

## CHAPTER 4

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# WILLIAM JAMES

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## INTRODUCTION

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William James was, by the time of his death in 1910, America's most celebrated psychologist and philosopher. Nevertheless, he is often unfairly portrayed as simply arguing that it is rational for us to believe anything that makes us feel good, since a belief is 'true' whenever believing it promotes our interests. However, James is more justly interpreted as attempting to draw out the consequences of a thoroughgoing naturalism about cognition for our understanding of normative notions like truth, goodness, and rationality. James was almost unique in his time in directly facing the problem of finding a place for value in a world that seemed increasingly to demand a naturalistic understanding, and his doing so without giving up on either the naturalism or the value has made his writings of perennial interest.<sup>1</sup>

I'd like to thank Cheryl Misak, Alex Klein, and Richard Gale for comments on earlier drafts of this piece.

<sup>1</sup> James was an extraordinarily rich thinker, and considerations of space have prevented me both from touching on many topics about which James wrote extensively and from dealing more substantively with alternative interpretations of those topics upon which I do touch. Nevertheless, I hope that what follows will make it clear why James's thought is as relevant today as it was a century ago.

## LIFE AND BACKGROUND

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James was born in New York City in 1842. His father, Henry James Sr, was an independently wealthy familiar of Emerson and Thoreau who pursued a nomadic and eccentric life as a free-floating intellectual, self-publishing theologian, and disciple of Swedenborg. William was the elder James's first child, and over the next nineteen years, the growing James family (Henry Sr., his wife Alice, and their children William, Henry Jr (the novelist), Wilky, Bob, and Alice) moved, on an almost yearly basis, between New York, London, Paris, Geneva, and Newport. After an aborted attempt to become a painter, William James entered Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School in 1861, where he studied chemistry with the university's future president, Charles Eliot, and, before switching to Harvard's medical school in 1864, began lasting and important friendships with Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr and Charles Sanders Peirce.

When James started at Harvard, the most pressing intellectual questions of the day revolved around Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, which had been published just five years earlier. The theory divided Harvard's scientific faculty, and while James's own sympathies were clearly on the Darwinian side, he took time off from his medical studies (for which he had a pronounced lack of enthusiasm) to join his Professor Louis Agassiz in his biological expedition up the Amazon, an expedition which was originally intended to find evidence of a 'separate creation' that would tell against Darwin's theory. Darwin's work had a tremendous influence on James in two respects. First of all, it presented a framework for more resolutely naturalistic explanations of human cognition and behavior, explanations that would be radically at odds with the dualist and idealist theories of the mind that were dominant at the time. Secondly, however, this expansion of the range of naturalistic explanation also seemed to support a kind of deterministic materialism that James was never able to reconcile himself with. Responding to both pressures, James gave one of the most thoroughly naturalistic stories of our cognitive life yet seen, while at the same time showing how it need not be the *whole* story, and insisted on keeping a place for faith and free will within the conceptual space framed by his more naturalistic writings in psychology.<sup>2</sup>

James finished his medical degree in 1869, but he never practiced medicine, and in 1870 he suffered a nervous collapse that made him incapable of any work

<sup>2</sup> See esp., his "The Dilemma of Determinism" in *WB&OEPP* and the chapters on "Will" and "The Consciousness of Self" in *PP*.

at all.<sup>3</sup> His health had already been ‘delicate’ for a number of years, and while he was well enough to serve as a lecturer in anatomy at Harvard by 1874, he remained subject to bouts of depression and ill health throughout his life. This affinity with what he later (in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*) referred to as the “sick soul” was an important strain in his thought that contrasted the outwardly “healthy minded” tone of his work. With President Eliot’s support, James expanded his teaching duties from physiology to psychology (a field previously covered exclusively by a member of the philosophy faculty, who maintained that the study of the brain could teach us nothing of use about the mind), and James then solidified his position in this area by founding what has generally been taken to be America’s first psychology laboratory, in 1875.<sup>4</sup>

In 1878 James published his first substantial philosophical work, “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence” (in EP), but the year was also noteworthy for two other reasons. First of all, James married Alice Howe Gibbons, who did much to stabilize his life, and over the next twelve years, they had five children, Henry (1879), William (1882), Herman (1884),<sup>5</sup> Peggy (1887), and Aleck (1890). Secondly, James signed a contract with Henry Holt to produce a textbook on psychology, and while, like his family, the book took him twelve years to complete, the resulting two-volume *Principles of Psychology* (1890) was a tremendous success and established James as the pre-eminent American psychologist of his generation. Psychology and philosophy were less clearly distinguished in those days,<sup>6</sup> and in 1880 James satisfied a long-standing ambition of his by being appointed Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Harvard. He published on philosophical topics throughout his career, but he made his first really big splash outside psychology with the publication of “The Will to Believe” in 1897 and the delivery of “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results” in 1898. His philosophical views became a subject of growing intellectual controversy from this time on.

<sup>3</sup> His father had had a similar crisis in 1844, and James describes his own experience (while attributing it to a “French correspondent”) in *VRE*, 134.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of this, see Harper 1949, 1950.

<sup>5</sup> Whose death in 1885 may have helped fuel James’s long-standing interest in parapsychology.

<sup>6</sup> *Mind*, for instance, served equally as a journal in philosophy and psychology, and was the main home of most of James’s early publications. *The Journal of Philosophy*, founded in 1904 as *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* came to play the same dual role in the United States. For a useful discussion of the role played by *Mind* in this period (especially with respect to James’s work), see Klein 2007.

After an extended stay in Europe, partially due to lingering ill health, James delivered the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh in 1901 and 1902, and their subsequent publication in 1902 as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* met with almost universal praise. The same could not be said for the philosophical work that followed, which generated intense discussion on both sides of the Atlantic, but won more critics than converts. In 1907, he both resigned from Harvard and delivered a series of public lectures which appeared later that year as *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. Much of the remaining three years of his life were spent responding to the controversy prompted by this book, and a collection of these responses appeared in 1909 as *The Meaning of Truth*. That same year he published his 1908 Hibbert Lectures from Oxford as *A Pluralistic Universe*, and this was to be his last major publication in his lifetime. James died in 1910 after having abandoned an attempt to write a more systematic and less ‘popular’ exposition of his philosophical views, the completed material from which appeared as *Some Problems of Philosophy* in 1911.

## CONCEPTS AND CONCEPTUALIZATION

The seeds of James’s later philosophical views were sown with his earlier psychological work, particularly that on concepts and conceptualization.<sup>7</sup> Starting from the assumption that human conceptualization is a *natural* phenomenon, and that such natural phenomena should be explained in (roughly) Darwinian terms, James concluded that concepts evolved to serve our *practical* rather than *theoretical* interests. Noting that it was far too little recognized “how entirely the intellect is built up of practical interests” (SR 72), James always insisted that conceptions were “teleological instruments” (SR 62) by which we take “a partial aspect of a thing which *for our purposes* we regard as its essential aspect, as the representative of the entire thing”.<sup>8</sup> Since the interest of theoretical rationality “is but one of a thousand human purposes” (SR 62), James concluded that our conceptual system evolved to help us *cope with* our environment, not to provide a theoretical account of it. Our conceptual system developed because it was *adaptive*, and

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, when he tried to present his philosophical views systematically in *Some Problems of Philosophy*, conceptualization returned as the dominant topic.

