

## INTRODUCTION

---

William James was born in 1842, into a remarkable family, and died in 1910. His family acquired a large financial legacy from his grandfather's estate. This grandfather had emigrated from Ireland in 1789 and established a successful career in Albany, New York state, in the developing American economy of the early nineteenth century. William James's father, Henry senior, devoted his life to religious and philosophical speculation and strongly influenced William's own dominant interest in those areas. Though William and his father evidently disagreed on some religious and philosophical issues their shared interests run like a thread through William's own work. Both endured a psychological crisis early in their lives, which had a dramatic effect on their intellectual interests. It led Henry senior towards a personal commitment to Swedenborg's mysticism, and led William to indulge in highly personal speculations about free-will and religious belief. Henry senior's family – with the two older sons William and Henry junior (the future novelist) – travelled extensively in Europe during the mid-nineteenth century, and these visits no doubt provided the experience of interaction between American and European families subtly recorded in Henry junior's novels. Their sister, Alice, suffered persistent medical problems and acquired a literary reputation on the publication of her diaries in 1934.<sup>1</sup> Two younger brothers, Wilkinson and Robertson, perhaps overshadowed by the public eminence of the older brothers, led colourful but less successful lives.

William James experimented as an artist with William Hunt in Newport, but after a year decided, with his father's strong approval, to give up art for science. He enrolled in the Lawrence Scientific School in 1861, in the Harvard Medical School in 1863, and graduated in 1869. He visited Europe both before and after graduating, and came to know something of the work of psychologists such as Charcot, Janet and Wundt. In 1869 and

1870, and to some degree throughout the 1870s, he suffered from depression. He took up a teaching post as an instructor in physiology at Harvard from 1873, and in 1878 married Alice Gibbens. Although he continued to suffer from bad health, and complained that he could not for that reason undertake laboratory work, he nevertheless began to establish a psychology department at Harvard and to publish his own work, partly in psychology and partly in philosophy.

The publication in 1890 of *The Principles of Psychology* made him famous. This two-volume work might be regarded as the first popular – and accessible – treatise on psychology, but it also deals with numerous issues of a more philosophical, even metaphysical, kind. Although James frequently expressed a strong wish to keep psychology, as an experimental and naturalistic science, distinct from philosophy, his own interests and the current development of psychology compelled him to connect the two. This is true of many of the chapters in the *Principles*, but also of the articles and lectures in which he outlines his pragmatism, his radical empiricism, his views on moral philosophy and on philosophy of religion. In 1901–2 he gave the Gifford lectures at Edinburgh University (published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*), and in 1906 gave a series of lectures in Boston (published as *Pragmatism*). Other published collections of essays, such as *The Will to Believe*, *The Meaning of Truth* and *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, spell out his philosophical views. He published also *A Pluralistic Universe*, based on lectures given at Oxford in 1908, and left behind an incomplete work, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, published posthumously in 1911. Two collections of more general essays, *Memories and Studies* and *Collected Essays and Reviews*, were also published after his death.

James's philosophy is wide-ranging, covering epistemology, radical empiricism, his own version of pragmatism, and philosophy of psychology, as well as moral philosophy and philosophy of religion. Although his writings may seem fragmented, and contain some apparent changes of view, his philosophy nevertheless contains a cluster of central themes all of which mark a radical change from a nineteenth-century philosophical paradigm, derived in large part from Hegel and the early nineteenth-century metaphysicians, towards a less abstract twentieth-century model.



The period in which James did his major work – from the late nineteenth century to the first decade of the twentieth – witnessed radical changes in many disciplines. In physics James Clerk Maxwell helped develop a theory of wave phenomena and electro-magnetic forces. In mathematics Riemann developed non-Euclidean geometries and Cantor and Weierstrass introduced trans-finite methods into number theory. New ideas were being canvassed in the social sciences, some influenced by Darwinian theories of evolution. James knew of many of these developments, even though he professed ignorance of mathematics. He mentions Maxwell in *Pragmatism*, and refers to Cantor in *Some Problems of Philosophy*. He was himself strongly influenced by Darwin, although he criticized Darwin's views on emotions, and was even more critical of the social applications of evolutionary theory in Herbert Spencer's work.

Perhaps the clearest expression of James's recognition of the need to encourage radical change appears, quite typically, in the images he uses to mark the new directions of his own philosophy. He represents the change from nineteenth-century traditional metaphysics to pragmatism as a parallel to the change from monarchies, with their deferential 'courtier' style, to republics and democratic societies. This no doubt echoed his own sentiments about the merits of republicanism and democracy in America, though he was critical of some aspects of American society, but it marks a recognition of the need for change in philosophy itself. In *Pragmatism* it is clear that the doctrine is recommended not purely on intellectual but also on moral grounds. Pragmatism is part of an unstiffening liberation from the pompous, hidebound and ultimately immoral influence of the prevailing monistic metaphysics as James conceived it.

monistic

These radical attitudes are expressed in James's claim that 'in every genuine metaphysical dispute some practical issue, however remote or conjectural, is involved', and that under the guidance of his own philosophical republicanism 'science and metaphysics . . . would work absolutely hand in hand'.<sup>2</sup> These claims represent a stark divergence from the abstract pretension of much nineteenth-century metaphysics, which tended to celebrate its distance from – and rivalry to – science. It scarcely needs saying that James applied these tenets in attacking a metaphysics which – because of its distance from science and practical life –

he believed did not contain genuine disputes, and which it was a part of his pragmatic method to unmask as spurious.

Although James fits naturally into that end of century process of radical change, it is important to recognize that he differed significantly from other radical philosophers. He did not share an interest in logic with Frege, Russell or the Logical Positivists, and in other respects, too, James either did, or would have wanted to, repudiate their views. Two related aspects of his work demonstrate this. On one side is his insistence on a non-intellectual, temperamental, root in all philosophical positions, combined with his own temperamental suspicion of intellectual theorizing and preference for practical life. His choice of a quotation from Goethe's *Faust* in 'The Sentiment of Rationality' captures his own attitude very clearly: 'Grey, dear friend, is all your theory; Life's golden tree alone is green.' On the other side is his ultimate desire to provide some justification, within empiricism, for religious – even supernatural – belief. Neither of these tendencies would have been acceptable to Russell, to the Logical Positivists or to 'tough-minded' empiricism in general.

James wished ultimately to present a philosophy which reconciled such 'tough-minded' attitudes with a 'tender-minded' recognition of the importance of our 'passional' nature and of the role religious beliefs may play in it. This represents a uniquely Jamesian turn which can be pursued further in certain of James's own unorthodox – or apparently unpragmatic – interests, such as his determined advocacy of investigation into 'psychic phenomena', or his frequent references to significant items on the 'fringe' of conscious experience. These trends are best exemplified, in philosophical terms, in his book *A Pluralistic Universe*, and in his deeply felt defence of mystical religious experiences in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The former contains a number of interesting comments on empiricism, in the discussion of Thomas Green's sensationalism, but it also reflects other aspects of his thought in the discussions of Gustav Fechner's mystical views and the philosophy of Henri Bergson, to which James was strongly drawn but which Russell equally strongly rejected.<sup>3</sup> The latter contains James's mature views of religious mysticism and an advocacy of what he calls 'crass supernaturalism' – neither of which would have been acceptable to Russell.

