***Chapter 10***

***Taking James to Work: Pragmatism for Managers***

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**Introduction**

Granted management’s inherent action-orientation—the focus on ‘getting things done’ in pursuit of tangible goals and in the face of resource and other constraints—the very name ‘pragmatism’ suggests it as appropriate for use in philosophy of management. It is not straightforwardly the case, however, that theoretical resources offered by classical philosophical pragmatism are always or obviously in the service of practical ends, or that managerial pragmatism is evident in all actions meant to achieve tangible business results.

Nonetheless, the importance of outcomes and consequences in Charles S. Peirce’s versions of pragmatism and again in William James’s individualized, psychologized, and epistemology-focused adaptations, support the notion of a thematic orientation towards action shared by classical pragmatism and management practice.[[1]](#endnote-1) Thus, for example, James states that “my thinking is first and last and always for the sake of my doing,” and he conceives of truth principally in terms of consequences: “any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor; is true for just so much … true *instrumentally*” (James 1984, 309; 1975b 34).

Writing of pragmatism’s application to organization studies, Bidhan Parmar et al. contend that “pragmatism encourages scholars to show how theoretical differences make a real difference to practice. This focus on practice shifts the focus on theory building … away from insular conversations between academics and towards practice-relevant research” (2016, 207). Identifying pragmatism’s potential for re-orienting philosophical research into management is one thing, but realizing it is another. To date, philosophers of management sympathetic to pragmatism have tended to deploy their ideological resources to advance conceptual models of management practices, and propose solutions to workplace issues predefined by philosophers. Organization theory has been studied in terms of a debate between dualism and anti-dualism, for example, and business ethics in terms of alternative conceptions of value (see Elkjaer and Simpson 2011; Rosenthal and Buchholz 2000). Such conceptual accounts of problems abstracted from real world complications tend more to the needs of academics “concerned with the issue of methodological rigor” and less to practitioners for whom “academic knowledge becomes relevant … when it is context-specific, providing concrete recommendations for action or plans of action” (Vo and Kelemen 2014, 242).

This chapter will show how James’s version of classical pragmatism might underwrite a philosophy of management that engages *directly* with the demands of management practice and with practitioners. Specifically, his methodological commitment to experience provides means by which managers might better understand the ways that they think about and respond to the complicated circumstances that define their jobs. In contrast to other management theories, it has potential to influence the moral and existential realities of managers, rather than just, say, their means for improving productivity or workplace success. On this account, James’s philosophy might not merely inform managerial practices, but also encourage more productive and ongoing exchanges between philosophers and managers.

**James’s Experiential Pragmatism, and Management**

James’s attitudes towards the dramatic socio-economic changes experienced by Americans in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries make him an unlikely source for ideas helpful to philosophy of management. Living “on the fulcrum between two historical worlds: the gentility of late Victorian New England and the cosmopolitan currents of modernity,” he was keenly aware of the impacts upon individuals and communities of large-scale industrial manufacturing, bigger business organizations, sophisticated financial and goods markets, and the managerialism that enabled them all (Halliwell and Rasmussen 2014, 5). “The resounding ideal of mere empty ‘bigness’ and ‘success’ is killing every genuine quality and ideal,” he wrote, and so he proclaimed himself “against bigness and greatness in all their forms,” including “all big organizations as such.” (James 1920, 2: 90) But rather than holding out hope that the new capitalism might be revoked and former values and lifestyles reinstated by way of wholesale revolution, James contends that “it is enough to ask of each of us that he should be faithful to his own opportunities and make the most of his own blessings” (1983, 149).[[2]](#endnote-2) If one goes about life carefully and thoughtfully and is “willing to live on possibilities that are not certainties,” then some improvement of one’s lot is possible, even in the face of unmitigated “market-war demands” and “success-worship” (1975a, 124). Philosophy’s role is to stand “for the dignity of smaller worldly successes, or of worldly failures”; to enable and encourage people to identify and commit effort to realizing those opportunities still open to them, even if these are few (1988, 107).

Consequently, like Peirce and John Dewey, James wanted to find, in the words of Bente Elkjaer and Barbara Simpson, “practical ways of accounting for human conduct and meaning-making in all of [their] dynamic and social complexity” as aids for developing “practical solutions to the myriad practical problems that arise in lived human experience” (2011, 56-57). By linking knowledge and action in this way, the classical pragmatists departed from a then-prevalent philosophical idealism championed by T.H. Green, F.H. Bradley, Josiah Royce and others, which they saw as too far removed from daily life to have practical merit. Arguments resting on universal teleology or some speculative philosophical concept were unlikely to encourage energetic pursuit of one’s opportunities, whereas tangible, real-world possibilities conceived in terms of one’s own thoughts and practices stood a better chance of motivating one to act, and clarifying one’s purpose for acting. As such, James sets out to engage as directly as possible with real-world circumstances, focusing upon “our actual hopes and needs” amidst “the world of concrete personal experiences to which the street belongs,” “multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed,” and evidencing “the contradictions of real life” (James 1975b 137, 17-18).

