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9 James's theory of truth

The pronouncements on the nature of truth in *Pragmatism* evoked howls of indignation (e.g., Russell 1945) as well as exaggerated praise. The howls (and some of the praise) came from readers who thought that James identified truth as whatever it gives us "satisfaction" to believe: the critics believed that this amounted to irrationalism, while the enthusiasts thought that the idea that truth is jibing with reality *deserves* to be abandoned (Rorty 1982), and the Italian pragmatist Giovanni Papini thought that irrationalism is a good thing (Perry 1935, 2:570–9).

The howlers and the enthusiasts were careless readers, however. They virtually ignored what James wrote about truth elsewhere. But it is not easy to say in a few words what James *did* think about truth, for, as I shall argue, James's view developed in complicated ways as he worked out his metaphysical system. In the present essay, I isolate the elements in James's theory of truth and show how they were linked by James's metaphysics of radical empiricism.

Here is a rough outline: I shall first describe two strains in James's thought: (1) A Peircean strain (as we shall see, this strain is quite strong, but James's critics ignore it). (2) The *un*-Peircean idea that truth is partly shaped by our interests. After that, I examine two more strains which reflect the metaphysics of radical empiricism, even though in *Pragmatism* James (unsuccessfully) attempted to avoid presupposing it. These are (3) a realist strain, summed up in the claim that truth involves agreement with reality, although that agreement is not one single relation, and (4) an empiricist strain, summed up in the claim that "truth *happens* to an idea." I also describe the way in which these strains reappear in the *Meaning of Truth*. My purpose here is

almost entirely exegetical; nevertheless, I shall close with a brief comment on James's theory.

I THE PEIRCEAN STRAIN

Peirce famously defined truth as "the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate" (5.407).¹ In spite of the many undeniable differences between James's metaphysical system and Peirce's, variants of this definition abound in James's writing.

They appear long before *Pragmatism*. In the concluding paragraph of the relatively early (1878) "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence," we find the characteristically Jamesean idea that human beings "help to create" truth combined with the Peircean idea that the true judgments are the ones that we are fated to believe, not at any given instant, but in the long run, on the basis of "the total upshot of experience." Let us look at this passage closely. Here is how the paragraph opens:

I, for my part, cannot escape the consideration forced upon me at every turn, that the knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foot-hold anywhere, and passively reflecting an order that he comes upon and finds simply existing. The knower is an actor, and coefficient of the truth on one side, whilst on the other he registers the truth which he helps to create. Mental interests, hypotheses, postulates, insofar as they are bases for human action – action which to a great extent transforms the world – help to *make* the truth which they declare. (*EPh*, 21)

Here the idea that we help to make the truth is spelled out in an innocuous way: our actions partially determine what will happen, and hence what will be true of the world. (In his later writings James will propose a more controversial sense in which we help to make truth.) But James is not primarily thinking of historical truth even here. For he immediately raises the question whether "judgments of the *should-be*" can correspond to reality and responds by declaring that this possibility should not be ruled out:

We know so little about the ultimate nature of things, or of ourselves, that it would be sheer folly dogmatically to say that an ideal rational order may not be real. The only objective criterion of reality is coerciveness, in the long run, over thought. . . . By its very essence, the reality of a thought is proportionate to the way it grasps us. Its intensity, its seri-

ousness – its interest, in a word – taking these qualities, not at any given instant, but as shown by the total upshot of experience. If judgments of the *should-be* are fated to grasp us in this way they are what “correspond.” The ancients placed the conception of Fate at the bottom of things – deeper than the gods themselves. “The fate of thought,” utterly barren and indeterminate as such a formula is, is the only unimpeachable regulative Law of Mind. {*EPh*, 21–2}

Although “the reality of a thought” is an unfortunate expression, James is not here confusing how a thought “grabs” us with the reality of things external to us (“the objective criterion of reality” in the sense of the criterion for something’s *being real*). What he means is that the criterion for something’s being real is precisely that we are fated in the long run to believe that it is – that the belief that it is real – where the “it” may be something as large as “an ideal moral order” – exhibits “coerciveness over thought.”

Nor did Peirce himself fail to appreciate the measure of both agreement and disagreement. Hence the curiously grudging tone of the following:

In the first place, there is the definition of James, whose definition differs from mine only in that he does not restrict the “meaning,” that is the ultimate logical interpretant, as I do, to a habit, but allows percepts, that is, complex feelings endowed with compulsiveness, to be such. If he is willing to do this, I do not quite see how he need give any room at all to habit. But practically, his view and mine must, I think, coincide, except where he allows considerations not at all pragmatic to have weight. {5.494}

Peirce refers to James’s interpretation of the pragmatic maxim (which James states in *P*, 28–9)² and the reservation is occasioned by the fact that James allows “[an idea’s] intensity, its seriousness – its interest, in a word” to have weight.

