

## CHAPTER 11

# THE PRAGMATIC METHOD

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### 1.1 PRAGMATISM AND THE “PRAGMATIC MAXIM”

WHILE classical pragmatism quickly became identified with the theory of truth that dominated critical discussions of it, both of its founders, Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, understood pragmatism essentially as a *method*. (The so-called, “pragmatic theory of truth” was originally intended to just be an instance of that method’s application, albeit a very important one).<sup>1</sup> This pragmatic method plays a central role in Peirce’s 1878 paper, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”, but it was introduced to the wider philosophical community (and first introduced by that name) by James, who in an 1898 lecture at the University of California at Berkley,<sup>2</sup> presented the “principle of pragmatism” as the view that:

To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what effects of a conceivably practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, then, is for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> When James defined pragmatism for *Baldwin’s Dictionary* in 1902 (James 1902b, p. 94), there was no mention of any theory of truth, but by the time *Pragmatism* was published in 1907, it was becoming clear that the name “pragmatism” was being used as a label, not only for the pragmatic method, but also for the particular account of truth associated with Peirce, James, Dewey, and Schiller. James initially preferred keeping the term “pragmatism” for the method and Schiller’s term “humanism” for the theory of truth (see James’s 1904 letter to Schiller (in James 1907, p. 163), as well as his 1904 article “Humanism and Truth”, reprinted in James 1909 (especially pages 37–38)). However, by 1907 he seemed resigned to the fact that “pragmatism” was being used for both, so while he insisted that pragmatism “is a method only” (James 1907, p. 31), he admits that “the word “pragmatism” has come be used in a still wider sense, as meaning also a certain *theory of truth*” (James 1907, pp. 32–33).

<sup>2</sup> Published that same year by the University Chronicle as “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results” (James 1898). Since the Chronicle was only circulated in the University of California system (aside from the 30 reprints that James received), James published it again (in a slightly revised form) in *The Journal of Philosophy* under the title “The Pragmatic Method” (James 1904).

<sup>3</sup> James 1898, p. 259, James 1904, p. 124, 1907, p. 29. Virtually the same passage appears in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 1902a, p. 351), and for most of James’s contemporaries, that version would be their first exposure to the maxim.

James focused primarily on how the principle (hereafter “the Pragmatic Maxim”) could be applied to solving disputes, particularly philosophical ones. He famously re-introduces the maxim in his *Pragmatism* by describing his application of it on a camping trip to a debate between two groups of his friends about whether a man would be “going around” a squirrel that kept itself on the opposite side of tree that the man was circling. James suggested that the answer “depends on what you *practically mean* by ‘going round’ the squirrel” (1907, p. 27). If you mean by “go round” being to the north, then to the west, then to the south, etc., then the man would have, while if you meant facing the squirrel’s front, then facing its side, then facing its back, etc., then the man would not have. Both groups predicted the same experiences from their seemingly opposing claims, so James concluded that their debate was idle. Of course, resolving one’s friends’ campground disputes is a fine thing to do, but James was most interested in the maxim’s application to “philosophical disputation”, where he expected it “wonderfully to smooth out misunderstandings and to bring peace” and to “yield a sovereignly valuable rule of method for discussion”.<sup>4</sup> As he puts it in *Pragmatism*:

The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. Is the world one or many?—fated or free?—material or spiritual?—here are notions either of which may or may not hold good of the world; and disputes over such notions are unending. The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other’s being right.<sup>5</sup>

James goes on to claim that:

It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence. There can be no difference anywhere that doesn’t *make* a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract truth that doesn’t express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere and somewhen. The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.<sup>6</sup>

James applies this method to the questions of whether the world has a material or spiritual origin,<sup>7</sup> and whether reality is ultimately “one” or “many”,<sup>8</sup> and to philosophical problems relating to substance,<sup>9</sup> absolute idealism,<sup>10</sup> free will,<sup>11</sup> possibility,<sup>12</sup> intentionality,<sup>13</sup> and, most famously, truth.<sup>14</sup> In each of these <sup>cases</sup> he hoped to support his thesis that in “every genuine metaphysical debate, some practical issue, however conjectural or remote, is involved”.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>4</sup> James 1898, p. 259, (also in James 1904, p. 124).

<sup>5</sup> James, 1907, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> James 1907, p. 30. (All but the last sentence also in James 1898, p. 260, 1904, pp. 124–125).

<sup>7</sup> James 1898, p. 260, 1904, p. 125, 1907, p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> James 1907, p. 63.

<sup>9</sup> James 1907, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> James 1907, p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> James 1907, p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> James 1907, p. 136.

<sup>13</sup> James 1909, p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> James 1907, ch. 6.

<sup>15</sup> James 1907, p. 52.