Throughout his corpus, James highlights “the contrast between the richness of life and the poverty of all possible formulas,” maintaining that theorisation of lived reality ought to begin with the characteristics of that reality as they are experienced rather than by way of philosophical pre-conceptualisation (James 1987, 489). Typically, he thinks, “Philosophy is dogmatic, and pretends to settle things by pure reason,” substituting conceptual abstractions for “real life” (1979a, 18-19). But to work from conceptual generalities is to miss life’s intensely complicated and personal character. “So long as we deal with the cosmic and the general, we deal only with the symbols of reality,” James insists, “but *as soon as we deal with private and personal phenomena as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term*” (1985, 393). He concludes that “the only fruitful mode of getting at truth is to appeal to concrete experience,” and so his philosophy rests squarely on deciphering lived consciousness, drawing out the implications of its characteristics for the ways that we live, and proposing recommendations for recovering one’s energetic engagement with life’s possibilities (1979a, 18-19).

James’s insistence on the need for philosophical inquiry to begin with the particulars of lived experience is in stark contrast with the usual approach adopted by philosophers of management. With few exceptions, philosophy of management follows the example set by much philosophy of art and philosophy of science, serving as a descriptive, diagnostic, or prescriptive process (or some combination of these) whereby pre-established theoretical resources are applied to generalized attributes of the field under review.[[3]](#endnote-3) The philosopher sits ‘outside the action,’ as it were, ignoring, downplaying, or redefining the chaotic contingencies of real-world circumstances by altering the level of conceptual abstraction. Philosophy of management commonly contains broad generalizations about how management is done and what constitutes a ‘problem’ for managers, and proceeds without acknowledgement of the range of roles, industries, cultures, and geographies (let alone personal circumstances) to which its conclusions ought to be applied. The question guiding such a project might be “what ought a manager to do in a situation like this one?” or “how might a person properly understand such a workplace problem?” without acknowledging how unlike one another are particular situations or problems of that general kind.

By comparison, the work done by a manager (or indeed a machine operator, administrator, tradesperson, maintainer, entrepreneur, or truck driver) is not so conceptually malleable: decisions about how to think through and enact one’s work are more often decided by the circumstances of the moment. The question is more likely to be, “what must *I* do *now*?” So long as the philosopher deals in abstractions that simplify or set aside the complexity and first-personal character of management work, then in James’s words, he will “fire his volley of new vocables out of his conceptual shotgun, for his profession condemns him to this industry, but he secretly knows the hollowness and irrelevancy” (James 1985, 360). There will be no spanning the ‘gap’ between the philosopher’s quest for rigor and the manager’s demand for relevance. A pragmatist approach to management will demand both the ability to generalize and extreme particularization.

James’s alternative approach locates all philosophies of practice in the study of conscious life. Rather than first deciding which kinds of action or problem define or typify management in the abstract, Jamesian philosophy of management would begin by investigating how people conceive and think through challenges associated with their work. Then, instead of proposing or applying a philosophical construct to such base conceptions with the aim of determining a prescription for each similar case, the pragmatist would alert managers to tendencies and opportunities in their thought, and equip them with means for thinking more carefully and insightfully about their circumstances. The rigor of Jamesian philosophy of management would derive from addressing the whole panoply of mental activity associated with work, and its relevance from helping managers to think through and cope with their work-related challenges. That it would be distinctively a philosophy of *management* rather than some other field of practice, such as education, is not a matter of the phenomena to which James’s theoretical commitments and ideas *could* be applied. After all, it is not the case that a manager’s conscious capabilities are fundamentally different from a teacher’s. Rather, it pertains to the problematic cases in which managers find it useful to apply them; problems like poor work habits, the ethics of disciplining employees, mediating personal preferences and corporate policies, ways of discerning formal organization structures from informal ones, and so on.

Whilst such an approach has the advantage of engaging with a manager’s capabilities and momentary circumstances, it seems burdened by a significant constraint: if philosophy ought to “deal with private and personal phenomena,” as James proposes, what about the kinds of social and publicly-observable activity commonly taken to define management? What about the manager’s interactions with colleagues, employers, family, and friends?

James’s experiential philosophy is inherently individualistic, consistent with his belief that rebellion against “the moral flabbiness born of the … squalid cash interpretation put on the word success” (“our national disease,” no less) relies on each individual’s remaining alive to his or her opportunities. (James 1920, 2: 260) This view chimes with his over-arching ontology. James conceives the world as “*a set of eaches, just as it seems*” (1977, 62). When we use words like ‘experience,’ ‘being,’ ‘reality,’ ‘environment,’ and ‘world,’ he thinks, we denote merely conceptual groupings of such diverse and multitudinous elements as experiences, individual lives, objects, perspectives, and so on, and not any shared essence. This ontological perspective, combined with James’s intense interest in the human condition, focuses him squarely on prospects for fulfilment in the lives of individuals rather than the development of communities. He writes that “surely the individual, the person in the singular number, is the more fundamental phenomenon, and the social institution, of whatever grade, is but secondary and ministerial” (1987, 97). It is individuals (rather than families, communities, work groups, or companies) that identify options, conduct evaluations, make decisions, and then either act upon them or not.