It is these aspects of his work which have encouraged philos-



ophers to assimilate James to a quite different tradition from that of Russell or the Logical Positivists – that of twentieth-century postmodern Continental philosophy. Richard Rorty's enthusiastic approval<sup>4</sup> of both Jamesian pragmatism and post-modern philosophers, such as Derrida, is an example of such an assimilation. There is no doubt that these aspects of James's philosophy distance his views from those of the more logically oriented philosophers who followed him and also wished to break with the past. But in other respects James's down-to-earth tough-mindedness, and his intention in several issues not to reject traditional philosophy but to update or renovate it, count against his direct assimilation to post-modernism. The truth is that James, who himself disliked labels, cannot be simply labelled. What he disparagingly refers to as a 'solving name' is precisely this type of labelling, which conceals rather than resolves genuine intellectual problems. One of the most congenial aspects of his thought is the extent to which it subverts many of the standard classifications in philosophy; and this holds true even in those areas where he wished to improve on, rather than simply reject, previous philosophical traditions. He has come down to later generations as one of the major figures of American philosophy and – along with Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey – as one of the three founding fathers of pragmatism. He exerted a strong influence on many later philosophers, including Bertrand Russell in the early twentieth century and W. V. O. Quine in the later twentieth century.

### *Pragmatism*

James says that pragmatism is both a method and a theory of truth. The method is outlined in this edition in the lecture 'What Pragmatism Means', from *Pragmatism*, and the theory of truth in the extracts from *The Meaning of Truth*. The second extract, 'The Sentiment of Rationality', gives a more general picture of the place that pragmatism holds in James's overall philosophy. It demonstrates James's hostility to over-intellectualism, his emphasis on a temperamental factor in intellectual and philosophical matters, and a consequent appeal to religious and moral conviction. It covers virtually the whole of James's philosophical interests, and acts as a link between the epistemological and the moral or religious aspects of that philosophy.

Pragmatic method is closely associated with James's account of meaning, which he borrowed, along with the title 'pragmatism', from Charles Sanders Peirce. In that account the meaning of some expression for an object is linked to the effects which that object produces. It is, broadly, a functional account of the meaning of concepts, and James saw those linguistic devices, and the more complex theories built up from them, as instruments. The method was designed to establish procedures in which we could become clearer about the scope of the concepts we used. The meaning of expressions has to be explained in terms of their 'practical effects'; if some expression has no such practical effects, then it has no meaning. If two hypotheses, apparently different, nevertheless share the same practical effects, then they have the same meaning. James believed that by using such guidelines we could clarify our thoughts and, most importantly, could locate the testable basis which lay at the heart of philosophical disputes. In that way the method implements James's belief that every metaphysical dispute rests on some practical, testable hypothesis. Pragmatic method, then, yields a clear picture of the practical meaning, the 'cash-value', of blurred, distorted or unclear concepts. It reduces those concepts to their 'fighting weight' and so strips them down to their essentials. The need for such a method in philosophy implies that philosophical views may become bloated or inflated, and mislead us about their practical cash-value. James makes it clear that he thinks that this has tended to happen in the prevailing monistic doctrines.

James offers little in the way of theoretical elucidation for such an account of meaning. In this context he does less well than his contemporary Gottlob Frege<sup>5</sup>, who was already, unknown to James, providing a more powerful and more adequate account of meaning based on his formal logic and his analysis of mathematics. Nevertheless James, true to his own pragmatic instincts, offers innumerable examples of the use for such a method. Like Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*, James implies that the examples carry the weight of the account, and it can scarcely be denied that they have a real value. His discussion of the complex issues behind the apparently simple conflict between materialism and spiritualism provides a good example of his technique. Such illustrations show James's own skill in analysing complex philosophical issues, but



the lack of a more developed theory of meaning to support his practice creates problems for him in other parts of his philosophy.

One of the first concepts to be subjected to a pragmatic <sup>truth</sup> analysis is that of truth. It is necessary for James to provide an account of truth since the notion of 'belief' lies at the heart of his philosophy and the predicate 'is true' stands as the essential evaluation for beliefs. It would be no exaggeration to say that the pivot on which his philosophy turns – the attempt to reconcile a tough-minded empiricism with a tender-minded justification for religious belief – requires a conception of truth which can cover all kinds of belief, moral and religious as well as factual. James contrasts his own pragmatic account with that of a monistic appeal to absolute truth – exemplified, for example, by F. H. Bradley – in which 'truth' can signify only a final, definitive, and unrevisable establishment of fact.<sup>6</sup> For James that was an understandable and tempting, but finally useless, appeal whose drawback was that it attracted attention away from the genuine issues. For him 'truth' was a 'working' notion which had to be understood in the context of our own basic beliefs; it stands as a general name for the ways in which we come to accept, reject, revise and amend beliefs in every aspect of our lives. It marks, especially, the potential conflict between a new belief and the previous stock of beliefs, which requires us to make some decision between them. We may reject the new belief, or amend our old stock to accommodate it. James thought that in such conflicts there was always a tendency to favour the older stock, but that the resulting conflict illustrated a kind of intellectual Darwinism in which an evolutionary survival value was the ultimate factor. The fitter beliefs will survive, and these will have a survival value for the human species. A theory of truth, consequently, should outline the structure of those conflicts and the guidelines which properly determine their outcome. James spoke of a 'logic of science' as the title for such guidelines, though he admitted that such a logic did not exist in his day. He also took the view that the older 'absolutist' conception of truth – 'in the singular and with a capital T' – was no more than a residual hypostatization of those complex 'workings of belief'.

James's theory of truth is epistemic in its insistence that pragmatic analysis should focus on what truth is 'known as',

i.e., how it functions, but it also deals with the acceptance of belief in both cognitive and non-cognitive contexts. 'Truth' and 'falsity' are simply generic names for the adjustments we continually make to our belief systems in the hope of arriving at knowledge, or at least of achieving guides for action which have survival value. James's pragmatism links belief and action quite generally in just that intimate way. James notoriously captured these ideas in the provocative claim that the true is no more than what is useful or expedient, and so encouraged a hostility which he then sought to mitigate. In *The Meaning of Truth* he attempts to guard against some of the standard misunderstandings which he believed the theory had unfairly attracted. In particular, even though his provocative claim had seemed to suggest that anyone may believe what they please, he now makes clear that this is not so and that his account of truth is realistic. There is a real world against which our beliefs, our actions, and our survival, have to be measured. We are entitled to believe what gives us satisfaction, or what provides a survival value, only in general and in the long run. It is as if that kind of satisfaction approximates closer to some ultimate truth in the end, although James was also sceptical of the belief that there was just one final, ultimate truth.

