

James, Intentionality, and Analysis

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Abstract and Keywords

William James was always gripped by the problem of intentionality (or “knowing”), that is, of how our thoughts come to be about the world. Nevertheless, coming up with a sympathetic reading of James’s account requires appreciating that James’s approach to analyzing a phenomenon is very different from that which most contemporary philosophers have found natural. In particular, rather than trying to give necessary and sufficient conditions for a thought’s being about an object, James presented an account of intentionality that focused on certain core cases (particularly those where we actually see or handle the objects of our thoughts), and explained the extension of our “knowing” talk to other cases (objects and events in the past, unobservables, etc.) in terms of various pragmatically relevant relations that can be found between those cases and the “core.” Once this account of intentionality is in place, a number of features of James’s approach to truth come in to clearer focus, and can seem less problematic than they would if one presupposed a more traditional account of intentionality and analysis.

Keywords: Pragmatism, William James, conceptual analysis, intentionality, truth, reference, meaning, prototypes

Introduction

Throughout his career, William James was gripped by the problem of how our thoughts come to be about the world, and the question of intentionality (sometimes referred to by him as the relation of “knowing” or as the “truth processes”) was never far from his mind.¹ His concern with this problem was expressed particularly vividly in his early (1885) review of Josiah Royce’s *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*:²

The more one thinks, the more one feels that there is a real puzzle here. Turn and twist as we will, we are caught in a tight trap. Although we cannot help believing that our thoughts *do* mean realities and are true or false of them, we cannot for the life of us ascertain how they *can* mean them. If thought be one thing and reali-

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ty another, by what pincers, from out of all the realities, does the thought pick out the special one it intends to know? (ECR 1885, 386)

Later, in his *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), he claimed that “the *relation of knowing* is the most mysterious thing in the world. If we ask how one thing *can* know another we are led into the heart of *Erkenntnisstheorie* and metaphysics” (PP 1890, 212). This early interest continued throughout his life and (in a letter to his brother) James complained that his *Pragmatism* (1907) was widely misunderstood because people failed to appreciate that “it really grew up from a more subtle and delicate theoretic analysis of the function of knowing, than previous philosophers have been willing to make.”³

Nevertheless, in spite of the importance he placed on it, James’s account of knowing is typically, if unjustly, neglected. This is at least in part because coming up with a sympathetic reading of James’s account requires appreciating that James’s approach to analyzing a phenomenon is very different from that which most contemporary philosophers have found natural.

Prototypes and Philosophical Analysis

In particular, philosophers and non-philosophers alike often understand phenomena in terms of the concepts by which they are designated, and think of these concepts in “definitional” terms.⁴ They thus picture an adequate analysis of a phenomenon as providing necessary and sufficient conditions for the corresponding concept’s satisfaction. Consequently, they assume that one can criticize another’s analysis of a phenomenon by showing that the resulting conceptual criteria includes things that the associated term doesn’t apply to, or fails to include things to which it does.

If one treats James as trying to provide such an analysis of intentionality (that is to say, one takes him to be trying to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for a thought’s being about an object), his account will seem not only rather slapdash, but also subject to embarrassingly obvious counterexamples. Fortunately for James, however, he was not aiming for this sort of analysis of intentionality. In particular, he was not aiming to provide any sort of *conceptual analysis* of the phenomenon. Rather than trying to capture the *essence* of the category by providing necessary and sufficient conditions for *every* case of a thought’s being about an object, James starts his analysis with the core/prototypical/paradigm cases, and works out from these, supplementing this analysis of the core with additional remarks about how the less prototypical cases could be understood in terms of their relations to (and similarities with) the paradigm.⁵ If one analyzes something in this way, marginal cases do not count as “counterexamples” simply because they lack properties that are prominent in the characterization of the prototypical ones. Their lack of these properties merely explains why they are marginal rather than prototypical. James is quite explicit about the prototypical nature of the sorts of cases he focuses on, claiming, for instance, to be interested in the “originals and prototypes of the truth-process” and

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that other types of intentional relations can be understood in terms of their relation to the prototypes.⁶

James was not, then, attempting to provide anything like a traditional “definition” of what it was for a thought to be about something else. James was aware that he was occasionally read as attempting to provide such definitions, and he insisted that criticisms based on that assumption (such as Russell’s) were unfair. As he puts it:

A mathematical term, such as *a*, *c*, *x*, *y*, *sin*, *log*, is self-sufficient, and terms of this sort, once equated, can be substituted for one another in endless series without error. Mr. Russell ... seem(s) to think that in our mouth also such terms as “meaning,” “truth,” “belief,” “object,” “definition” are self-sufficient with no context of varying relations that might be further asked about. What a word means is expressed by its definition, isn’t it? The definition claims to be exact and adequate, doesn’t it? Then it can be substituted for the word—since the two are identical—can’t it? Then two words with the same definition can be substituted for one another, *n’est-ce pas*? Likewise two definitions of the same word, *nicht war*, etc., till it will be indeed strange if you can’t convict someone of self-contradiction and absurdity. (MT 1909, 148)

Definitions are fine for the terms of artificial languages of math and logic, but when providing an analysis of the “natural” language terms such as “meaning,” “truth,” and “belief,” one should not expect such neatness.

It is important to stress that his pursuing this kind of analysis needn’t represent any lack of rigor on James’s part. Prototype-driven analyses are not reserved for those too lazy to roll up their sleeves and work out the required sets of necessary and sufficient conditions. Studies of human categorization provide strong evidence that many, if not most, of our categories simply *can’t* be adequately captured by sets of necessary and sufficient conditions.⁷ Prototype-centered accounts may thus be the only way to provide empirically adequate analyses of our categories, since there simply may be *no* set of properties that all and only the things that fall within a category possess.

