

William James's Pragmatism, Naturalism and Pessimism about Absolute Truth

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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 adequacy of our concepts, 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 undoubtedly 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 inquiries ultimately can't live up to this regulative ideal.

James's philosophy is generally 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.

Introduction: Two notions of truth

William James recognized (with some frustration) that many people found his writings on truth hard to understand, and he occasionally suggested that this was because our word "truth" itself is used in two ways, sometimes picking out "temporary" (or "subjective", "relative" or "half") truth and other times aspiring to pick out "Absolute" (or "objective or "ultimate") truth.¹ Unfortunately (indeed, strangely, given how important the notion of truth is for James) while James will occasionally mark the distinction by attaching these modifiers to "true" in his work, he rarely makes the fact that he takes there to be anything like an ambiguity here explicit in *Pragmatism* (or any of his published writings). In one of the few places where he does explicitly address the issue, he ends *Pragmatism's* chapter on Common Sense (which comes immediately before the chapter on truth) with the question "May there not after all be a possible ambiguity in truth?" (PR 94), and he mentions this "ambiguity" almost as an aside in a note to 1904's "Does Consciousness Exist,"² but spells it out in perhaps his clearest fashion in his 1908 seminar at Harvard where he claims:

It is unfortunate that truth should be used, now for the temporary beliefs of men and now for a purely abstract thing that nobody may, perhaps, ever be in possession of. *The pragmatist definition of truth applies to both.* Since the word, however, is the same, I wish someone here present might invent distinct words for *ultimate truth* and *temporary belief*. – Schiller says 'truth as claimed' and 'truth as validated.' That gives the distinction, and if those adjectives could always be used, it would obviate the trouble. It has given a great deal of trouble to Mr. Schiller and myself, because our critics say that, because we call temporary belief true, therefore we have no right to believe in ultimate truth. It is really, I should say, an uncandid way of pinning on us one thing, the inferior thing; and because we say 'yes' to that, therefore, they say, you are cut off from ultimate truth.³

Of course, most philosophers don't see such an ambiguity in the word "truth". On the contrary, they assume that we *already* have two words that pick out what James calls "temporary belief" and "ultimate truth", namely "*belief*" and "*truth*".⁴ The "unfortunate"

¹ For the most part, I'll be sticking with "Temporary" and "Absolute" in what follows.

² "Note the ambiguity of this term ["truth"], which is taken sometimes objectively and sometimes subjectively." "Does Consciousness exist" (in *Essays on Radical Empiricism* (hereafter ERE)), p. 13. (Unless noted otherwise, all page references are to the Harvard Editions.)

³ "Report of a Discussion in Philosophy 20e: Seminary in the Theory of Knowledge", in James' s *Manuscript Lectures*, p. 433, italics mine.

⁴ Russell's response to schiller's paper "The Ambiguity of Truth" seems characteristic: "This 'ambiguity' appears to us to be wholly non-existent. The distinction involved is the distinction between what *is* true and what is *thought to be* true." (Russell, "Pragmatism" in his *Philosophical Essays*, p. 111.)

thing, according to such philosophers, is not that “truth” is used ambiguously in *English*, but rather that *James* uses the normally unambiguous word in such an ambiguous fashion.

I'm not going to defend the claim that “truth” is ambiguous, but at the same time I don't think that James is merely *conflating* “truths” with beliefs. Even if the word isn't ambiguous between two *actual* meanings, it may be that it has, for want of a better word, two *possible* meanings and that James realized that we may not be able to tell *a priori* which of the two it actually has.

Methodological naturalism about the meaning of “truth”

As mentioned above, most philosophers are unsympathetic with the assumption that “truth” has a ‘temporary’ interpretation at all, but James's conviction otherwise comes from his treating a theory of truth as starting with those things that are *taken to be true* (the ‘temporary truths’), and *generalizing*⁵ from those to get an account of the meaning of “truth” (at least in its ‘temporary’ sense). See, for instance:

“An individual claims his belief to be true,” Schiller says, “but what does he mean by true? And how does he establish the claim?” With these questions we embark on a psychological inquiry. To be true, it appears, means, *for that individual*, to work satisfactorily for him; and the working and the satisfaction, since they vary from case to case, admit of no universal description. (*The Meaning of Truth* (hereafter “MT”) 132, underlining mine.)