Unfortunately, the application of James’s method to philosophical cases proved far less successful than its application to his friends’ campground dispute. Indeed, there remains a surprising amount of disagreement about just what the maxim James proposes actually is. In particular, there has been a considerable lack of clarity about just what sort of “significance” James is talking about, and most prominently, just what he means by “practical consequences”.<sup>16</sup> There have been a number of interpretations of the Maxim, of which four of the most central are: the “Peircian” reading, the “activist” reading, the “subjectivist” reading, and finally the “practical” reading. While some of these readings have advantages over others (both in terms of exegetical plausibility and fruitfulness of the resulting maxim), none have proved entirely satisfactory, and so it is not surprising that contemporary philosophers inclined to describe themselves as pragmatists do so for reasons other than a commitment to any version of the Pragmatic Maxim.

## 2.1 THE “PEIRCIAN” READING

A natural reading of James’s Pragmatic Maxim would be to take it to be essentially the one that Peirce introduced in 1878. James certainly encourages this when he introduces the maxim not only as “the principle of pragmatism” but at the same time as “the principle of Peirce”,<sup>17</sup> and James’s maxim does seem remarkably similar to Peirce’s now familiar claim that in order to attain the third grade of clearness<sup>18</sup> with our ideas we:

Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.<sup>19</sup>

On the Peircian reading of the Pragmatic Maxim, the “significance” involved is *cognitive* significance, and the cognitive content of a philosophical view is to be understood in terms of the “practical effects” (in particular, the experiences) that would follow from its *truth*.

It was certainly this reading that led many to view the Pragmatic Maxim as being a variant of the ‘verificationist’ accounts of meaning that were beginning to gain traction in the early part of the twentieth century,<sup>20</sup> and it is unsurprising that the two were often viewed

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, such differences are often understood as explaining the difference between (in the terminology of Rescher 2000, pp. 64–5) the “pragmatism of the right” associated with writers like Peirce, C. I. Lewis, Haack, and Rescher himself, and the “pragmatism of the left” associated with James, Schiller, and Rorty. For a similar narrative seeing these two strains coming out from the interpretation of the pragmatic maxim, see also Mounce 1997 and Misak 2013.

<sup>17</sup> The maxim is so described in James 1898, p. 259, 1902a, p. 351, 1904, p. 124, and 1907, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> The first two grades coming from familiarity and explicit definitions (Peirce 1878, p. 126).

<sup>19</sup> Peirce 1878, p. 132. This “method of ascertaining the meaning of hard words and of abstract concepts” is later identified by Peirce as “pragmatism”, and, like James, Peirce prefers to think of pragmatism as a method only, rather than a “doctrine of metaphysics” or “attempt to determine any truth of things” (Peirce 1907, p. 400). Peirce, of course, modified and clarified his presentation of the maxim in the years that followed (for a discussion of this, see Hookway 2004, Misak 2013).

<sup>20</sup> See Soames, chapter 3 of [this volume](#).

as notional variants of the same basic view.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, provided that one understood “practical consequences” to simply be “perceptual consequences”, it would be hard to see how the two maxims differed. Furthermore, in Peirce’s own hands, pragmatism had a noticeable “anti-metaphysical” tone. While James emphasized how the pragmatic method would allow us to resolve many philosophical disputes, Peirce at times seemed more inclined to treat pragmatism as a method to separate the problems that were intellectually tractable from the ones that were, ultimately, nonsense.<sup>22</sup> When he asked himself what he expected of pragmatism, Peirce provided an answer that would not have seemed out of place in the Vienna Circle:

It will serve to show that almost every proposition of ontological metaphysics is either meaningless gibberish . . . or else downright absurd; so that all such rubbish being swept away, what will remain of philosophy will be a series of problems capable of investigation by the observational methods of the true sciences.

(Peirce 1905, p. 338)

While the more expansive notion of experience that Peirce endorses allows him to take a different line on the meaning of mathematical sentences than the positivists,<sup>23</sup> the Pragmatic Maxim, understood in this Peircian fashion, faces a number of challenges similar to those faced by defenders of verificationist theories of meaning.

One such problem is that by tying the cognitive content of a statement to what practical effects we should expect if it were true, the Peircian interpretation of the maxim seems to leave without significance, statements about the past that don’t have predicted consequences for the future. If I claim that Plato stubbed his toe 18 days before his eleventh birthday, the claim certainly seems meaningful, but it seems unlikely that there are any *particular* experiences that we can expect from it. Of course, Peirce insists that “it is unphilosophical to suppose that, with regard to any given question (which has any clear meaning), investigation would not bring forth a solution of it, were it carried far enough”,<sup>24</sup> but most of us would be more skeptical about whether such cases would bring forth any such solution. Further, even in those cases where we have such predicted effects, the maxim still suggests that such statements are, in some sense, really *about* the future. If I claim that a large meteor landed 10,000 years ago where Toronto is now located, there may be future experiences (about, say, how an excavation would turn out) that this would predict, but to say that those predictions are the entire

<sup>21</sup> Ayer, for instance, claims that “Peirce’s pragmatic maxim is indeed identical, for all practical purposes, with the physicalist interpretation of the verification principle” (Ayer 1968, p. 45). See also Lewis 1934, p. 65, Carnap 1936, p. 123, and Reichenbach 1938, p. 49. (For an account stressing the differences between the Peircian and the verificationist maxims, see Misak 1995.)

