

JAMES'S PRAGMATIC MAXIM AND THE "ELASTICITY" OF MEANING

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1. Introduction

To the extent that William James had an account of 'meaning',¹ it is best captured in his "pragmatic maxim", which takes perhaps its "canonical" form as follows:

To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what effects of a conceivably practical kind the object may involve – what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, then, is for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all.²

However, James's maxim has been subject to a number of conflicting interpretations,³ and the following will argue that some of these interpretive difficulties stem from the fact that (1) James seriously understates the differences between his own views and those presented by Peirce in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear", and (2) James's understanding of the maxim typically ties meaning to truth, but since James (or at least the James of *Pragmatism*) takes "truth" talk to stretch from "temporary" to "absolute" truth, a similar 'elasticity' can be found in his conception of meaning. However, this 'elasticity' is found in our everyday talk of meaning as well, and James manages to capture it in a more cohesive way than more contemporary accounts that often try to do so by positing two completely distinct types of meaning or content.

2. James's pragmatic maxim and its 'Peircian' interpretation

While there are many ways James's maxim could be understood, the most obvious way would be to do so in terms of the maxim presented by Peirce in his seminal paper, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear", namely, "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object" (Peirce 1878: 132). After all, the wording these canonical statements of Peirce's and James's maxims is extremely similar, and right after presenting his version, James describes it not only as "the principle of pragmatism" but also as "the principle of Peirce".⁴ Of course, the interpretation of Peirce's own version of the maxim is up for debate,

and Peirce arguably changed his understanding of his maxim over the years,⁵ but one popular, and natural, way to understand the “effects” in the Peircian maxim above is as the *sensible* effects. As Peirce puts it right before presenting his version of the maxim, “Our idea of anything is our idea of its sensible effects” (Peirce 1878: 132).

The Peircian maxim is thus often read as amounting to a form of verificationism,⁶ and Peirce gives us good reason for such a reading. Not only does he tie meaning exclusively to sensation (or at least “sensible effects”) in the passage above, but (like the logical positivists) he thought that his preferred account of meaning would show most metaphysical discourse to be “meaningless gibberish” so that what would be left for philosophy would be “a series of problems capable of investigation by the observational methods of the true sciences” (Peirce 1905a: 338). Further (and crucially), perhaps the clearest applications of the maxim that Peirce gives in that original paper, his discussion of transubstantiation, has a distinctly verificationist feel. In particular, he argues that since “we can . . . mean nothing by wine but what has certain effects, direct or indirect, upon our senses”, it follows that “talk of something as having all the sensible characters of wine, yet being in reality blood, is senseless jargon” (Peirce 1878: 131). As we shall soon see, James had a very different understanding of how the maxim would apply to the topic of transubstantiation, and that difference will give us a compelling reason to think that he must have something different from this straightforwardly ‘Peircian’ version of the maxim in mind.

One pressing problem for the Peircian maxim as a reading of James is that it seems poorly suited for explaining the meaning of *normative*, particularly *ethical* statements.⁷ Statements about the way things ought to be (rather than how they are) seem to have no predictive import, which would suggest, on this Peircian reading of the pragmatic maxim, that no practical consequences follow from them. There may be, for instance, no sensible effects following from the truth of a statement like “eating meat is always wrong” since, after all, most people could continue to enjoy eating meat forever in spite of its being wrong. Positivists were often willing to embrace this consequence (suggesting, say, the moral discourse had ‘emotive’, rather than cognitive, content),⁸ and while Peirce was occasionally ambivalent about ethical inquiry,⁹ ruling out the meaningfulness of ethical discourse from the start would be quite alien to James’s approach to philosophy.¹⁰

With this in mind, we should remember that while James claimed that his maxim was essentially Peirce’s, he also suggested that the maxim should be “expressed more broadly” than Peirce did (P: 259; EPh: 124), and while pragmatism seems uncomfortably close to verificationism when one understands “practical consequences” to simply be Peirce’s “sensible effects”, there are good reasons to think that James never understood “practical consequences” in such a restrictive fashion.