This is just a general instance of James's “method of attacking problems by asking what their terms are ‘known as’”,⁶ and we can see another clear instance of it when he tackles the related issue of intentionality by insisting:

Now it is to be observed that the common consent of mankind has agreed that some feelings are cognitive and some are simple facts having a subjective, or, what one might almost call a physical, existence, but no such self-transcendent function as would be implied in their being pieces of knowledge. Our task is again limited here. We are not to ask, “How is self-transcendence possible?” We are only to ask, “How comes it that common sense has assigned a number of cases in which it is assumed not only to be possible but actual? And what are the marks used by common sense to distinguish those cases from the rest?” In short, our inquiry is a chapter in descriptive psychology—hardly anything more. (MT 14, underlining mine)

⁵ See *Pragmatism* (hereafter “PR”) pp. 34, 36-7 for emphasis on generalization and claim that ‘old truths’ are just entrenched examples of the process from which new beliefs are formed.

⁶ *Correspondence of William James* Vol. 12, p. 400. (University of Virginia Press, 2004). The method is attributed to Shadworth Hodgson, who is treated by James as one of the two sources of his Pragmatism in virtue of it (Peirce being, of course, the other -- for a discussion of this, see Skrupskelis forthcoming).

This method contrasts with that of simply starting with our *general beliefs* about truth, and trying to come up with a definition based on those. This latter method would lead to a potentially more ‘objective’ conception of truth, but the later project would be, for James, like coming up with an account of the nature of water by simply reflecting on our beliefs about it. To know the nature of water we need to look at the *actual* stuff in the world that we call “water” and discover what properties such samples have in common, and in much the same way, to know the meaning of “truth” we have to look at those things that we call “true”.

Of course, even if James is entitled to suppose that there are two uses of “true”, it can be very hard to tell which of the two types of truth he is talking about at any given point. Consider, for instance, the following oft-quoted passages from *Pragmatism*. James starts by arguing:

‘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. (PR 106)

The first, italicized, sentence makes a claim that would seem to hold most naturally for “temporary truths”, but (as James’s critics so frequently point out) it remains at best controversial for truth in any more objective sense. Taken on its own, then, it may thus seem like temporary truth is the topic here. However, the qualifications which come after with their emphasis in the “long run” and “on the whole” make it seem like by “the true” he means *absolute* truth. Unfortunately, James follows the passage above immediately by introducing “absolute” truth as if it were something new:

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 today by what truth we can get today, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood.* Ptolemaic astronomy, Euclidean space, Aristotelian logic, scholastic metaphysics, were expedient for centuries, but human experience has boiled over those limits, and we now call these things only relatively true, or true within those borders of experience. ‘Absolutely’ they are false; for we know that those limits were casual, and might have been transcended by past theorists just as they are by present thinkers. (PR 106-107)

The passage above makes it seem that by “truth” in the initial paragraph, James must have meant temporary and not absolute truth, an impression that is confirmed by the paragraph immediately following, where he claims:

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 forwards, a Danish thinker has said, but we understand backwards. The present sheds a backward light on the world's previous 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 some day 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. (PR 107)

Here, once again, the unmodified “truth” seems to refer to the temporary truths rather than the absolute truths, but this makes “in the long run” and “on the whole” talk in the first paragraph seem mysterious.

Of course it may simply be that James takes the initial sentence of the first paragraph to apply to *both* temporary and absolute truths. Indeed, he stresses after introducing the distinction between temporary and absolute truth in his 1908 seminar that “*The pragmatist definition of truth applies to both*”. If so, he may feel that there is no need to disambiguate such claims, since they are meant to work equally well on both readings. However, if James really thinks that “truth” is *ambiguous*, how could he claim that the same *definition* applies to both uses of the term?

Well, while James does take there to be two uses of “truth” he certainly doesn't take “true” to be a word like “bank” where the two meanings are completely independent of each other. In particular, his claim that the definition applies to both meanings of “truth” in spite of the fact that these are *different* meanings can be explained by the fact that ‘absolute’ truth is an *idealization* of our ‘temporary’ truths, and thus serves as a norm for our temporary truths. That is, it is what we get if we extend the norms that govern our movements from one truth to another and the regulative ideal of the potentially better truth to their ideal limit.