<sup>8</sup> “The Sentiment of Rationality” (original version), in *EP*, 34.

while this may be explained by its corresponding to the structure that the world *actually* has, it need not be so.

With this view of concepts comes a particular take on the properties of the world being conceptualized. Rather than thinking that the world had an independent structure that made some properties ‘more real’ than others,<sup>9</sup> James took the essence of a thing to be whichever of its properties “is so *important for my interests* that in comparison with it I may neglect the rest” (PP 961),<sup>10</sup> so that a property “which figures as the essence of a thing on one occasion” may become “a very inessential feature on another” (PP 959). The resulting conceptual pluralism in the *Principles of Psychology* is expressed in claims like the following:

The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. In a sense the statue stood there from eternity. But there were a thousand different ones beside it, and the sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest. . . . Other sculptors, other statues from the same stone! Other minds, other worlds from the same monotonous and inexpressive chaos! (PP 277)

James develops these themes throughout his career, and they are cashed out most explicitly in *Pragmatism*’s fifth and seventh chapters on common sense and humanism.

One particular problem that James tried to leave out of his *Principles of Psychology* was that of just how an idea (a piece of “flat content” with “no self-transcendency about it” (ME&N 17)) could come to be *about* anything external to it. *That* it could was taken as a given, but *how* it could was left unexplained,<sup>11</sup> since, as he put it in 1885, “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” (ECR 386). His recognition that ‘aboutness’ couldn’t be treated as a *sui generis* property of our mental states is something that distinguishes James, to his credit, from many of his critics. If the aboutness of our thoughts is taken for granted, their truth can seem relatively unproblematic,<sup>12</sup> and much of what James goes on to say about

<sup>9</sup> An idea that has recently been rehabilitated in Lewis 1983.

<sup>10</sup> Italics, unless noted otherwise, are James’s.

<sup>11</sup> For attempts to avoid this in *PP*, see pp. 212 and 216. James’s reluctance to discuss the issue may have been tied to the fact that what he then considered to be the most compelling account of this relation (that presented in Royce 1885) committed one to the sort of absolute idealism that he always found both morally and metaphysically distasteful.

<sup>12</sup> An exemplary combination of these qualities can be found in Pratt 1909, who takes James to task for missing out on the fact that truth simply means “that the object of which one is thinking is as

the truth of our thoughts makes sense only in the context of recognizing that their even having *truth conditions* requires a naturalistic explanation.

James's first attempt to give an explicitly *naturalistic* account of the relation of thought to the world was in 1885's "The Function of Cognition",<sup>13</sup> where he presents a methodological principle that shows up in much of his work:

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 common sense to distinguish those cases from the rest?" In short, our inquiry is a chapter in descriptive psychology—hardly anything more. (*MT* 14)

James took the most basic cases of our thoughts being about the world to be found in perception, where (as he puts it) idea and object "fuse and make an indissoluble marriage" (*ERE* 265), so that to perceive an object "is for mental content and object to be identical" (*MT* 36).<sup>14</sup>

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 actual percepts of the objects 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 we had the terminal object 'in mind' from the outset, even altho *at* the outset nothing was there in us but a flat piece of substantive experience like any other, with no self-transcendency about it" (*ERE* 29). Indeed, James argues that "*Such simply and fully verified leadings are certainly the originals and prototypes of the truth-process*", and other cases

one thinks it" (Pratt 2001 [1909], 67), while the fact that one's thoughts do mean things external to them "is merely one of those ultimately simple things which, just because they are ultimate and simple elements of experience, can never be explained further, nor analyzed further, but must be merely recognized and accepted" (*ibid.* 140). How these issues divide James and his opponents is also clear in James's correspondence with John E. Russell, found in *ERE* 145–53. For a more extended discussion of this issue, see Jackman 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Many of the themes of this paper were developed in a series of essays he published between 1904 and 1906, and which appeared in 1912 in the posthumously published collection *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. "The Function of Cognition" had originally been intended by James for this collection as well, but since it had already been reprinted in *The Meaning of Truth*, it was not included in the 1912 collection. The goals of this earlier paper are clearly captured by the title of Strong's 1904 essay on it, "A Naturalistic Theory of the Reference of Thought to Reality".

<sup>14</sup> See also *MT* 35, 61–2. This view was the cornerstone of what later came to be known as his 'doctrine of pure experience', and even if one is not partial to the metaphysical details of James's account of perceptual reference itself, the basic idea that our perceptual contact with the world can serve as a paradigm for how our ideas come to be about it is extremely intuitive. (See Evans 1982, e.g., for a contemporary manifestation of this thought.)

of aboutness “are all conceivable as being verifications arrested, multiplied or substituted one for another” (PR 99).

The importance of such “verifications arrested” can be seen in that while James’s initial account allows my idea of Memorial Hall to have always referred to the hall once it *actually* leads me to it, common sense suggests that my idea refers to the hall *before* this happens, or even if I *never* track it down at all. Indeed, a large and significant portion of my thoughts seem to lie outside James’s initial extension of aboutness to non-perceptual cases. James is aware of this, and he claims that in such cases we ‘virtually’ refer to the objects of our thoughts.

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. (ERE 34)

James goes on to claim that while “the immensely greater part of all our knowing never gets beyond this virtual stage” (ERE 34), as long as this ‘virtual knowing’ can be cashed out whenever it needs to be, there should be no *practical* difference between a theory which says that we are *only virtually* referring in such cases and one that claims that we are *actually* referring in them.<sup>15</sup> The verification processes are still, as James puts it, what truth and intentionality mean “essentially”, but this is only to say that we couldn’t understand verifiability independently of actual verification.