Since this last point about categorization is fairly crucial for this reading of James, I will digress a bit on it here.

The mechanism by which a prototype-centered category gets its extension is very different from that traditionally associated with concepts. According to the traditional story, a concept’s extension was made up by all and only those objects that possessed the properties that were characteristic of the concept. Every object either does, or does not, fall within the extension of the concept, and no instance of a concept is any more central to it than any other. To take an (all too familiar) example, if a “bachelor” is defined as an “unmarried adult male,” then everything either would, or would not, be a bachelor in virtue of their having (or lacking) the properties of being an adult male and being unmarried

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(and no one who had both those properties would be a better or worse example of a bachelor than any other).

Things are very different when categories are understood as displaying prototype effects, and the following example from traditional Dyirbal (an aboriginal language of Australia) should make this clear.⁸

In Dyirbal classification every object in the world falls into one of four categories, *bayi*, *balan*, *balam*, *bala*, and speaking Dyirbal correctly requires using the right classifier before each object. The members of the four categories include the following:

1. *Bayi*: men, kangaroos, possums, bats, most snakes, most fishes, some birds, most insects, the moon, storms, rainbows, boomerangs, some spears, etc.
2. *Balan*: women, bandicoots, dogs, platypus, echidna, some snakes, some fishes, most birds, fireflies, scorpions, crickets, the hairy mary grub, anything connected with water or fire, sun and stars, shields, some spears, some trees, etc.
3. *Balam*: all edible fruit and plants that bear them, tubers, ferns, honey, cigarettes, wine, cake.
4. *Bala*: parts of the body, meat, bees, wend, yamsticks, some spears, most trees, grass, mud, stones, noises and language, etc.

The project of trying to find necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in these four groups is hopeless because their membership is determined very differently from what the classical picture of categories presupposes. Instead of being determined by the possession of a fixed group of properties, class membership in Dyirbal has the following characteristics.

Centrality: Categories have certain central members. For *Bayi*, the central members are (human) males and animals. (Willy wagtails and the moon are less central members.) For *Balan* the central members are (human) females, water, fire, and fighting. (Stinging vines, gar fish, and the hairy mary grub are less central members.) For *Balam*, the basic members are non-flesh food. In each case, the central member will be “better” and “less problematic” examples than the others, and this will be reflected in the speed, ease, and certainty to which people apply the category in various cases. (We see a similar phenomenon with our own use of words such as “bird,” “table,” or “game.”)

Chaining: Complex categories are structured by chaining. Central members of a category are linked to other less central members, which are linked to still others, and so on. These “chains” often incorporate specific knowledge (including certain idealized models of the world, such as knowledge of mythology) which overrides general knowledge in such cases. Birds, for instance, even though they are animals, fall into category 2 (rather than category 1) because, in Dyirbal mythology, they house the spirits of dead females. Other more mundane knowledge can also affect the chains. For example, women are mythologically linked to the sun (while men are linked to the moon, which thus falls into category 1), which is linked to sunburn, which is linked to the hairy mary grub (the grub produces a painful rash that feels much like sunburn). It is by virtue of such a chain that

the hairy mary grub is thought to be in the same category as women. The chains are mythologically motivated (women to the sun), causally motivated (the sun to sunburn), and experientially motivated (sunburn to the hairy mary grub). In none of these cases are common objective properties being picked out by both instances of the term. There is nothing “objectively” “masculine” about the moon or “feminine” about the sun (the gender roles of the two heavenly bodies are reversed in cultures with different mythologies—as with Apollo and Artemis in Greek mythology), and the extension of the term to the hairy mary grub relies on contingent facts about our own embodiment (a creature who didn’t have a sunburn-like reaction to its contact would see no connection between the grub and the sun).

No Common Properties: Categories on the whole need not be defined by common properties. There is no reason to believe that the Dyirbal find anything in common between women and hairy mary grubs. Nor do they assume, so far as is known, that there is anything feminine about fire or danger, or anything fiery or dangerous about women. The lack of common properties is most clearly seen with the fourth category, *Bala*, which seems to simply include everything not in the other classes.

Dyirbal classification may be an unusually vivid case, but these basic phenomena of centrality, chaining, and lack of common properties are widespread, and they are reflected in James’s account of intentionality. James’s implicit assumption that an adequate analysis of intentionality should have such a prototypical structure is very plausible. For James, cases in which we actually see and/or manipulate the objects of our thought provide the prototype of “knowing,” and other cases are understood in terms of their relation to the prototype even if they lack properties that are crucial to the prototypical cases.⁹

Both the classically definitional and the prototype-centered analyses of categories can, in some sense, be understood as trying to get at what is “essential” to a category/phenomenon, but each brings with it a different conception of what “being essential” involves. In the former case, the essential properties must be shared by all members of the category. In the latter, the essential properties need not be possessed by everything which falls under the term, but the intelligibility of the category depends upon the essential cases because the peripheral cases are understood as members of the category in virtue of their relation to the more basic ones.

James’s Basic Account of Intentionality: Immediate and Mediate Knowing

James wanted to provide a naturalistic explanation of how one piece of “flat content ... [with] no self-transcendence about it” came to be “about” something else:¹⁰

We are not to ask, “How is self-transcendence possible?” We are only to ask, “How comes it that common sense has assigned a number of cases in which it is assumed not only to be possible but actual? And what are the marks used by com-

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mon sense to distinguish those cases from the rest?" In short, our inquiry is a chapter in descriptive psychology—hardly anything more.¹¹

James's method was to look at the clearest cases in which we *treat* our thoughts as being about the world and provide an analysis of what is going on in them. His account of "knowing" thus has a strong descriptive/phenomenological component, and so it is perhaps not surprising that the story he ends up with has a clear prototype structure.