The respective roles of absolute truth and temporary truth would thus be very much like that traditionally seen between truth and belief, but absolute truth and temporary truth are not independent of each other in the way that belief and truth were traditionally

taken to be. Constraints that determine our temporary truths are still there when we idealize, and so factors that contribute to temporary truth (such as subjective satisfaction) can still be there when we get to 'objective'/'absolute' truths. This is not so obvious when we simply think of belief and truth, which allows for a much more radical discontinuity between the two that is characteristic of most versions of skepticism. For James, absolute truth is understood as a norm for temporary truths in that it represents an idealized extension of the application of the norms already in play with our temporary truths, so there isn't a way for the best application of those temporary norms to lead us away from absolute truth. By contrast, the intellectualist treats truth as an independent goal of belief that the other norms of belief (consistency, etc.), might fail to lead to.

The contribution of the subjective

Much of this is familiar from other versions of Pragmatism, and what makes James's version distinctive was his emphasis of the fact that the *subjective* factors that contributed to our temporary truths were supposed to contribute to absolute truth as well. For James, if absolute truth just comes from the continuous reapplication of the norms governing our temporary truths, then different conceptions of those norms will result in different conceptions of what will make up absolute truth as well.

For the non-skeptical intellectualist or even a more conservative pragmatist like Peirce, the 'subjective' factors that may contribute to what we temporarily take to be true (i.e., what is believed) will play no role in determining 'absolute' truth. On such accounts, even if one agreed with James (as against, say, Clifford)⁷ that in cases where the evidence leaves a question undetermined, we need not withhold belief and can legitimately take to be true that alternative which satisfies our more subjective interests, one could still say that, since these subjective factors come in only in cases where the evidence leaves a question unsettled, and since at the posited ideal limit of inquiry, no question will be evidentially unsettled, then no subjective factors will contribute to what is 'absolutely' true.⁸

⁷ Clifford, W.K. 1877, "The Ethics of Belief" in his *Lectures and Essays* London: Macmillan.

⁸ On such a view, the possibility that a question could be evidentially unsettled even at the end of inquiry would be enough to show that truth could not be understood in terms of what is believed at the end of inquiry.

For James, by contrast, the subjective factors do not ‘wash out’ during the idealization process in this fashion. This is partially because, unlike the intellectualist, James takes these ‘truth processes’ to reflect how expressions come to have the *meanings* that they ultimately do, not how independently meaningful expressions become true, and it is their constitutive contribution to what our expressions mean that allows our subjective preferences to contribute to even the ‘absolute’ truth of our thoughts and utterances.⁹

For instance, while the evidence can make it clear that two of our commitments conflict, it may not tell us which of the two should be given up, and it is often *subjective* factors that will do this later job. These subjective factors thus ultimately determine whether the term has an extension in line with one commitment or the other (and thus which sets of commitments have the potential to be ‘absolutely’ true). We can see something like this potentially happening in how various inquirers have reacted to sentences like the following:

“Whales are fish”. The evidence may determine that the belief that whales are fish conflicts with the belief that “fish” picks out a natural kind, but upon realizing this, the evidence doesn’t settle whether it is “whales are fish” or “fish are a natural kind” needs to go, and different sets of subjective interests may lead inquirers to take “fish” to be a functional/commercial kind instead.

“Pluto is a planet”. Pluto has a stable orbit around the sun and has developed a spheroidal shape, but it doesn’t have sufficient mass to clear its debris field by incorporating all proximate objects into it. If this third condition is taken to be part of the definition of planet, then Pluto is not a planet, but one can, as many do, take our commitment to Pluto’s being a planet to rule out this third condition as being part of the definition of what it is to be a planet.¹⁰

"Atoms are indestructible": When we discovered that what we now call atoms had parts, we faced the prospect of either giving up this claim, or concluding that most of what we had been calling atoms weren’t actually atoms. The choice to give up the former was made, arguably, for subjective reasons.