It is true that on Peirce’s view interests also have a role in determining the truth. For Peirce himself writes that the ultimate aim of inquiry is a finished knowledge, which we are to approach in the limit but never actually achieve and which will have an “aesthetic quality” that will be a “free development of the agent’s own aesthetic quality” and will, at the same time, match the “aesthetic quality” of “the ultimate action of experience upon him” (5.136). However, Peirce supposes that all rational inquirers will share this “ultimate aim,” while James believes that more practical and more

immediate aims and sentiments must also play a role in determining what the "ultimate consensus" will be.

Moreover, the sense in which Peirce and James think of our "interests" or our "ultimate aim" as *determining* truth is complex. For both James and Peirce truth is a property of beliefs or judgments, and without thinkers there are no beliefs to be true or false. In that sense, both Peirce and James can agree that being interested in having true beliefs determines whether there will be truth. Moreover, our various interests determine what inquiries we shall pursue, what concepts we will find useful, and so on; that is, they determine *which* truths there will be. But James is willing to draw radical consequences from this last idea, consequences Peirce is not willing to draw because of his scholastic realism, his belief that ultimately only those concepts survive that correspond to real Thirds. The element in James's thought that Peirce objected to is clearly expressed in "The Sentiment of Rationality." There James writes:

... of two conceptions equally fit to satisfy the logical demand, that one which awakens the active impulses, or satisfies other aesthetic demands better than the other, will be accounted the more rational conception, and will deservedly prevail. . . .

... a thorough-going interpretation of the world in terms of mechanical sequence is compatible with its being interpreted teleologically, for the mechanism itself may be designed.

If, then, there were several systems excogitated, equally satisfying to our purely logical needs, they would still have to be passed in review, and approved or rejected by our aesthetic and practical nature. (WB, 66)

But the disagreement – and it is very important – over just this claim of James's should not obscure the fact that James, like Peirce, declares his allegiance to a notion of truth *defined in terms of ultimate consensus*.

But, one might object, the reason that the community of inquirers will agree on a certain opinion in the long run is that the opinion is *true*. "Consensus theory of truth" suggests the reverse, that the opinion to which the community of inquirers will agree in the long run is true because they agree on it. Surely neither Peirce nor James would say that! The answer is that it is virtually a conceptual truth for both Peirce and James that the long-run opinion of those who inquire, the opinion that they are "fated" to hold, is the true one. This is their *constitutive* account of truth. But neither James nor

Peirce thinks that the community of inquirers can simply *decide* what the long-run opinion is to be; both stress how tightly we are coerced by both reality and the body of previous belief.

Any comparison of James with Peirce must face two difficult exegetical questions, however. (1) Although Peirce in places does speak of "the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate," he later glosses this as the opinion which we *would* converge to *if* inquiry were indefinitely continued (5.494). Would James accept a similar modification? And (2) Peirce insists that the convergence to the final opinion which is formulated by a true belief be determined by an "external permanency" (he also writes "by nothing human"). Would James agree?

With respect to the first question, I shall argue that James is talking about an ultimate convergence to be actually, not just counterfactually, brought about. But I shall postpone this discussion until we have examined what James says about truth in *Pragmatism*.

The second question is somewhat easier. Contrary to some misreaders, James *does* insist that a truth must put us in ("fruitful") contact with a reality (*MT*, 104–7). This strain in James's thought is termed (by him) his "epistemological realism," and Perry admits that his famous work "largely ignores" it (Perry 1935, 2:591). Early and late James speaks of "agreement" with reality and even (as in the passage quoted above) of "correspondence" (although he also insists that correspondence is a notion that must be *explained*, not one that can simply function as the *explanation* of the notion of truth [*P*, 96]). However, James also thinks that what kinds of contact with realities will count as "fruitful" depends on our "aesthetic and practical nature." Thus James rejects both the view that agreement with reality is not required for truth and the Peircean view that our convergence to certain beliefs will be forced on us "by nothing human."

While these differences from Peirce are certainly momentous, the points of agreement should not be missed. They share the idea of truth as a final opinion to be converged to and determined (although not, in James's case, exclusively determined) by reality.