<sup>22</sup> However, see Peirce 1905 (p. 339) on how, unlike other “prope-positivist” theories, his maxim allows one to extract the “precious essence” of metaphysics (particularly as it relates to the nature of signs and categorical schemes). For a discussion of this, see Nagl 2004, p. 13, Haack 2006, p. 145.

<sup>23</sup> There is good reason to think that Peirce had much more than sensations in mind when he spoke of experience. In particular, he speaks not only of “external” experiences (of which sensation would be paradigmatic) but also of “internal” experiences, which would include, for instances, the experiences we have when engaged in a mathematical proof or ~~the~~ manipulation of a geometrical diagram ~~when doing~~ ~~a mathematical proof~~. (For a discussion of this, see Misak 2013, p. 42.)

<sup>24</sup> Peirce 1878, p. 140.

significance<sup>25</sup> of my statement seems to leave out the fact that it is essentially a claim about what happened 10,000 years ago, not about what would happen if you took soil samples in Toronto tomorrow.

James seems willing to bite such bullets when he argues (in an example that will come up again) that, if there were no future, the dispute between those who think that God created the world and those who think that it resulted from “blind physical forces”<sup>26</sup> would (if both theories could explain all of our current experience)<sup>27</sup> be “purely verbal”, and that “the two theories, in spite of their different-sounding names, mean exactly the same thing”.<sup>28</sup> It is only because we have a future that such a debate between the theist and materialist is a significant one. The materialist is, according to James, committed to all life in the universe eventually perishing (and all of our accomplishments and values going unremembered), while the theist predicts that our values will be preserved even if we, as individuals, die out. As James puts it, “Materialism means simply the denial that the moral order is eternal, and the cutting off of ultimate hopes; spiritualism means the affirmation of an eternal moral order and the letting loose of hope.”<sup>29</sup>

Another problem for the “Peircian” version of the Pragmatic Maxim is that it may seem that normative statements about the way things ought to be (rather than how they are) will not come out as meaningful when the maxim is applied to them. Such statements seem to have no predictive import, which would suggest that no practical consequences follow from their truth. There may be, for instance, nothing we can predict from the truth of a statement like “eating meat is wrong”, since we may very well continue to eat meat forever in spite of its being wrong. Their denial of cognitive value to ethical statements was a familiar objection to verificationist theories of meaning, and it seems to be a fair charge against the “Peircian” reading of the Pragmatic Maxim as well.<sup>30</sup>

The Peircian version of the maxim is not, then, without serious problems, and one might ask whether other readings of the maxim might fare better. James claimed that his maxim was essentially Peirce’s, but he also suggested that the maxim should be “expressed more broadly” than Peirce did,<sup>31</sup> and most subsequent writers have taken James to have understated his differences with Peirce. That certainly seemed to be the view of Peirce himself, and his evident dissatisfaction with how his original maxim was developed by James can be seen in his suggestion that his own view (and its “poor little

<sup>25</sup> As Peirce and James stated above, “our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (Peirce 1878, p. 132), and “[o]ur conception of these effects, then, is for us the whole of our conception of the object” (James 1898, p. 259, James 1904, p. 124, 1907, p. 29).

<sup>26</sup> James, 1907, p. 50.

<sup>27</sup> James explicitly assumes that both positions are equally successful at explaining how things stand now (James 1907, p. 51).

<sup>28</sup> James 1907, pp. 50–51.

<sup>29</sup> James 1907, p. 55. James, however, quickly came to have doubts about this purported equivalence, even without these future considerations (James 1909, p. 103).

<sup>30</sup> Of course, it isn’t clear whether Peirce himself intended his maxim to apply to our ethical concepts, since he insisted that pragmatism was “a method of ascertaining the meanings, not of all ideas, but only of what I call ‘intellectual concepts’, that is to say, of those upon the structure of which, arguments concerning objectivity may hinge” (Peirce 1907, p. 421). That said, some (such as Misak 2000, 2013) have argued that ethical claims can be worked into a Peircian framework.

<sup>31</sup> James 1898, p. 259.

maxim”)<sup>32</sup> be renamed “pragmaticism” in order to distinguish it from the “pragmatism” that was by then associated with James.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, James’s pragmatic maxim has often been read in ways that are *radically* different from Peirce’s.

### 3.1 THE ‘ACTIVIST’ READING

One way to do this is to read James’s principle as not proposing a conception of *cognitive* significance at all. Rather, the maxim is just read as a way of sorting those philosophical questions that are worth pursuing from those that are not. As Kitcher recently put it:

James and Dewey share [with the Logical Positivists] the wish to eliminate “insignificant questions” from philosophy—but the apparent communion of goals depends on a bad pun. ‘Significance’ for them has nothing to do with semantics, or with a verificationist approach to meaning: they are out to focus philosophy on issues that matter to people.<sup>34</sup>