Two deeper anxieties remain. One is that a pragmatic account of truth leaves out what truth actually 'consists in'; instead it offers only an account of the way the notion functions. A second concerns the use James makes of the account in his overall project of reconciliation. One of the merits James claimed for his account was that it unified the evaluations we make of factual and moral or religious claims. In the latter sphere, for example, there is no doubt that James wished to claim that truth ascription depended upon a personal satisfaction which the religious belief might yield. He also thought that such satisfactions attended the acceptance of belief in science, but that in religious contexts the satisfaction was linked to the 'strenuous and energetic' attitude with which it allowed us to confront moral dilemmas. A part of that attitude again linked the ideas of moral conviction with a motive for action. These ideas are present in 'The Sentiment of Rationality' and achieve their more extensive discussion in *The Will to Believe*. It is, however, worth noting now that James answered these more serious objections. He recognized that his account of truth focussed on the practical

*The Sentiment of  
Rationality*



ways in which we come to ascribe truth, or to accept beliefs, and that the monistic theory might claim to address the issue of what truth consisted in. But his view was that the working of belief is prior to that general notion, and that once a concession has been made to the 'solving name' of an ultimate or final truth there is nothing more to be done with it. The whole value of an account of truth lies, for him, in the detailed workings of belief.

### *Radical Empiricism*

James's pragmatism is claimed to be strictly independent of any substantive philosophy such as empiricism, although it is quite clear that James is drawn towards that doctrine and an associated utilitarianism. His concise summary of his own form of 'radical empiricism' represents it as a philosophy concerned only with what is experienceable, including not only the substantive parts of experience but also the relations between those substantive parts. Pragmatism itself gestures towards such views, but neither its method nor its putative theory of meaning entail them. Empiricism needs some formulation in terms of a theory of meaning but James's account is too imprecise to cover that lack. The very notion of what is experienceable needs stricter definition, especially since James's own conception of experience constitutes his primary objection to the traditional empiricists. For he believed that traditional empiricists misdescribed the nature of our basic experience, and had over-emphasized certain parts of experience at the expense of others. They had emphasized the separate and substantive parts to the exclusion of what he called 'conjunctive relations'. He thought that an empiricist like Hume had admitted 'disjunctive relations', that is relations which mark a division between substantive items, but had not recognized the positive conjunctive relations which hold those parts of experience together. He thought it psychologically unrealistic to think of experience as a succession of discrete items, and preferred the image of a continuous stream. That view forms part of his psychological account of the stream of consciousness in the *Principles of Psychology*, and leads him to reject the traditional empiricists' simple sensations as the basic building-blocks of experience. His own view is expanded in the critique of Green's 'sensationalism' in *A Pluralistic Universe*.

James offers a more detailed view of the radical empiricist

account of experience and knowledge in his paper 'Does Consciousness Exist?' Central to that view, and a part of what must have made the paper seem subversive in its time, is the idea that philosophers and psychologists had misunderstood the notion of 'consciousness'. James makes it clear that he is not simply denying any role or significance to such a notion; rather he rejects the significance and role which earlier philosophers and psychologists had given it. 'Consciousness', as he says, is not the name of some elusive entity but rather of a function, and the function is precisely that of relating parts of our experience to each other when we are said to know something. Just as he had taken a 'functional' view of the meaning of expressions, so he now takes a 'functional' view of the nature of consciousness. The upshot is that for James the fundamental division which we make between the physical and the mental is to be understood properly not as a distinction between two fundamentally different kinds of entity, but rather as two different ways of categorizing one and the same entity. To that basic item, or 'stuff', he gives the name 'pure experience' — to mark the point that it is so far undifferentiated into the physical or the mental. Those two categories are, for him, simply two different ways of counting one and the same material which, since it is undifferentiated, can be regarded as 'neutral' with regard to these derived categories. This aspect of James's view led to the label for his doctrine of 'neutral monism', although James himself seems never to have used the term. The doctrine influenced Russell and was extensively discussed in his Logical Atomism and The Analysis of Mind.<sup>7</sup>

James's view of pure experience is tantalizing but unclear. It is unclear in the status attached to pure experience itself, which is sometimes treated as a kind of basic 'stuff', sometimes rather as a device for gaining a proper understanding of the relation between the mental and the physical. There is no doubt that James wished to use the account as a means of rejecting traditional 'representationalist' views of perception or knowledge, and the associated sharp division between mind and body in Descartes' version of such a theory. But the postulation of a neutral material from which both mind and body derive is not the best way to express that rejection. It is better to treat James's doctrine rather as a way of avoiding any commitment to a fundamentally real stuff whether physical, as in materialism, or

MONISM

pure  
experienceneutral  
monism



mental, as in spiritualism. Viewed in that better way James's claim is that mental and physical items cannot be wholly divorced from each other. Nothing is, then, purely mental or purely physical, and all items in experience have some kind of a dual aspect which links them on one side with a physical history and on another with a mental sequence. James takes the opportunity to map these relationships in noting the resemblances which make a judgment 'adequate' to its 'object', and in drawing attention to a class of what he calls 'appreciations' which show in the clearest way the dual aspect of certain of our concepts. An adequate representation of a spatially extended world, for example, must have that extension. The world represented and its mental representation differ, according to James, not in the presence or absence of extension but in the differing relations which extension has to its context in each case. Among 'appreciations' would be the concept of a 'painful object' which points on one side to the property of an object and on the other to an experience of pain. James's account here anticipates more recent views. It invokes the relation between 'content' and 'consciousness' in such propositional attitudes as that of belief. For the notion of a belief connects a mental attitude necessarily with a content which points beyond that particular consciousness. That idea of a mental representation directed towards something beyond is implicit in Brentano's appeal to intentionality,<sup>8</sup> as James acknowledged, and is part of a current interest in propositional attitudes in the philosophy of mind.

### *Philosophical Psychology*

Although James had a lively sense of the boundary between psychology and philosophy his work, even in the *Principles of Psychology*, often straddles that boundary. This is not surprising given the state of development of psychology at the time, and James's own interest in philosophy. In the *Principles* there is much of philosophical interest, and not just in those sections where he addresses issues with an overt philosophical history. His accounts of attention and the will, of habits, and of the emotions, are all of interest, but it is not possible to include them all in this edition. Instead I have selected four chapters which deal with related issues about the mind-body problem,

the stream of consciousness, and the associated analysis of personal identity. Even there are too long to reproduce in full, and Chapters 9 and 10 of the *Principles* have been abbreviated in order to focus on the philosophical discussion. I have also included James's short first chapter in which he outlines his conception of psychology, and Chapter 6, 'Methods and Snares of Psychology', which adds some cautionary detail to that conception.

In the opening chapter of the *Principles* James offers a definition of psychology, a survey of its immediate history, and a methodological principle for the discipline. Psychology is neatly characterized as 'the science of mental life', but James points out that two different historical conceptions of psychology lie concealed behind the phrase 'mental life'. In one, a 'spiritualist' conception, mental life consists of a range of faculties, such as memory, belief or desire, which are attributed to a central agency, the 'self'. In the other, 'associationist' conception, these powers are to be explained by means of their ideas, or contents, and the relations between them. The former might be identified as a rationalist, or Kantian, conception and the latter as predominantly empiricist, so that the division echoes James's general contrast between a rationalist monism and an empiricist pluralism. It is an issue which reappears in his discussions of the mind-body problem in Chapters 5 and 6 of the *Principles* and in his account of personal identity in Chapters 9 and 10. At this point, however, James is content merely to distinguish between questions about the nature of these mental aptitudes and questions about the conditions under which they operate, and this leads him to formulate his own important guiding principle. For psychology has to deal with the latter question of the operating conditions of the mind, and among these are pre-eminently the physiological conditions of the brain. James is sometimes regarded as a paradigm example of a humanist psychologist for whom the personal feeling of experience is the essential datum for psychology, but it is evident, even in these early pages, that his own physiological training has had a profound effect upon the way he approaches psychological investigation. It is even more evident when he formulates the guiding principle: that there is no mental modification without bodily change.