The 1878 formulation of what I shall call "James's ultimate consensus theory of truth" that I quoted earlier and the discussion of the objectivity of moral value in "The Sentiment of Rationality" (1879) were written long *before* James arrived at his metaphysics of radical empiricism, which was first published in a series of eleven articles

that appeared in 1903–4. (These essays, plus one other, were posthumously published as *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. In “The Will to Believe” (1896) truth is also defined as “the total drift of thinking” (WB, 24). By 1906, however, the metaphysics of radical empiricism was worked out to his satisfaction, as was his answer to Royce’s claim that pragmatism cannot account for reference to objects outside the mind (Royce 1969, 321–53; this should be read in the light of 1969, 681–709), and the complex architecture of *Pragmatism* reflects the fact that James was now working from within a rich framework of metaphysical ideas. Particularly relevant is the fact that James now distinguishes between “half truths” – the statements we accept at a given time as our best posits – and “absolute truths.” The passage in which the distinction is drawn is difficult to interpret – I shall examine it closely in the course of this essay – but as James later explains it in *The Meaning of Truth*, the claim is that we *do* attain absolute truth, although we can never guarantee that we do; and James posits that pragmatism itself is absolutely true. In *The Meaning of Truth*, absolute truth is characterized by James as membership in an “ideal set” of “formulations” on which there will be “ultimate consensus” (MT, 143–4) – yet another Peircean formulation.³

II JAMES ON “AGREEMENT WITH REALITY”

Pragmatism is deliberately popular in style, so much so that both Royce (who disagreed with James) and Bergson (who largely agreed) hinted that it might be misunderstood (Royce 1971, 511) and Barzun 1983, 107). The lectures which it contains describe pragmatism as a “method” in philosophy, and also more narrowly as “a theory of truth”; yet there is nothing one could call a “definition of truth.” James’s response to Russell, who read James as attempting to give a necessary and sufficient condition for truth, beautifully characterizes the essence of Russell’s approach as well as illustrating James’s own style of thought:

A mathematical term, such as *a*, *b*, *c*, *x*, *y*, *sin*, *log*, is self-sufficient, and terms of this sort, once equated, can be substituted for one another in endless series without error. Mr. Russell . . . seem[s] to think that in our mouth also such terms as “meaning,” “truth,” “belief,” “object,” “definition” are self-sufficients with no context of varying relations that might be further asked about. What a word means is expressed by its definition, isn’t

it? The definition claims to be exact and adequate, doesn't it? Then it can be substituted for the word – since the two are identical – can't it? Then two words with the same definition can be substituted for one another, *n'est-ce pas*? Likewise two definitions of the same word, *nicht wahr*, etc., till it will be indeed strange if you can't convict someone of self-contradiction and absurdity. (MT, 148)

Instead of offering a rigorous definition of truth of this kind, the discussion in *Pragmatism* proceeds by means of a number of examples.

In *Pragmatism* two ideas are stressed: (1) truth is agreement with a reality or realities and (2) "truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events" (P, 97).

James begins his discussion by asking what "agreement" and "reality" mean, in the dictionary definition, when applied to the statement that a true idea is one that "agrees" with reality (P, 96). James writes:

In answering these questions, the pragmatists are more analytic and pains-taking, the intellectualists more offhand and irreflective. The popular notion is that a true idea must copy its reality. Like other popular views, this one follows the analogy of the most usual experience. Our true ideas of sensible things do indeed copy them.⁴

Shut your eyes, and think of yonder clock on the wall, and you get such a true picture or copy of its dial. But your idea of its works, unless you are a clockmaker, is much less of a copy, and yet it passes muster. . . . Even though it [your idea of the works] should shrink to the mere word "works," that word still serves you truly. And when you speak of the "timekeeping function" of the clock, or of its spring's "elasticity," it is hard to see exactly what your ideas can copy.

Here we have the idea of a range of cases of which copying is simply one extreme. The idea that it is empty to think of reference as *one* relation is also a central insight of Wittgenstein's; but, without slighting Wittgenstein, one must point out that James already said that here.

James also says something about verification here (P, 97): *True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot.* But James at once points out that that "general statement" is itself vague: "But what do the words verification and validation themselves signify? They again signify certain practical consequences of the verified and validated idea. It is hard to find any one phrase that characterizes these

consequences better than the ordinary agreement formula – just such consequences being what we have in mind when we say that our ideas ‘agree’ with reality. . . . Such an account is vague and it sounds at first quite trivial, but it has consequences which it will take the rest of my hour to explain” (*P*, 98).

I will examine this lecture (“Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth”) more closely in Section III. But first I want to look at a passage in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, where the point that there is not one single relation between an idea (*any* idea) and what it is about is elaborated with the aid of the metaphysics of radical empiricism:

Suppose me to be sitting here in my library at Cambridge, at ten minutes’ walk from “Memorial Hall,” and to be thinking truly of the latter object. My mind may have before it only the name, or it may have a clear image, or it may have a very dim image of the hall, but such an intrinsic difference in the image makes no difference to its cognitive function. Certain *extrinsic* phenomena, special experiences of conjunction, are what impart to the image, be it what it may, its knowing office.