On this reading, the Pragmatic Maxim is just an injunction for us to move, as Dewey famously put it, from the “problems of philosophers” to “the problems of men”,<sup>35</sup> and in which we do not “solve” philosophical problems, “we get over them”.<sup>36</sup> The maxim thus comes out as something closer to the sort of principle one finds Rorty applying when he claims that for pragmatists like himself “the traditional questions of metaphysics and epistemology can be neglected”, not because they are “devoid of meaning” or “rest on false premises” but because “they have no social utility” since “the vocabulary of metaphysics and epistemology is of no practical use.”<sup>37</sup> James might differ from Rorty and Dewey about just how much juice could still be squeezed from traditional philosophical problems,<sup>38</sup> but on this reading, all three would agree that pragmatism involved shifting one’s focus to the problems which were of “vital” importance.<sup>39</sup>

There are passages in James that can certainly encourage such a reading, as when he claims:

[M]ost men instinctively . . . do turn their backs on philosophical disputes from which nothing in the line of definite future consequences can be seen to follow. The verbal and empty character of philosophy is surely a reproach with which we are but too familiar. If pragmatism be true, it is a perfectly sound reproach unless the theories under fire can be shown to have alternative practical outcomes, however delicate and distant these may be. The common man and the scientist say they discover no such outcomes, and if the metaphysician can discern none either, the others certainly are in the right of it, as against him. His science

<sup>32</sup> Peirce 1908, p. 448.      <sup>33</sup> Peirce 1905, pp. 334–5.

<sup>34</sup> Kitcher 2012, pp. xii–xiii. (See also Kitcher 2012, p. xvii.)

<sup>35</sup> Dewey, 1917, p. 95. (See also Dewey, 1925, p. 7.)      <sup>36</sup> Dewey, 1909, p. 40.

<sup>37</sup> Rorty, 2007b, pp. 37–8. Of course, Rorty would certainly not refer to this as “a method”.

<sup>38</sup> Unlike Rorty and the positivists, James believed that the traditional philosophical questions did have practical import (see Nagl 2004, p. 20).

<sup>39</sup> This contrasts with Peirce who, at least at times, thought that the application of the Pragmatic Method was particularly inappropriate for such “vital” questions (though see Misak 2013, p. 45).



is then but pompous trifling; and the endowment of a professorship for such a being would be silly.

(James 1907, p. 52)

Further, such a reading of James is almost as old as pragmatism itself, and can be traced back to Lovejoy's argument that James's maxim ultimately gives us neither the "intellectual meaning" nor the "logical validity" of propositions, but rather their "moral worth" and "human significance".<sup>40</sup> According to Lovejoy, James conflated the question of which topics were worth studying with the question which topics were meaningful at all, and mistakenly transformed "a strong conviction concerning the relative importance of propositions into a logical doctrine concerning the import of propositions."<sup>41</sup>

This "activist" reading makes the maxim's focus on the future seem less problematic, since it is more plausible to claim that disputes that have no consequences for future experience are *idle*, than it is to say that they are *meaningless*.<sup>42</sup> On this reading, the maxim isn't intended to produce anything like reductive definitions or complete accounts of meaning. Rather, the maxim is meant to specify that part of meaning that is useful *for philosophical purposes*, since the point is to get the part of meaning relevant to debate. The "verification transcendent" part of meaning may be there, but not a part of meaning that helps us settle the issue. If we are actually going to debate whether Plato stubbed his toe 18 days before his eleventh birthday, then consequences of the sort the maxim emphasizes will be needed. If no such consequences can be found, debate on the issue is futile.

However, the activist reading makes James's choice of the maxim itself, and what he wants to do with it, fairly mysterious. First of all, the activist reading treats the principle as one for sorting those philosophical problems that are worth pursuing from those that are not, but James seemed to consistently describe pragmatism as a method for solving philosophical disputes, not one for deciding whether or not a dispute was worth pursuing. Secondly, if one wanted to simply switch our focus to problems that made a significant difference to our lives, it's hard to imagine that one would choose to do so with a maxim of the sort that James formulates. One needs a lot more to settle whether a question is "idle" than just whether its answer makes some difference to "somebody, somehow, somewhere and somewhen",<sup>43</sup> since anything that has *any* experiential consequences will make such a difference. If the "activist" reading were what James wanted, the principle would have been a terrible way to express it. Even manifestly trivial questions such as "Is there an even or odd number of grains of sand in my nephew's sandbox?" can be tied to some difference in future experience, so the maxim seems ill suited for separating those questions which are "idle" from those which are not.

None of this is to deny that James might have a good deal of sympathy with the Dewey/Rorty/Kitcher position that we should focus on problems that make a difference

<sup>40</sup> Lovejoy 1908b, p. 56.      <sup>41</sup> Lovejoy 1908b, p. 59.

<sup>42</sup> Such a reading stresses passages of James such as "if no future detail of experience or conduct is to be deduced from our hypothesis, the debate between materialism and theism becomes quite idle and insignificant. Matter and God in that event mean exactly the same thing—the power, namely, neither more nor less, that could make just this completed world—and the wise man is he who in such a case would turn his back on such a supererogatory discussion" (1907, p. 52).

<sup>43</sup> James 1907, p. 30.

to our lives: it's only to note that this sympathy wasn't what he was expressing with his Pragmatic Maxim.