James’s emphasis on individuals is significant for philosophy of management, being contrary to a tendency amongst organization theorists since the 1980s to emphasize the social aspects of businesses. In respect of managers specifically, an approach like James’s can be seen as promoting conceptions of an atomic individual standing apart from a collection of other atomic individuals who are cast into the role of followers, encouraging what Peter Edward describes as “a division between managers who use their minds to make reasoned decisions and workers who, preferably largely unthinkingly, are required merely to use their bodies to enact those decisions” (2016, 352). The political overtones of such a view are plain, and contrary to James’s own beliefs: power and influence rest—and perhaps should remain—with the boss, and what matters most is what the boss thinks. By contrast, the more prevalent modern view tends to emphasize “the embedded dynamics of leadership” and the extent to which every individual, regardless of role or power, is “continuous with others and with the historically situated social institutions of which they are a part" (Rosenthal and Buchholz 2000, 189, 192). Particular people or roles are more or less powerful, and that power can be used more or less selfishly, but it is not possible to properly understand those people or roles separate from the wider organization (and communities) of which they are part.

Although James acknowledged the importance of relations with others for constituting one’s self (e.g., James 1981, 281-82), only in one essay published late in his life, “The Moral Equivalent of War” (1982, 162-73), did he address social relations explicitly. Even some of James’s fellow-travellers and popularisers have taken him to task for over-emphasizing the individual. For example, his pragmatist contemporaries, Peirce and Dewey, criticised him for being overly concerned with individual agency and failing to acknowledge the extent to which it was enabled and constrained by social inter-relations (see Menand 2001, 88). More recently John McDermott has claimed that James’s “position on the individual was dramatically one-sided and his innocence of the social matrix by which we became single selves was most unusual for a late nineteenth-century thinker” (1986, 80-81).

In terms of understanding and guiding the *practice* of management, however, James’s individualism may prove no handicap. Doubtless it is important for a manager to remain mindful of the extent and subtleties of inter-personal relationships both within the organization and outside it: most management roles have a significant social dimension. As James writes (suggestively, though not very instructively), “our lives are like islands in the sea or like trees in the forest. The maple and the pine may whisper to each other with their leaves, and Conanicut and Newport hear each other’s fog-horns. But the trees also commingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the islands also hang together through the ocean’s bottom” (1986, 374). In other words, even apparently isolated individuals interact with and are influenced by those around them, so that, as the pragmatist organizational theorist Mary Parker Follett writes, for James, “we cannot put the individual on one side and society on the other, we must understand the complete interrelation of the two. Each has no value, no existence without the other” (1926, 61-62).

But coupling James’s acknowledgement of the significance of social relations with his quest for a philosophically ‘concrete’ conception of first-person experience, his focus on the individual seems well-founded. James can be understood as less concerned with providing a generalized description of inter-personal relations from the perspective of someone observing and organizing them conceptually, and more interested in identifying the ways in which those involved in such relations think about and respond to them, and proposing new ways in which they might do so. In a business setting, James’s approach means dropping such questions as “what is the nature of the relationship between managers and their staff (or peers, or other stakeholders)?” in favour of ones like “how might this manager think through her social interactions?”—together, perhaps, with “… and how might a theoretical account of the process help her if she is not very good at it?” The former approach abstracts from the particularity of a manager’s experiences in the cause of broad applicability. It pursues a conceptualized account of how a set of people in relatively similar jobs interact with other people in or around the workplace, where criteria for determining the similarity of jobs and the particular interactions under review are often left unstated. By contrast, the latter one acknowledges the wide range of factors relevant to how a manager might conceive of and address her specific circumstances, and the possibility that some particular aspect of an interaction might be crucial for deciding how to go about it. It ensures that the social nuances of a job, task, or work group (deeply embedded friendships amongst team members, say, or the disruptive presence of a truculent nay-sayer) are acknowledged not just in terms of their being experienced at all, but because of the feelings of worry and doubt (or confidence and determination) that they engender in the manager. As such, James’s approach to social relations has the advantage (ideally) of respecting the complicated realities of coping with budget, time, and performance pressures while at the same time dealing with the views, words, expectations, frustrations, friendships, and rewards of working with others.

James’s focus on first-person experience is the most distinctive aspect of his philosophy. Perhaps naively given the various roles and meanings assigned to experience in the history of philosophy, James intended it to be philosophically uncontroversial; after all, he explains, “experience in its immediacy seems perfectly fluent. The active sense of living which we all enjoy, before reflection shatters our instinctive world for us, is self-luminous and suggests no paradoxes. Its difficulties are disappointments and uncertainties. They are not intellectual contradictions” (1976, 45). We go through daily life generally unconcerned by theoretical questions regarding the nature of first-personal experience, even though *what* we experience can be deeply troubling. Moreover, as James points out, “the more primitive flux of the sensational life” and the “concrete pulse of experience appear pent in by no such definite limits as our conceptual substitutes for them are confined by” (1977, 127). In making our way in the world, we simply accept that our experiences are limited by our senses and intellect rather than by such logical constraints as determine our explanatory concepts. As Thomas Powell puts it, “our explanations are accountable to experience and not to the concepts we devise to explain it; and if the concepts fail, then perhaps we have learned an even bigger lesson: that human experience is not the kind of thing that goes into a theory” (2014, 167).

To understand how radically James’s approach differs from those that usually underpin philosophies of practice (including philosophy of management) requires an appreciation of his account of experience. Specifically, it demands an understanding of his preoccupation with the complex dynamics of consciousness. James is more interested in describing the rich potential for thinking things afresh granted one’s circumstances and capabilities, and less in assessing patterns of thought and action evident amongst a group of people or under some general set of conditions. As such, we will turn next to the critical aspects of James’s theory of experience.