For instance, if you ask me what hall I mean by my image, and I can tell you nothing; or if I fail to point, or lead you towards the Harvard Delta; or if being led by you I am uncertain whether the hall I see be what I had in mind or not; you would rightly deny that I had “meant” that particular hall at all, even though my mental image might to some degree have resembled it. The resemblance would count in that case as coincidental merely. For all sorts of things of a kind resemble one another in this world, without being held for that reason to take cognizance of one another. (38–9)

In short, mere resemblance never *suffices* for truth. It is what we do with our “images” that makes the difference. “[I]f I can lead you to the hall, and tell you of its history and present uses, if in its presence I feel my idea, however imperfect it may have been, to have led hither, and to be now *terminated*; if the associates of the image and of the felt hall run parallel, so each term of the one corresponds serially as I walk with an answering term of the other; why then my soul was prophetic and my idea must be, and by common consent would be, called cognizant of reality. The percept was what I *meant*, for into it my idea has passed by conjunctive experiences of sameness and fulfilled intention. Nowhere is there a jar, but every moment continues and corroborates an earlier one.”

These remarks on the ways ideas correspond to reality presuppose the notion of “conjunctive experiences.” (James also speaks of “con-

junctive relations," but, according to radical empiricism, relations too are directly experienced.) The most striking aspect of James's radical empiricism is its intention to be close to "natural realism" (*ERE*, 63ff.). In perception I am *directly acquainted* with external reality – indeed, to speak of my "sensations" and to speak of the external realities the sensations are "of" is to speak of the same bits of "pure experience," counted "twice over" (with two different "contexts"). I have argued that James was the first post-Cartesian philosopher to completely reject the idea that perception requires *intermediaries* (Putnam 1990 and 1994b).

However, James subscribed to the slogan *esse est percipii*. Since one is directly acquainted with reality, impressions are not simply in the mind, and since *esse est percipii*, then all there is are these impressions that are *not* simply in the mind. No doubt, that is why James does not call them "impressions" but "pure experience." Reality just *is* the flux of "pure experience."

In addition, James held that concepts always "build out" the bits of pure experience they describe. For that reason, direct acquaintance is not *infallible*.⁵ Even if I see something that looks just like a clock's face, it may turn out that my belief is mistaken – I may be looking at a *trompe l'oeil* painting.

Nevertheless, a vital *part* – if never all – of the "agreement with reality" that James speaks of is verification by direct acquaintance with external realities; and James lashes out at his critics for ignoring this (*MT*, 104–7). Speaking to what he calls the "fourth misunderstanding" of pragmatism ("No pragmatist can be a realist in his epistemology"), he writes, "The pragmatist calls satisfactions indispensable for truth-building, but I have everywhere called them insufficient unless reality be also incidentally led to. . . . Ideas are so much flat psychological surface (*sic*) unless some mirrored matter gives them cognitive lustre. This is why as a pragmatist I have so carefully postulated 'reality' *ab intitio*, and why, throughout my whole discussion, I remain an epistemological realist" (*MT*, 106).

Ideas which have not yet been verified may also agree with reality. As we have just seen (*ERE*, 38–9), James takes the relevant relation(s) to be "conjunctive relations";⁶ and as we said, such relations are *given in experience*. The relevant relations are precisely the ones that constitute verifications. The idea that there are elm trees in a certain forest may, for example, be "directly verified" in the future

by going to the forest and seeing the elm trees. The fact that the idea "led me" to the elm trees and "terminated in" that direct acquaintance of the elm trees constitutes its "agreement" with the elm trees.

An idea that was never directly verified may also agree with a reality by "substituting" for it (*ERE*, 31–3); for example, the belief that the couch in my office was there at 3AM last Sunday morning leads to as successful a prediction as if I had directly verified it. Compare this with the statement that "Truth lives for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs 'pass', so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them. But this all points to direct face-to-face verifications somewhere, without which the fabric of truth collapses like a financial system with no cash basis whatever" (*P*, 100). Summing up all these sorts of "agreement," James writes, "to 'agree' in the widest sense with a reality *can only mean to be guided straight up to it or into its surroundings, or to be put into such working touch with it as to handle either it or something connected with it better than if we had disagreed*. Better either intellectually or practically!" (*P*, 102).