The importance of “verifications substituted” shows up in two ways. First, it helps account for the *social* character of language and thought. Even if the analysis of the perceptual core of intentionality is individualistic, the extended account of non-perceptual reference makes room for social contributions by stressing that having a thought about an object involves being led to it “through a context which the world provides” (MT 35; see also MT 21). Consider my ability to identify, say, my own, as opposed to someone else’s,

<sup>15</sup> “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” (PR 99).

copy of *Walden*. This ability is based largely on the fact that it is the only copy of *Walden* sitting on my bookshelf, rather than my knowledge of perceptual features that distinguish it from all other copies of the book, and our being embedded in particular contexts is thus essential to our ability to think about various objects. Furthermore, one's context is a *social* one, and while I couldn't find Memorial Hall on *my own*, given my social context, I would have no trouble locating it if I were placed in Cambridge. I would only need to ask people around me until I found someone who was able to lead me to it. I refer to what I do by many of my (especially technical) terms because the experts I rely on would, if asked, lead me to particular sets of objects. How a term is used in one's social surroundings can thus affect what one's own ideas are about. No one needs to be able to track down the reference for all of their terms, but "beliefs verified concretely by *somebody* are posts of the whole superstructure" (PR 100).<sup>16</sup>

The second role for "verifications substituted" regards those things which we could not, perhaps even in principle, have perceptual contact with. (James gives as examples here ether waves, ions, and the contents of other people's minds (ERE 34).) Such cases obviously present at least *prima facie* problems for an account of reference that tries to explain it in terms of perceptual contact with the objects referred to. However, if our ideas can lead us to the *environment* of these objects, James argues that such experiences can 'substitute' for actual perceptual contact. Non-actualized cases of virtual knowledge typically "lead to no frustration or contradiction" and to "the *surroundings* of the objects" (PR 99–100), and both of these characteristics could be shared by our thought about unobservables. Standard cases of virtual knowledge count as 'knowing' in virtue of having the potential to become like the prototypical cases, and reference to unobservables *counts as* 'knowing' in virtue of sharing the evidential characteristics of the virtual cases.<sup>17</sup> 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" (ERE 34), reference to unobservables can be admitted as well.

There are two things to note about this account of the relation of thought to the world. First of all, if "the percept's existence as the terminus of the

<sup>16</sup> See also PR 103, MT 91. James's account is thus able to accommodate the type of 'social externalism' associated with Burge 1979, and the "division of linguistic labor" of Putnam 1975.

<sup>17</sup> As James puts it elsewhere: "The untrammelled flowing of the leading-process, its general freedom from clash and contradiction, passes for its indirect verification" (PR 103). (Though one should note that for many scientific unobservables James is willing to take an instrumentalist line.)

chain of intermediaries *creates* the function”, then *whatever* terminates the chain becomes “what the concept ‘had in mind’ ” (ERE 31). This means that what the function is can change over time, and that what our terms *ultimately* refer to is settled only when inquiry reaches its end. “Gold”, on such an account, at one point referred to *gold or platinum* since that is what the idea led us to interact with at the time, and only for the last few hundred years has it referred *exclusively* to *gold*.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, if there is no settled and stable leading relation, then there will be no fact of the matter about what our terms ‘ultimately’ refer to. Secondly, since what a term leads us to need not be the objects that fit the descriptions originally associated with it, what our terms and concepts refer to need not correspond exactly to the content of the descriptions we associate with them. Consequently, while James’s conception of concepts themselves gives them a classically definitional character (see, e.g., SPP 47), his view is that their *extension* and truth conditions need not reflect those definitions. This leaves little motivation for any sort of purely a priori analysis of our concepts (even concepts like goodness, rationality, or truth), since that would reveal only their *internal* structure, not the nature of what those concepts were *about*.<sup>19</sup>

## RATIONALITY AND THE WILL TO BELIEVE

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Like his account of aboutness, James’s account of rationality and the justification of belief seems to start out as “a chapter in descriptive psychology” (MT 14). Beginning with “The Sentiment of Rationality” in 1879,<sup>20</sup> James took an empirical approach to the question of the nature of rationality and, rather than engaging in any a priori analysis, asked what, as a matter of fact, were the signs that determine what we consider “rational” (SR 57). James stressed that we tend to find rational those views that not only pass the canonical tests of rationality (consistency, comprehensiveness, simplicity, etc.), but

<sup>18</sup> Though we can now say that the word *always* referred to gold, since (through its “powers of retroactive legislation” (PR 107)) the final identification determines what the function was all along. This aspect of James’s view is developed in more detail in Jackman 1998.

<sup>19</sup> In this respect he is like those philosophers (e.g., Devitt (1994) and Kornblith (1994)) who claim to “naturalize” their analysis of philosophical concepts like meaning and knowledge.

<sup>20</sup> This original was combined with material from 1880 when it was reprinted in 1896 under the same title in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Unless stated otherwise, page references will be to this updated version.

also satisfy human cravings that are traditionally viewed as being irrelevant to the question. In particular, he claimed that any view that “disappoints our dearest desires and most cherished powers” (as he thought pessimism and materialistic determinism did (SR 70–1)) would never, ultimately, be considered rational by us (SR 70).<sup>21</sup>

Of course, one could agree with James that our subjective interests contribute to what views fall within the extension of “rational”, and still insist that even if such considerations *do* contribute to what we believe, they *shouldn't*. If “rationality” really picks out this sort of ‘natural’ rationality, it is still an open question whether we should always believe what is “rational” to believe.<sup>22</sup> That we should believe what is rational is a central belief associated with the term, but since James ties the meaning of “rational” to how we actually apply the term, rather than to such general beliefs, we cannot simply assume that the general belief that we ought to believe what is rational to believe is still true. That we shouldn't let our subjective interests contribute to what we believe was the core of the “evidentialist” position, which held, in Clifford's famous terms, that “it is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything on insufficient evidence”.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the evidentialist, James clearly endorsed the belief-forming practices described in “The Sentiment of Rationality”, and his most worked out and important defense of this expansive conception of rationality was found in his infamous essay “The Will to Believe”.<sup>24</sup> That essay is commonly portrayed as arguing that we should believe in God because whether or not there is a God, we would be happier believing that there is one; but in addition to misrepresenting the character of James's argument, this misses the fact that while religious belief is the hook by which the audience is drawn into the argument, the essay is about the justification of belief in general. James presents his paper as a “justification of faith” (WB 13), but religious belief was only a particularly vivid and pertinent application of the view. Faith, for James, is “belief in something concerning which doubt is theoretically possible” (SR 76), and since James (like most, if not all, pragmatists)

<sup>21</sup> See also SR 74, 75. For similar remarks on how such factors contribute to what we consider ‘real’, see *PP* 939–40, 945.

<sup>22</sup> Just as some responded to Strawson's argument that induction was rational because using induction was just part of what we *mean* by being “rational” (Strawson 1952) by saying that this just left us facing the same old problem of induction, but now in the form of the question of whether it was a good thing for us to be “rational”.

<sup>23</sup> Clifford 1999 [1877]: 77, quoted in WB 18.