James thought, plausibly enough, that the prototypical cases of our thoughts being about objects in the world involved their "operating" on those objects (either by our *perceiving* them, *handling* them, or both), and so his discussion of "operation," especially in its perceptual form, provides the foundation for his account.

While the material from *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (published in 1912, but primarily collecting material from 1904 to 1905) focus on perception as the core case from which the other cases of intentionality are understood, it is noteworthy that his earlier work on the topic, particularly in "The Function of Cognition" (1885) and *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), also put considerable emphasis on our ideas "operating" on (or "affecting" (MT 1909, 32)) the realities we take them to be about.¹²

Now by what tests does the psychologist decide whether the state of mind he is studying is a bit of knowledge, or only a subjective fact not referring to anything outside itself?

He uses the tests we all practically use. If the state of mind *resembles* his own idea of a certain reality; or if without resembling his idea of it, it seems to imply that reality and refer to it by operating upon it through the bodily organs; or even if it resembles and operates on some other reality that implies, and leads up to, and terminates in, the first one,—in either or all of these cases the psychologist admits that the state of mind takes cognizance, directly or remotely, distinctly or vaguely, truly or falsely, of the reality's nature and position in the world. (PP 1890, 213.)

Or, as he put it in "The Function of Cognition": "*The feeling of q knows whatever reality it resembles, and either directly or indirectly operates on.* If it resemble without operating, it is a dream; if it operate without resembling, it is an error" (MT 1909, 26).¹³

James was happy enough with this basic account for him to republish "The Function of Cognition" in his *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), and while he appended a note to the reprinted version to add that the earlier paper suffered from a "possibly undue prominence given to resembling" (MT 1909, 32), James never takes back this emphasis on the importance of operating on objects.¹⁴

Nevertheless, for James, like many others, the clearest cases of the knowing relation can be found in perception, where we are directly acquainted with the object of our thoughts.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is instructive to compare James and Russell (or at least the Russell of *The Problems of Philosophy* [1912]) on this matter. While both philosophers assigned a primary role to what we were "acquainted" with in (among other things) percep-

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tion, the sense in which acquaintance is the “foundation” for other types of “mediated” knowing is very different in James than it is in Russell.¹⁶ In particular, while Russell contrasted immediate “knowledge by acquaintance” with the more mediate “knowledge by description,” acquaintance was “foundational” for Russell in the very robust sense that “knowledge by description” could be *reduced* to logical compounds of items known by acquaintance.¹⁷ By contrast, acquaintance was, for James, foundational only in the sense that other types of knowing were ultimately *understood in terms* of it. Our “knowledge about” an object was not, however, *reducible* to what we knew by acquaintance. “Knowledge about” objects involves “causal/external” rather than “logical/conceptual” relations to what was known immediately.

In particular, James extends the paradigm of perceptual reference by arguing that one’s ideas can know objects outside of one’s perceptual field by *leading* one through a series of experiences that *terminate* in an actual percept of the object referred to. For instance, James’s “Memorial Hall” idea may just be a dim image in his mind, but if this image allows James to go to the hall and recognize it, then “we may freely say that [he] had the terminal object ‘in mind’ from the outset, even altho *at* the outset nothing was there in [him] but a flat piece of substantive experience like any other, with no self-transcendancy about it” (ERE 1904, 29). Our ideas about objects outside of our perceptual field need not *share* all the properties of the core cases of perception, but they bear a “chaining” relation to them: they are ideas that lead one to the actual percept. Indeed, such cases can be considered the “prototype” of *conceptual* reference for James. The prototypical case of having “knowledge about” an object involves being led to direct acquaintance with that object. As he puts it, “Following our mental image of a house along the cow-path, we actually come to see the house; we get the image’s full verification. *Such simply and fully verified leadings are certainly the originals and prototypes of the truth-process*” (P 1907, 99).

James’s initial account of the intentionality of our thoughts, in which our ideas are about objects because they lead us into perceptual contact with (or some other type of operation on) those objects, faces a number of problems if viewed as a conceptual analysis of the form: *P’s idea x is about object O if and only if x leads P to come into perceptual contact with or otherwise “operate” on O.* Among such problems are:

1. It suggests that one can’t have thoughts about objects until one has *actually* tracked them down. For instance, my “Paris-thought” isn’t actually *of* Paris until I actually make it to the city, and so if I never visit Paris, I will have never actually thought about it.
2. It ignores the “social” character of language and cognition, and suggests that I couldn’t have thoughts about things that I couldn’t recognize.
3. It would seem to make reference to unobservable entities impossible.
4. By making non-perceptual cognition dependent upon how we track things down in the future, it suggests that we couldn’t have thoughts about the past.
5. It suggests that I could never *mis-identify* an object, since whatever object I picked out would become the one I “had in mind.”

However, all of these problems are manageable once we realize that James typically keeps his discussion close to the core of the subject. While these would be problem cases if intentionality were simply *equated with* the prototype, they can be incorporated into James's account since they can still be *understood in terms of* the prototype. As James puts it, "Experience offers indeed other forms of truth-process, but they are all conceivable as being verifications arrested, multiplied or substituted one for another."¹⁸

Virtual Knowing and the Potentially Verified

Starting with the first of the issues just listed, an apparent (and immediate) problem with James's account of intentionality is that while it allows that my idea of Memorial Hall counts as having always referred to the hall once it *actually* leads me to it, common sense suggests that our idea refers to the hall *before* this happens, or even if I *never* track the building down. Indeed, it might seem that a large and significant portion of my thought is outside even James's initial extension of the prototype to non-perceptual cases. I can have thoughts about Barack Obama, Bucharest, or the Basilica of St. John the Baptist, but none of these ideas may ever reach the stage of "face-to-face" verification characteristic of the prototype.