This account of "agreement" led James to link truth to verificatory experiences, and it is necessary to see why James felt constrained to adopt it. James was a direct realist about perception, but not about *conception*. The relation of our concepts to whatever they are said to "agree with" or "refer to" can only be a matter of external relations, according to James. "The pointing of our thought to the tigers is known simply and solely as a procession of mental associates and motor consequences that follow on the thought, and that would lead harmoniously, if followed out, into some ideal or real context, or even into the immediate presence, of the tigers themselves" (*EPh*, 74). Philosophers who think that our ideas possess intrinsic intentionality, he insists, are simply wrong. In the same passage, he even makes the significant slip of equating "our ideas" with mental images: "There is no self-transcendancy in our mental images taken by themselves" (*EPh*, 74). (Recall his claim that in the absence of "mirrored matter" ideas are just "flat psychological surface.") Thus, it is *the search for external relations that constitute reference* that leads James to seek particular "conjunctive relations" that can be *observed* to connect our ideas with what they are about.

But this is not the only possible way to think of conception.

Philosophers – and I am one of them – who reject what I have called the “interface conception of conception,”⁷ agree that conception frequently involves words and images. But we insist that the words and images which we use in thought are not “flat psychological surface” to which an interpretation has to be added. Words in use are not mere noises, and mental images are profoundly unlike physical images. But the issues are deep, and I do not have space to pursue them here. To round out my account of James’s notion of “agreement with reality,” I shall instead make two further remarks.

(1) James recognizes that not all of our concepts refer to sensible realities. Unlike the positivists, James was willing to count the objects of “non-perceptual experiences,” if their existence should be confirmed, as on an ontological par with the things we can observe by means of the senses (*ERE*, 10). For example, mathematical notions, ethical notions, and religious notions are not subject to verification either by direct experience or by means of scientific experiments; and James is content to offer separate accounts in each case, without pretending to a single overarching theory of all possible sorts of “agreement with reality.” In the case of ethics and religion, James’s account is itself pluralistic.⁸ In the case of religion, James finds a partial, but very imperfect, analogy between religious experience and observation (*VRE*) – but there are also purely intellectual factors, and there are ethical requirements, including a need for a picture of the universe that we find sympathetic. The need for trade-offs, if we are ever to find a satisfactory religious world-picture, is the subject of James’s *Pluralistic Universe*. In the case of ethics, there is a utilitarian moment, represented by the idea that we must try to satisfy as many “demands” as possible; but there is also an anti-utilitarian moment, represented by the rejection of the idea that there is any single scale on which demands can be compared. The overriding ideal is to discover “more inclusive ideals” (R. Putnam 1990). (Here James is at his most “pluralistic.”)

(2) Verification is a holistic matter, and many factors are involved, success in prediction being only one. Among the other factors that James mentions are conservation of past doctrine (*P*, 83), simplicity (*P*, 36), and coherence (“what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience’s demands, nothing being omitted” [*P*, 44]). James describes the fluidity of this holistic verification when he writes, “New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-

over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity. We hold a theory true just in proportion to its success at solving this problem of 'maxima and minima.' But success in solving this problem is eminently a problem of approximation. We say this theory solves it on the whole more satisfactorily than that theory; but that means more satisfactorily to ourselves, and individuals will emphasize their points of satisfaction differently. To a certain degree, therefore, everything here is plastic" (*P*, 35). This plasticity provides the space for practical interests to cast their vote, in the way James had in mind when he wrote in the passage from "The Sentiment of Rationality" I quoted earlier, "... of two conceptions equally fit to satisfy the logical demand, that one which awakens the active impulses, or satisfies other aesthetic demands better than the other, will be accounted the more rational conception, and will deservedly prevail" (*WB*, 66).

III "TRUTH HAPPENS TO AN IDEA"

Although James insisted that there is a close connection between verification and truth, he vehemently denied confounding them (*MT*, 108–9). How then should we understand the statement that "truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its veri-*fication*"? (*P*, 97). It is wrong to take this as a conflation of truth with verification, for the following reasons:

(1) When beliefs are "made true" by the process of verification, they are made true *retroactively*. As James himself puts it:

Ptolemaic astronomy, euclidean space, aristotelian logic, scholastic metaphysics, were expedient for centuries, but human experience has now boiled over those limits, and we call those 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. When new experiences lead to retrospective judgments, using the past tense, what these judgments utter *was* true, even tho no past thinker had been led there. (*P*, 107)

(2) Although any particular verification terminates at a time, "the process namely of [an idea's] verifying itself" is endless. "Experience, as we know, has ways of *boiling over*, and making us correct

our present formulas," he writes (*P*, 106). What we refer to as "verified" claims are "true within those borders of experience" – the experience that we count as having verified them – but whether they are "absolutely" true only future experience can decide. James clearly recognized that "confirmed" is a tensed predicate whereas "true" is tenseless and recognized as well that a statement which is verified (in the sense of being confirmed) may later turn out to be false.