⁹ See my “James’ Pragmatic Account of Intentionality and Truth”, *Transactions of the C.S Peirce Society* Winter 1998, Vol. XXXIV, No. 1: pp. 155-181. To take a familiar example, the truth conditions (at least in some possible worlds) for “Dogs like bones” vary depending on whether or not you take the kind “dog” to be individuated by their genetic make up or evolutionary history, but the question of which way we should go on this is not one that can be settled by pooling more evidence, and ‘subjective’ factors must be brought in to settle the question even under ideal epistemic conditions. This case is particularly clear, but they can be quite widespread.

¹⁰ <https://usm.maine.edu/planet/pluto-planet-again>

"Stealing is wrong": Many argue that we presuppose that there are attitude independent moral values behind such statements, and if there are no such things, then such statements must be false. Others argue that if there are no such independent values, we just need to understand moral discourse in a way that no longer presupposes them. Once again, our subjective interests could arguably determine our answers to such questions.

These last two cases are particularly interesting, in that they are ones in which the more metaphysically ambitious presuppositions of our use of such concepts aren't satisfied. This produces a tension between our general beliefs about, say, atoms and values and the way the terms are concretely applied,¹¹ and which of the two would have to ultimately give may be determined in part by our subjective interests. If James is right, it will turn out that we can face precisely such a choice with the term "truth" as well.¹²

Why not stick with Absolute Truth?

But even if subjective factors contribute to what is ultimately 'absolutely' true, why shouldn't we still simply tie the word "true" to the ideal associated with it? (Especially given that it is an ideal that we are very attached to.) This question leads to a major difference between the Jamesian and the standard 'intellectualist' position, which ties us back to the earlier point that while the intellectualists think of truth as something out there waiting to be discovered, for James truth, even absolute truth, must be *made*.¹³ In particular, while we certainly succeed in making our temporary truths, there will be no guarantee that we *can* make absolute truths, and thus no way of being certain that any of our claims are (absolutely) true or false. This brings a degree of fallibilism about the *existence* of absolute truth that isn't as visible on most accounts. Indeed, James at times seems to display not only fallibilism, but also a good deal of *pessimism* about the existence

¹¹ Such differences may have been more salient to James since, unlike many, he did not presuppose any sort of 'copy' theory of representation, so the possibility of a radical mismatch between what seem to be essential parts of our conceptions and what we were actually talking about was much more vivid.

¹² James's doubts relate, as we shall see, about the attainability of 'absolute' truth, but one might think that worries about, say, the liar paradox give us similar reasons for thinking that, strictly speaking, nothing is either true or false (see Scharp, K, *Replacing Truth* OUP 2013).

¹³ "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." (PR 107.)

of absolute truth. Remember that in our initial quotation from James's 1908 seminar, he described Absolute Truth as "a purely abstract thing that nobody may, perhaps, ever be in possession of ", and to repeat another passage quoted above:

The 'absolutely' true... 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.

It often isn't sufficiently stressed by James's commentators just how pessimistic a thing this is to say. The perfectly wise man and the absolutely complete experience are ideals we don't expect to *ever* be realized, and if absolute truth needs to be realized with these two if it is to be realized at all, then we can be quite confident that no claim of ours will ever be 'absolutely' true.

Nominalism and 'relaxed' interpretations of Peircian Truth

This sort of pessimism would not seem so serious if it just stemmed from James's apparent 'nominalistic' unwillingness to understand absolute truth in counterfactual terms. There would be many reasons to be pessimistic about absolute truth if one bought into the reading of Peirce where such truth required that we *actually* reach some global 'end or inquiry' in which every question had been answered conclusively.¹⁴ The problems with such a conception of truth are familiar, and I don't think that anyone seriously thinks that we would reach such a global resolution of *every* question, so if the existence of *any* truth required settling *every* question, it would be pretty easy to agree that nothing will turn out to be true.

James occasionally writes as if absolute truth would require that we *actually* get to the ideal limit of inquiry, and that there is no reason to think that we will ever actually reach such a stage for many questions, but while such a criticism may stick against Peirce's original description of truth in "How to make our ideas clear",

The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real. (Peirce, EP1: 139)

¹⁴ Possibly the social analog of the sort of "absolutely complete experience" that James mentions above.