Experience for James is best understood as the first-person, introspectively-accessible product of encounters between one’s self and the world. As “the entire process of phenomena,” it is the most basic fact of human existence: one’s life just *is* experiential, defined in terms of the world as it is taken, consciously considered, and responded to (James 1988, 95). As such, it includes not just sense experience (although as McDermott points out, James emphasised the perceptual “in an effort to condemn as potentially dangerous a conceptual order not rooted in our actual experiencing”), but also moral, aesthetic and religious experiences, enjoyment and pain, anger and fear, desire and repulsion, effort and ease, deduction and creation, matters of interest and indifference, dependencies and independences, and so on (McDermott 1976, xxi). Furthermore, on James’s account, experience includes memories, needs, desires, and dreams just as much (and in the same ways) as cause-effect relationships, logical constructs, and perceptual observations, and interruptions and abrupt leaps of focus as much as smoothly continuous trains of thought.

Rather than applying pragmatist concepts to pre-ordered phenomena, James studies the often disorderly first-personal reality of those phenomena in pursuit of normative guidance for locating and realizing life’s prospects. In following him, Dewey makes the point that philosophers typically have “denied that common experience is capable of developing within itself methods which will secure direction for itself and … create inherent standards of judgement and value.... To the waste of time and energy, to disillusionment of life that attends every deviation from concrete experience must be added the tragic failure to discover what intelligent search would reveal and mature among the things of ordinary experience” (1929, 38). By ignoring or downplaying the potential for everyday experience to guide future thoughts and actions, most philosophers have missed much that is important about how we make our way in the world. James means to correct such failures. In his pragmatism, the transience of human experience emphasises what McDermott calls “the profound inferential character of our values, decisions, and disabilities” and James’s task is, “in phenomenological terms, … to diagnose the experience of the individual as we cast about in the flow of experience, bringing a mind-set but also getting and begetting as the press of the world filtered into our consciousness” (McDermott 1984, 668). James liked to refer to Søren Kierkegaard’s reminder that we must “live forward” even though we “understand backward” (James 1975b, 107). All our ideals and most important judgements—including those made in the course of our trades and professions—are prospective rather than retrospective, yet our understanding of what we might reasonably hope for and how best to pursue it relies on lessons, habits, expectations, and evidence drawn from experience to date.

For James, in Powell’s words, “all enquiry, whether in science, literature, or metaphysics, is a fundamentally *human* enterprise, a narrative told by humans about how it feels to be human,” and “the task of the philosopher-psychologist” is “reporting what happens [in consciousness] as truly and completely as possible” (Powell 2014, 166-67). James’s methodological challenge is to reflect the first-personal immediacy of experience without adopting a purely hypothetical approach (with which he charges Descartes), underlying ontological structures (as in Plato and Kant), or final positions and teleological paths (like Hegel). James sees such approaches as flawed not because they originate outside experience (as if that were possible), but by dint of being too general. No such theoretical approach can account for the immediacy, subtlety, and open-endedness of one’s own thought, James contends, and the only valid ‘observational’ approach is “the looking into our own minds and reporting what we there discover,” paying careful heed to the states and circumstances of one’s own consciousness. (James 1981, 185)[[4]](#endnote-4) Consequently, James’s justly-celebrated *The Principles of Psychology* is “an extended essay on what it is like to be human—based largely on what it was like to be William James,” in which he describes in detail an enormous range of ‘types’ or ‘aspects’ of experience (sensation, perception, thought, memory, habit, self-conception, and so on) (Powell 2014, 170). Rather than conceptualizing thought ‘from the outside,’ as though experience were simply another object for philosophical study, James locates relevant concepts descriptively within experience, preserving rather than simplifying the complexity of mental phenomena.

Foremost amongst James’s observations is the essentially dynamic character of experience, an attribute that precludes universalizable philosophical guidance for practice. Experience on James’s account is, as James Kloppenberg summarizes, “always relational (it never exists in the abstract or in isolation from a world containing both other persons and concrete realities, as did Descartes’ rationalist cogito), creative (it never merely registers sense data passively, as did Locke's empiricist tabula rasa), and imbued with historically specific cultural values (it is never ‘human’ or universal, but always personal and particular)” (1986, 102). Its contents are contingent and ever-changing, depending upon the chance configuration of circumstances. Furthermore, relations between thoughts are always open-ended and multifarious, a conflux of “existence, succession, resemblance, contrast, contradiction, cause and effect, means and end, genus and species, part and whole, substance and property, early and late, large and small, landlord and tenant, master and servant,” and much else besides (James 1981, 520). Through experience we come to realise that “possibilities, not finished facts, are the realities with which we have actively to deal” (1979b, 55). As such, however we go about theorizing experience, it “has a way of boiling over and making us correct our present formulas,” so that, whether in constructing theories or making commonplace judgements, “we have to live today by what truth we can get today, and be ready tomorrow to call it a falsehood” (1975b, 106, 107).