3. James’s ‘two-pronged’ version of the maxim

When comparing James’s and Peirce’s canonical statements of their maxims, it is noteworthy that while Peirce originally presents an explication of what makes up the content of our beliefs in terms of a single (albeit complex) factor, namely, the “effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have”, James’s canonical version elaborates on these ‘effects of a conceivably practical kind’ in an explicitly ‘two-pronged’ way, stressing that they involve not only a sensory component (“what sensations we are to expect”), but also a practical component (“what reactions we must prepare”) (P: 259; EPh: 124; P: 29).¹¹ This two-pronged presentation of the maxim as including both a sensory and a practical component is typical of James. So, for instance, in *Baldwin’s Dictionary* he characterizes pragmatism as the doctrine that “the whole ‘meaning’ of a conception expresses itself in practical consequences, consequences either in the shape of conduct to be recommended, or in that of experiences to

be expected, if the conception be true” (EPh: 94), while in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* he writes, “To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, we need then only consider what sensations, immediate or remote, we are conceivably to expect from it, and what conduct we must prepare in case the object should be true” (VRE: 351). In fact, of the two, he often seems to treat the practical component the more important, writing that “the conduct [the thought] is fitted to produce” is its “sole significance” (VRE: 351),¹² and that “the ultimate test for us of what a truth means is indeed the conduct it dictates or inspires” (P: 259; EPh: 124). As we shall see, this reflects a general emphasis in his thinking about the relation between conception and action goes back to his early papers such as “Reflex Action and Theism”, where he insists that “perception and thinking are only there for behavior’s sake” (WB: 92).

We can see what difference that adding this second component can make when we compare James’s and Peirce’s discussions of transubstantiation. As we saw earlier, Peirce explicitly states that the pragmatic maxim shows that debates about transubstantiation are without significance.¹³ James, however, takes the opposite line, arguing that in debates about the Eucharist “the substance idea” would have “momentous pragmatic value”:

Since the accidents of the wafer don’t change in the Lord’s supper, and yet it has become the very body of Christ, it must be that the change is in the substance solely. The bread-substance must have been withdrawn, and the divine substance substituted miraculously without altering the immediate sensible properties. But tho these don’t alter, a tremendous difference has been made, no less a one than this, that we who take the sacrament, now feed upon the very substance of divinity. The substance-notion breaks into life, with tremendous effect, if once you allow that substances can separate from their accidents, and exchange these latter.

(P: 46–47)

James, rather unhelpfully, doesn’t say what this “tremendous effect” is supposed to be, but it is clear that if the consecrated host really were “the very substance of divinity”, this would make a tremendous difference to the behaviors appropriate around it, and these differences are reflected in a number of contrasts between Catholic and Protestant religious practice. So, for instance, rather than throwing them away, Catholics must preserve in the tabernacle any communion wafers that remain after the mass (since the consecrated wafers are supposed to *literally* be the body of Christ), they must bow to the altar upon entering the church (since the body of Christ may *literally* be there in the tabernacle) and so forth.¹⁴ “What sensations we are to expect” will be the same on both the Catholic and Protestant interpretation of the Eucharist, but “what reactions we must prepare” can be very different.

However, while it is clear that James takes the maxim to involve both a sensory and a practical component, there is an important ambiguity in James’s view, one that shows up most clearly in his presentation of the practical component. For instance, when James ties “what a truth means” to “the conduct it dictates or inspires” (P: 259; EPh: 124) he seems to waver between something descriptive and dispositional (the conduct the truth ‘inspires’) and something more normative (the conduct it ‘dictates’). This wavering is typical, and generally his discussions of this second component seem to hover between the descriptive and the normative,¹⁵ and both sorts of reading can be applied to his talk of the conduct “recommended” (EPh: 94) by the thought, or the conduct it “calls for” (EPh: 124) is “fitted to produce” (VRE: 351; EPh: 124), or “we must prepare”¹⁶ if it is true. This isn’t (or isn’t *just*) careless exposition on James part, and there are good reasons for James to make space for both the dispositional and normative versions of the maxim, but before we see why, we should look at each of these readings in turn.