## 4.1 THE SUBJECTIVIST READING

This leads to a surprisingly popular explanation of how James's maxim opens things up from the original "Peircian" version. On this reading of James, he proposes that we take the content of a philosophical view to be the practical consequences not (only) of its being true, but (also) of our *believing it*.<sup>44</sup>

This "subjectivist" reading of the maxim is obviously more forgiving than the Peircian one about which questions would be meaningful. It would, for instance, have an easy time allowing ethical statements to be meaningful, since one's ethical beliefs can affect one's behavior in a fairly straightforward way. While the *truth* of the statement "eating meat is always wrong" might not entail any experiences on our part, it seems clear that *believing* it has practical consequences in terms of what we will and won't do because of that belief. On such an account, "Eating meat is always wrong" would be meaningful at least in part because my believing it would lead me to stop eating meat (or at least eat it less).

In much the same way, the subjectivist reading doesn't have the problem of potentially treating claims like "Plato stubbed his toe 18 days before his eleventh birthday" as meaningless. I'm not sure what difference it could make to my future experience if that claim were true, but it seems pretty clear what sort of differences there could be if I *believed* it. In particular, it would make a difference to what I would answer if asked, "Do you think that Plato stubbed his toe 18 days before his eleventh birthday?"

These small advantages, however, are a consequence of one of the major downsides of the subjectivist reading of the maxim—namely, on such a reading *every* claim is going to not only be meaningful, but also have a distinct meaning. Every belief will have *some* consequences that follow from believing it for *someone*, and no two beliefs will have the same consequences for *everyone*. "John bought a female fox" and "John bought a vixen" have distinct meanings because answering "yes" to the question "Did John buy a fox?" is likely to follow from believing the first, while it may be less likely to follow from believing the second. The subjectivist reading thus allows so much that the maxim is completely stripped of its teeth. James claims that many disputes would collapse into insignificance once subjected to this test,<sup>45</sup> but it seems as if no dispute would be "purely verbal" if the subjective effects of believing were allowed to determine the contents of the beliefs involved.

Given how problematic the resulting view is, it is surprising how little textual evidence there is that James endorsed this more "subjective" interpretation of the maxim. Indeed, when James presents the maxim, the formulations he gives invariably favor a reading that

<sup>44</sup> For recent versions of this interpretive strain, see, for instance, Bacon 2012, p. 28, De Waal 2005, p. 21, Hookway 2010, p. 8, Misak 2013, p. 58, Rescher 2000, p. 9, Suckiel 2006, p. 33, Tallise and Aiken 2008, pp. 11–13 (It is also suggested by Brandom's claim that for James, Peirce's principle, amounts to the claim that "the meaning of a claim is the difference that adopting it would make to what one does" (Brandom 2011, p. 20).).

<sup>45</sup> James 1907, p. 30.



ties content to the practical effects of the sentence's *truth* rather than our *believing* it.<sup>46</sup> By contrast, there are no explicit formulations of the maxim where James states, or even suggests, that the consequences of *believing* the sentence to be the relevant ones.

So what reason could there be for ascribing the subjective reading of the maxim to James? Lovejoy first suggested such a reading in 1908, and (at least partially because it fits other pre-conceptions readers would have about James),<sup>47</sup> many subsequent writers on James seemed happy to just follow Lovejoy's lead on this issue. In that article, Lovejoy argues<sup>48</sup> that James must have something like the subjectivistic version of the maxim in mind, since (1) James takes absolute idealism<sup>49</sup> not to involve any predictions about our future experiences:

[the Absolute] remains supremely indifferent to what the *particular* facts in our world actually are. Be they what they may, the Absolute will father them. . . . You cannot redescend into the world of particulars by the Absolute's aid, or deduce any *necessary* consequences of *detail* important for your life from your idea of his nature.

(James 1907, p. 40, italics mine)

and (2), James suggests that claims about the Absolute are still meaningful because of the emotional and spiritual comfort they bring:

the use of the Absolute is proved by the whole course of men's religious history . . . it is indeed not a *scientific* use, for we can make no *particular* deductions from it. It is emotional and spiritual altogether.

(James 1907 p. 131, italics mine)

However, the focus of these passages that Lovejoy appeals to is on a lack of detailed *particular* predictions, not a lack of consequences at all,<sup>50</sup> and the mere fact that there are no particular "scientific" deductions of future experiences that follow from our commitment to the Absolute does not entail that we wouldn't still be committed to there being a concrete difference in *some* (as yet unspecified) future experience. When we look what James actually says about the Absolute right after he claims that we can't deduce any particular consequences from it, he clearly commits himself to the truth of the belief in the Absolute entailing a difference in what would be experienced—it's just that there are no details about either the timeframe or the general form of the good turn of events entailed, and thus no specific predictions. As he puts it:

What do believers in the Absolute mean by saying that their belief affords them comfort? They mean that since in the Absolute finite evil is "overruled" already, we may, therefore, whenever

<sup>46</sup> See, for instance, James 1902a, p. 351, James 1902b, p. 94, James 1907, pp. 28, 29, 30, James 1909, p. 37, James 1910.