There can be no more relevant realization for a philosophy of practice. One’s decisions and actions will be guided by the concrete, ever-changing particulars of one’s experience. Not only might our actions prove erroneous, even if well-founded on what we have learned previously, but our conceptions of even such stable things as organizations, cultures, and institutions might prove unreliable should circumstances change (Chia 2002, 866). Any theory proposing that tomorrow’s managerial decisions should rely upon the same criteria as today’s, without acknowledging the (perhaps preeminent) need for flexibility, is at best a crude device and at worst misleading. A manager new to her role might rely on lessons from business school, unaware that they ‘work’ in only a limited range of ideal instances. A dogmatic boss might cling to the example of one early, career-defining decision. By contrast, a flexible, seasoned manager is likely to have learned that unexpected events can make even the most carefully-considered decision seem wrong in retrospect, that decisions considered inconsistent by others can in fact be well-founded in contextual subtleties, that few significant management decisions are straightforward, and that management training typically says little about such realities of professional life as these.

James abandons more traditional ways of framing problems of practice because they risk abstracting from experience to too great a degree. As Gregory Pappas reminds us, conceiving of any problem as a spectator, a theorist operating outside life’s push and pull, means losing much of what we take from actually having an experience, including the meaning of the problem (2008, 33-35, 206-07). The point of a Jamesian approach is not to abandon theory, but to reorient it towards the experience it means to describe and aid. For philosophy of management to be relevant for practitioners, it must recover the concreteness and intricate complexities of management decisions and practices and the circumstances that frame them. It must account for the fact that managers are not, by dint of a job title, soulless automatons, but people who must reconcile sometimes contradictory ethical commitments and sometimes conflicting familial and social obligations. It must consider the influence upon them of rapidly changing circumstances, the burden of decisions, the impacts of status and material rewards, and the particularities of job, skill, company, industry, location, training, culture, colleagues, and so on. Business schools would produce more job-ready graduates by providing greater exposure to the complicated realities of managing and to Jamesian ways of thinking them through, and less to theories encouraging a too-orderly, overly-systematized view. We turn next to theoretical resources provided by James that might support such a change.

**Resources for Management Practice in James’s Pragmatism**

To this point, we have seen that James’s commitment to experience is consonant with a methodological pragmatism capable of surmounting the ‘gap’ between management theorists and practitioners. Rather than pre-determining thoughts and actions that typify or define ‘management,’ and then conceptualising them, a Jamesian approach would instead propose ways in which managers might understand and become more sensitive to the resources and patterns of consciousness that guide them in coping with circumstances encountered in their job. James’s philosophy enables what John E. Smith describes as “an opening of horizons so that experience no longer meant merely a *content* passively received but many *contexts* in which that content could be taken and its full meaning developed” (1993, 122). By attending carefully to the context and purpose of one’s thought and action, the relevant details will tend to be self-disclosing. The academic’s insistence on rigor is satisfied through careful study of experience in all its intricate and confusing richness; the practitioner’s desire for relevance is met through a set of constructs capable of informing thought and action throughout and beyond professional life.

To leave things there, however, might suggest that James had provided just a theoretical base for a philosophy of management, but none of the tools for realizing it. How might mere awareness of one’s patterns of thought help to improve one’s abilities as a manager? What does ‘improvement’ of one’s capabilities mean? What concrete guidance does James offer managerial decisions? If pragmatism is just “a way of thinking about thinking,” as sometimes proposed, what help is it for thinking towards action (Westbrook 2005, ix)? But in fact, James does address the implications of his philosophy of experience for practice, either by describing the connotations of specific patterns of thought, or proposing ways in which these might be conceived and deployed more effectively. Whilst a comprehensive catalogue of these is beyond our scope, some indicative examples will help to alleviate the worry that James’s pragmatism is, despite its promising methodology, still too abstract.

Foremost amongst the characteristics of human thought studied by James and most obviously relevant to management practices is reliance on habit. According to James, much about our thought and action is habitual. “When we look at living creatures from an outward point of view, one of the first things that strikes us is that they are bundles of habits,” (James 1981, 109) products of a tendency to “*make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can*” (1984, 134). But whereas the everyday conception of habits pertains typically to actions of minor import (brushing one’s teeth, verbal ticks, or routine sequencing of behaviours, for instance), James recognises that habits range from the most primitive animal instinct (or “innate tendency”) to the most sophisticated aspects of human life (in “acts of reason”). Simple bodily habits of the former kind are merely activations of “ready-made arrangements” in the brain and body, whereas more complex cases (taking up a new language, learning to lead, coping in a crisis, ...) demand careful, conscious effort and repetitive training in pursuit of habituation that “*diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed*” (James 1981, 119). Since such effort and practice are products of deliberate attention, we have the capacity to amend our habits, at least before they become ‘embedded,’ and James proposes a set of tools for how we might achieve this (1983, 48-53).

To the extent that each individual is defined by consistent thoughts and actions, habit is “an invisible law, as strong as gravitation” which “keeps him within his orbit, arrayed this year as he was the last” (James 1981, 126). Habituated relational connections, whether between ideas or between ideas and consequent actions, require less energy and effort than less familiar ones. Not only is habit a matter of practical convenience, but also, as James writes, “the more of the details of our daily life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automatism, the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their own proper work” (ibid.). Greater conscious capacity becomes available for dealing with more interesting, perplexing, and unformed situations.