Peirce's subsequent discussions of a pragmatist conception of (absolute) truth don't seem subject to such worries.¹⁵ If James were simply willing to adopt, say, Peirce's more realistic attitude towards counterfactual possibilities, he could then understand absolute truth in something more like Peirce's sense, where something is absolutely true if it is what we *would* settle on if inquiry went to its ideal limit, even if inquiry never actually gets there.¹⁶ Further, if one thinks that a global resolution of all our questions is dubiously coherent (even if spelt out in counterfactual terms), one could understand Peircian truth as something closer to Crispin Wright's notion of "superassertability",¹⁷ so that a belief would be true if no amount of further inquiry would lead us to revise it.¹⁸ Such an account would allow one to understand the truth of individual sentences piecemeal without any needing to presuppose any 'global' end of inquiry where all of the questions were settled.

However, things are not this simple, and James would not free himself of his pessimism simply by giving up nominalism and adopting the more piecemeal approach to truth presented by contemporary defenders of Peirce. In particular, even the non-nominalistic and piecemeal conception of 'absolute truth' requires that there to *be* an answers that we would converge on were we to investigate long enough, and James develops a picture of conceptualization and inquiry in which we have no way of guaranteeing the possibility of such long term convergence. Absolute truth is an ideal, but we have no guarantee that it will ever be realized not only in the sense that we may never achieve it, but also in the sense that it may not be there to be achieved at all. For some (perhaps most) claims, even something like piecemeal Peircian truth might be too demanding, and prolonged inquiry might cause us to simply oscillate between the claim and its denial.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Misak, C. *Truth and the End of Inquiry*, OUP 1991.

¹⁶ James does, after all, have a notion of "virtual truth" for sentences that, while not verified, will be so in the future. It may then seem that most 'virtual' truths are 'absolute'. That is, virtual absolute truths are those that would be believed at the end of inquiry *if* inquiry ever got to its end.

¹⁷ See Crispin Wright, C. *Truth and Objectivity*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), and "Minimalism, Deflationism, Pragmatism, Pluralism," in Michael Lynch, ed., *The Nature of Truth* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 751-89.

¹⁸ See Misak, C. *The American Pragmatists*, (OUP 2013) for arguments that this is how Peirce himself understood the notion of truth.

James 'Instrumentalism'

This pessimism is related to, and perhaps an extension of, the *instrumentalism* about scientific theories that James discusses in *Pragmatism*. James takes it to be a descriptive fact about the sciences of his day that its practitioners don't take their theories to be *literally* true in the sense of capturing the structure that the world has objectively:

Up until about 1850 almost everyone believed that the sciences expressed truths that were exact copies of a definite code of non-human realities. But the enormously rapid multiplication of theories in these later days has well-nigh upset the notion of any one of them being a more literally objective kind of thing than another. There are so many geometries, so many logics, so many physical and chemical hypotheses, so many classifications, *each of them good for so much and yet not good for everything*, that the notion that even the truest formula may be a human device and not a literal transcript has dawned on us. We hear scientific laws treated as so much 'conceptual shorthand', true so far as they are useful but no further. Our mind has become tolerant of symbol instead of reproduction, of approximation instead of exactness, plasticity instead of rigor. (MT 40, italics mine)

It is important to note that this instrumentalism is not driven by the fact that we are faced with, say, empirically equivalent but ontologically divergent theories (that is, multiple theories that would all be equally true in the above Peircian sense of standing up to indefinite inquiry), but rather that we are faced with a plurality of theories each of which copes well with some parts of experience, but none of which can be made to fit with for all of it (that is, *none* of which are candidates for Peircian truth).¹⁹ James *generalizes* this instrumentalism about scientific truth to truth *tout court*, when he argues:

It is to be doubted whether any theorizer to-day, either in mathematics, logic, physics or biology, conceives himself to be literally re-editing processes of nature or thoughts of God.... The suspicion is in the air nowadays that the superiority of one of our formulas to another may not consist so much in its literal 'objectivity,' as in subjective qualities like its usefulness, its 'elegance' or its congruity with our residual beliefs. Yielding to these suspicions, and generalizing, we fall into something like the humanistic state of mind. Truth we conceive to mean everywhere not duplication, but addition; not the constructing of inner copies or already complete realities; but rather the collaborating with realities so as to bring about a clearer result. (MT 41)

Further, the problem that James saw with the competing scientific theories ("each of them good for so much and yet not good for everything") is seen by him as arising with our conceptual schemes writ large. As he puts it:

¹⁹ In this respect, I think that Steven Levine ("Does James Have a Place for Objectivity?: A Response to Misak" *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* (2013, V.2)) understates how radical James's views in this area are by suggesting that they amount to just a "conceptual pluralism" resting on the fact that "the sensory flux *tolerates* multiple ways of being taken up" (p. 127).