As we saw, James accepted the formula "truth is agreement with reality" – provided that formula is properly understood. His metaphysical commitments caused him to identify the "agreement" in question with *some actually observable "conjunctive relation(s),"* and the only ones James could find are the ones involved in verification processes. So James came to the conclusion that beliefs do not (unobservably) "agree with reality" independently of whether they are verified, but rather *come to agree with reality* as the conjunctive relations in question come into existence. Hence the doctrine that "truth happens to an idea"!

But since reality has ways of making us correct our present formulas, it can only be the entire process of *verification in the long run* that "makes" an idea true. All the elements of James's theory of truth – the Peircean component, the idea that our practical interests play a role, James's conception of "agreement," and the notion that truth "happens" to an idea – have to be kept in mind when one is interpreting any single statement in James's complex text.

I pointed out in Section I that, although Peirce does speak of "the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate," he later glosses this as the opinion which we *would converge to if* inquiry were indefinitely continued, and I asked if James would accept a similar modification. The answer is that he would not. For in Peirce's view, the *counterfactual* "If investigation *had been* indefinitely prolonged, such-and-such a statement *would have been* verified" might be true even though no actually experienced fact supports that counterfactual. A statement may "agree" with reality although the "conjunctive relation" which constitutes that agreement exists only as a counterfactual possibility and not as a "conjunctive experience"; truth does not have to "happen" for an idea to be true, it only has to be the case that "it would have happened if." James's metaphysics has no place for such a claim. (But James does not object to counterfactuals as such. Many counterfactuals actually get verified. But

those counterfactuals have had truth "happen" to them; they are not made true by a mysterious kind of potentiality ("Thirdness") but by the "cash-value" of incorporating them in our system of beliefs. Peirce would reply that this insistence on actual bits of "pure experience" as the *sole* constituents of reality is a form of "nominalism," and that nominalism is a profound philosophical error. My concern is not to decide the issue between these two great pragmatists but to bring out the enormous difference in their underlying metaphysical assumptions. James "radical empiricism" has no room for Peirce's "Thirdness."

IV TWO IMPORTANT (AND DIFFICULT) PASSAGES IN PRAGMATISM AND *THE MEANING OF TRUTH*

Misreadings of James's views on truth are almost always based upon four paragraphs in *Pragmatism*. Let me quote them in full:

"The true," to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as "the right" is only the expedient in the way of our behaving. Expedient in almost any fashion; and expedient in the long run and on the whole of course; for what meets expediently all the experience in sight won't necessarily meet all farther experiences equally satisfactorily. Experience, as we know, has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas.

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. It runs on all fours with the perfectly wise man, and with the absolutely complete experience; and if these ideals are ever realized, they will all be realized together. Meanwhile, we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready tomorrow to call it falsehood. Ptolemaic astronomy, euclidean space, aristotelian logic, scholastic metaphysics, were expedient for centuries, but human experience has now boiled over those limits, and we call those 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.

When new experiences lead to retrospective judgments, using the past tense, what these judgments utter *was* true, even tho no past thinker had been led there. We live forward, a Danish thinker has said, but we understand backwards. The present sheds a backward light on the world's previ-

ous processes. They may have been truth-processes for the actors in them. They are not so for one who knows the later revelations of the story.

This regulative notion of a potential better truth to be established later, possibly to be established absolutely, and having powers of retroactive legislation, turns its face, like all pragmatist notions, towards concreteness of fact, and towards the future. Like the half-truths, the absolute truth will have to be *made*, made as a relation incidental to the growth of a mass of verification experience, to which the half-true ideas are all along contributing their quota. (*P*, 106–7)

Critics typically cite only the first sentence. Such readers attend only to the idea that “expedience” is what determines truth, although most of this lecture (*P*, lecture 6) is devoted to “agreement” with realities. Thus, Russell quotes James as follows: “The ‘true’ is only expedient in the way of our thinking. . . . in the long run and on the whole of course.” Russell omits “to put it very briefly” and “in almost any fashion” – indications that what we have is a thematic statement, and not an attempt to formulate a definition of “true” – and also substitutes his own notion of what “expediency” is for James’s, and ends up saying that James proposed the theory that “true” means “has good effects.”

In *The Meaning of Truth*, James complains of an additional misunderstanding: it consists in accusing “the pragmatists” of denying that we can speak of any such thing as “absolute” truth (*MT*, 142–3).