But the advantages that habit confers are accompanied by risks. For example, one’s actions can become to an uncertain degree a product of tendencies of which one might remain unaware; it is not always clear which habits are (or will become) beneficial, and which detrimental (James 1983, 53); and, habits can be means for engraining the kind of “conservative inertia” with which James was so deeply concerned (1982, 131). To avoid dissipating one’s energy and risking the loss of “potentialities” (or ‘opportunities’) by continuing to enact detrimental or outdated habits requires deliberate, ongoing self-review. As Michael Eldridge and Sami Pihlström write, “one of our most important habits is the meta-level habit of critically reflecting on, revising, and transforming our habits. Thus, our habits are not simply given to us once and for all; we are responsible for continuously self-critically examining whether they enable us to achieve our purposes (which are themselves in view only through the habitual actions we engage in) or not” (2011, 34).

That an effective manager relies in large part on making and maintaining good habits is obvious. Not only do habits enable a manager to make the most of relatively scarce time and attentive effort, but they enable such reliable and predictable judgements and responses as necessary for staff to conduct their work with confidence, and for a productive organizational culture. Indeed, James suggests, “it is your despised business man, your common man of affairs” whose ability to voluntarily focus attention “is likely to be the most developed; for he has to listen to the concerns of so many uninteresting people, and to transact so much drudging detail” (James 1983, 67). But the manager needs to watch-out for problematic habits, too, whether devoting too much time to short-term tasks (such as clearing e-mails), adopting an overly-aggressive physical posture, or favouring risk-laden strategies over conservative ones. In short, every habit carries with it the risk of becoming insensitive or unresponsive to context, and the ‘antidote’ is remaining alert to the presence and appropriateness of one’s own habits

James provides a second example of a pattern of human thought with clear implications for management in *A Pluralistic Universe*, where he describes conceptualization in terms of the construction of various symbolic systems representing different aspects of, or perspectives on, the same reality. James’s point is that we ought to remain alert to the risks of adopting any singular perspective on reality, and to entertain and encourage others in pursuit of richer, more complete perspectives. An organization can be depicted in such diverse terms as organization charts, flow charts, balance sheets, and annual reports, for instance (Harter 2013, 73). For a manager to cling to some conceptual depiction as *the* one (the most right, complete, accurate, or insightful) to the detriment of insights from others is to risk parochial or poorly-informed judgements, and to handicap her engagement with people holding different views. We might imagine a Chief Financial Officer so wedded to the significance of monthly profit and loss figures that the contribution of the production schedule to the organization’s financial health is lost from view.

James also proposes specific guides to action. Examples include: his lecture titled “The Gospel of Relaxation,” which speaks to overly-stressed managers about their environment and means for coping as much as to the students who were its original audience (James 1983, 117-31); his multi-faceted theory of self-development, spanning much of his corpus, which addresses the existential challenges of marrying one’s circumstances (including one’s work environment) with realization of one’s capabilities and opportunities; and, a range of practical exercises for altering one’s habits by means of concentrated and persistent effort (for example, James admonishes us to “*never suffer an exception to occur until the new habit is securely rooted in your life*” and to “*seize the very first possible opportunity to act on every resolution you make*”) (1983, 49, 50).

Whether James’s ethics ought to be classified as a primarily prescriptive offering or a merely descriptive one is difficult to decide, but its relevance for busy managers is plain. As Joshua Margolis points out, "ethical issues tax people cognitively, and 'cognitive busyness' reduces our capacity to make appropriate judgements, let alone search for and construct creative courses of action. Just when people most need to draw on their fullest capacities, those very situations elicit a lower level of functioning" (1998, 413). In his essay “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” James proposes a wholly naturalistic ethics in which questions about ethical value would be resolved by reference to experience rather than any transcendent source or measure of ethical value. For James, much like David Hume, words like ‘good,’ ‘bad,’ ‘right,’ and ‘obligation’ do not refer to the “absolute natures” of acts, but instead to “objects of feeling and desire” with “no foothold or anchorage in Being, apart from the existence of actually living minds” so that “nothing can be good or right except so far as some consciousness feels it to be good or thinks it to be right” (James 1979b, 150, 147). His account emphasizes the sensitivity of our judgements to subjective assessments of which circumstances are relevant, the often-contradictory nature of our ethical principles and inclinations, and the need to sometimes make ethical judgements in the absence of relevant facts or the presence of confusion.

 Whether taken to be descriptive or normative, James’s views chime with the often complicated and compromised moral options faced by managers, where “a plurality of conflicting interests must be integrated, and that can only be done by the morally perceptive, creative, individual operating in a specific context in response to specific conflicts" (Rosenthal and Buchholz 1999, 118). Often, the manager’s role is to mediate between predetermined corporate rules and other imperatives, or to apply organizational regulations effectively. Not only is such a task sometimes very complicated and the correct approach unclear, but it encourages the manager to substitute corporate rules for her own moral sensitivities. James’s observations serve to remind managers that their judgements of right and wrong ought to rely on the full range of previous experience to help decide *which* facts are relevant, *how* they ought to be assessed, and whether or not corporate rules ought to be called into question. As Doug Anderson writes, “the pragmatic attitude does not allow the business practitioner a moral holiday in his or her role as business person. It reveals that we are all engaged in the moral experiment of producing our own world and socio-economic environment; it gives us each a stake in the care of the conditions of human flourishing” (1999, 63). As such, “the agent cannot retreat to the harbour of dogmatic belief but must actively address the situation” (Anderson 1999, 61). To develop the moral capabilities of managers is not a matter just of teaching corporate policies and legal requirements (although of course there is a place for these), but of “find[ing] ways to improve moral perception and awareness on the front-end of judgement; and we must find ways to translate resulting judgements into action. Practitioners need to be equipped with a complimentary set of tools for discerning the mere presence of ethical issues and for constructing action amid the panoply of considerations" (Margolis 1998, 420).