<sup>24</sup> Though many of the same points show up in the expanded version of “The Sentiment of Rationality” that was anthologized in *WB&OEPP*. For a more extended analysis of the argument of WB, see Jackman 1999.

was a fallibilist, he considered doubt to be theoretically possible with respect to *any* belief, so that we can not “live or think at all without some degree of faith” (SR 79).<sup>25</sup>

The central claim of “The Will to Believe” is that

*Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, “Do not decide, but leave the question open,” is itself a passionate decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing truth.* (WB 20)

The above passage makes both the *descriptive* claim that, in certain specified circumstances, the contribution of our passionate nature can’t be avoided and the *normative* claim that this contribution is a good thing, and in both cases our “passionate nature” picks out all those ‘subjective’ factors that James stressed in “The Sentiment of Rationality”, including “all those influences, born of the intellectual climate, that makes hypotheses possible or impossible for us, alive or dead” (WB 18). These include not only our natural disinclination to believe views that seem to frustrate our “active tendencies” (SR 70), but also those more contingently ‘received ideas’ which, while by no means self-evident, are treated as such by everyone in a given cultural context.<sup>26</sup>

The descriptive claim that the contribution of our passionate nature is unavoidable is tied to James’s understanding of belief in terms of dispositions to action, and to his restricting the claim to “genuine” options between propositions. For James a ‘genuine’ option must be (1) “live”, that is, both choices must actually “make some appeal, however small, to your belief” (WB 14);<sup>27</sup> (2) “forced”, that is, the choice presented must be unavoidable, so that it will be more like the choice between staying at a party or leaving it than the choice between going to one party rather than another, which can be avoided by not going to either (WB 14–15); and (3) “momentous” in that “the opportunity is unique, the stake is significant, and the decision is irreversible” (WB 15). If a choice is forced, we can’t help but act on it,

<sup>25</sup> See also, “the only escape from faith is mental nullity” (SR 78).

<sup>26</sup> James’s examples being, e.g., our belief “in molecules and the conservation of energy, in democracy and necessary progress, in Protestant Christianity and the duty of fighting for ‘the doctrine of the immortal Monroe’” (WB 18). For a further discussion of the influence of custom on what is considered rational, see SR 67.

<sup>27</sup> The option to believe that the F.B.I. was connected to the Kennedy assassination is live for me, even if I don’t actually believe it, while the idea that Martians were so connected is not even live.

and with a momentous option, the forced choice is “irrevocable”. However, for James, “belief is measured by action”, with the test for belief being “willingness to act”, and a “willingness to act irrevocably” constituting full-fledged belief (WB 32, SR 76, WB 14; see also ILWL 50). Consequently, when an option is genuine, *some* belief regarding it must be decided, and since it cannot be, by hypothesis, decided on intellectual grounds, something else must settle the matter. That something is, according to James, our passional nature.

This descriptive claim is, of course, tied to James’s conception of belief’s constitutive connection to action, but that view of belief is not as essential to the equally important normative claim that the contribution of our passional nature is justified. The evidentialist objects to our ever forming beliefs on the basis of less than conclusive evidence;<sup>28</sup> but James points out that such a position takes epistemic justification to be exclusively governed by the norm that one should try to reason in a fashion that would minimize the number of false beliefs that one forms. While this norm can seem like a reasonable one, there is an equally truth-sensitive epistemic norm that gives the opposite advice about what to do in conditions of uncertainty: that is, we should try to form beliefs in a fashion that would leave us with as many *true* beliefs as possible. As James puts it, “Believe truth! Shun error!—these, we see, are two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may end by coloring differently our whole intellectual life” (WB 24). Both norms are equally truth-sensitive, and the epistemicist gives no reason to think that the conservative norm of minimizing error should always trump the more liberal norms of maximizing truth. Indeed, James argues that the epistemicists’ commitment to the conservative norm is itself just an expression of their own passional nature, in particular, their “private horror of becoming a dupe” (WB 25).

This opens up room for a plurality of epistemic positions, ranging from the extremely conservative one of not believing anything that isn’t completely certain to the opposite (and dubiously coherent) extreme of believing everything.<sup>29</sup> However, if the *function* of belief really is to guide action (as it will naturally seem to be within a Darwinian framework), then a conception of

<sup>28</sup> Though one should note that James somewhat unfairly implies that Clifford believes that for evidence to be “sufficient”, it must be *conclusive*.

<sup>29</sup> Since believing everything would commit one to acting in incompatible ways even on conceptions of the relation of belief and action that are looser than James’s, believing *everything* isn’t a coherent possibility.

rationality which rules out any actual belief formation will seem unsuitable as an account of the rationality of embodied *agents* whose beliefs are required to let them *function within*, rather than just theorize *about*, the world. While there is nothing in James's view that requires that any particular belief formed be one that benefits us, one way in which practical benefits bear on the question of *epistemic* justification relates to just what balance we should have between the conflicting imperatives of maximizing true beliefs and minimizing false ones. For James, the balance between the imperatives that is best will be the one that best serves our interests, and since our interests can change from context to context and person to person,<sup>30</sup> our epistemic norms can vary from context to context as well. For instance, James is quite clear that when forming most of our *scientific* beliefs, our interests dictate that we should try to keep the contribution of our passional nature to a minimum (WB 25–6).<sup>31</sup> Further, determining the right balance for our epistemic norms will be an *empirical*, rather than an *a priori*, project.<sup>32</sup>

James has two further arguments against evidentialism that are connected to neither his fallibilism nor his conception of the relation between belief and action. First of all, whenever the evidence that would confirm the truth of a particular proposition is available only to those who *already* believe the proposition, evidentialism would frustrate even the inquirer whose interests were *purely* theoretical. James notes that scientists often believe particular theories in advance of finding their confirming evidence, and that in the absence of such 'premature' convictions they may be unable to do the work necessary to find the evidence. *Faith* in both "nature's uniformity" (SR 76) and one's particular theory (WB 26) may occasionally be necessary to sustain certain demanding forms of inquiry (see also WB 19, 27, 28; ILWL 51). The evidentialist may think that this is just a psychological failing on the scientist's part, but if it is true that *humans* have this failing, then it should be rational for them to inquire in a fashion that accommodates it, since any rule "which

<sup>30</sup> James notes that the more purely 'epistemic' demands for simplicity and comprehensiveness often conflict with one another, and that "although all men will insist on being spoken to in the universe in some way, few will insist on being spoken to in the same way" (SR 75). This theme is expanded considerably in the first chapter of *Pragmatism*.

<sup>31</sup> Though, as we shall see, while James advocates a fairly conservative stance when it comes to the *evaluation* of scientific theories, he notes that a more liberal belief-forming procedure is often required that for their *discovery* (WB 26).

<sup>32</sup> James could be seen as a precursor of current naturalized epistemologists (such as Stich (1990), Dennett (1987), and Cherniak (1986)) who try to understand our canons of justification in evolutionary terms.

would absolutely prevent [an inquirer] from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule” (WB 31–2). Furthermore, James points out that in the religious case, the world may simply be set up so that the evidence is not available prior to belief. God may choose to stay hidden from the faithless inquirer, who might thus “cut himself forever from his only opportunity of making the gods’ acquaintance” (WB 31).