That dependence of the mind on the brain is compatible with

rationalist, spiritualist, Kantian, self, monism

empiricist, associationist, non-self, pluralism



either a strict reduction of the mental to the physical, or a weaker relation in which the mental supervenes on the physical. The stronger claim is that mental events are nothing but physical events in the brain, but it becomes clear that James rejects that reductive view. In Chapter 5 of the *Principles* he discusses a materialist, 'automaton' theory and dismisses its advocacy on 'quasi-metaphysical' grounds as an 'unwarrantable impertinence'. By contrast he accepts the common-sense notion of mental causes, and supports this with an evolutionary argument for the role of consciousness as a 'selecting agency' and a 'fighter for ends'. This marks an initial commitment to some form of dualism, but the commitment is so far ill-defined, and is discussed further in Chapter 6. reductive physicalism  
dualism

One alternative to the 'automaton' theory is an appeal to a distinctive 'mind-stuff', a version of Cartesian dualism. In Chapter 6 James rejects some corollaries of such a theory, in particular the idea that just as physical states, such as motion, may be resultants of other aggregated physical states, namely the separate masses and velocities of other bodies, so mental states may be regarded as resultants of mental vectors. James also pursues the associated idea that such an hypothesis might be preserved at the expense of treating the basic mental vectors as unconscious, for in such cases we are conscious only of the resultant mental state and not of the separate vector properties on which it depends. That latter postulation of unconscious mental states is dismissed, however, as a 'sovereign means for believing what one likes in psychology'. The former is robustly attacked on the grounds that such mental aggregation, or fusion, requires some independent medium in which the vector quantities operate. In the physical sphere resultant forces and motions are dependent upon the aggregate effects of vector properties of other bodies within the medium of the spatial-causal nexus. James thinks that the mental sphere lacks that independent medium, and so he accepts aggregation at the physiological level, but treats the mental experience as emerging from that aggregated physical effect. His solution to the problem is the more economical view that aggregation of the physical effects in the brain is all that we need to accept. Although the mental experience results from that combined physical event there is no need to suppose that any further aggregation takes place at the mental level. This reinforces the claim that for him mental states mental vectors  
emergent



supervene upon, and do not reduce to, the underlying physical states, and it distances his own view from Cartesian dualism. In later writings, however, particularly *A Pluralistic Universe*, James seems to modify this view and to accept some kind of mental fusion.

It might be thought that these criticisms of 'mind-stuff' would lead James to adopt a monistic materialism, but at the end of the chapter he makes it clear that he has no decisive ground to reject spiritualism. He recommends a materialist and positivist heuristic for psychology but allows that it is open even to psychologists to admit a spiritual 'self' as an enduring mystery, 'which must one day be cleared up'. The discussion ends somewhat inconclusively, but nevertheless has real merits. It outlines the requirements for an acceptable dualism which would reject both a crude materialist theory and a substance-dualism of a Cartesian kind. It contains illuminating criticism of 'unconscious mental states' and of mental states as resultants, and is honest in its attempt to steer a path through these rejected traditional views towards some better account. If no such clear account is provided at this stage James at least points to important factors in any adequate account, such as the representational power of propositional attitudes, the explanatory appeal to brain physiology, and the over-riding biological reference to evolutionary factors in selection mechanisms and the choice of ends. That latter appeal to evolution reflects James's conception of psychology as a biological science.

James's acute criticisms of such a notion as that of 'unconscious mental states' reflect a self-critical attitude to psychology which is further elaborated in his chapter 'Methods and Snares of Psychology'. There he outlines a number of tempting errors which he thinks psychologists are prone to, and associates these with the standard methods of investigation in the discipline. It is no surprise that he is sceptical of detailed numerical or statistical processing when he says of contemporary German psychology: 'This method taxes patience to the utmost, and could hardly have arisen in a country whose natives could be bored'. Although he here reflects his own temperamental distaste for technical or formal methods, his view also cautions against an unthinking use of them which may be technically subtle but lack genuine psychological insight. He makes interesting comments on introspective and behavioural data, but his central point is the temptation of

mental  
fusion

self as  
binding  
glue of  
experience  
from one  
perspective

evolutionary  
factors

methodological  
errors



what he calls 'the psychologist's fallacy', that is, an error in which the theorist's descriptions of the mind are thought to match exactly the subject's own consciousness as he experiences it. In part James here underlines his own methodological preference for introspection as a basic method; in part it reflects his own preference for the practical realities of life and his suspicion of intellectual theory. But it reflects also a genuine problem, which runs through the nineteenth-century view of social, or behavioural, sciences – namely, how to reconcile the theorists' 'external', third-person view of a subject's consciousness with an 'internal', first-person view. Thus James recommends caution in accepting psychological theories as comprehensive accounts of psychological reality.

That issue is specifically present in his later discussions of the stream of consciousness and its relation to personal identity in Chapters 9 and 10 of the *Principles*. In these chapters it is not just a question of the general relation of mind to body but a specific application of that issue to personal consciousness and identity. Chapter 9 explores, with the exposure of the psychologist's fallacy in mind, the basic datum of the stream of consciousness. In its phenomenology and its vivid rhetorical terminology it has become a classic text in its own right; but it deserves inclusion here as a preliminary to the account of personal identity in Chapter 10. The account of a stream of consciousness fits easily into James's radical empiricism. It emphasizes the extent to which he thinks the traditional empiricists had erred in focussing on the disjunctive elements of consciousness at the expense of the conjunctive.

The traditional empiricists commit the psychologist's fallacy, but James offers a further diagnosis of their mistake. For he thinks that they were misled by our language – in which the nouns signify the substantive and interesting parts of experience – into thinking that consciousness consisted of nothing else. 'Consciousness for those empiricists appears like a set of beads which need to be strung, but where the string itself is invisible and so far inexplicable. At some points James seems to fall into a similar trap, when he suggests that the words, typically prepositions, which mark the relational, conjunctive string in our consciousness, have as good a right to be treated as names of discrete objects. But his better attitude is to reject, like Wittgenstein, the idea that all words function as the names of objects.

personal identity  
warmth and intimacy of ideas/mind  
Kantian arch-ego  
identity throughout the stream

In all this he shows some anticipation of later doctrines, and the same is true of his consequent discussion of personal identity. His contribution to that problem is already anticipated in Chapter 9 of the *Principles*, where he indicates that a stream of consciousness is inseparable from the idea of an 'owner' which is itself linked to the 'appropriation' of other ideas and their associated 'warmth and intimacy' and bodily feelings. His solution also attempts to remedy defects which he thought belonged to a traditional empiricist view such as that of Hume. Throughout the chapter, however, he draws a sharp distinction between an empiricist view which locates a sense of personal identity within the stream of consciousness and one which locates an owner outside that stream as an 'arch-ego' or 'transcendental ego', as he puts it. That contrast presents an obvious dilemma. To locate a person's identity at some point in the stream of consciousness seems to fail to do justice to the continuing identity throughout that stream. To locate it outside the stream, however, seems to make it absurdly unverifiable and unrelated to the experiences which it owns. James's resolution seeks to improve on the former empiricist account without making any concessions to the latter Kantian arch-ego. It is a resolution which holds out the hope of a reconciliation between the 'spiritualist' and the 'positivist' accounts of the mind-body problem which he had failed to reconcile in Chapter 6.

