead us instead to conclude that the "absolute" interpretation is not the best account of what we mean by "true."<sup>39</sup>

- 32 "True" may be on James's picture, a term like "saint." That term has, arguably, a "strong" reading (roughly, a holy person who is now part of "the great cloud of witnesses up in heaven," (Hebrews 12:1)) and a "weak" reading (roughly, someone who is canonized by the Catholic church). Those who think that there actually is a cloud of witnesses up in heaven will be inclined to favor the strong reading of the term. For them, canonization is meant to *recognize* sainthood, not *constitute* it, so someone could be a saint but fail to be canonized, and vice versa. On the other hand, those of us who come to believe that there isn't any heaven at all can either adopt the weaker reading where canonization is constitutive of sainthood, or hold on to the strong reading, and just conclude that there aren't any saints. The decision we make may be determined by our practical interests, particularly those relating to whether or not "saint-talk" would still have any useful role in our lives even if the strong reading were insupportable.
- 33 In the pessimistic scenario where absolute truth is unattainable, much the same can be said for "true." It may be, ultimately, subjective factors that would determine whether we give up on the existence of truth altogether. Some might feel that the absolute conception is so central to our notion of truth that if there were no absolute truth then we should say that there is no truth at all. Indeed, Peirce seems committed to a position something like this when he claims, "I do not say that it is infallibly true that there is any belief to which a person would come if he were to carry his inquiries far enough. I only say that that alone is what I call Truth. I cannot infallibly know that there is any truth."<sup>40</sup> Others might feel that truth-talk is central enough for us that if the ideal of absolute truth proved to be unrealizable, then we would simply need to understand "truth" in a way that doesn't make absolutist presupposition. I think that James's willingness to understand truth as "temporary truth" puts him firmly in this latter camp. If you think that absolute truth is a realizable ideal, then it will be natural to think that temporary truth is a pretty shabby candidate for what most of us mean by "true." However, if, like James, you think that this ideal may fail to be realized, even in principle, then the shabby candidate can begin to look like what we really have been talking about with the term all along. (In this sense, true might be like "free," where the concept is so central to our practices that we might not want to take on any sort of error theory about its application).<sup>41</sup>
- 34 Given Putnam and Rorty's extended debate about just "how far" pragmatism should go, <sup>42</sup> it is unsurprising that Putnam would like to argue that both of Pragmatism's fathers were on his side, and while I've argued here that James's writings about absolute truth hardly put him in Putnam's camp, James's position still isn't quite as radical as Rorty's suggestion that absolute truth is *just* an ideal. For James, it is still an *empirical* question whether inquiry could develop in a way that leads to absolute truth. While he may have presented some reasons for doubting that this sort of consensus can be reached, those considerations are hardly conclusive, and if it did turn out that absolute truth was attainable, it would be natural for that to be the primary way to understand what truth was. Putnam ultimately claims that James takes his account of truth to be a *hypothesis*,<sup>43</sup> and I would argue that both the absolute and temporary readings of truth are very

much "live" hypotheses for James.<sup>44</sup> How inquiry will ultimately pan out, and thus how truth should ultimately be understood, is something for future inquiries to decide.