James responds to this worry by arguing that in cases in which we haven't actually tracked down the purported objects of our thoughts, we can still be understood as "virtually" referring to them.

The key to this difficulty lies in the distinction between knowing as verified and completed, and the same knowing as in transit and on its way. To recur to the Memorial Hall example lately used, it is only when our idea of the hall has actually terminated in the percept that we know "for certain" that from the beginning it was truly cognitive of *that*. Until established by the end of the process, its quality of knowing that, or indeed of knowing anything, could still be doubted; and yet the knowing really was there, as the result now shows. We were *virtual* knowers of the hall long before we were certified to have been its actual knowers, by the percept's retroactive validating power. Just as we are "mortal" all the time, by reason of the virtuality of the inevitable event which will make it so when it shall have come. (ERE 1904, 34, MT 1909, 67.)

But, of course, there are not only cases in which we have not tracked down the objects of our thoughts *yet*, there are also many cases in which the relevant objects are *never* tracked down. Our eventual tracking down of objects lacks the inevitability of our eventual demise, so the comparison to "mortal" may not seem entirely apt. James recognizes this, and he goes on to claim that "the immensely greater part of all our knowing never gets beyond this virtual stage" (ERE 1904, 34; MT 1909, 67). James assumes that his "transcendentalist" opponent will object that "by first making knowledge to consist in external relations" and "then confessing that nine-tenths of the time these are not actually but virtually there," he has "knocked the solid bottom out of the whole business, and palmed off a substitute of knowledge for the genuine thing" (ERE 1904, 35; MT 1909, 68).

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James, however, argues that as long as we *can* find the object of our thoughts, we need not always *actually* do so, and “where potentiality counts as actuality in so many other cases, one does not see why it may not so count here” (MT 1909, 91). After all, as James stressed, as long as this “virtual knowing” could be cashed out whenever it needs to be, there would be no *practical* difference between a theory which says that we are virtually referring to objects most of the time and one that claims that we are *completely* doing so. After all, what practical difference would it make if we were to “completely” rather than “virtually” refer to these items?¹⁹ Since virtual knowing plays the same practical role as “completed” knowing in most cases, it is justifiable to extend “knowing-talk” to these cases that remain virtual. There is nothing about our practice of “about” talk that is dependent upon knowing being “non-virtual” all (or even most) of the time.

Even if most of our knowledge were virtual, these “virtual” cases would still be understood in terms of their relation to the non-virtual prototypes. It is precisely in virtue of their potential to become like the prototype that the ideas in question count as “knowing” the objects that they do,²⁰ so a given dog-idea is “cognitive” of a real dog because “the actual tissue of experience is constituted [so that] the idea *is capable of* leading into a chain of other experiences ... which go from next to next and terminate at last in vivid sense-perceptions of a jumping, barking, hairy body.”²¹ Virtual knowing is still a type of knowing, and with it, James’s account of intentionality expands its focus from the most central cases of *verification* to the broader notion of *verifiability*. The verification-processes is still, as James puts it, “essential,” but this means only that we can’t understand verifiability independently of verification.

Of course, one might still wonder why James can’t give a more traditional definition of aboutness by making a direct appeal to potential verifiability, and, indeed, he may seem to be doing just this when he claims that “*A percept knows whatever reality it directly or indirectly operates on and resembles; a conceptual feeling, or thought, knows a reality, whenever it actually or potentially terminates in a percept that operates on or resembles that reality, or is otherwise connected with it or with its context*” (MT 1909, 27–28).²² This sort of disjunction is a useful way to summarize the accounts, but such rough presentations aren’t definitions, and would still be open to other counterexamples (say, about the past and unobservables) that the full account will cover.

The Social Character of Language

James is frequently criticized for taking an overly “individualistic” approach to philosophical questions, so it is not surprising that he has also been accused of missing out on the *social* character of language and cognition.²³ Indeed, it is easy to see how one might get such an impression from James’s writings, since the prototypical cases of intentionality (at least for James) *are* individualistic. However, even if the presentation of acquaintance and the prototypical cases of “knowledge about” objects is focused exclusively on the individual’s perceptions and operations, the analysis of the more extended cases of non-

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perceptual intentionality can still do much to accommodate the social aspects of language and cognition.

In the core cases that James focuses on, we are always able to, on our own, *recognize* what we are ultimately referring to. Consequently, if one takes all the characteristics of the core to be essential, it can seem that in order to refer to something, one must at least be able to locate or recognize it on one's own. If an idea is *unable* to lead one to a particular object, then it isn't cognitive of it. James highlights this issue himself in his discussion of Memorial Hall.

For instance, if you ask me what hall I mean by my image, and I can tell you nothing; or if I fail to point or lead you towards the Harvard Delta; or if, being led by you, I am uncertain whether the Hall I see be what I had in mind or not; you would rightly deny that I had "meant" that particular hall at all, even though my mental image might to some degree have resembled it. The resemblance would count in that case as coincidental merely, for all sorts of things of a kind resemble one another in this world without being held for that reason to take cognizance of one another. (ERE 1904, 28; MT 1909, 62.)

James here seems to be suggesting that, if the individual himself couldn't locate or recognize the object, he couldn't have thoughts about it. This would be, however, unduly restrictive since we frequently credit people with thoughts about objects or types of things which, if left entirely to their own devices, they would be unable to locate or identify.²⁴ After all, I certainly think that *I* can refer to Memorial Hall, but I wouldn't be able to recognize it if I were taken to Boston and asked to pick it out from a group of buildings standing in front of me.