identity as connectedness of thought  
ownership of a herd of cattle  
consciousness as function

The solution links the sense of personal identity firmly to each 'passing thought' in the stream of consciousness. Our sense of identity is no more than the connectedness which we feel between our present experience, with its immediate predecessors and its imminent expected successors, and others which we associate with it and with that bodily warmth and intimacy. It is as if, to use James's own striking imagery, the title to ownership of a herd of cattle was passed from one cow to another. The owner is not, then, to be found outside the herd, as in a transcendental ego, but is in each case in a functional relationship to the remainder of the herd. Such a solution fits naturally with the earlier account of consciousness in radical empiricism as the name of a function rather than of an object, but it is not clear whether the solution is entirely satisfactory. In particular it will be objected that James has offered only a plausible account of the phenomenology of personal identity rather than any adequate criterion with which to establish it. The point might



be elaborated in either of two ways. In one it will be said that even if the account suffices to explain how it is that at *each* moment in our consciousness we think of 'ourselves' as a person of such and such a kind, still it provides no guarantee that we have remained the same throughout the whole of our experience. The point might be reinforced by noting James's own psychological reflection that our memories are imperfect and change significantly with age, so that the range of 'appropriated' experiences will itself vary, perhaps quite substantially, from time to time. One who looks for some further way of identifying all these variable classes of experience together into a full stream of consciousness over time will not find it in James's account. Or again, it will be said that the central problem of personal identity is to find some objective, third-person criterion which can determine when two streams of consciousness can be identified as belonging to one and the same person. Since James's account offers only a first-person, phenomenological picture of our sense of identity at particular points in our total consciousness, it seems unable to resolve that problem.

James might reply that he restricts himself to a first-person account, to an account of our felt sense of identity. He might also claim that his account, while focussing at any point on one particular set of appropriated experiences, nevertheless provides us with the truth about appropriation and our sense of identity at all such stages. For at any such point in our experience the sense of identity which we feel may amount to nothing more. This would be to argue that there simply is no other resource to appeal to, and to add that there is no need for any other resource since the supposed additional problems are spurious. Although he clearly believes that any appeal to a transcendental 'arch-ego' outside the stream of consciousness is spurious, he may not satisfy his critics that he has not left something out. As in the case of his account of truth, however, it is not easy to say clearly what that additional item may be. Certainly traditional empiricists such as Hume had failed to identify it.

## Moral Philosophy

the light of being/truth

James's moral philosophy is less well known than his pragmatism or his radical empiricism, yet it is an integral part of his philosophy. In the moral philosophy, as in his epistemology,

there is a bias towards practical considerations, and many of his papers comment on contemporary social issues. But the selection given here displays a more theoretical and philosophical account of moral and religious belief than appears in James's other writings. As in the epistemology, his account is influenced by a psychological approach to the issues, and this is nowhere more apparent than in his discussion of free-will. It was the free-will issue which preoccupied him during his depressive period in the 1870s, and it is the solution to that problem, in such papers as 'The Will to Believe' and 'The Dilemma of Determinism', which demonstrates the pivotal role for the notion of belief.

'The Will to Believe' argues – against the criticism of W. K. Clifford – for a legitimate place for what James calls a 'volitional' or 'passional' factor in all belief. Clifford's own view was directed against the acceptance of religious belief in the absence of any evidence or rational ground. He claimed that such attitudes were not merely rationally unwarranted, but positively immoral, and recommends the suspension of belief in these cases. James's whole attitude to morality, religion and life reacted against such an 'intellectual' and neurotically cautious view; his paper constitutes both a defence of religious belief and more generally an explanation of the way in which the will is related to belief. For James there always is such a volitional factor in any belief; the traditional separation between cognitive and volitional factors simply cannot be sharply drawn. His position is, as he notes, similar to that in Pascal's Wager, in which the hope of an after-life, even though the outcome is unknowable beforehand, is nevertheless something it would be unwise to gamble against. Such a hope, along with other moral and religious beliefs, is an example of what James calls 'voluntarily adopted faiths'.

James does not hold that a volitional factor in belief entitles us to belief what we please, any more than his account of truth commits him to the view that we may regard as true anything which gives us personal emotional satisfaction. He takes the view that there are well-defined circumstances in which we are justified in accepting beliefs for which we have no intellectual or evidential warrant. These circumstances, which justify our voluntarily adopted faiths, are explained in terms of options which are for us 'forced, live and momentous', or, as he puts it, 'genuine'. In those cases, he thinks, we may choose a bold

historical  
affect

voluntarily  
adopted  
faiths

forced,  
live, and  
momentous



being-with

## INTRODUCTION

survival  
strategies

xxxv

confident assent and action

strategy and accept the relevant belief, since the benefits of such a decision, as in Pascal's Wager, may be obtainable in no other way. James distinguishes the institutional caution which science imposes on its practitioners from the bolder strategy in which, when faced with a hazard, it may be rational to take the gamble. The issue may turn, of course, on personal temperament; the constitutionally nervous person may be unable to take the gamble and may consequently fail to survive. What is needed in order to obtain the beneficial outcome is some encouragement to be bold, and James is prepared, unlike Clifford, to give that encouragement. *encouragement to be bold*

James thinks that it is irrational to adopt the attitude of science towards religious belief and so cautiously to wait until some evidence is available, for there may be no possibility of providing evidence for religious beliefs however long we wait. In the meantime such caution may lose us any benefits we may otherwise gain, just as a nervous suitor who delays any expression of love may fail to arouse a reciprocal feeling. James seems willing to allow that religious beliefs may confer benefits just in virtue of supplying the believer with personal consolation or satisfaction, but he recommends the adoption of such faiths primarily on moral and altruistic grounds. He holds that religion provides a uniquely powerful motive for moral action, and measures the prospective benefits of such beliefs in terms of the beneficial consequences of that action. His personal experience in the 1870s seems to have made him aware of the apathy which may arise without such motivation. The remedy is, as he says in a quotation from Carlyle, to 'Hang your sensibilities. Stop your snivelling complaints and your equally snivelling raptures. Leave off your general emotional tomfoolery and get to work like men.' Some may find such a degree of robustness insensitive, but it matches James's own less vehement appeals to what he calls a 'strenuous and energetic life' in morality. *nervous suitor*  
*strenuous and energetic life in morality*

One of the first, and personally most important, manifestations of a voluntarily adopted faith was James's own response to the free-will problem. He makes the point that the first action of a free-will should be to affirm its freedom,<sup>10</sup> and so indicates that a volitional gamble may overcome a depressive apathy. That response was both practical and personal, but in 'The Dilemma of Determinism' James attempts to deal more philosophically with the determinist threat to freedom. His discussion



is bounded by two assumptions: first, that in this context there is no possibility of proof, so that all that can be done is to 'deepen our theoretical sense' of the conflict; and second, that determinism and indeterminism are the only options. Determinism traditionally claims that all events are made necessary by causal laws, while indeterminism claims that some events — such as those involving human consciousness — are not subject to such laws. Determinism, in James's account, amounts to the claim that the universe contains only necessities, while indeterminism claims by contrast that there are real possibilities, or real novelties, in human behaviour which mark our free-will. James disregards a third strategy, in which it is claimed that causal necessity and human free-will are compatible, so that we do not need to make a choice between them. He disparages such a view as 'soft determinism' and pursues it no further.