There are thus at least three well-characterized levels, stages or types of thought about the world we live in, and the notions of one stage have one kind of merit, those of another stage another kind. It is impossible, however, to say that any stage as yet in sight is absolutely more *true* than any other. ... There is no *ringing* conclusion possible when we compare these types of thinking, with a view to telling which is the more absolutely true. Their naturalness, their intellectual economy, their fruitfulness for practice, all start up as distinct tests of their veracity, and as a result we get confused. Common sense is *better* for one sphere of life, science for another, philosophic criticism for a third; but whether either be *truer* absolutely, Heaven only knows. (PR 92-3, underlining mine)²⁰

Inquiry into a question will never produce a stable answer, since there is not a stable framework for inquiry, and when we adopt, say, a scientific framework, many claims that were previously endorsed will be denied because their ontological presuppositions will be rejected.

If we are stuck moving between such ‘incomplete’ conceptual schemes, our claims will end up being, as James put it above, only “relatively true, or true within those borders of experience” (PR 107).

Conceptual Pessimism

Of course, one might think that this is only a *temporary* state, and that we should expect, eventually that we should be able to find a single system that will explain everything. However, James seems at times pessimistic about the status quo changing, and his reasons for being so become clearer in the series of lecture he delivered a year after *Pragmatism*, lectures subsequently collected as *A Pluralistic Universe* (hereafter “PU”). In that book (as well as his posthumously published *Some Problems of Philosophy* (hereafter “SPP”)), James presents a picture of how our concepts work that might lead one to doubt that any claim that made use of them could ever turn out to be ‘absolutely’ true.²¹

According to James, concepts emerged to serve our *practical* ends, and our most fundamental concepts²² evolved to serve the most basic of these ends. However, a conceptual system that emerged this way may not be well suited to provide the kind of

²⁰ Note that the quotation above ends with the question of *whether* any of the competing schemes be true absolutely, not of *which* one is.

²¹ These consequences are given a more prominent place in these later works, but the basic picture of concepts that they rest on goes back to James’s *The Principles of Psychology*.

²² For instance, those concepts discussed in *Pragmatism*’s fifth chapter, “Pragmatism and Common Sense”, like “space”, “time”, “thing” and “cause”.

consistent *theoretical* account of reality that absolute truth requires.²³ Indeed, James' infamous rejection of the "logic of identity" in *A Pluralistic Universe*²⁴ is best understood as a rejection not so much of logic itself, but of the assumption that the inferential structure of our basic concepts matches the structure of the world at a more 'global' level.²⁵

This assumption that, if extended to their logical extremes, our concepts will eventually misrepresent the realities they normally help us cope with is not limited to the concepts of common sense. James seems to suspect that it will be a problem with *any* conceptual system, since *conceptualization itself* misrepresents the 'continuous' nature of reality.²⁶ Concepts (at least as James understands them) require sharp boundaries, and while the imposition of models of the world where things are sharply defined has tremendous practical value, it inevitably misrepresents the richness of reality, and thus are unable to get to a point of absolute truth. The pinch will always be felt if any concept is extended enough, and thus no stable rest to inquiry will ever be reached.

²³ As he notes in his Harvard Lectures of 1908:

Are we certain in advance—of course, we can practically assume in advance, but are we theoretically certain in advance—that reality will be plastic to our categories? In other words are we theoretically certain in advance that reality will prove itself consistent? I think it is a postulate we must make, but, theoretically, no one can warrant its truth. For it is a statement about ultimate reality, which no one can make. ("Report of a Discussion in Philosophy 20e: Seminary in the Theory of Knowledge", in James' s *Manuscript Lectures*, p. 438)