Nevertheless, James can accommodate such cases, since it is crucial to his account that knowing an object involves being led to it "through a context which the world provides."²⁵ Being able to *actually* locate the objects of our thoughts does not require being able to distinguish them from all others in a context-independent way. My ability to locate, say, my copy of Henry James's *Washington Square* is based largely on the fact that it is the only copy of the novel to be found on the bookshelf in my living room, rather than my knowledge of perceptual features that distinguish it from all other copies of that book.²⁶ Our being embedded in particular contexts thus turns out to be essential to our ability to locate the particular objects of our thoughts. However, once we admit that our context is important in this way, there seems little reason to think that such an account can't include our *social* context as well. After all, I couldn't find Memorial Hall on my own, but given my social context, I would have no trouble locating the building if I were placed in Cambridge. I would only need to find a map of the city, or ask people around me until I found someone who was able to lead me to it. Indeed, even in the passage about failing to identify Memorial Hall quoted earlier, James allows that the knowing function does not require our being able to find the hall on our own, rather, it counts us as knowing the hall if we can "recognize" it after being led to it by our peers (ERE 1904, 28; MT 1909, 62).²⁷ It is only if, after getting such help, that we still insist that we aren't sure that the hall in

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front of us is what we had in mind, that James entertains doubts that we were really thinking about it.

I refer to what I do by many of my terms because, given my social context, the people I rely on would lead me to some objects and not others. If I were in a different social context, many of my ideas would be cognitive of different things.²⁸ How a term is used in one's social surrounding can thus affect what one's own ideas are about. I am treated as referring to Memorial Hall by "Memorial Hall" even if I cannot uniquely pick it out myself, because I can rely on others to do so for me. As long as *somebody* can be relied upon to know where the building actually is, the system works. Such a picture of our "trading truths" with others brings to mind, of course, what is today frequently referred to as the "division of linguistic labor,"²⁹ and James stresses this "cooperative" aspect of language use in the following:

The untrammelled flowing of the leading-process, its general freedom from clash and contradiction, passes for its indirect verification; but all roads lead to Rome, and in the end and eventually, all true processes must lead to the face of directly verifying sensible experience somewhere, which somebody's ideas have copied. (P 1907, 103)

The "division of labor" metaphor is especially apt for James, and his claim that "truth lives ... on a credit system" (P 1907, 100) applies equally well to intentionality.

This division of labor thus accounts for how social usage can help determine what we are talking about when we are ambivalent or uncertain about a term's conditions of application, and James can allow for such social contributions even when our dispositions are not indeterminate (as when I'm initially disposed to pick out Elliot Hall as "Memorial Hall"). If an idea refers to the object that brings its workings to a satisfactory terminus, then social factors can affect what we are talking about to the extent that they affect which objects we ultimately find satisfactory. The "satisfaction of hearing you corroborate me"³⁰ is part of what we often look for in a successful case of knowing, and so one of the desiderata for a successful case of knowing is to get one's conversational partners to agree that what one has picked out is indeed what one was talking about. What might otherwise "work" for the individual may turn out not to be satisfactory because it would involve picking out as the referent of his term something different from what his compatriots would.

Why such corroboration should be important to us is clear. First of all, we want our utterances to be understood by others. Furthermore, the utterances of others are much more likely to be useful to us as sources of information about the world if we mean what they do by the same words. If we go our own way with the meanings of our words, we can lose our grip on a tremendous amount of information that would otherwise be available. James stresses this in a passage that highlights the importance of treating our language as a shared, temporally extended, practice:

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All human thinking gets discursified; we exchange ideas; we lend and borrow verifications, get them from one another by means of social intercourse. All truth thus gets verbally built out, stored up, and made available for everyone. Hence, we must *talk* consistently just as we must *think* consistently: for both in talk and in thought we deal with kinds. Names are arbitrary, but once understood they must be kept to. We mustn't now call Abel "Cain" or Cain "Abel". If we do, we ungear ourselves from the whole book of Genesis, and from all its connections with the universe of speech and fact down to the present time. We throw ourselves out of whatever truth that entire system of speech and fact may embody. (P 1907, 102–103)

James here spells out the pragmatic justification for the idea that each speaker typically understands themselves as a "reference preserving link" (Evans 1973) in a continuous chain of use for the terms in a shared language. Objects which don't lie at the beginning of such chains tend to be "intellectually less satisfying" than those that do because they frustrate this presupposition and disconnect us from the testimony of others.

Once again, the basic explanation is individualistic, as in the core cases, but our desire to refer to what other people do by their words allows reference in non-core cases to be socially determined. If my conception of sofas, or arthritis, were idiosyncratic, I might still refer to what my fellows did by these terms because my intention to use my words in line with social usage may ultimately make the socially determined referents more "satisfactory" for me.

Unobservables

This brings us to the case of "unobservables," those items which we could not, perhaps even in principle, have perceptual contact with (quarks, another's thoughts, etc.). Such cases obviously cause at least prima facie problems for an account of intentionality that grounds so much in perceptual contact with the objects referred to. Of course, those who play up James's "instrumentalism" might suggest that he would simply bite the bullet here and deny that we can refer to unobservables. This would, however, be a mistake. Even if one can read James as denying the existence of, say, the theoretical posits of the sciences of his day, that sort of instrumentalism isn't grounded in general worries about unobservables, and it would be much harder to read him making similar claims about, for instance, the mental states of others.³¹

However, if James doesn't deny that such reference to unobservables is possible, then how can he explain it? First of all, one should also note that while reference to unobservables is more problematic for some of the exclusively perception-grounded talk about knowing in the *Essays on Radical Empiricism*, it is less of a worry for the earlier, and more recognizably pragmatist, account in *The Principles of Psychology* and "The Function of Cognition," which stresses the importance of our thoughts "operating" on objects in a

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non-perceptual sense as well. This commitment to “operation” is never given up by James, so even in his “A world of pure experience,” we find him insisting that:

Where direct acquaintance is lacking, “knowledge about” is the next best thing, and an acquaintance with what actually lies about the object, and is most closely related to it, puts such knowledge within our grasp. Ether-waves and your anger, for example, are things in which my thoughts will never *perceptually* terminate but my concepts of them lead me to their very brink, to the chromatic fringes and to the hurtful words and deeds which are their really next effects. (MT 1909, 69, ERE 1904, 36)

Even if we can’t directly observe sub-atomic particles, we can manipulate them in ways that allow our thoughts to be understood as “cognitive” of them. Much the same could be said of the thoughts of others. We can’t perceive them directly, but we do feel their effects (those “hurtful words and deeds”) and can operate on them as well. We don’t just hear our interlocutor’s angry words, but we are also (if all goes well) capable of acting in ways that can reduce their anger, change their beliefs, etc. It’s not just a matter of being *close* to the unobservable, it’s a matter of being able to affect its behavior and tailor our behavior to it.

Furthermore, even when we start with the “perceptual” rather than “operational” paradigm, we can see how James’s account could be extended to such cases. Examples of virtual knowing discussed earlier have involved a thought’s being about something even though no perceptual contact is *ever actually* made, and by focusing on some of the phenomenal features of such cases, particularly how the virtually known typically coheres well with the rest of our knowledge, James can explain why we extend the application of “knowing” to those cases in which perceptual contact could not even *possibly* be made. We thus make a move from the merely *unobserved* to the *unobservable*. After all, James characterizes virtual cases for observables as follows:

The immensely greater part of all our knowing ...is never completely nailed down. I speak not merely of our ideas of imperceptibles like ether-waves or dissociated ‘ions’ or other ‘ejects’ like the contents of our neighbors’ minds; I speak also of ideas which we might verify if we would take the trouble, but which we hold for true altho unperceptually, because nothing says ‘no’ to us, and there is no contradicting truth in sight. (MT 1909, 67; ERE 1904, 34)

Once we admit the standard cases of virtual reference and allow that “*to continue thinking unchallenged is, ninety-nine times out of one hundred, our practical substitute for knowing in the completed sense*” (MT 1909, 67; ERE 1904, 34), reference to unobservables can be admitted as well.³²

Non-actualized cases of virtual knowledge generally have the “freedom from clash and contradiction” that passes for “indirect verification”³³ and this characteristic could be shared by our thought about unobservables.³⁴ Standard cases of virtual knowledge count as “knowing” in virtue of having the potential to become like the prototype; reference to

unobservables counts as “knowing” in virtue of sharing the evidential characteristics (that freedom from clash and contradiction) of the virtual cases.

Thinking about the Past

Still, even when developed in these ways, James’s account of intentionality seems to remain forward-looking, and this raises potential problems for providing an account of our thoughts about the past.³⁵ Indeed, reference to the past is frequently taken to be the most serious problem with James’s theory of truth,³⁶ and it poses a similar problem for his account of intentionality.³⁷ We typically understand ourselves as being able to refer to historical figures like Caesar, but how is this to be explained on James’s account? Certainly not in terms of our tracking him down, or for that matter, even being able to be led into his immediate environment.

However, this will be another case in which James can appeal to the fact that “*to continue thinking unchallenged is, ninety-nine times out of one hundred, our practical substitute for knowing in the completed sense*” (MT 1909, 67; ERE 1904, 34). While Caesar and his immediate environment are not available, there are other items associated with Caesar (manuscripts, statues, etc.) that we can be connected with.

Caesar *had* and my statement *has*, effects; and if these effects in any way run together, a concrete medium is provided for the determinate cognitive relation. ...

The real Caesar, for example, wrote a manuscript of which I see a real reprint and say “the Caesar I mean is the author of *that*.” (MT 1909, 121)

We can’t directly perceive or operate on items from the past, but as long as our words get a grip elsewhere, they can extend from their more secure base. In particular, James has plenty of room to add something like Russellian “denoting” to his account, and so could always claim that some (past) items could be known “by description.” James distinguishes “knowledge of acquaintance” from “knowledge about” (PP 1890, 216–217), and this distinction is frequently compared to Russell’s knowledge-by-acquaintance knowledge-by-description distinction.³⁸ Nevertheless, it should be noted that while James’s “conceptual knowing” is often informed by “knowledge about,” it is not knowledge “by description” (since what our knowledge about leads us to track down may not be what the associated descriptions are true of). As a result, something like knowledge by description can still be added to James’s account, and while Russell’s descriptions needed, ultimately, to be composed of elements that we were directly acquainted with, James could include items that are only virtually known among the ingredients that can go into the descriptions. So, for instance, I can denote Caesar as “the author of *The Gallic Wars*,” while the book itself is referred to in virtue of my ability to track down a copy, rather than in virtue of further identifying descriptions.

Of course, if James makes such a move, he may still face the problems typically associated with descriptive accounts—what if, say, Caesar didn’t really write *The Gallic Wars*?³⁹ This worry about our descriptions picking out people who we aren’t intuitively talking

about highlights a similar problem with the non-denotational cases: namely, what should we say if the object we would (collectively) track down isn't the object that we are "intuitively" understood as talking about? This general problem of "misrepresentation" will be the subject of the following section.

Misrepresentation (and Truth)

A particularly pressing source of potential problems for James's basic account are mis-identifications. For James, our being led to an object does not merely *indicate* that we had always been thinking about it. Rather, the leading relation is supposed to be *constitutive* of the intentional one. The objects our practices ultimately end up "operating" on are thereby the ones our ideas refer to. As James puts it:

The percept here not only *verifies* the concept, proves its function of knowing that percept to be true, but the percept's existence as the terminus of the chain of intermediaries *creates* the function. Whatever terminates the chain was, because it now proves itself to be, what the concept "had in mind".⁴⁰

The "direction of fit" between what we are referring to and our attempts to locate such referents thus seems to be the opposite of what is commonly supposed. What we are referring to appears to be beholden to our investigations rather than the other way around.