Within those limits his discussion concentrates on our temperamental attitudes to events which we think ought not to have happened and profoundly regret. We may approach them with deep pessimism in the face of their supposed necessity or simply adopt a romantic optimism, but both attitudes seem to conflict with any feeling of regret. The former makes it incomprehensible that we should feel regret when the event could not have been avoided; and the latter is in conflict with the very pessimism of regret itself. Other objections to a variety of related attitudes are made, but in the end James's view is that we should hold a different position, neither pessimistic nor optimistic but melioristic. Such an attitude frankly recognizes the problems of moral life, and robustly accepts a strenuous and energetic response to those problems in order to improve our lives. That attitude, however, rests on an acceptance of genuine chances, real possibilities and novelty, which alone provide the zest or excitement of individual and collective endeavour.

The same appeal to a strenuous — as opposed to an easy-going — mood is made in 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life', but there James outlines a more philosophical ground for moral values. His view rejects any absolute moral truth, as he rejects any absolutist account of truth, and instead accepts an ultimately subjective basis for moral judgment. James refuses to enshrine any general formula for what is morally good or right, but his own positive account veers clearly towards some version of utilitarianism. In the early part of his paper James identifies



what he calls a 'psychological' question about the origin of moral values; but his later discussion can be linked with a more philosophical question about the ontology of such values. For what he considers is the question of the way in which moral values and judgments can arise. The view is that moral values emerge from subjective properties of sentient agents, especially their feelings and desires, and it is in that limited way that James regards moral values as ultimately subjective. Although they ultimately rest on, and arise out of, subjective feelings, he does not think that this entitles us to hold any moral views we choose. Moreover, he is well aware that the central problems of a social morality arise from the competing demands or desires of sentient agents and the need to reconcile them. It is in the light of that background that he formulates his own general principle that what is good or right is whatever satisfies any desire, and that the least sum of dissatisfactions should resolve competition between those desires. James's principle, like his claim that the true and the right are in the end no different from the useful or expedient, is agreeably subversive, but it is clear that for him such a principle has a restricted value. It does not by itself resolve practical conflicts in applied ethics, for these can be decided only in a historical context in which he believes that philosophers' principles neither have, nor should have, much force. Rather what he also insists on is the relevance to such moral conflicts of what he calls 'metaphysical and theological facts', and at this point he returns to the earlier claims about the unique strength of motivation in moral action provided by religious belief. As he puts it: 'the strenuous type of character will on the battlefield of human history always outwear the easy-going type, and religion will drive irreligion to the wall'.

The final essay in this section, 'On a Certain Blindness', reverts to a more practical theme. It is an eloquent plea for tolerance of others' moral views and practices even in the face of their apparent incomprehensibility. It rightly emphasizes the ease with which we may regard others' views as unintelligible from our own standpoint. James offers two striking illustrations of this danger, one from a story by Robert Louis Stevenson, and another from his own experience of walking in the North Carolina hills. In the former a group of Scottish schoolboys engage in a harmless but seemingly pointless ritual to strengthen their group solidarity, and give real expression to a secret joy.

religion will drive irreligion to the wall

affect,  
causal  
necessity,  
pluralism,  
embodied  
hermeneutics

In the latter James rebukes himself for responding unfavourably to the environmental damage caused by some settlers in the mountains without appreciating their way of looking at their activities. What to him, as a privileged Rambler, is a scene of devastation, is to the settlers an expression of their triumph over intolerably harsh living conditions. The discussion testifies to the practical pluralism which James canvassed in both moral philosophy and epistemology. It expresses a relativism of an unobjectionable kind which warns against forms of colonialism, or group superiority, resulting from a blinkered belief that our own moral standpoint is the only intelligible or rational point of view.

### *Religion and Religious Belief*

James makes extensive reference to his views on religious belief throughout his moral essays and in *Pragmatism*. His interest in mystical religious experiences is evident even in the *Principles* where he speaks of a 'fringe', 'suffusion' or 'more', attached to our thoughts, and their expression of which we are unconscious. His developed view of these beliefs and experiences is expressed in the Edinburgh Gifford lectures published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. It might be said that his whole philosophy looks hopefully towards that topic as a terminus which itself depends on the central notions of belief and the satisfactory workings of belief. At the end of the Gifford lectures his views about the nature and role of religious, mystical and supernatural belief become more explicit.

Although James was critical of appeals to unconscious mental states he nevertheless admits a significant reference to such unconscious influences in psychology and in religion. Part of the underlying motive here is, again, a wish not to be dogmatic in rejecting dubious ideas out of hand. James thought it unprofessionally intolerant of scientists to reject the evidence for 'psychic' phenomena without a proper scientific examination of that evidence. In a similar way he canvasses, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the idea of a science of religion based on a psychological investigation of those claimed mystical experiences. He recognized that few people claim to have had, or even to understand, mystical experiences but wanted in the lectures to survey the available reports in order to find any common



elements, and to assess the significance that might be placed on them.

That psychological survey has continued subsequently in a fragmentary way with investigations of card-guessing telepathy, and of 'out-of-body' or 'near-death' experiences. But the principal philosophical interest in James's account comes from the concluding sections of his book where he sums up his position, and measures it against other standard philosophical views. It is to those sections, above all, that we may look for the success of his attempted reconciliation of tough-minded empiricism and tender-minded religious conviction.

James identifies the essence of mystical religious views in two related claims. In the first it is claimed that there are dimensions of reality of which we are not normally or fully aware, but to which we become open in subliminal fringe experiences; and in the second it is claimed that we may feel 'secure' and 'healthy' just insofar as we achieve a harmonious relationship to such abnormal realities. James derives these features from his own survey of mystical experiences. Despite his confession that he has never had such experiences, it is difficult not to associate the account with his own attempt to overcome depression and to achieve that secure and healthy outlook in an energetic and strenuous life. It is clear that for him the strongest motives for such a life derive precisely from religious beliefs. In the Postscript to his lectures James faces the issue directly and advocates what he calls a 'crass supernaturalism' against the more intellectually refined but practically feeble ways of accommodating mystical belief. That advocacy constitutes a final example of the voluntarily adopted faiths which he had defended against Clifford in 'The Will to Believe'.