Of course, there is no guarantee that the mere availability of philosophical resources such as James’s for enhancing managers’ capabilities will result in their adoption by practitioners. Some theorists have questioned whether it is possible for any philosophy to usefully inform business practices (e.g., Wallis 2012, 69) and others have suggested that the predominant view amongst philosophers of how best to develop theoretical knowledge has alienated it conceptually from the mercantile activity of Western economies (Capaldi 2006). Perhaps the two endeavors are simply too disparate for meaningful engagement, management practice being defined by such actions as setting objectives, organizing, motivating, measuring, and developing professional skills under the press of urgent circumstances (Drucker 2011), and philosophy a matter of contemplating abstract ideas at leisure, and teasing out ambiguities in intricate models of the world.

Yet there are good reasons to suppose that productive engagement between philosophy and management practice is both achievable and desirable. Despite evident differences, they share much common ground. As Peter Koslowski observes, “both deal with human action, its quality of goal attainment and … the need for the coordination of human actions. The governing of oneself and the governing of others is the central concern of philosophical ethics and of political philosophy. Managing oneself and managing others is the goal of management” (2010a, 4). On my reading, “governing” and “managing oneself” are sound representations of James’s intent in his work on ethics and habit, and his insights there seem capable of informing empathetic interactions with others. Furthermore “the practice of management cannot be separated from the practice of conceptualizing what needs to be done and from understanding the consequences this will have,” as Mihaela Kelemen points out (2011a, 7). For a manager to assess her circumstances, determine an appropriate course of action from a range of alternatives, and then plan, enact, and learn from it necessitates a series of conceptual arrangements and assessments. No other field of theory has yet produced a definitive account of how best to go about this activity. Management styles, tools, and techniques come and go, and modern corporations tend to adopt first one kind of training or ‘framework’ and then another, but management training has not settled on any one, reliable approach.

It might be that philosophy holds an advantage over such provisional, one-dimensional management devices as organizational culture surveys and ‘the quality movement’ (where managerial emphasis is placed on process controls in pursuit of product and corporate success) by dint of its broad scope, diverse methodologies, and historically authoritative standing. The case for incorporating any particular management approach into an organization’s training and development program often rests on its being underpinned by analytic, data-driven research that is claimed to ‘prove’ its value (often in terms of profitability alone). Yet such research tends to involve tightly-defined and small-scale theses, methodological standardization, and testing under controlled conditions, characteristics quite alien to the messy realities of management (Vo and Kelemen 2014, 250). Managers alert to the complicated realities of their work, and those who have experienced short-lived frameworks or half-hearted training trends, can become cynical about such tools. By contrast, philosophy need not follow ‘the siren call’ of empirical evidence, or address only observable phenomena, but can instead draw out and address the range of theoretical challenges faced by managers and the variety of ways in which they might be conceived and responded to.

We have seen that James’s pragmatism provides theoretical means for bridging the gap between philosophers and the practitioners of management. Prospects for its adoption in workplaces would be best served by attending to straightforwardly pragmatic factors. For example, it will be necessary to make clear the relevance and richness of pragmatist resources amidst its particular terminology, argumentative style, historical assumptions, and theoretical preconceptions. So, for example, James’s mellifluous and suggestive writing would need to be condensed and modernized, salient points made pithy and approachable for a new audience. In this regard, lessons might be learned from other areas of applied philosophy, and from the numerous forums and technologies being used to expand philosophy’s audience (including, but not limited to, works of ‘popular philosophy’).[[5]](#endnote-5) It might be, too, that philosophers would ‘get a foot in the door’ by engaging with management consultancies and training institutions rather than operating entirely from universities.

Moreover, pragmatist philosophers of management will need to remain mindful that they will meet resistance from those corporate leaders wary of thinking that promotes questioning rather than conformance, and sensitivity to context over blanket application of rules. While company leaders often profess appreciation for original thinking amongst their employees, they realize that it makes top-down decisions more difficult to implement and their consequences harder to predict. In short, training managers to attend more carefully to the ways that they think and the nuanced circumstances defining their work can make managing them more difficult, and might even threaten the interests of organizational superiors. The case for pragmatism’s adoption by corporations will have to be carefully framed and utterly convincing. Otherwise, the philosophers will be left to chat amongst themselves.