Perhaps such readers take the remark about “the perfectly wise man” to be mocking absolute truth. But what James is telling us is that, while it is true that we will never reach the *whole* ideal set of formulations that constitutes absolute truth, “we imagine that all of our temporary truths” will *converge* to that ideal limit. In his reply to this misinterpretation, James says as much:

I expect that the more fully men discuss and test my account, the more they will agree that it *fits*, and the less they will desire a change. I may, of course, be premature, and the glory of being truth final and absolute may fall upon some later revision and correction of my scheme, which will then be judged untrue in just the measure in which it departs from that final satisfactory formulation. To admit, as we pragmatists do, that we are liable to correction (even tho we may not expect it) *involves* the use on our part of an ideal standard. (*MT*, 142)

On the next pages James is even more explicit:

Truth absolute, [the pragmatist] says, means an ideal set of formulations towards which all opinions may in the long run of experience be expected to converge. In this definition of absolute truth he not only postulates that there is a tendency to such convergence of opinion, to such *absolute consensus*, but he postulates the other factors of his definition equally, borrowing them by anticipation from the true conclusions expected to be reached. He postulates the existence of opinions, he postulates the experience that will sift them, and the consistency which that experience will show. He justifies himself in these assumptions by saying that they are not postulates in the strict sense but simple inductions from the past extended to the future by analogy; and he insists that human opinion has already reached a pretty stable equilibrium regarding them, and that if its future development fails to alter them, the definition itself, with all its terms included, will be part of the very absolute truth which it defines. The hypothesis will, in short, have worked successfully all around the circle and proved self-corroborative, and the circle will be closed. (MT, 143–4)

It might be objected, however, that what James is doing here is giving a pragmatist definition of "absolute truth" (in order to reply to those who think that a pragmatist can have no such concept), and that he has quite a *different* theory of "truth" *tout court*.⁹ The latter, it might be claimed, just *is* being verified. But such a reading, in addition to ignoring the characterization of truth as "the total drift of thought," "the fate of thought," and "the entire drift of experience,"¹⁰ in James's earlier writings, does not fit the paragraphs just quoted. What is verified is *not* called "true," but only "half-true." And when James writes of such now-refuted doctrines as Euclidean geometry, he writes "we call these *only relatively true*, or true within those borders of experience."

Moreover, in the very next sentence, James adds "'Absolutely' they are false" – and immediately goes on to write of our newer judgments about these matters "what these judgments utter *was* true," without any use of the qualifier "absolutely." James quite freely equates "true" and "absolutely true"; it is "half-true" that always takes the qualifier.

V A FEW COMMENTS ON JAMES'S THEORY OF TRUTH

One can, I believe, learn a great deal from James. He was the first modern philosopher successfully¹¹ to reject the idea that our impressions are located in a private mental theater (and thus constitute an

interface between ourselves and "the external world"), although one does not have to accept James's whole metaphysics of "pure experience" to follow him here. James emphasized the ways in which *verification* and *valuation* are interdependent, without drawing relativist or subjectivist conclusions, and we should do the same (Putnam 1994). James taught us to see concepts as instruments which serve many different interests. But James's theory of truth is seriously flawed. I will mention just one objection – a fatal one – jotted down by Royce on a copy of James's leaflet, "The Meaning of the Word Truth."¹² The objection is that, on James's account, for a statement about the *past* to be true it is necessary that the statement be *believed in the future*, and that it become "the total drift of thought." In this way, the truth-value of every statement about the past *depends on what happens in the future* – and that cannot be right.

James was aware of the possibility of some such objection, and Perry gives us his answer.¹³ What James says is simply that there is a difference between past *realities*, which cannot be changed, and *truths* about the past which are "mutable." Presumably he meant that it is judgments that are true or false (James – reasonably, in my view – would never so much as entertain the Fregean alternative of conceiving of thoughts as entities which exist independently of thinkers); truths do not exist until some thinker actually thinks them. But his claim that the past is immutable (considered as a "reality" and not as a "judgment") is still in tension with his theory, as we may see by considering a contested historical judgment, say that Lizzie Borden committed the famous axe murders. Many believe she was guilty; so the judgment that she was exists, and (since she was acquitted) the judgment that she was innocent was at least entertained as a reasonable possibility. If the immutability of the past means that it is a "reality" that Lizzie Borden committed the murders or a "reality" that she did not, *independently of whether one or the other of these judgments is ever confirmed*, then, if she committed the murders but the judgment that she did never becomes "coercive over thought," on James's theory of truth it will follow that

Lizzie Borden committed the murders, but the judgment that she did is not true – contradicting the principle that, for any judgment *p*, *p* is equivalent to the judgment that *p* is true.