These passages mark something of a climax to his philosophy and express views which are strongly in tune with his moral philosophy, his pragmatism and his pluralism. At the same time, however, they contain an unresolved conflict which finally shows the handicap of not formulating a clear theory of meaning. For those views indicate a conflict in James's account of the meaning of religious beliefs. On one side James's account of the meaning of such beliefs points to the practical effects which they may have, including, as we have seen, their effects in terms of moral motives and actions. From that point of view the meaning of religious beliefs is determinedly immanent, that is, it points to the

ordinary world of individual and social action and is to be valued according to the degree to which the actions it generates are beneficial in the long run. Insofar as those consequences are beneficial then the beliefs will be rightly regarded as true. It is in that way that James represents truth as a sub-species of the good in *Pragmatism*. On the other side, however, James's crass supernaturalism suggests that the content, and so the meaning, of mystical beliefs refer not to an immanent natural world – even with its moral properties and beneficial actions – but to a supernatural, or transcendent, reality. There remains, consequently, the difficulty of explaining how the meaning of such beliefs can accommodate both of these conflicting requirements. Perhaps it would be possible to reformulate James's account of the moral and supernatural content of such beliefs so as to mitigate the conflict, but that could be done only by means of a more developed account of meaning than James himself offers. He provides a robust attitude to religious mysticism but leaves it to later philosophers to resolve its central difficulty.

G. H. BIRD

## References

- 1 The diaries were privately printed in 1894, published in an edited version in 1934, and published in full in 1964.
- 2 *Pragmatism*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978, pp. 31 and 52.
- 3 Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1946, Chapter 28.
- 4 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- 5 Gottlob Frege, 'On Sense and Reference', in P. T. Geach and M. Black (eds) *Frege's Philosophical Writings*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1960.
- 6 See, for example, F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1893.
- 7 Bertrand Russell, 'The Philosophy of Logical Atomism', in R. C. Marsh (ed.) *Logic and Knowledge*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1956; *The Analysis of Mind*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1921.



8 Franz von Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, translated and edited by L. L. McAlister, London: Routledge, 1973.

9 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1954, paras 1-3, 26-30, 37-9, 43.

10 For example in *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 2, New York: Holt, 1890, p. 573.

## NOTE ON THE TEXTS

---

The texts of the separate contributions appear as they did in book form. James frequently reprinted papers from journals in several different collections. Sometimes, as in the case of 'The Sentiment of Rationality', he combined earlier papers to form the contribution to a collection. That essay which appeared originally in *The Will to Believe* in 1897 is a combination of two earlier papers, one with the same title from 1879 and another entitled 'Rationality, Activity and Faith' from 1882.

Each contribution is dated from its appearance in book form. In some cases, such as some reprinted chapters from *The Principles of Psychology* where the earlier publications account only for a few pages, references to those publications have not been made. The numbering of footnotes has been changed in all the texts; some footnotes have been deleted. In particular I have followed Professor Bakewell's earlier Everyman edition, *William James: Selected Papers on Philosophy* (1917), in deleting some footnotes to the texts from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, but there I have reverted to the original organization of the text. In Bakewell's earlier edition the final two sections of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* were combined into one under the title 'The Positive Content of Religious Experience', but here they are reproduced in their original form as Lecture 20 and Postscript.

Significant deletions from the original chapters have been made in the case of the extracts from *The Principles of Psychology*. Some of them, especially Chapter 10 of the *Principles*, are very long and some of the material is of more strictly psychological than philosophical interest. I have tried to focus on the central philosophical themes in those chapters, not least because they have been selected to complement epistemological themes from James's radical empiricism. This has meant that other chapters have had to be excluded, but my belief is that those chosen are more relevant to current debates about the



mind-body problem and the nature of psychology both in philosophy and in cognitive science. Beyond that, the discussions of the stream of consciousness and of personal identity are classic texts which it would be wrong to omit. It would have been possible to reproduce more of *Pragmatism*, and of course to include more items from any of the collections of essays. But what is included here corresponds to the somewhat fragmentary nature of James's own publications in separate journal papers, and invites readers to go to the originals for a more extensive acquaintance with James's own writings.

The contributions have been grouped under five headings: Pragmatism, Radical Empiricism, Philosophical Psychology, Moral Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion. The five sections themselves, and the separate contributions within each of them are grouped thematically rather than chronologically.

## Sources

The following list provides information on the source of each chapter, and also provides information on where the contribution was first published.

Chapter 1, 'What Pragmatism Means', is from *Pragmatism* (1907), and was first published as part of 'A Defence of Pragmatism' in *Popular Science Monthly*, 70, 1907.

Chapter 2, 'The Sentiment of Rationality', is from *The Will to Believe* (1897), and was first published in part as 'The Sentiment of Rationality' in *Mind*, 4, 1879; and in part as 'Rationality, Activity and Faith' in the *Princeton Review*, 2, 1882.

Chapter 3, 'Humanism and Truth', is from *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), and was published in part as 'Humanism and Truth' in *Mind*, NS, 13, 1904; and in part as 'Humanism and Truth Once More' in *Mind*, NS, 14, 1905.

Chapter 4, 'The Pragmatist Account of Truth and its Misunderstandings', is from *The Meaning of Truth*, and was first published in *The Philosophical Review*, 17, 1908.

Chapter 5, 'The Meaning of the Word Truth', is from *The Meaning of Truth*, and was first published in *Mind*, NS, 17, 1908.

Chapter 6 contains two short statements entitled 'Radical Empiricism',

# I

## What Pragmatism Means

the tree and  
the squirrel

Some years ago, being with a camping party in the mountains, I returned from a solitary ramble to find everyone engaged in a ferocious metaphysical dispute. The *corpus* of the dispute was a squirrel — a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree-trunk; while over against the tree's opposite side a human being was imagined to stand. This human witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving rapidly round the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps the tree between himself and the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught. The resultant metaphysical problem now is this: Does the man go round the squirrel or not? He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree; but does he go round the squirrel? In the unlimited leisure of the wilderness, discussion had been worn threadbare. Everyone had taken sides, and was obstinate; and the numbers on both sides were even. Each side, when I appeared, therefore appealed to me to make it a majority. Mindful of the scholastic adage that whenever you meet a contradiction you must make a distinction, I immediately sought and found one, as follows: 'Which party is right', I said, 'depends on what you practically mean by "going round" the squirrel. If you mean passing from the north of him to the east, then to the south, then to the west, and then to the north of him again, obviously the man does go round him, for he occupies these successive positions. But if on the contrary you mean being first in front of him, then on the right of him, then behind him, then on his left, and finally in front again, it is quite as obvious that the man fails to go round him, for by the compensating movements the squirrel makes, he keeps his belly turned towards the man all the time, and his back turned away. Make the distinction, and there is no occasion for any farther dispute. You are both right and both wrong according as you conceive the verb "to go round" in one practical fashion or the other.'



Although one or two of the hotter disputants called my speech a shuffling evasion, saying they wanted no quibbling or scholastic hair-splitting, but meant just plain honest English 'round', the majority seemed to think that the distinction had assuaged the dispute.

I tell this trivial anecdote because it is a peculiarly simple example of what I wish now to speak of as *the pragmatic method*. The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. Is the world one or many? – fated or free? – material or spiritual? – here are notions either of which may or may not hold good of the world; and disputes over such notions are unending. The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right.

