

Henry Jackman

‘William James on Conceptual Pessimism and the Ambiguity of Truth’

Abstract: William James is often treated as confusing verification and belief with truth, and he seems to invite such treatment by talking about the existence of both an ‘objective’ and a ‘subjective’ sense of “true”. Realist critics of James from Russell to the present day typically view this ‘subjective’ sense of truth to be just an inapt name for belief, but James’s openness to this ‘subjective truth’ is grounded in a type of naturalism about representation that his critics often fail to appreciate. In particular, James’s naturalism can be understood as underwriting the possibility of a type of semantic pessimism about the representational purport of our thoughts and utterances, a pessimism that suggests that our thoughts and utterances are not the sorts of things ultimately capable of being either true or false in any ‘absolute’ sense.

Absolute truth plays a ‘regulative’ role in James’s system, but he allows the possibility that subjective truth may be all that “true” picks out if our behavior ultimately can’t live up to this regulative ideal.

James’s philosophy is characterized by both the acceptance of the possibility of pessimistic outcomes, and the insistence that such an outcomes aren’t inevitable. This results in his endorsing a type of meliorism in his discussions of ethics, free will and religion. The paper will conclude by arguing that James ambivalence about absolute truth can be best understood in terms of a similar sort of semantic meliorism, and that such a view still deserves serious consideration.



Henry Jackman is an associate professor of philosophy at York University. He works primarily on topics in the philosophy of language and the history of American pragmatism, particularly relating to

the work of William James. He is co-editor of Routledge's *Studies in American Philosophy* series, and is currently working on a book on James's philosophy.

Selected Publications:

"William James", in Misak, (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, New York: Oxford University Press, October 2008.

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"William James's Naturalistic account of Concepts and his 'Rejection of Logic'" in Lapointe S. (ed.) *Philosophy of Mind in the 19th Century*, Routledge, 2018

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