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## NOTES

1. This narrative is especially clear in Mounce 1997, and Misak 2013, and see Rorty 1979, 1982, 1991 [1986], and Putnam 1981, 1995 for reasons why those two are often viewed as the contemporary exemplars of these two forms.
2. For the most part, I'll be sticking with "temporary" and "absolute" in what follows.
3. James (1988 [1908]: 433). (For more on James's talk of the "ambiguity" of truth, see also James (1976 [1904]: 13; 1975 [1907]: 94, and 1975 [1909]: 100.)
4. See Rorty (1991 [1986]: 128). Something like Rorty's view of the role of absolute truth in James is aptly defended in Lamberth 1999, 2005.
5. See Putnam 1987, 2005.
6. See the discussion of James (1975 [1909]: 143) in Putnam (2017 [1987]: 173), and Putnam (2017 [2005]: 195-6).
7. Putnam (2017 [2005]: 200).
8. For an early instance of this complaint, see Russell (1910: 111).
9. See, for instance, James (1975 [1907]: 34, 36-7), and James (1975 [1909]: 132).
10. James (2004: 400).
11. Putnam (2017 [1987]: 185).
12. See also James (1975 [1909]: 100).
13. And one should note (with Putnam 2017 [1987]: 173) that James's talk of "definitions" here is pretty impressionistic, and what he is offering is more of a "theory" or "account" of truth than a definition.
14. See, for instance, "The Sentiment of Rationality" in James (1979 [1897]).
15. For a discussion of this, see Jackman 1998.
16. James (1975 [1907]: 107).
17. James (1975 [1907]: 107).
18. Referring to his earlier indicative understanding of it as being a "grievous error" (Misak 2016: 14).
19. Putnam (2017 [1987]: 181).
20. As Putnam puts it, "James's 'radical empiricism' has no room for Peirce's 'Thirdness'" (Putnam 2017 [1987]: 182).
21. An assumption that would have seemed more natural in James's time as the influence of the sort of "Absolute Idealism" associated with philosophers like James's colleague Royce (1885) was then at its peak.
22. Indeed, it has been suggested that formal reasons relating to Gödel's incompleteness proof entail that such a "global" resolution of every question isn't even in principle possible (see, for instance, Johnston 1993).
23. Lamberth (1999: 218; 2005: 228).
24. See particularly Putnam (2017 [1987]: 173; 2017 [2005]: 193, 199 n.29), where he talks about James's claim that his own theory of truth is absolutely true. (Putnam is here referring to James (1975 [1909]: 142), and as Lamberth (2005: 229) notes, the passage in question is not quite as ringing of an endorsement of the claim as Putnam might have us believe.)
25. Peircian truth thus comes out as something closer to Crispin Wright's notion of "superassertability" (Wright 1992, 2001). Misak (1991, 2013) argues that this is how Peirce himself ultimately understood his notion of truth.
26. See also James (1975 [1907]: 103).
27. In this respect, I think that Levine 2013 understates how radical James's views in this area are by suggesting that they amount to just a "conceptual pluralism" resting on the fact that "the sensory flux *tolerates* multiple ways of being taken up" (2013: §18).

28. These consequences are given a more prominent place in these later works, but the basic picture of concepts that they rest on goes back to James's *The Principles of Psychology* (1890).
29. James (1970 [1909]: 109). See also James (1970 [1909]: 96-7), James (1988 [1908]: 438).
30. For instance, those concepts discussed in *Pragmatism's* chapter on "Common Sense" such as "space," "time," "thing" and "cause."
31. Indeed, one might think this about the concept of truth itself, and that worries about the liar paradox give us similar reasons for thinking that, strictly speaking, nothing could be absolutely either true or false (see Scharp 2013).
32. For further discussion, see Jackman 2018.
33. Putnam (2017 [2005]: 191).
34. Putnam (2017 [2005]: 192). Note that Putnam is in some sense aware of this, as seen in his discussion of precisely this issue in Putnam & Putnam (2017 [1996]: 163).
35. Putnam (2017 [1987]: 176), see also Putnam 1996, 2001.
36. See, for instance, James (1975 [1909]: 106-7), and for a discussion of the relevance of this aspect of James's thought, see Lamberth (1999: 220-1; 2005: 224).
37. Putnam (2017 [2005]: 200).
38. I should note here that while some have questioned whether James could endorse the possibility of complete skepticism about absolute truth because he writes "There is absolute truth' is the only absolute truth of which we can be sure" (James 1975 [1909]: 143), that claim isn't actually something that James says himself. Rather it is only something that he puts in the mouth of "the better absolutists," so one shouldn't read too much into it as an expression of James's own views.
39. This won't take away from the importance of absolute truth as an *ideal* that regulates our behavior, and as James notes, no one "who ever actually walked the earth has denied the regulative character in his own thinking of the notion of absolute truth" (James 1975 [1909]: 143); it is just to suggest that this regulative role can be played even if the ideal is never realized.
40. Peirce (1958 [1908]: 398).
41. See Strawson 1962.
42. See, for instance, Putnam 1981, Rorty 1998.
43. Putnam (2017 [2005]: 194).
44. For James's conception of a "live" hypotheses, see James (1979 [1897]: 14).

## ABSTRACTS

While historians of pragmatism often present William James as the founder of the "subjectivist" wing of pragmatism that came back into prominence with the writings of Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam has argued that James's views are actually much closer to Peirce's (and Putnam's own). Putnam does so by noting that James distinguishes two sorts of truth: "temporary truth," which is closer to a subjective notion of warranted assertibility, and "absolute truth," which is closer to Peirce's own comparatively objective notion of truth as what would be believed at some idealized end of inquiry. Putnam then argues that the temptation to read James as a precursor to Rorty requires privileging his talk of temporary truth, when, in fact, it was always absolute truth that was the primary sense of the term for James. This paper will argue that James's views on truth are, in fact, much less tied to the absolute notion than Putnam suggests, and, indeed, that James's

account of the relations between our concepts and reality leave open the possibility that no claim of ours could ever be "absolutely" true, and thus that "temporary" truth would be all we could ever expect to have.

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