A second sort of case that causes problems for the evidentialist arises when the facts that we are trying to discover are themselves sensitive to our beliefs, so that purely ‘detached’ inquiry is impossible. For instance, if I interact with someone while withholding judgment about whether or not they like me, this may result in a lack of warmth on my part that will bring it about that I won’t be liked (WB 28). James argues that it is at least *possible* that our belief in the Divine is such a case (ILWL 55), but his most famous illustration is that of an “Alpine climber” who finds himself stuck in a storm and facing a chasm that must be leapt if he is to make it home safely. The climber is (without any *evidence*) confident in his ability to make such a jump, and successfully does so. However, had he been a good evidentialist, and not *believed* that he could jump the chasm in question, his diffidence would have undermined his performance enough for the leap to be fatal (SR 80).

The Alpine climber is an important case for James, but it has led to a number of misunderstandings of his view. First of all, the fact that our beliefs can sometimes contribute to their own truth is occasionally treated as if it was the central point of James’s paper, and that such a contribution is a *necessary* condition for the input of our passional nature to be legitimate.<sup>33</sup> However, James’s view is not that the contribution of our passional nature is justified only in such cases, but rather that such cases serve as *counterexamples* to the evidentialist suggestion that the passional contribution is *never* justified. Cases like the Alpine climber (and the hidden God) are meant to show that, as a *general* rule, evidentialism is unworkable, and thus to open up a space for the contribution of our passional nature in other cases once global conservatism has been ruled out.

The other way in which the Alpine climber is misleading is that it can suggest that James is arguing that particular beliefs are epistemically justified by their beneficial effects, so that the Alpine climber is justified by the fact that he was better off making the jump than he would have been either making

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., Gale 1980, 1999; Suckiel 1982: 90.

an unsuccessful jump or refusing to attempt a jump or freezing to death. James does note that in such make-true cases it is “the part of wisdom . . . to believe what in the line of your needs” (ILWL 53–4), but one is *epistemically* entitled in such cases to choose *either* option. The diffident Alpine climber would be epistemically justified in believing that he *couldn't* make the jump, even if he had no compelling evidence for this as well. The benefits of a belief may give one reason to prefer one of two epistemically justified options, but they do not, in themselves, provide the epistemic justification. Furthermore, even in these cases, the expected benefits are not supposed to enter explicitly into the agent's *reasoning* about what to believe. The examples James gives, most obviously the Alpine climber, don't involve agents who explicitly engage in any such prudential reasoning when forming their beliefs,<sup>34</sup> which is understandable, since such reasoning would typically *undermine* the relevant ‘make-true’ effects.

Rather than defending anything like wishful thinking or simply confusing epistemic (truth-directed) and prudential (benefit-directed) justification, James thus defends our natural reasoning processes against the one-sided evidentialist distortion of them that he took to be characteristic of most of the philosophical tradition.

## ETHICS AND OBJECTIVITY

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Like many naturalists, James found little room for *sui generis* ethical facts in his ontology,<sup>35</sup> and since neither moral relations nor the moral law could “swing *in vacuo*”, he took the “only habitat” for goodness, badness, and obligation to be “the mind which feels them” (MPML 145; see also MPML 148). As James puts it, “without a claim actually made by some concrete person there can be no obligation”, and “there is some obligation wherever there is a claim” (MPML 148), so that “the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand” (MPML 152–3).<sup>36</sup> James continues here a long tradition

<sup>34</sup> Though they are occasionally redescribed in the secondary literature so that the climber explicitly engages in such prudential reasoning. See, e.g., Pojman 1993: 543 and Jordan 1996: 412.

<sup>35</sup> James refers to such a conception as the “superstitious view” of ethical facts (MPML 148).

<sup>36</sup> See also: “every *de facto* claim creates in so far forth an obligation” (MPML 148); “Any desire is imperative to the extent of its amount; it *makes* itself valid by the fact that it exists at all” (MPML 149); and “everything which is demanded is by that fact good” (MPML 155).

of arguing that any facts about values have to be understood in terms of facts about our practice of *valuing*,<sup>37</sup> and this might seem to make goodness, like the valuations that it depends upon, a purely 'subjective' phenomenon. Nevertheless, James still wants our values to be 'objective', since while values are constructed out of our valuations, we intend them to be more than simply expressions of our preferences. Value judgments aspire to be truth-apt, and because of this, any set of valuations can be criticized for being inconsistent, since inconsistent values can no more both be realized than inconsistent beliefs can both be true.

A completely solitary individual could produce objective values simply by reaching an equilibrium among his own demands, and James describes such a moral universe as follows:

Moral relations now have their *status*, in that being's consciousness. So far as he feels anything to be good, he *makes* it good. It *is* good, for him; and being good for him, is absolutely good, for he is the sole creator of values in that universe, and outside of his opinion things have no moral character at all. . . . In such a moral solitude it is clear that there can be no outward obligation, and that the only trouble the god-like thinker is liable to have will be over the consistency of his own several ideals with one another. . . . Into whatever equilibrium he may settle, though, and however he may straighten out his system, it will be a right system; for beyond the facts of his own subjectivity, there is nothing moral in the world. (MPML 145–6)

However, such a 'moral solitude' changes radically when another agent appears on the scene. One could have a type of 'twin solitude' if the two agents didn't take any interest in each other (and didn't recognize each other as moral agents at all); but, barring that, recognition and interaction involves trying to bring the combined set of demands into an equilibrium (MPML 146–7). Such an equilibrium need not require that everyone in the group have the *same* desires (any more than the equilibrium of the solitary thinker requires that none of his *prima facie* desires conflict). Rather, just as the equilibrium of the solitary thinker comes from his recognizing and organizing his desires so that his final set is consistent, the social equilibrium requires only that each individual member of a group endorse the same general demands even when these general demands may conflict with their particular desires.

What set of demands could lead to such an equilibrium is an *empirical* rather than an *a priori* question (MPML 141, 157), but it seems clear that it will be by no means an easy state to achieve, since having a set of enforced social demands

<sup>37</sup> For a recent discussion of this tradition in empiricism from Hobbes on, see Putnam 2002.

that simply prevent members of society from *acting* on their conflicting desires is not enough. Because of this, a social equilibrium may *never* be reached, and James's view incorporates a type of meta-ethical fallibilism in which, while we believe that values are objective, we recognize that they could turn out not to be.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, many might, on discovering that objective values require the sort of harmony that James describes, decide that the realization of their values is more important to them than their objectivity, and that no equilibrium is worth reaching if it involves compromise with a set of values different from their own.