This makes the problem of misrepresentation pressing, since people can occasionally pick out things that their words and ideas intuitively don't seem to refer to. If I go out to find Memorial Hall, and wind up at Eliot Hall instead, it seems wrong to claim that Eliot Hall was what my "Memorial Hall" idea had been referring to all along (which it would seem to be if the tracking down *created* the knowing function). Fortunately, as the discussion of language's social character suggested, James has the resources to account for such cases.

In particular, while the termination of the chain creates the knowing function, whether or not a chain has, in fact, been *terminated* is not something about which we are infallible, and mis-identification involves us thinking that a chain is terminated when it is not. Briefly put, mis-identifications are understood in terms of identification that are corrected by *future* experience. As James famously puts it with respect to truth:

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. ... Meanwhile we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood.... The present sheds a backwards light on the world's previous processes. They may have been truth processes for the actors in them. They are not so for one who knows the later revelations of the story. This regulative notion of a potential better truth to be established later, possibly to be established some day absolutely, and having powers of retroac-

tive legislation, turns its face, like all pragmatist notions, towards concreteness of fact, and towards the future. (P 1907, 106-107)

Questions of truth and intentionality are deeply connected for James (as is seen in his willingness to talk about the “truth” of names and concepts), and just as James talks about “absolute” and “temporary” truth, there are objects that our thoughts are “temporarily” cognitive of, and those that they are about “absolutely.” Cases of mis-identification can thus be understood as those in which the “temporary” and “absolute” extensions of one of one’s terms come apart. The chain can appear to be finished even when it isn’t, but such cases can still leave the knower with (“virtual”) “absolute” knowledge of the correct objects. So, for instance, I can still count as “virtually” referring to Memorial Hall with my “Memorial Hall” thoughts even as I identify Eliot Hall as what I was thinking of. Of course, were the tissue of experience set up so that no correction of this initial judgment were possible (say, I’d steadfastly refuse to withdraw my claim that Eliot Hall was “Memorial Hall” no matter what evidence I was subsequently given), then James would have to say that Eliot Hall was what I was referring to in the fuller sense as well. However, if things really were that way, then James might be right to doubt that there was much sense to be made of the claim that I was “really” referring to anything else. (In such a scenario, I would certainly be referring to Eliot Hall by “Memorial Hall” *eventually*, so the question would be how far back these attributions can be legitimately made.)

Conclusion

In spite of its attracting comparatively little attention during its time (or since), James’s account of intentionality played a central role in his thinking, and while his account is not without its problems, it’s arguably superior to most of the alternatives offered in James’s day. This lack of attention may be in part due to its missing the (definitional) form that philosophers typically expect from an account, but James not only rejects the common assumption that theories must have such a form, but provides an account that undermines that very assumption. If intentionality worked through some sort of “copying,” then one might expect every category (including those relating to truth and reference) to have necessary and sufficient conditions associated with it, since those are the conditions which would give the criteria by which objects “fit” the relevant terms. On the other hand, if intentionality is ultimately based on our having the potential to *operate on* the objects of our thoughts, then the tidiness of our categories (and thus of our accounts of intentionality and truth) is less of an issue. James’s account of intentionality thus supports his approach to analysis, and so feeds into his account of truth not only because constraints on what we can talk about are bound to affect the truth conditions of our claims, but also because what sort of account we can give of truth will depend in part on how we think that the word “truth” itself comes to pick out whatever it does. James’s writings on truth often have the comparatively unsystematic quality that his writings on intentionality also display, but if his writings on intentionality are on the right track, then this lack of systematicity need not be a bad thing.

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Notes:

- (1.) Thanks to Alex Klein, Jim Conant, Richard Gale, and members of the audience at Guelph University for comments on earlier versions of this paper. Note that when I quote James, italics, unless stated otherwise, are always James's.
- (2.) Royce 1885. In this book Royce presented what James called an "original proof of Idealism" based on the question, "How can a thought refer to, intend, or signify any particular reality outside itself?" (ECR 1885, 384, 385). For a nice summary of how James understood Royce's argument and its importance, see his 1888 letter to Charles Renouvier (CWJ 1888, 6.358-360).
- (3.) Letter to Henry James, September 8, 1907 (CWJ 1907, 3.344).

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(4.) I should note that James often speaks of *concepts* in just this way. But in James's case this is combined with a skepticism about the extent of the match between our concepts and the realities that they purport to represent, and he takes this mismatch between how we conceive of things and how we refer to them to underwrite a type of skepticism about the "conceptual method" in philosophy. (For further discussion, see Jackman 2018.)

(5.) For a discussion of James's general tendency to focus on concrete examples and lack of interest in providing necessary and sufficient conditions, see Gale (1998, 38, 52), Seigfried (1990, 148-151), and Putnam (1997).

(6.) P 1907, 99. The "truth process" here is more tied to intentionality than propositional truth, with the example James discusses being about how "a mental image of a house" could lead us to follow a cow path until we encounter the real house.

(7.) Rosch (1975) and Lakoff (1987).

(8.) This example adapted from Lakoff (1987, 96).

(9.) This may have some affinities to Wittgenstein's point that "meaning" and "reference" are "family resemblance" terms (Wittgenstein 1953, section 67). (For more on this connection, see Boncompagni, this volume.)

(10.) Much of the material in this section is discussed in more detail in Jackman (1998). Quoted from MEN 1903-1904, 17. See the chapters by Levine and O'Shea in this volume for additional discussion of this issue.