4. The “dispositional” and “normative” readings of the maxim

The first reading of the maxim’s practical component is dispositional, where this aspect of the meaning of a belief¹⁷ is simply the actions it would cause us to perform, that is, how we would be disposed to behave if we had the belief in question. This can lead to perhaps the standard explanation of how James’s maxim differs from the original ‘Peircian’ version: namely, Peirce understands a proposition’s meaning in terms of what follows from its truth, while James understands a proposition’s meaning in terms of what follows from its being believed.¹⁸

James, however, never put things this way himself, and his formulations of the maxim invariably tie content to the practical effects of a conception’s *truth* rather than its being *believed*.¹⁹ However, what James frequently *does* do is apply the maxim to give the content of a *belief* or *thought* rather than an abstract proposition.²⁰ His focus was always on the psychological states of particular people, and his pragmatic maxim is very much tied to his views on the nature of belief.

While the embedding of the pragmatic maxim within a theory of belief is downplayed in *Pragmatism* itself, it is clear in his earlier papers like “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results” where, immediately before presenting the maxim, James writes:

Beliefs, in short, are really rules for action; and the whole function of thinking is but one step in the production of habits of action. If there were any part of a thought that made no difference in the thought’s practical consequences, then that part would be no proper element of the thought’s significance. Thus the same thought may be clad in different words; but if the different words suggest no different conduct, they are but outer accretions, and have no part in the thought’s meaning. If, however, they determine conduct differently, they are essential elements of the significance. . . . Thus to develop a thought’s meaning we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce; that conduct is for us its sole significance. And the tangible fact at the root of all our thought distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice.

(P: 259)²¹

From this ‘functional’ point of view, something like the dispositional reading of the practical component (indeed, of the whole maxim) can seem natural: the content of a mental state is a function of (1) the experiences that cause it and (2) the behaviors that it causes. As James puts it in his “Reflex Action and Theism”:

The structural unit of the nervous system is in fact a triad, neither of whose elements has any independent existence. The sensory impression exists only for the sake of awaking the central process of reflection, and the central process of reflection exists only for the sake of calling forth the final act. All action is thus re-action upon the outer world; and the middle stage of consideration or contemplation or thinking is only a place of transit, the bottom of a loop, both whose ends have their point of application in the outer world.

(WB: 92)

In essence, the content of the second stage of the ‘reflex arc’ is understood in terms the first and third.²²

Adding even this ‘dispositional’ version of the practical component to the maxim clearly makes it better suited for treating normative claims as meaningful than the more purely ‘sensory’

version of the maxim. For instance, since one's ethical beliefs can effect one's behavior in a fairly straightforward way, explaining how ethical beliefs are at least *meaningful* wouldn't be a problem. James seems to affirm this connection even in earlier papers like "Rationality, Activity and Faith", where he insists that the question "Is this a moral world?" is meaningful in spite of dealing with something non-phenomenal because "any question is full of meaning to which, as here, contrary answers lead to contrary behavior" (James 1882: 82; WB: 86).

That said, tying the meaning of our ethical beliefs merely to how they *dispose* us to act seems to leave the content of those beliefs overly *subjective*. We often do act in ways we take to be wrong, and on the dispositional (and thus 'subjective') reading, these 'incontinent' actions would be reflected in the content of the beliefs themselves, so that, say, my belief that you shouldn't eat meat may come out as meaning that you shouldn't eat meat unless it looks *really* tasty. This seems to leave out an important part of the particularly *normative* quality of our ethical beliefs, namely the they are meant to describe how we think that we *should* act, not merely how we *do* act. Fortunately for James, there is a second way that the 'practical' component of pragmatic maxim could be understood, namely, in explicitly normative (and thus 'objective') rather than dispositional terms. This reading ties meaning to the effects that a belief *should* have on the believer's behavior, rather than what affects it merely *would* have. As mentioned above, James frequently characterizes the practical component in normative terms, so, for instance, appeals to the actions "called for" by a particular truth seems better to fit the normative than the dispositional characterization.²³