Such a stance is not, according to James, an option for the moral philosopher, since for the *moral philosopher* the demand for objectivity is the primary (if not the *only*) value in play (MPML 142). James argues that the philosopher has as his primary ideal "that over all these individual opinions there is a *system of truth* which he can discover if he only takes sufficient pains" (MPML 151; see also MPML 141–2, 146–7). If the moral philosopher's demand is frustrated, and there turns out to be "no one 'objective' truth, but only a multitude of 'subjective' opinions" (MPML 146–7), we have two choices. On the one hand, we can tie the meaning of 'good' to those general beliefs that suggest that it has to be objective, in which case we are committed to a type of 'error theory' in which all our ethical claims are, strictly speaking, false. On the other hand, we can tie the meaning more closely to our actual applications of the term 'good', and recognize that, if all this gets one is a 'subjective' meaning for the term, then that is what we will have to settle for. James doesn't discuss this possibility much in his paper, since, in the role of moral philosopher, he is committed to the sort of objectivity that would obviate such a choice; but questions of this kind will come up again in his discussion of truth, and James is willing to face them more directly there.

Given that others may not prioritize the value of ethical objectivity as James does, is the moral philosopher entitled to believe in objective ethical values? For James, the answer remains "Yes". James thinks that it is at least *possible* that the required conditions could be achieved, for two reasons. First, there is the progress he takes us to have made towards that goal so far.<sup>39</sup> Second, there

<sup>38</sup> One should note that the "could" here picks out not only *epistemic* possibility, but *metaphysical* possibility as well. Given that their objectivity depends upon how we go on to coordinate our values, there may be no settled fact of the matter as to whether values are objective.

<sup>39</sup> James believes that, as a matter of fact, we are at least moving towards such a harmonious equilibrium, so that "as our present laws and customs have fought and conquered other past ones, so they will in their turn be overthrown by any newly discovered order which will hush up the

is the possibility that some “divine thinker with all enveloping demands” may step in to help us towards that goal (MPML 161). This certainly doesn’t give us any *guarantee* that there will ever be an equilibrium among all our values; but the moral philosopher is still entitled to believe that there could be one, and thus in the objectivity of ethical claims, because the question is both evidentially undetermined and arguably “genuine”. Further, since it seems certain that we would never reach the kind of consensus required if we *didn’t* believe in the possibility of such consensus, it is a case where belief in the fact could help make the fact.<sup>40</sup> The objectivity of value is thus a good candidate to be a “Will to Believe” case, and so the moral philosopher is entitled to believe in such objectivity in spite of his fallibilism.

## PRAGMATISM AND TRUTH

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James claims that “truth is one species of the good” (PR 42), and James’s naturalistic approach to truth is similar to, if more controversial than, his approach to the good. Instead of analyzing the concept in purely a priori terms, James asks: “Grant an idea or belief to be true, . . . what concrete difference will its being true make in any one’s actual life?” (PR 97). His answer is that the true is whatever “proves itself to be good in the way of belief”, though it must be good for “definite, assignable reasons” (PR 42). In particular, true ideas are “those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify” (PR 97). Nevertheless, the account of truth in terms of the “expedient in the way of our thinking” (PR 106) makes it clear that the ‘passional’ elements that James took to contribute to rationality are meant to contribute to truth as well.

It seemed to many that James was here simply confusing truth and verification, since, so understood, the truth of a statement could change over time and vary from person to person. James, however, argues that this is precisely what we should say about *subjective* (sometimes “temporary” or “half”) truth, since for any individual, to be true “means, *for that individual*, to work satisfactorily for him”; and since such workings and satisfactions

complaints that they still give rise to, without producing others louder still” (MPML 156). See also MPML 155–6, 157.

<sup>40</sup> Indeed, James suggests just this in SR 86–7.

“vary from case to case”, they “admit of no universal description” (*MT* 132). Nevertheless, James freely admits that there is a *second* sense of truth, *objective* (sometimes “absolute” or “ultimate”) truth that is both interpersonally and temporally stable.

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 today by what truth we can get today, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood.* Ptolemaic astronomy, Euclidean space, Aristotelian logic, scholastic metaphysics, were expedient for centuries, but human experience has boiled over those limits, and we now call these things only relatively true, or true within those borders of experience. ‘Absolutely’ they are false; for we know that those limits were casual, and might have been transcended by past theorists just as they are by present thinkers. (*PR* 106–7)

However, while James does think that truth “is taken sometimes objectively and sometimes subjectively” (*ERE* 13; see also *ML* 433), he argues that the pragmatist definition of truth “applies to both” (*ML* 433), because ‘absolute’ truth is an idealization of our ‘temporary’ truths. That is, absolute truth is what we get if we extend the norms that govern our movements from one temporary truth to another to their logical limit. Since absolute truth represents an idealized extension of the application of the norms *already* in play with our temporary truths, there isn’t a way for the best application of those temporary norms to lead us away from absolute truth. This leads to a familiar sort of anti-skepticism common to most versions of pragmatism; but what made James’s version distinctive was his insistence that, while “the half-true ideas are all along contributing their quota” (*PR* 107), the *subjective* factors that contributed to our temporary truths contribute to absolute truth as well.

James’s critics take it for granted that the ‘subjective’ factors that (justifiably or not) contribute to what is “temporarily true” (i.e., what is believed) will play no role in determining ‘objective’ truth. This may be true even of those who agree that in cases where the evidence leaves a question undetermined, we can legitimately believe whichever alternative satisfies our more subjective interests. Such critics still insist that, since these subjective interests come into play only when the evidence leaves a question unsettled, and since at the posited ideal terminus of inquiry on a particular question, all the evidence will be in, no subjective factors will be left to contribute to what is ‘absolutely’ true. For James, by contrast, the subjective factors do not ‘wash out’ through the idealization process. This is largely because James takes

these ‘truth processes’ to reflect how expressions come to get their *meaning*, not how independently meaningful expressions come to be true, and it is its constitutive contribution to what our expressions mean that allows our ‘passional nature’ to contribute to even the ‘absolute’ truth of various claims (see Jackman 1998).

To take a familiar example, the truth conditions of “All Dogs share a common ancestor” may vary depending on whether or not the kind “dog” individuates animals by their genetic makeup or their evolutionary history. The question of which way we should go on this may not be one that can be settled by gathering more evidence, and ‘subjective’ factors must be brought in to settle the question even under ideal epistemic conditions, since, as James put it in the *Principles*, the essence of a thing is “that one of its properties which is so important for my interests that in comparison with it I may neglect the rest” (PP 961). In such cases, the evidence can make it clear that two of our commitments relating to a term conflict, but it is often *subjective* factors that then determine which of the two will be given up. When we discovered what we now call “subatomic” particles, we could have either given up on the truth of “Atoms are indivisible” or “Atoms exist”, and our reasons for giving up the first, rather than the second, were as ‘subjective’ as they were evidentially based.<sup>41</sup>