(11.) MT 1909, 14. See Bordogna (2008, 157) for a discussion of how this approach related to boundary disputes between philosophy and psychology in James's time.

(12.) Strong (1904) gives a useful exposition of this early stage of James's work, arguing that for James "operate" is an "inexact expression" that has "to do with causal relations, but not necessarily with causal relations that influence the object" so that "act with reference to" or "adjust our relations to" (as in the case when we encounter a tree and turn out of our initial path to avoid walking in to it), might be a more accurate way of characterizing the relation (Strong 1904, 256, 257).

(13.) This reading thus differs from that of O'Shea (this volume), who claims that James is here suggesting that "no sensorial image or feeling-instance, *q*, can by itself succeed in being *about* any reality unless it not only operates upon but *resembles* that reality." However, this requires a thought's being an "error" to amount to a failure to be *about* the object at all, while I'm more inclined to think that James endorses Royce's insight that the very possibility of error presupposes the ability of the thought to still be about whatever reality it is in error about.

(14.) While he does regret the "undue emphasis laid upon operating on the object itself," the regret is about the emphasis on the *object itself* rather than the *operation*, since he later realized that operation on the object itself is often "replaced by operations on other

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things related to the object” (MT 1909, 32). This expanded base will be crucial in letting his account deal with thoughts about “unobservables” and the past.

(15.) During the period of his focus on radical empiricism, perception often displaced operation as the explicit focus of his account of knowing, since for the radical empiricist, to perceive an object, or to know it immediately, “is for mental content and object to be identical” (MT 1909, 36; see also MT 1909, 35, 61–62) so that “[t]he external and the internal, the extended and the not extended fuse and make an indissoluble marriage” (ERE 1905, 265). See Lamberth (1999), Putnam (1998), and Putnam (1999).

(16.) Further, for Russell, the justification for giving pride of place to such “immediate” knowing was primarily epistemic (though perhaps not in a purely “foundationalist” way—see Klein (2017)), while for James the motivation was primarily metaphysical and phenomenological.

(17.) For instance we know about Caesar through “some description which is composed wholly of particulars and universals with which we are acquainted” (Russell 1912, Ch. 5), and “[e]very proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted” (Russell 1910–1911/1918, 219).

(18.) P 1907, 99. Original in italics.

(19.) Hence his rhetorical question “What then would self-transcendence affirmed to exist in advance of all experiential mediation or termination, be *known-as*? What would it practically result in for *us*, were it true?” (ERE 1904, 36; MT 1909, 68).

(20.) James makes a similar point about truth itself when he claims:

We let our notion pass for true without attempting to verify. If truth means verification-processes essentially, ought we then to call such unverified truths as this abortive? No, for they form the overwhelmingly large number of the truths we live by. Indirect as well as direct verifications pass muster. Where circumstantial is sufficient, we can go without eye-witnessing. ... The verification of the assumption here means its leading to no frustrations or contradiction. ... For one truth-process completed there are a million in our lives that function in this state of nascency. They turn *towards* direct verification; lead us into the *surroundings* of the objects they envisage; and then, if everything turns out harmoniously, we are so sure that verification is possible that we omit it, and are usually justified by all that happens. (P 1907, 99–100)

(21.) MT 1909, 74; ERE 1905, 101, italics mine.

(22.) See also ERE 1904, 27.

(23.) The suggestion that James generally neglects “the social” can also be found, among others, in Gale (1998, 29, 165), Thayer (1975, xxii), McDermott (1986, 53), Otto (1943, 189), Morris (1970, 143, 151), and Scheffler (1974, 124, 145–146).

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(24.) This should all be familiar from the cases discussed in Putnam (1975) and Burge (1979).

(25.) MT 1909, 35, original in italics.

(26.) For a related discussion, see Evans (1982, 278–280).

(27.) James’s famous discussion of our being able to think about tigers in India (EPH 1894, 72–74; MT 1909, 33–35) also involves a situation in which one must rely on the expertise of others to have a realistic hope of making it from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to those parts of India where one might encounter those “striped rascals” (MT 34; EP 74).

(28.) James recognizes this possibility explicitly when he notes that “If a different intermediation, leading to a different real terminus, should occur, we should say, even were the initial state of mind identical, that now it had a different ‘object’” (MEN 1903–1904, 17).

(29.) See Putnam (1975).

(30.) MT 1909, 118.

(31.) See Jackman (2018).

(32.) Such an account would also allow us to refer to things like the number 26, though James didn’t devote much attention to such cases.

(33.) P 1907, 103.

(34.) One should note, however, that for James many of the theoretical entities posited by the scientific theories of his day would not be candidates for “knowing” of this sort. This was precisely because he took them *not* to be free from such “clash and contradiction” when they were extended beyond the very restricted domains where they proved useful (see Jackman (2018)).

(35.) Specifically, the distant past that we never experienced. James takes reference to things from our own past to be relatively unproblematic, and that in cases where we have had past perceptual contact with an object, we can always succeed in referring to it in a retrospective way (MT 1909, 26).

(36.) Such a view is shared by early critics of James such as Royce and Bradley and contemporary (sympathetic) expositors of James such as Putnam and Gale (see Gale (1998), Putnam (1997)).

(37.) James flags the problem himself in a frustratingly enigmatic footnote to his unfinished manuscript *The Many and the One*: “Knowledge of the past immediately occurs to one as incompatible with such an account. Less so than appears, however; but this question is just one of those that are postponed” (MEN 1903–1904, 17).

(38.) See, for instance, Misak (2016, 54).

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(39.) All familiar from Kripke (1980).

(40.) MT 1909, 64; ERE 1904, 31. See also MT 1909, 63; ERE 1904, 29.

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