**Conclusion**

The organization theorist Edward Lawler has argued that the ‘usefulness’ of any field of organizational study rests on satisfying two criteria: contributing to the body of knowledge comprising the academic discipline *and* improving practitioners’ understanding of organizations, thereby promoting improved practices (1999). Although “the potential American pragmatism holds for informing how scholars and practitioners understand, analyze, and ‘improve’ forms of organization and management to the benefit of human experience is, with some notable exceptions, unrealized,” as Kelemen and Nick Rumens contend, a recent rush of publications seems to suggest that this is changing (Rumens and Kelemen 2013, 4). Two recently-published essay collections apply pragmatism to a range of topics in organization and management, whilst others contain a chapter or two devoted to justifying and encouraging such a project.[[6]](#endnote-6) There has been a long-running and colorful debate about pragmatism’s influence upon, and relevance to, the management of public resources.[[7]](#endnote-7) Numerous articles and chapters have been published in organization studies discussing management-related topics from a pragmatist perspective.[[8]](#endnote-8) Other publications have covered topics more obviously within the remit of philosophy of management, applying pragmatist resources to such projects as defining management, developing business strategies, justifying the quality movement, conducting human resources management in ethical ways, determining corporate social responsibilities, and constructing corporate leadership models.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Yet there is little evidence that these publications have done much to promote the relevance of philosophy for the conduct of management, or to bring philosophers and managers into a dialogue that might alter how management is taught and practiced. Indeed, they generally fail even to acknowledge any need to reconcile a preoccupation with rigor with a concern for how theory might be applied. It is as though pragmatism’s ideological preoccupation with action is deemed sufficient to demonstrate its relevance for management practice, leaving it to managers to locate germane ideas and modes of application. Like philosophers of management from other schools, pragmatists have tended to begin by defining “management problems” or “issues” or “concepts” in abstract terms, cleansed of the situational messiness that characterizes them in practice, and then to deploy conceptual resources to understand or solve them. For pragmatists as for philosophers of management from other schools, processes of predefinition and conceptualization are sources of abstraction, and even the most perspicacious, resourceful, and elegantly-expressed theory cannot undo its methodological biases.

Given the classical pragmatists’ preoccupation with locating practices for making the best of an open-ended future, and the extent to which management practices influence the economic, social, environmental, and personal wellbeing of those living in modern economies, the failure so far to encourage dialogue between philosophers and managers is significant. As Vo and Kelemen suggest of Dewey, James too would “see organization studies as a vehicle to help people lead better lives” (2014, 242). James’s version of pragmatism addresses both methodologically and practically those matters crucial for a philosophy providing “the opportunity to reconceptualise the divide between theory and practice in management studies in a theoretically robust and practically useful way” (Kelemen 2011b).[[10]](#endnote-10) For him, our most meaningful problems are always to do with how we think about and respond to our urgent and particular circumstances, rather than with how we conceptualize *kinds* of issues, and conscious life is largely occupied with the particulars of context, problem, and consequence. Philosophy should concern itself above all with alerting people to the opportunities contained within their circumstances for thinking in fresh and productive ways. As such, James encourages careful attention towards the particularity and dynamism of one’s own experience, rather than towards simplifying theoretical constructs. The most specific tools that he provides—those to do with habit, ethics, conceptualization, and so on—are general resources for addressing momentary, specific, unique circumstances. The gap between philosopher and manager is bridged not just by the philosopher’s ‘immersing herself in the details’ of a particular management problem, but by providing guidance for the manager’s own thinking of the details long after the philosopher has returned to her office.

1. **Notes**

. John Dewey’s pragmatist analyses of early-twentieth century socio-economic and institutional arrangements reflect this same preoccupation, and derive in large part from the work of Peirce and James. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . This general characterization ought not to detract from James’s social progressivism. From the mid-1890s until the end of his life, James participated in public debates about issues as diverse as American imperialism, regulation of big business, care of the mentally ill, lynching, homogenisation of university teaching qualifications, medical licensing, and the status of heterodox approaches to science and medicine, amongst others. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . There are exceptions. A few philosophers have pursued “fields where philosophy can be of use for management as a resource for improving the performance of the firm” or laid out theoretical resources that they believe might be helpful for managers in better performing their duties. (See Koslowski 2010b, 7 for a discussion.) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . James considered in depth the myriad methodological problems posed by introspection, particularly the faithfulness of introspective reports to experience’s immediacy. Finally, though, he insisted on the fallible utility of his method, finding no alternative for accessing experience without prior conceptualisation. (*James 19811*, 191) Nonetheless, he remains careful to avoid drawing universal conclusions on the basis of introspective reports alone. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Examples include philosophy-themed podcasts and videos, such journals of popular philosophy as *Philosophy Now* and *Philosophy Today*, philosophy blogs, *The School of Life*’s resources, and philosophical columns in newspapers, such as “The Stone” in *The New York Times*. Lessons can be taken also from the ways in which various psychological theories have been adapted in staff selection tools, ‘cultural inventories,’ tests of leadership potential, and so on. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . For the former, see Kelemen and Rumens 2013 and Khalil 2004, and for the latter, Helin et al. 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . See for example Snider 2000, Hildebrand 2004, Shields 2008, Whetsell and Shields 2011, Hildebrand 2008, Brom and Shields 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . See for example Brandi and Elkjaer 2013, Siegers 2013, Taylor and Bell 2013, Bidet and Chave 2015, Parmar, Phillips, and Freeman 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . See respectively Kelemen and Rumens 2008, Nonaka and Zhu 2012, Lorino 2015, Watson 2010, Margolis and Walsh 2003, Wood and Dibben 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . Wick and Freeman see the rapprochement in different terms: “For the pragmatist, the criterion of usefulness applies across two dimensions that the positivist views as sharply distinct: epistemological (is this information credible, well-informed, reliable?) and normative (does this help advance our projects?)” (1998, 130).

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