We can see another instance of this when we consider the truth of religious beliefs. James was unable to accept either “popular Christianity” or “Scholastic Theism” (VRE 410), and never had any mystical experiences of his own (VRE 301); but defending the legitimacy of religious faith remained a major concern throughout his life. His own religious views were, however, remarkably thin and idiosyncratic. In “The Will to Believe”, the “religious hypothesis” that he defends merely involves the affirmations that “the best things are the more eternal things” and that “we are better off even now if we believe [religion’s] first affirmation to be true” (WB 29–30), and at the end of the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, he takes the common and generic core or religious belief to be “that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come” (VRE 405); and he denies that this “wider self” need be infinitely, or even tremendously powerful (VRE 413). The resulting conception of religion is so modest that some might fail to recognize it as

<sup>41</sup> Similarly, there may seem to be a tension between our general beliefs about freedom and the situations in which we actually call someone “free”, and if the two really are incompatible, it won’t be a purely non-subjective matter which one should be given up.

religion at all, but this thinned conception has the advantage of making it a lot easier for religious beliefs to be justified, and perhaps even true. Many of the general beliefs associated with “God” or “Religion” were, to James’s mind, indefensible, and so he focused on those aspects of religion that were less epistemically problematic. For instance, if holding on to “God exists” required giving up “God is Perfect”, or “God created the universe”, then James was certainly willing to do so. By contrast, those who worry about the argument from evil typically hold God’s omnipotence, benevolence, and omniscience dearer than they do God’s existence. The merely “wider self” that James discusses in *Varieties* is certainly not enough to count as divine to many (indeed, his view may be compatible with this wider self being one’s own subconscious (*VRE* 403)); but just as with truth and goodness, the question is which part of the conception do we want to hold on to, and that answer will reflect our subjective interests.<sup>42</sup>

Of course, whether or not they accept James’s gloss on the nature of absolute truth, most philosophers still insist that such ‘objective’ truth is the *only* kind of truth, and that James’s insistence on referring to our temporary beliefs as *truths* of any sort is just perverse.<sup>43</sup> A *temporary* truth is standardly taken to be no more a *kind* of truth than a *purported* spy is a *kind* of spy.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, James’s talk of temporary or ‘subjective’ truths will turn out not to be as unmotivated as it might at first seem, since objective truths don’t, for James, exist independently of us, any more than objective values do. His willingness to call certain beliefs of ours “truths” rather than, say, “rational beliefs” stemmed from a suspicion that, at the end of the day, there might not be anything else for the term to pick out.

For James, *reality* is, in a fairly robust sense, independent of us, but “the absolute truth will have to be *made*” (*PR* 107), since it includes both reality being a certain way *and* a claim’s managing to pick out precisely that reality

<sup>42</sup> Indeed, some of the less charitable readings of James stem from thinking about what James’s views would have to be for them to be used to support some of the more robust (and standard) versions of religious belief.

<sup>43</sup> One should note that James’s use of “truth” here, seems to be fairly common in other branches of the humanities, where talk of “my truths” or “another culture’s truths” is not unusual.

<sup>44</sup> James is quoted by his students as claiming that “It is unfortunate that truth should be used, now for the temporary beliefs of men and now for a purely abstract thing that nobody may, perhaps, ever be in possession of”, and wishing that someone “might invent distinct words for *ultimate truth* and *temporary belief*” (*ML* 433). However, most philosophers think that we *already* have two words that pick out “temporary belief” and “ultimate truth”: viz., “belief” and “truth”. The “unfortunate” thing, according to such philosophers, is not that “truth” is used in this ambiguous way, but that *James* uses the normally unambiguous word in such an ambiguous fashion.

‘absolutely’. Furthermore, while we certainly succeed in making our temporary truths, there will be no guarantee that we *can* make such absolute truths, and thus no way of being certain that any of our claims are (absolutely) true or false. Indeed, James occasionally displays not only fallibilism, but also a good deal of *pessimism* about the existence of absolute truth, which he describes as “a purely abstract thing that nobody may, perhaps, ever be in possession of”, and as something that will only be realized with “the perfectly wise man” and “the absolutely complete experience” (*PR* 107), neither of which is an ideal we ever expect to see realized. For a statement to be ‘absolutely’ true, there must be a verdict that “no farther experience will ever alter” (*PR* 106), and James points out that we have no way of guaranteeing such long-term convergence. Not only might we fail to *actually* get to the end of inquiry, but (even with an *indefinite* prolongation of inquiry) such an end might also not be *possible* to achieve. This may be the case not only globally—that is, there will be no point where *every* question is settled—but also locally—that is, even for *particular* questions we cannot expect to get to a point where their status is definitively settled. Peirce famously tied the truth to an ‘end of inquiry’ that is sometimes understood as a ‘global’ position, where *all* questions are settled;<sup>45</sup> but James’s formulation of absolute truth has no such commitment, yet his skepticism remains. For many questions, stable convergence might be too demanding, and prolonged inquiry might simply oscillate between a claim and its denial.

Such worries are underwritten by the *instrumentalism* that James endorses in *Pragmatism*. James takes it to be a descriptive fact about the sciences of his day that their practitioners don’t take the theories they employ to be *literally* true, since “the enormously rapid multiplication of theories in these latter days has well-nigh upset the notion of any one of them being a more literally objective kind of thing than another”, so that we have “become tolerant of symbol instead of reproduction, of approximation instead of exactness, plasticity instead of rigor” (*MT* 40). It is important to note that this instrumentalism is driven not by the fact that we are faced with, say, empirically equivalent but ontologically divergent theories, but rather that we are faced with a plurality of theories none of which we can give up because no subset of them can explain *all* of what the remainder can; they are “each of them good for so much and yet not good for everything” (*MT* 40). Now James *generalizes* this instrumentalism, because he recognizes the phenomena seen

<sup>45</sup> For reasons for doubting that this was Peirce’s considered position, see Misak 1991.

in competing scientific theories within our conceptual schemes writ large. As he puts it:

There are thus at least three well-characterized levels, stages or types of thought about the world we live in, and the notions of one stage have one kind of merit, those of another stage another kind. It is impossible, however, to say that any stage as yet in sight is absolutely more *true* than any other. . . . There is no *ringing* conclusion possible when we compare these types of thinking, with a view to telling which is the more absolutely true. Their naturalness, their intellectual economy, their fruitfulness for practice, all start up as distinct tests of their veracity, and as a result we get confused. Common sense is *better* for one sphere of life, science for another, philosophic criticism for a third; but whether either be *truer* absolutely, Heaven only knows. (PR 92–3)

Inquiry into *any* question may never produce a stable answer, since there is no stable framework for inquiry, and when we adopt, say, a scientific framework, many claims that were previously endorsed when using the framework of common sense will be denied because their ontological presuppositions are rejected. This may remain true of even seemingly ‘obvious’ statements like “There is a table in front of me”, which, while stable within the framework of common sense, may not survive in a framework where a term like “table” does not denote.<sup>46</sup>

One might think that this is only a *temporary* state, and that we should eventually expect to find a single explanatory system that could capture all of the truths that we were trying to express with the others. However, James remained pessimistic about the *status quo* changing, and in his work from 1908 to 1910, he returns to earlier themes that, when developed, can lead one to doubt that any claim that made use of our concepts could ever turn out to be ‘absolutely’ true. According to James, since concepts emerged to serve our *practical* ends, and our most *fundamental* concepts (such as that of “substance”, “causation”, or “person”) evolved to serve some of our earliest practical ends (PR 83), our conceptual system may be ill suited to “make us theoretically acquainted with the essential nature of reality” (PU 96) in a way that absolute truth requires.<sup>47</sup> James’s late claim that logic

<sup>46</sup> For worries about this tension, see Sellars 1963 [1960]; Unger 1979. There will be no fact about which framework will be best for James at least partially because each framework does a particularly good job of satisfying one subset of the demands that, in SR, James argues go into what determines what we consider “rational”.