²⁴ "For my own part, I have finally found myself compelled to *give up the logic* [of identity], fairly, squarely, and irrevocably. It has an imperishable use in human life, but that use is not to make us theoretically acquainted with the essential nature of reality.... Reality, life, expedience, concreteness, immediacy, use what words you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it. If you like to employ words eulogistically, and so encourage confusion, you may say that reality obeys a higher logic, or enjoys a higher rationality.... but I prefer to call reality if not irrational then at least non-rational in its constitution, -- and by reality here I mean reality where things *happen*, all temporal reality without exception." (PU 96-7)

²⁵ "In the first place, logic, giving primarily the relations between concepts as such, and the relations between natural facts only secondarily or so far as the facts have been already identified with concepts and defined by them, must of course stand or fall with the conceptual method. But the conceptual method is a transformation which the flux of life undergoes at our hands in the interests of practice essentially and only subordinately in the interests of theory... and to understand life by concepts is to arrest its movement, cutting it up into bits as if with scissors, and immobilizing these in our logical herbarium where, comparing them as dried specimens, we can ascertain which of them statically includes or excludes which other." (PU 109)

²⁶ For further discussion, see my, "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.

Truth without Absolute Truth

So what should we say if the 'pessimistic' conclusion that James imagines actually turned out to be the case, and that the regulative ideal that our use of "true" aspired to was unsatisfiable? Of course it would then follow that nothing was 'absolutely' true, but it seems less clear that we should conclude that nothing was *true*. After all, we should, with James, consider the possibility that the failure of absolute truth should lead us instead to conclude that the 'absolute' interpretation is not the best account of what we mean by "true".

"True" may be on James's picture, a term like "witch", "free", "saint" or "immoral". All of those terms have, arguably, a 'strong' reading (roughly, someone who casts spells and is in league with the devil, freedom as the incompatibilist understands it, a holy person in whom Christ dwells, or something that violates an objective moral norm) and a 'weak' reading (roughly, someone who is recognized as a "witch" (Wicca) in a society, freedom as the compatibilist understands it, someone who is canonized by the Catholic church, and something vigorously disapproved of by society). There are two uses of each of these terms in the sense that some people may have something like the weaker sense in mind when they use the term, while others have the stronger sense. However, these terms aren't, strictly speaking, *ambiguous*. If the presuppositions behind the strong readings were, in fact, satisfied, most would agree that something that satisfied the weak criterion but not the strong would not *really* be a witch, free, immoral or a saint. Furthermore, if the metaphysical presuppositions behind the strong senses of these terms *aren't* satisfied, one could still hold on to them and claim that there are no witches, saints or free or immoral actions. That said, in this latter case there is also the option of holding on to the term and claiming that the weaker sense, the sense that did correspond to the conditions under which the terms were actually applied, is what the terms should be understood as having meant all along. Which way we should go for any particular term will depend, ultimately, on one's subjective interests and whether you think that the term has a purpose even if the strong reading falls through, so one might think it best to tie "witch" to the strong reading and say that there are no witches, while tying "free" and "good" to the weak reading, so that one can still take part in the practice that uses this terminology.

Much the same can be said for truth. It may be, ultimately subjective factors that would (in the pessimistic scenario where absolute truth is unattainable) determine whether we give up on the existence of truth all together. Some might feel that the absolute conception is so central to our notion of truth that if there were no absolute truth then we should say that there is no truth at all. Indeed, Peirce seems committed to a position something like this when he claims, "I do not say that it is infallibly true that there is any belief to which a person would come if he were to carry his inquiries far enough. I only say that that alone is what I call Truth. I cannot infallibly know that there *is* any truth."²⁷ Others might feel that truth-talk is central enough for us that if the ideal of absolute truth proved to be unrealizable, then we would simply need to understand "truth" in a way that doesn't make absolutist presupposition (as the compatibilist understands "freedom" in a similarly less loaded way). I think that James's willingness to understand truth as "temporary truth" puts him firmly in this latter camp.²⁸ If you think that absolute truth is a realizable ideal, then it will be natural to think that Temporary Truth is a pretty shabby candidate for what most of us mean by "true". However, if, like James, you think that this ideal may fail to be realized, even in principle, then the shabby candidate can begin to look like what we have been talking about with the term all along. (In this sense, true might be like "free" or "immoral" (better, "good"), where the concept is so central that we might not want to take on any sort of error theory about it.)