<sup>47</sup> James wrote extensively about the practical consequences of our beliefs, and it is a common understanding of his "The Will to Believe" (James 1896a) to take it to focus on the practical benefits that come from *believing* in God (in contrast to Pascal who focused on the practical benefits associated with the belief's *truth*), and so it can be tempting to read such concerns of his into his understanding of the Pragmatic Maxim.

<sup>48</sup> Lovejoy 1908a, p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> The "absolute" being shorthand for the views James attributes to "absolute idealists" like Royce and Bradley who took the world to be fundamentally a single whole that was, ultimately organized in the best of all possible ways (See Royce 1885, Bradley 1893).

<sup>50</sup> For a good discussion of this, see Sukiell 1982, ch. 3.

we wish, treat the temporal as if it were potentially the eternal, be sure that we can trust its outcome, and, without sin, dismiss our fear and drop the worry of our finite responsibility. In short, they mean that we have a right ever and anon to take a moral holiday, to let the world wag in its own way, feeling that its issues are in better hands than ours and are none of our business.

(James 1907, p. 41)

Now it seems from this passage James's position is that while we can't *deduce* any *particular* consequences from our belief in the Absolute, we can take "moral holidays" if we believe in it because we can infer that things will work out for the best no matter what we do ourselves. The psychological consequences of believing it are important, but they follow from a conclusion about what the total sum of experiences will be like if the hypothesis is true.

That said, most of the problems with the subjective reading discussed above stem from the fact that it focuses on the effects that a belief *does* have on a believer's behavior, rather than what effects it *should* have.<sup>51</sup> If the subjective maxim were read a more normative way, many of the problems with the descriptive version of the subjective maxim would disappear. For instance, how we *should* behave if we believed that there was a vixen in the forest is no different than how we should behave if we believed that there was a female fox there, even if the actual behavior produced was different.

Such a normative reading would also allow one to avoid another serious problem for the descriptive version of the subjective interpretation of the maxim—namely, that it seems to make it hard to attribute any general content to a philosophical view because just what a belief will lead someone to do varies from person to person. For instance, while James argues that a belief in the Absolute can justify an occasional moral holiday, he couldn't (if the descriptive–subjective reading were right) claim that the content of the Absolute is such a right to take moral holidays unless he had grounds for thinking that this was the actual effect that believing in the Absolute had for most people. If people mistakenly thought that the Absolute required moral seriousness on their part and behaved accordingly, then that would be the content for them. On the other hand, with the more normative reading of the subjective version of the maxim, James can claim that the content of the Absolute is that we can take moral holidays because that is what we *should* be able to do if we believed in the Absolute, even if such a belief didn't actually incline us to take such holidays.

This normative reading of the subjective version of the maxim still runs into the problem that James did seem to focus on the consequences of a claim's *truth* rather than the consequences of our *believing* it, but it does point towards yet another interpretation of the maxim, one that avoids that problem while incorporating much of what the normative subjective version of the maxim hoped to capture.

## 5.1 THE PRACTICAL READING

While the subjectivist reading has serious problems, there is something to its treating the maxim as tying meaning to our forthcoming actions as well as our sensations, and there are ways of doing this without moving to the subjectivist reading itself.

<sup>51</sup> See Gale 2010, p. 110 for a useful discussion of the "normative" vs. the "causal" phrasings of the maxim in James.

In particular, when James speaks of “what effects of a conceivably practical kind the object may involve”, he refers not only to “what sensations we are to expect from it”, but also to “what reactions we must prepare.”<sup>52</sup> Now, it is a real question what this second aspect is supposed to add to the first. When he summarizes the Principle in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, this second aspect is cashed out in terms of “what conduct it is fitted to produce” and “what conduct we must prepare in case the object should be true”, and while it is easy to conclude that every difference in predicted sensation will produce a difference in the set of actions called for, it is conceivable that there could be a difference in actions called for without there being a difference in predicted sensation. For instance, it is easy to read ~~these~~ <sup>this second aspect</sup> as allowing room for normative claims to have meaning because their truth is “fitted” to produce conduct that is in line with them. “Eating meat is wrong” has a different meaning from “Eating meat is right” because “the conduct we must prepare” ~~in~~ <sup>with</sup> the former precludes eating meat, while the “conduct we must prepare” ~~in~~ <sup>with</sup> the latter includes the possibility of eating it. The second type of practical effect that James mentions in his Pragmatic Maxim thus makes the view more forgiving than both Peirce’s version or the positivist criterion of meaning.<sup>53</sup>

The resulting view is “normative” in that it focuses on what the belief is “fitted” to produce. That is, it focuses on what we *should* do if the belief were *true*, not simply on what we might *actually* do if we *accept it* as true.<sup>54</sup> Still, it should also be clear why emphasizing this sort of practical consequence could make one’s position sound like the subjective version of the maxim. The actions one should engage in if a sentence were true often are the actions one should engage in if you believed it, and so an appeal to those actions or attitudes can look as if one is appealing to the effects of *believing* the sentence rather than any practical consequence that follows from its *truth*. For instance, in the example of the Absolute that has been given, the view would be that a “practical effect” of the *truth* of the claims associated with the Absolute would be that we are *entitled* to take moral holidays. There is nothing subjectivist about this, but it is easy to confuse with the subjectivist view that understands the meaning of the Absolute as stemming from the fact that we will be more likely to take moral holidays if we *believe* in it. On this reading, if the truth of absolute idealism didn’t legitimize moral holidays, then the fact that people who believed in it *actually* felt entitled to such holidays would be irrelevant to its meaning.