<sup>47</sup> James’s infamous rejection of the “logic of identity” in *A Pluralistic Universe* may thus be best understood as a rejection not so much of logic itself, but of the assumption that the inferential structure of our concepts matches the structure of the world at a ‘global’ level.

and conceptualization distort our perception of reality, rather than being a retreat from his earlier scientific attitude into a comforting mysticism, is actually a *consequence* of his naturalistic approach to the nature and origin of conceptualization, by which it is “a transformation which the flux of life undergoes at our hands in the interests of practice essentially and only subordinately in the interests of theory” (*PU* 109).

The assumption that, if pushed to their logical conclusions, our concepts will eventually misrepresent the realities they normally help us cope with is not limited to the concepts of common sense. James seems to suspect that it will be a problem with *any* conceptual system, since *conceptualization itself* misrepresents the ‘continuous’ nature of reality. Concepts require sharp boundaries, and while the imposition of models of the world where things are sharply defined has tremendous practical value, they inevitably misrepresent the richness of reality, and thus are unable to get to a point of absolute truth. The pinch will always be felt if any concept is extended enough. As James put it, “Conceptual treatment of perceptual reality makes it seem paradoxical and incomprehensible; and when radically and consistently carried out, it leads to the opinion that perceptual experience is not reality at all, but an appearance or illusion” (*SPP* 46).

So what should we say if the ‘pessimistic’ conclusion that James imagines actually turned out to be the case, and that the regulative ideal of absolute truth that our use aspired to was unsatisfiable? Of course, it would follow that none of our beliefs were ‘absolutely’ true, but it seems less clear that we should conclude that none of them were *true*. Instead, we should consider the possibility that the unrealizability of absolute truth suggests that the ‘absolute’ interpretation is not the best account of what we mean by “true”. If it turns out that we can’t find the grounding for our claims to be ‘objectively’ true, then we have two choices. We can continue to insist that those factors tying our use to the ‘objective’ interpretation are essential to the meaning of “truth” and thus adopt an ‘error theory’ where all of the term’s applications are (if not, strictly speaking, false<sup>48</sup>) at least non-denoting, or we can adopt an interpretation of “true” that is a little more subjective, and thus allow at least some of our sentences to be true. Which way we should go with the semantics of “true” is precisely one of those ‘subjective’ issues discussed above. Our general beliefs

<sup>48</sup> One might think that even if nothing turned out to be absolutely true in such a scenario, some could still count as absolutely false if it turned out that they weren’t endorsed in any of the alternative frameworks.

about truth (e.g., truth doesn't change) are well entrenched, but so is the belief that some of the things we say are *actually* true, and if the former is incompatible with the latter, then the former may have to go. We prefer, and presuppose, that truth is 'absolute', but if absolute truth is unattainable, our use of "true" might be best understood as picking out subjective truth<sup>49</sup> rather than nothing at all.<sup>50</sup> Philosophers typically assume that the best way to settle the question of whether "truth" should have a subjective or objective interpretation is to do more *philosophy*; but for James, the question may ultimately be an *empirical* one.

However, while this leads one to a type of *fallibilism* about the existence of objective truth,<sup>51</sup> it doesn't follow that we aren't entitled to believe in it. We can be entitled to such a commitment, because the belief that inquiry could reach the type of stable convergence needed to produce absolute truth is arguably both a genuine option and evidentially undetermined. Consequently, James could argue that we are entitled to believe in objective truth even if we can't be assured that it exists, especially since this is a clear case where believing in something might be necessary for bringing it about. If we didn't believe that anything was true 'absolutely', then we would be less inclined to conduct our inquiries in a fashion that would produce convergence even if it were possible.<sup>52</sup> The epistemologist is entitled to believe in objective truth as another "will to believe" case, but James may be equally entitled to his pessimism; and given that James has reason to think that it is evidentially

<sup>49</sup> As with the ethical case, there is some degree of play as to which type of subjectivism should be endorsed, since even if 'absolute' truth were unattainable, some types of non-absolute truth will be more subjective than others. For instance, tying subjective truth to what my society believes, while still far from absolute truth, might be less subjective than tying it to whatever I believe at any moment.

<sup>50</sup> In this sense James's account of truth applies to itself. It is, ultimately, subjective factors which would (in the pessimistic scenario) determine whether we give up on the 'absolute' understanding of truth, and just as James claims that the moral philosopher can't accept ethical subjectivism (MPML 142), it may be that philosophers in general are more committed to the objectivity of truth than most. (Indeed, when James talks about the moral philosopher needing a system of truth, he must have such objective truth in mind.) Either way, James's suggestion that there is a 'subjective' sense of truth is far from incoherent.

<sup>51</sup> James's position here contrasts markedly with that of Royce, who takes a similar connection between convergence and objective truth and, by combining it with what he takes to be an a priori assurance that objective truth and falsity exist, constructs a transcendental argument for the metaphysics required to make convergence inevitable. James is in this respect more like the Peirce who claims: "I do not say that it is infallibly true that there is any belief to which a person would come if he were to carry his inquiries far enough. I only say that that alone is what I call Truth. I cannot infallibly know that there *is* any truth" (Peirce 1966: 398). The difference being, of course, that Peirce takes the fallibilism about absolute truth to be necessarily fallibilism about truth *per se*.

<sup>52</sup> We would, for instance, feel less pressure to make our belief system consistent.

unsettled whether objective truth is achievable, his talk of ‘subjective’ truth should not be dismissed as merely confused.

## REFERENCES

Unless otherwise notes, all citations of William James refer to his *Collected Works*, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). The following abbreviations are used:

- ECR        *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 1987.  
 EP         *Essays in Philosophy*, 1978.  
 ERE        *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 1912/1976.  
 ILWL       “Is Life Worth Living”, 1895, repr. in *WB&OEPP*.  
 ME&N      *Manuscript Essays and Notes*, 1988.  
 ML         Manuscript Lectures, 1988.  
 MPML      “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”, 1891, repr. in  
               *WB&OEPP*.  
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