And similarly if she did *not* commit the murders, but the judgment that she did not never becomes "coercive over thought," we will have a violation of the same principle.

James might reply that the reality is immutable, but what is *true* of the reality is not; but this would totally undercut the reply (the letter to Lane) that Perry reprints.

What led James into this *cul de sac* was his failure to challenge traditional views of *conception*. James decisively rejected the interface conception of perception. And at one point (*ERE*, 10) he even seems prepared to give a parallel account of *conception*, but this was not followed up. Instead, in *Pragmatism* and in *Meaning of Truth* he returned to treating thoughts and ideas as mental shapes, "flat psychological surface," which require *external relations* to connect them to public objects. As we saw, James picked various relations to do the connecting, for example, "leading to" and "substituting for." An idea may lead me to the reality it refers to, or it may substitute for it in the sense that belief in it works as well as if we had perceived the reality in question.

It is easy to see how the problem with the truth of our beliefs about the past results. My ideas cannot "lead me" to past things and events; they are gone. The only way in which an "idea," postulated to be "loose and separate" from what it refers to (*EPh*, 74), can "refer" to the past things and events is by "substituting" for them. But this is just to say that an idea of past events is true if it works now and in the future! ("Works" in the sense(s) appropriate to the "verification process," of course.) This is the way in which James's failure to be as radical in his account of conception as he was willing to be in his account of perception led him to a disastrous theory.

I believe that much of what James wanted to deny should be denied. It is right that we do not have to think of truth as presupposing a mysterious "relation of agreement with reality" – *one and the same relation in all cases* – or an infinite mind able to overcome the limitations of all limited and finite points of view (as in absolute idealism) or some other piece of transcendental machinery, something metaphysical *beneath* our practice of making and criticizing truth claims, which makes that practice possible. James's *Pragmatism* is at its most powerful when it argues just this, and at its least successful when it tries to find the "external relations" which make reference and truth possible.

NOTES

I am very much indebted to Ruth Anna Putnam for close reading and helpful criticism of an earlier draft.

- 1 §407 in Peirce 1931–60, vol. 5. All my references to this edition will have the form which has become standard, namely, vol. no. paragraph no.
- 2 Peirce may also be thinking of “The Pragmatic Method” (*EPh*, 123–39). There James writes, “I think myself that [the principle of pragmatism] should be expressed more broadly than Mr. Peirce expresses it. The ultimate test for us of what truth means is indeed the conduct it dictates or inspires. But it inspires that conduct because it first foretells some particular turn to our experience which shall call for just that conduct” (124).
- 3 It is true that the reference to “fate” is absent. But Peirce himself rather downplays this notion, writing in a footnote to the definition cited, “Fate means merely that which is sure to come true. . . . We are all fated to die.”
- 4 As we shall see, this does not mean that resemblance is ever sufficient for reference.
- 5 The mutability of knowledge is a constant theme (see, for example, *P*, 107 and lecture 5). Pure experience in itself is neither true nor false, but any conceptualization of it is fallible (*ERE*, 28–9).
- 6 These are relations which we perceive as *similarities* or at least as *connections*.
- 7 In recent years we have been urged to think of conceptions as *capacities for representing* rather than as *representations* by John McDowell (1992, 1994), John Haldane (1989, 1992), and myself (Putnam 1994b).
- 8 James’s account of mathematics is in the empiricist tradition. Mathematics deals with internal relations among our ideas which are themselves directly observable by us. I do not think that this account is tenable.
- 9 This objection was suggested by David Lamberth.
- 10 Speaking of the propositions “this is a moral universe,” “this is an unmoral universe” – for James, these are fundamental moral/religious propositions – James writes (in “The Sentiment of Rationality,” one of the essays in *WB*), “It cannot be said that the question Is this a moral world? is a meaningless and unverifiable question because it deals with something non-phenomenal . . . the verification of the theory which you may hold as to the objectively moral character of the world can consist only in this – that if you proceed to act upon your theory it will be reversed by nothing that will later turn up as that action’s fruit; *it will*

harmonize so well with the entire drift of experience that the latter will, as it were, adopt it, or at most give it an ampler interpretation, without obliging you in any way to change the essence of its formulation" (WB, 86; emphases added).

- 11 Thomas Reid and Peirce also opposed it, but, in my view, not successfully (see Putnam 1994b, 468n).
- 12 Royce's notes may be found in Perry 1935, 2:735–6. The leaflet is reprinted in *MT*, 117–19.
- 13 See the letter to Alfred C. Lane, reprinted in Perry 1935, 2:477–8.