<sup>52</sup> James 1898, p. 259, James 1904, p. 124, 1907, p. 29. This is perhaps expressed most clearly in the definition of pragmatism James provides for *Baldwin’s Dictionary*: “The doctrine that the whole meaning of a conception expresses itself in practical consequences, consequences either in the shape of conduct to be recommended, or in that of experiences to be expected, if the conception be true” (James 1902b, p. 94).

<sup>53</sup> It would also underwrite James’s insistence (James 1909, p. 103) that the pragmatist must recognize the difference between a “spiritually animated maiden” and an “automated sweetheart” (a “soulless body” that was “absolutely indistinguishable” from the former), since the reactions appropriate to one need not be appropriate to the other.

<sup>54</sup> Of course, just what conduct is recommended by the truth of a claim will (as stressed in Brandom 2011, p. 50) depend on what the individual desires, and this will produce, not only a more expansive holism than the sort associated with the Peircian version, but will also be more individualistic, since the desires in question will vary from individual to individual more than the predicted experiences would.

We can see how this works in James's discussion of the Eucharist. While Peirce explicitly states that the Pragmatic Maxim shows that debates about the Eucharist are without significance,<sup>55</sup> James seems to take the opposite line, namely:

Substance here would appear to have momentous pragmatic value. Since the accidents of the wafer don't change in the Lord's supper, and yet it has become the very body of Christ, it must be that the change is in the substance solely. The bread-substance must have been withdrawn, and the divine substance substituted miraculously without altering the immediate sensible properties. But tho these don't alter, a tremendous difference has been made, no less a one than this, that we who take the sacrament, now feed upon the very substance of divinity. The substance-notion breaks into life, then, with tremendous effect.

(James 1907, pp. 46–7)

James notably, and rather unhelpfully, doesn't say what the "tremendous effect" in this case is supposed to be. Since the accidents are the same, it is often assumed that the "practical effects" of the switch in substance cannot be objective, and this has led to a reading of Peirce and James in which Peirce takes talk of transubstantiation to be meaningless because no experiential consequences follow from its *truth*, while James takes such talk to be meaningful because of the mental comfort and satisfaction that comes from *believing* in it. However, on the reading suggested here the difference comes, not from the psychological effects of believing in transubstantiation, but rather from the acts and attitudes normatively required by the bread and wine becoming "the very substance of the divinity". Differing attitudes towards the Host's desecration, whether one should genuflect to the Host on the altar upon entering the church, how one should treat extra communion wafers can seem to be demanded by the *truth* of the various views of transubstantiation, and this accounts for their difference in meaning for James.

The practical reading of the maxim thus allows for pairs of claims to have distinct meanings, even if they entail the same future experiences,<sup>56</sup> but the added fineness of grain that comes from focusing on "the conduct we must prepare" is also a vital part of determining the meaning of our philosophical claims for James, because he believes that, just as much as with the sensations predicted, the more "practical" side of a philosophical position will ultimately determine whether it is acceptable or not. As he puts it early on in his "The Sentiment of Rationality", if two conceptions of the world are equally consistent and both account for the available evidence, "that one which awakens the active impulses, or satisfies other æsthetic demands better than the other, will be accounted the more rational conception, and will deservedly prevail".<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, James often ties his discussion of various philosophical questions that may seem at bottom "metaphysical" (free will vs. determinism, materialism vs. theism, monism vs. pluralism) to the practical conclusions that one should draw from such competing positions (e.g. giving up hope if materialism is true, being complacent if idealism is true). Such an argumentative gambit can often seem like engaging in a kind of wishful thinking

<sup>55</sup> Peirce 1878, pp. 131–2.

<sup>56</sup> However, James's independent commitment to radical empiricism (particularly its postulate that "the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience" (James 1909, p. 6)) may temper his ability to appeal to this aspect of the maxim.

<sup>57</sup> James 1882, p. 66. One should note that, in spite of his criticism of James's views on the "The Will to Believe", Peirce arguably moves in this direction when he claims that the "ultimate test" of a

(drawing metaphysical conclusions from what one wants to be true), but it may just as well be that James is arguing that in these cases (which he consistently claims to be empirically underdetermined), such practical considerations, whether we like it or not, often determine the views we adopt. Focusing merely on the experiences predicted, rather than the more normative expectations, however, obscures these deciding factors and makes the debates seem more intractable than they really are. Spelling out philosophical views in terms of the practical version of the Pragmatic Maxim puts these practical considerations, which are always (even if just subconsciously) motivating, into the foreground so that they can be targets of rational scrutiny as well.