Truth and the Will to Believe

It is, of course, an empirical question whether the sort of convergence that Absolute Truth requires is possible, and in this sense, the 'nature of truth' can't be determined by

²⁷ Peirce, C. S. 1908. Letter to Lady Welby, Dec 23, 1908. Reprinted in Wiener (ed.) *Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings (Values in a Universe of Chance)*. New York: Dover, 1958, p. 398.

²⁸ After all, James is famous for noting that the true is a species of the good, and we can see a similar tension with our interpretation of "good". Like "true", "good" has 'subjective' and 'objective' interpretations, and if it turns out that we can't find the grounding for our ethical claims to be "objectively" true, then we have two choices. We can continue to insist that those factors tying our use to the 'objective' interpretation are essential to the term's meaning and thus adopt an 'error theory' where all of the term's applications are, strictly speaking, false, or we can adopt a interpretation of "good" that is a little more subjective, and thus allow that more of our sentences are true. Which way we should jump with the semantics of "good" is one of those 'subjective' issues of the sort that we discussed above. (For a discussion of James's views in this area, see my "William James on Moral Philosophy and its Regulative Ideals" in *William James Studies*, Vol. 15, n.2 (Fall 2019) pp. 1-25.)

mere armchair reflection. James may have had reasons for doubting that Absolute Truth could be achieved, but his fallibilism is stronger than his pessimism in this area, and he also felt that we had a 'right to believe' in Absolute Truth, and this tension between doubt and hope (a tension that runs through so much of James's work) structures his complex writings on truth.²⁹

It is this hesitancy about the existence of absolute truth that connects James's writings on truth to his earlier work on the 'will to believe'.³⁰ James never doubts that we have a deep commitment to the existence of absolute truth, stating that "No relativist who ever actually walked the earth has denied the regulative character in his own thinking of the notion of absolute truth" (MT 143).

While, (unlike, say, Royce) James will not take our commitment to our claims being objectively true as part of a transcendental argument hoping to show that such convergence is necessary, James's epistemology allows that we are *entitled* to believe that the ideal will be realized, even if we lack compelling evidence that it would. For James, we are entitled to believe an evidentially underdetermined claim if the option of believing that claim is "live", "forced" and "momentous".³¹ The belief that there are objective truths and convergence could happen this way arguably satisfies all these three criteria, so James could argue that we are entitled to believe in such absolute objective truth even if we can't be assured that there is. This is even more so, since the belief in absolute truth is arguably one of those where "where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. *And where faith in a fact can help create the fact*" (WB 29). If one doesn't think that

²⁹ This tension also may reflect the difference between reflecting on and engaging in our practice of inquiry. One can form doubts about absolute truth when engaged in the former, but it is much harder to do in the later.

³⁰ James explicitly treats our belief in absolute truth as a case where we can exercise our 'Will to Believe', in the following note to "Abstractionism and 'Relativismus'":

both these philosophers [Rickert and Münsterberg] confess in the end that the primal truth of which they consider our supposed denial so irrational is not properly an insight at all, but a dogma adopted by the will which anyone who turns his back on duty may disregard! But if it all reverts to 'the will to believe,' pragmatists have that privilege as well as their critics. (MT 143.)

³¹ For a more detailed discussion of this, see my "Prudential Arguments, Naturalized Epistemology, and the Will to Believe", *Transactions of the C.S Peirce Society* Winter 1999, Vol. XXXV, No. 1: pp. 1-37.

we could reach an end of inquiry, then it might seem that we never would get inquiry to converge on a consistent set (since we would feel no pressure to make system consistent).³² In most of his actual practice, it seems as if James does take this assumption for granted, and its only when reflecting on the practice of calling things true that he draws attention to the fact that these assumptions may not be quite as secure as they seem.

Conclusion:

Some kind of 'subjectivism' about truth (like subjectivism about good) is, then, a live (if unpreferred) candidate for James. We prefer, and presuppose, absolute truth, but if it isn't there to be found, we might be best interpreted as meaning the more subjective, and in that case, some form of 'temporary truth' may be the best we can do.

³² For a related discussion of why we might need something more than warranted assertability to drive our inquiry, see Price, H. "Truth as Convenient Friction". (Though James himself often doesn't seem too grasp the force of this point, as seen in his reply to Musgrove in his Harvard Seminar (p. 434))