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Such a normative understanding of the maxim also seems presupposed by James's application of the maxim to the views of other philosophers, as when he tries to explain the meaning of the idealist's appeal to the 'Absolute' in terms of its giving us an *entitlement* to take 'moral holidays'.²⁴ James suggested in *Pragmatism* that there are no differences in the "experiences predicted" by the idealists and their non-idealist opponents, and that the differences between the two show up in the practical effects of adopting idealism or not. In particular, given that the world's salvation was, for the idealist, inevitable, their taking the occasional "moral holiday" would be "in order" (P: 41). If this were a *dispositional* claim, James would obviously be on shaky ground, as there isn't any real evidence that absolute idealists were any more disposed to take moral holidays than the rest of us. Further, many of them flatly rejected James's suggestion when he presented it in *Pragmatism* (MT: 35). However, if the practical effects are understood in normative terms, then the actual dispositions of the idealists would be less relevant, and the point would be that, if their beliefs were true, they would "*have a right*" (P: 41, emphasis added) to take such 'holidays' even if they weren't inclined to do so (and even if the rest of us are just as likely to take such holidays, our non-idealistic worldview may not entitle us to them).

The normative reading seems, of course, best suited for explaining the content of ethical discourse, since ethical norms are among those norms that can be built directly into the analysis of meaning. On the normative reading, the meaning of "eating meat is always wrong" could be spelt out in terms of what the belief actually "calls for", namely, our never eating meat, and not, say, only eating meat when it looks really tasty, even if the latter is what most people would be disposed to do if their competing desires were strong enough.²⁵

Indeed, while this dispositional/normative split has been discussed here with respect to the practical component of the maxim, it can be found with the *sensory* component as well. In particular, we can see a similar split between (1) the experiences that *do* lead us to form a particular belief, and (2) the experiences that *should* lead us to form it. If I'm disposed to think that a cat is in front of me when a raccoon passes in front of me in the dark, the dispositional meaning of "cat" will include such badly illuminated raccoons, but the normative meaning will not. I *shouldn't* believe that there is a cat in front of me in that context, as my disposition to correct the belief if the lighting improves shows.

Consequently, we have two ways of understanding each of the sensory and practical components of James’s maxim, but rather than needing to argue that James must ‘really’ mean just one of these two, a good case can be made for him being entitled to help himself to both.

5. The ‘temporary’ and ‘absolute’ content of our beliefs

Both the dispositional and normative readings of the pragmatic maxim have something to be said for them, and the fact that James’s formulations often straddle the two may be because an adequate account of meaning must include both. The purely ‘dispositional’ and the ‘normative’ meanings have a role to play, and depending on which of the two you emphasize, you get a more ‘subjective’ or ‘objective’ conception of meaning.

In particular, the formulations of the maxim that James typically gives tend to be in terms of what follow from the *truth* of an “object” (VRE: 351), “concept” (MT: 37; SPP: 37), “alternative” (P: 29), “notion” (P: 28), or “world formula” (P: 30), or simply from a “truth” (P: 259; EPh: 124). However, James’s talk of “truth” is itself notoriously elastic, and in *Pragmatism* he uses the term to talk about everything from the most “temporary truth” (the beliefs that the subject *currently* takes to be justified) all the way to the “absolute truth” (the beliefs that the subject would be justified in having if they achieved a stable end to inquiry into the relevant questions).²⁶ The ‘temporary’ and ‘absolute’ understandings of “truth” give us two versions of the pragmatic maxim, so, for instance, when we take a claim of James’s such as:

The pragmatic method . . . is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true?

(P: 28)

If “true” in this passage is read as “temporarily true”, we get the dispositional reading of the maxim, while if it is read as “absolutely true”, we get something like the normative reading.