This aspect of James's method, that of making the subjective engines driving our philosophical views explicit (and thus subject to rational evaluation) is far removed from simply endorsing wishful thinking. Rather, it involves recognizing that such "subjective" factors will inevitably affect what views we ultimately adopt, and that it is thus best to have them subject to criticism, since the practical upshot we *actually* draw from a philosophical view may not be the one that we *should* draw from it. (As when the absolute idealist thinks that his or her view underwrites a type of moral seriousness, while James argues that it actually legitimates a type of moral complacency.) If our practical demands help determine which views (among those that pass basic logical muster) we will ultimately accept, making the practical consequences of various philosophical views explicit can go a long way towards settling philosophical disputes, because we can, for instance, (1) see what ultimately makes a view like absolute idealism appealing, and (2) argue for a replacement for it that captures those appealing aspects as well (which James claims his form of meioristic pluralism does).

One problem<sup>58</sup> with this version of the maxim is that explaining the meaning of our claims in terms of such normative consequences means that the claims themselves can't be used to *explain why* we are committed to doing what we do. It might seem that we should, for instance, genuflect in front of the Host *because* it is literally the body of Christ, but if what distinguishes the meaning of that claim from the more symbolic interpretation of the Eucharist just *is* the set of normative consequences which includes genuflection, not throwing out unused communion wafers, etc., then the attempt to explain *why* we should genuflect in front of the Host in terms of that claim seems circular. (Of course, something like this worry is present for the "Peircian" reading as well, and one might think that the fact that explaining the meaning of "a large meteor landed 10,000 years ago where Toronto is now located" in terms of future experiences, would similarly preclude our explaining why we would find a crater formation under the soil around Toronto in terms of a meteor having landed there 10,000 years ago.)

One might be able to assuage this worry by claiming that the maxim isn't, strictly speaking, intended to provide meaning equivalences (which was, as a self-standing problem, the sort of issue that James was comparatively unconcerned with), but is just meant to capture the fact that to clearly understand a claim, you need to know what follows from its truth. Indeed, James's and Peirce's shared suggestion that "the whole of our conception of

hypothesis "must lie in its value in the self-controlled growth of a man's conduct in life" (Peirce 1908, p. 446).

<sup>58</sup> Which I'd like to thank an anonymous referee for this volume for stressing.



the object” is “our conception of these [practical] effects”<sup>59</sup> could be understood as compatible with this more modest reading. Even if the maxim didn’t produce full meaning-equivalencies, capturing how things would be different if one claim rather than another were true could still do much the same work in helping settle philosophical disputes.

Even so, as a philosophical method, the practical version of the maxim brings with it problems of its own. In particular, the normative matters that determine “the conduct we must prepare” can be controversial, often more so than the views that they are supposed to explain, and so using such predictions to elucidate the meaning of a controversial subject can seem quixotic at best. Indeed, by the time he published *The Meaning of Truth*, it was quite clear to James that most, if not all, of his interlocutors did not accept his proposed explications of the meanings of their views.<sup>60</sup> What James took to be the essential practical upshot of various philosophical views were taken to be at best peripheral by their defenders.

After all, the normative consequences that come with, say, the different cosmologies James considers are themselves far from obvious. Not only because the empirical consequences of such cosmologies are hard to predict, but also because how one should react even if one could be sure of those consequences is open to debate. For instance, when James claims that “Materialism means simply the denial that the moral order is eternal, and the cutting off of ultimate hopes”,<sup>61</sup> he is working with particular assumptions about what a materialist cosmology must look like (namely, that all of the stars must burn out and all life die out), and someone who didn’t share such assumptions wouldn’t view “materialism” as having such a meaning at all. The pessimism comes not, then, from materialism itself, but from certain (admittedly plausible, but ultimately optional) assumptions about what a scientific cosmology must predict for our future.

Furthermore, even if he could be assured that materialism did entail that all conscious life would permanently die out, James’s pessimistic and somewhat depressive attitude towards the universe burning out in the far, far distant future isn’t shared by all,<sup>62</sup> and deciding the question of whether there is any point to our actions if no one will be there to remember them in a million years isn’t obviously an easier question to settle than the question of whether God created our world. While there is much to be said for making the practical consequences of our views as explicit as possible, just what those practical consequences are is often itself subject to philosophical dispute.

In conclusion, then, each version of the Pragmatic Maxim brings with it a range of problems, so it should not be surprising that while there are many philosophers today who identify themselves as “pragmatists”, it is not because they endorse any version of the method that Peirce and James initially identified with the view.

<sup>59</sup> Peirce 1878, p. 132, James 1898, p. 259, James 1904, p. 124, 1907, p. 29.

<sup>60</sup> James 1909, p. 5.

<sup>61</sup> James, 1907, p. 55.

<sup>62</sup> It is more characteristic of what he calls the “sick soul” rather than the “healthy minded” (see James 1902a, ch. 4–7), and his assertion that the sick soul simply has a deeper and wider appreciation of reality (James 1902a, 136–8) is largely undefended. He mentions that only the sick soul is aware of the evils that are really there, but gives no reason to think that the healthy minded couldn’t be aware of such evils as well (other than that they are not as bothered by them as the sick souls are).



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