The meaning of a subject’s belief can thus be taken in either an ‘objective’ or a ‘subjective’ fashion, with *both* being understood, ultimately, in terms of the pragmatic maxim. The subjective meaning is tied to the experiences which actually would lead the subject to form the belief and the actions it actually would lead them to perform, while the objective meaning reflects the experience which *should* lead them to form the belief and the actions that they *should* perform if they had believed it. So for instance, the ‘temporary’ meaning of “cat” is understood in terms of those things that I currently take to be cats, and the behaviors that those things currently bring about in me, while the ‘absolute’ meaning of “cat” is understood in terms of those things that I *should* take to be cats, and those behaviors that I should engage in around cats. In James’s case, both of these “shoulds” are, crucially, understood in terms of extended rational inquiry.²⁷ To return to our example earlier, the fact that I *shouldn’t* call the poorly eliminated raccoon a “cat” is understood in terms of the fact that, if I were to investigate that object further, I would eventually conclude that it was a raccoon rather than a cat.

While the more temporary/subjective meanings are bound to be idiosyncratic,²⁸ the absolute/objective meanings are likely to be shared since the experiences that *should* lead people to have a given belief is likely to be more similar the ones that actually *do*. Inquiry is a process that itself values agreement (“the satisfaction of hearing you corroborate me”; MT: 118), and so the ‘absolute’ meanings of different inquirers are likely to converge with each other. If I’m inclined to call a pain in my thigh “arthritis”, the temporary meaning for my “arthritis” beliefs will include such thigh pain, but given my disposition to accept correction from my doctor, a

more objective meaning for my beliefs will tie the meaning of arthritis to the more accepted social use.²⁹

Of course, the suggestion that there are two sorts of meaning is common in philosophy, and distinctions like that between sense and reference,³⁰ narrow content and wide content,³¹ functional role and truth conditions³² all pick out similar distinctions, with ‘temporary meaning’ doing the work that senses, narrow contents and functional roles are expected to do (explaining behavior), and ‘absolute meaning’ doing the work expected of referents, wide contents, and truth conditions (explaining shared concepts and communication). There is no question for James about which of the two is ‘really’ meaning since, for James, “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),³³ and our interests are bound to favor different conceptions of meaning in different contexts. When we are interested in predicting and explaining behavior, the actions that the belief actually causes would be the most relevant, and ‘temporary meanings’ capture this (in just the way that ‘senses’, ‘narrow contents’ and ‘functional roles’ all hope to). On the other hand, when we are more interested in coordinating information about a shared world, it is the ‘absolute’ meanings that play the central role (in just the way that referents, wide contents and truth conditions are expected to).

However, the temporary/absolute distinction has the advantage over these ‘two-factor’ accounts in that unlike those other theories of content where the two components are so different that one might wonder what holds them together as types of “meaning”, for James there is an essential unity behind the multiplicity. The objective meanings are understood in terms of the extension of the very practices of inquiry that produced the subjective ones.³⁴ The subjective meanings reflect the current state of inquiry, while objective meanings reflect how we would act if we inquired on the relevant matters for long enough.

Indeed, one could argue that James’s account allows more of a *continuum* than most narrow/wide distinctions, so we could have various degrees of ‘communal’ meanings standing in between current idiosyncratic meanings and the fully objective ones.³⁵ (Hence the sense in which meaning is ‘elastic’ rather than ‘ambiguous’.) So while the most temporary meaning for the beliefs that involve “arthritis” may involve the pains in my joints, and a more objective meaning may correspond to expert usage, there may be a still more objective meaning that corresponds to what the experts *should* be settling on (given that there is always a possibility that the current experts are mistaken in their usage). Having something intermediate like this would be especially important since in some cases there may not be anything that fills the more absolute role, and so the more social/temporary meaning may be the only meaning that we would ultimately have.³⁶

In conclusion, then, while James’s writings on meaning remain underdeveloped, his pragmatic maxim provides the basis for a flexible account of content that can both serve our purposes in explaining behavior and coordinating information about a shared world.

Notes

- 1 Which I distinguish here from a general story about how thoughts managed to be ‘about’ external objects. For a discussion of this (admittedly related) aspect of James’s thought, see Jackman (1998, forthcoming).
- 2 This passage appears verbatim in P (259), EPh (124), and P (29). Virtually the same wording also appears in VRE: 351 (with ‘conduct’ replacing ‘reactions’).
- 3 For a discussion of some of these, see Jackman (2016).
- 4 The maxim is so described in P (259), VRE (351), EPh (124), and P (29), and in each of these cases he calls back specifically to Peirce (1878).

- 5 For a discussion of this, see Hookway (2004), Misak (2013), and Atkin (2016). In spite of Peirce’s later revisions, the version from ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’ has had by far the largest impact, and by the ‘Peircian’ understanding of the maxim, I will be referring to this influential 1878 presentation, not to Peirce’s comparatively neglected later thoughts on the topic.
- 6 See, e.g., Lewis (1934: 65), Carnap (1936: 123), Reichenbach (1938: 49), Feigl (1949: 9), Quine (1951: 37), and Ayer (1968: 45). For later accounts stressing the differences between the Peircian and the verificationist maxims, see Misak (1995), Hookway (2004), and Atkin (2016) – though these all lean heavily on work Peirce produced *after* ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’.
- 7 Like the verification principle, the Peircian version of the pragmatic maxim, with its forward-looking emphasis on sensible effects, has trouble explicating statements that seem to be about the *past*, but this worry will apply to all versions of the maxim, including James’s. For an extended discussion of this, see Jackman (2016).
- 8 See, e.g., Ayer (1936/1946).
- 9 In particular, he suggests that moral questions weren’t proper topics for the sorts of objective inquiry he had in mind, and that we were better off just trusting our instincts in moral matters. See, e.g., the first lecture of Peirce (1898); though see also Misak (2002) for the suggestion that he wasn’t really being forthright about his own views here).
- 10 Especially since James was keen to insist that pragmatism amounted to ‘a method only’ (P: 31), and that it allowed us to clarify philosophical disputes without presupposing what the correct answer to those disputes would be. This is not, of course, to say, like Talisse and Aiken (2008: 14–15), that James couldn’t come up with particular answers to philosophical questions once the method is applied, just that the method doesn’t rule out answers to substantive questions from the start.
- 11 Atkin (2016: 33, 46) notes that Peirce’s talk of ‘practical bearings’ can seem like a gesture toward the practical component, but the ‘practical bearings’ in Peirce’s canonical statement serve as a restriction on what sensible effects may be relevant, not as something additional to them.
- 12 This connection is made verbatim in P (259) and EPh (124) as well.
- 13 Peirce (1878: 131–32).
- 14 One should also note that while James presents this as an argument for the *meaningfulness* of the Catholic position, it is not necessarily an argument *in favor* of it, and certainly not, as Misak and Talisse (2019) suggest, meant to be a ‘decisive’ one.
- 15 See Gale (2010: 110) for a useful discussion of the ‘normative’ vs. the ‘causal’ phrasings of the maxim in James.
- 16 P (259) and EPh (124) for reactions and VRE (351) for conduct.
- 17 James also talked of the meaning (and truth) of a concept, notion or idea, but notably, focused on psychological rather than more ‘abstract’ bearers of meaning. In what follows I’ll typically focus on belief.
- 18 The tradition of reading James this way goes back to Lovejoy 1908 (esp. pp. 6–10, 13, 26); for recent versions of this reading, see Bacon (2012: 28), Brandom (2011: 20), De Waal (2005: 21), Hookway (2010: 8), Misak (2013: 58), Misak and Talisse (2019), Rescher (2000: 9), Suckiel (2006: 33), and Talisse and Aiken (2008: 11–13).
- 19 See, e.g., VRE (351), EPh (94), P (28–30), MT (37), and SPP (37).
- 20 James’s skepticism about the value of positing propositions as intermediaries between our thought and talk and the realities we think and talk about is well known (see, e.g., MY: 151), and it seriously misstates James’s position to claim that his formulation of Peirce’s principle ‘is essentially a meaning criterion for propositions’ (Madden 1953: 66).
- 21 Virtually the same passage appears in James (EPh: 123–24), and James puts the maxim in a much the same context in a very similar passage in James (VRE: 351).
Peirce presents a similar picture of belief in ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’ according to which different beliefs are distinguished according to the different ‘rules of action’ they produce (Peirce 1878: 130). Unfortunately, Peirce doesn’t fully connect it to the discussion of meaning in that paper. (Since the Catholic and Protestant understanding of the Eucharist don’t produce ‘the same rule of action’, they arguably shouldn’t be the same even by Peirce’s own lights.) Indeed, Peirce’s more verificationist presentation of the maxim may just have been a temporary, if influential, aberration on his part, and it may be that something more like the two pronged conception was in play when Peirce and James (both under the influence of Bain [1859]), discussed the material that went on to become ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’ in the ‘metaphysical club’ meetings of the early 1870s. (This might explain why James tended to understate the differences between his own position and the views Peirce actually presented in the published paper.)

- 22 Though James does later admit that this picture of the reflex arc is a little too simplistic (see WB: 192–93; PP; C5: 32).
- 23 It should be noted that, in spite of originally presenting the maxim as tying meaning exclusively to sensory effects in ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’, Peirce himself ultimately comes to present the maxim in much this way, saying that the maxim ties meaning to the actions that we rationally ought to perform (Peirce 1903: 134–35, 1905: 346). Ironically, around the time of these later reformulations, Peirce claimed, in his characteristically uncharitable fashion, that it was *James’s* maxim that tied meaning exclusively to ‘the sensational side of experience’; excerpt from a 1904 letter from Peirce quoted in Ladd-Franklin (1916: 718).
- 24 He has in mind here writers like Royce (1885) and Bradley (1893).
- 25 Of course, this only follows if there *is* something that we ought to do, and James ultimately gives us reason to doubt that this may be the case (for a discussion of this, see Jackman 2019), but the point is that the *semantic* theory doesn’t pre-judge the question, so that pragmatism remains ‘a method only’ (P: 31).
- 26 See Jackman (2021).
- 27 With these two components in play, it might seem as if we could have a ‘mixed’ ascription that understood, say, the sensory component in dispositional terms and the practical component in normative terms, but it’s not clear that, even if we did want to do this for some reason, this would be a coherent option on James’s view, since the process of inquiry by which the components are refined is bound to refine both.
- 28 While the dispositional reading seems to give *everyone’s* belief at least a slightly different content (since no belief will have all of the same consequences for any two people), contemporary defenders of functional role semantics (see Block 1986) seem willing to bite this bullet, and insist that for at least one component of meaning, similarity (rather than identity) of meaning may be all that we need (for a discussion of this, see Jackman 2020), and there is little reason to think that James couldn’t make the same move, especially since he has absolute meanings to appeal to when coordination must be explained.
- 29 The example is, of course, familiar from Burge (1979). We see, of course, a similar split on the practical level. The temporary meaning of my arthritis beliefs may involve rubbing olive oil on the relevant parts of my body, while the more objective meaning may replace this disposition with taking aspirin.
- 30 Frege (1892).
- 31 McGinn (1982).
- 32 Block (1987).
- 33 James can thus ultimately be understood as a type of contextualist about meanings the way he is for everything else, and would likely be sympathetic with Lycan’s ‘Double Indexical Theory of Meaning’, where ‘MEANING =def Whatever aspect of linguistic activity happens to interest *me now*’ (Lycan 1984: 272).
- 34 And if it is for just this reason that James claims that the pragmatic definition of truth applies to *both* absolute and temporary truth (ML: 433).
- 35 James could thus give a unified account of not only the contemporary narrow/wide distinction, but also that between social and objective meaning that Sawyer (2018) posits as that between ‘linguistic meanings’ and ‘concepts’. See also Burge’s related distinction between ‘conventional meaning’ and ‘cognitive value’ (Burge 1986).
- 36 Our ethical beliefs might be a candidate for this.

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