A glance at the history of the idea will show you still better what pragmatism means. The term is derived from the same Greek word *πράγμα*, meaning action, from which our words 'practice' and 'practical' come. It was first introduced into philosophy by Mr Charles Peirce in 1878. In an article entitled 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear', in the *Popular Science Monthly* for January of that year,<sup>1</sup> Mr Peirce, after pointing out that our beliefs are really rules for action, said that, to develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance. And the tangible fact at the root of all our thought-distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve – what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole

<sup>1</sup> Translated in the *Revue Philosophique* for January 1879 (vol. 7).

of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all.

This is the principle of Peirce, the principle of pragmatism. It lay entirely unnoticed by anyone for twenty years, until I, in an address before Professor Howison's philosophical union at the University of California, brought it forward again and made a special application of it to religion. By that date (1898) the times seemed ripe for its reception. The word 'pragmatism' spread, and at present it fairly spots the pages of the philosophic journals. On all hands we find the 'pragmatic movement' spoken of, sometimes with respect, sometimes with contumely, seldom with clear understanding. It is evident that the term applies itself conveniently to a number of tendencies that hitherto have lacked a collective name, and that it has 'come to stay'.

To take in the importance of Peirce's principle, one must get accustomed to applying it to concrete cases. I found a few years ago that Ostwald, the illustrious Leipzig chemist, had been making perfectly distinct use of the principle of pragmatism in his lectures on the philosophy of science, though he had not called it by that name.

'All realities influence our practice,' he wrote me, 'and that influence is their meaning for us. I am accustomed to put questions to my classes in this way: In what respects would the world be different if this alternative or that were true? If I can find nothing that would become different, then the alternative has no sense.'

That is, the rival views mean practically the same thing, and meaning, other than practical, there is for us none. Ostwald in a published lecture gives this example of what he means. Chemists have long wrangled over the inner constitution of certain bodies called 'tautomers'. Their properties seemed equally consistent with the notion that an unstable hydrogen atom oscillates inside of them, or that they are unstable mixtures of two bodies. Controversy raged; but never was decided. 'It would never have begun,' says Ostwald, 'if the combatants had asked themselves what particular experimental fact could have been made different by one or the other view being correct. For it would then have appeared that no difference of fact could possibly ensue; and the quarrel was as unreal as if, theorizing in primitive times about the raising of dough by yeast, one party should have



invoked a "brownie", while another insisted on an "elf" as the true cause of the phenomenon.<sup>2</sup>

It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence. There can be no difference anywhere that doesn't make a difference elsewhere — no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere and sometime. The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.

There is absolutely nothing new in the pragmatic method. Socrates was an adept at it. Aristotle used it methodically. Locke, Berkeley and Hume made momentous contributions to truth by its means. Shadworth Hodgson keeps insisting that realities are only what they are 'known-as'. But these forerunners of pragmatism used it in fragments: they were preluders only. Not until in our time has it generalized itself, become conscious of a universal mission, pretended to a conquering destiny. I believe in that destiny, and I hope I may end by inspiring you with my belief.

Pragmatism represents a perfectly familiar attitude in philosophy, the empiricist attitude, but it represents it, as it seems to me, both in a more radical and in a less objectionable form than it has ever yet assumed. A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power. That means the empiricist temper regnant, and the rationalist temper sin-

<sup>2</sup> 'Theorie und Praxis', *Zeitsch. des Oesterreichischen Ingenieur u. Architekten-Vereines*, 1905, 4 and 6. I find a still more radical pragmatism than Ostwald's in an address by Professor W. S. Franklin: 'I think that the sickliest notion of physics, even if a student gets it, is that it is "the science of masses, molecules and the ether"'. And I think that the healthiest notion, even if a student does not wholly get it, is that physics is the science of the ways of taking hold of bodies and pushing them!' (*Science*, 2 January 1903)

cerely given up. It means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality and the pretence of finality in truth.

At the same time it does not stand for any special results. It is a method only. But the general triumph of that method would mean an enormous change in what I called in my last lecture the 'temperament' of philosophy. Teachers of the ultra-rationalistic type would be frozen out, much as the courtier type is frozen out in republics, as the ultramontane type of priest is frozen out in Protestant lands. Science and metaphysics would come much nearer together, would in fact work absolutely hand in hand. frozen out  
science and metaphysic.

Metaphysics has usually followed a very primitive kind of quest. You know how men have always hankered after unlawful magic, and you know what a great part, in magic, words have always played. If you have his name, or the formula of incantation that binds him, you can control the spirit, genie, afrite, or whatever the power may be. Solomon knew the names of all the spirits, and having their names, he held them subject to his will. So the universe has always appeared to the natural mind as a kind of enigma, of which the key must be sought in the shape of some illuminating or power-bringing word or name. That word names the universe's principle, and to possess it is, after a fashion, to possess the universe itself. 'God', 'matter', 'reason', 'the absolute', 'energy', are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest. solving names  
- metaphysical quest

But if you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any such word as closing your quest. You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience. It appears less as a solution, then, than as a programme for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be changed.

Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest. We don't lie back upon them, we move forward, and, on occasion, make nature over again by their aid. Pragmatism unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work. Being nothing essentially new, it harmonizes with many ancient philosophic tendencies. It agrees with nominalism for instance, in always appealing to particulars; with utilitarianism in emphasizing practical aspects; with positivism

set each one at work



in its disdain for verbal solutions, useless questions, and metaphysical abstractions.

All these, you see, are anti-intellectualist tendencies. Against rationalism as a pretension and a method, pragmatism is fully armed and militant. But, at the outset, at least, it stands for no particular results. It has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method. As the young Italian pragmatist Papini has well said, it lies in the midst of our theories, like a corridor in a hotel. Innumerable chambers open out of it. In one you may find a man writing an atheistic volume; in the next someone on his knees praying for faith and strength; in a third a chemist investigating a body's properties. In a fourth a system of idealistic metaphysics is being excogitated; in a fifth the impossibility of metaphysics is being shown. But they all own the corridor, and all must pass through it if they want a practicable way of getting into or out of their respective rooms.

No particular results then, so far, but only an attitude of orientation, is what the pragmatic method means. The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories', supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.

So much for the pragmatic method! You may say that I have been praising it rather than explaining it to you, but I shall presently explain it abundantly enough by showing how it works on some familiar problems. Meanwhile the word pragmatism has come to be used in a still wider sense, as meaning also a certain theory of truth. I mean to give a whole lecture to the statement of that theory, after first paving the way, so I can be very brief now. But brevity is hard to follow, so I ask for your redoubled attention for a quarter of an hour. If much remains obscure, I hope to make it clearer in the later lectures.

One of the most successfully cultivated branches of philosophy in our time is what is called inductive logic, the study of the conditions under which our sciences have evolved. Writers on this subject have begun to show a singular unanimity as to what the laws of nature and elements of fact mean, when formulated by mathematicians, physicists and chemists. When the first mathematical, logical and natural uniformities, the first laws, were discovered, men were so carried away by the clearness, beauty and simplification that resulted that they believed themselves to have deciphered authentically the eternal

thoughts of the Almighty. His mind also thundered and reverberated in syllogisms. He also thought in conic sections, squares and roots and ratios, and geometrized like Euclid. He made Kepler's Laws for the planets to follow; he made velocity increase proportionally to the time in falling bodies; he made the law of the sines for light to obey when refracted; he established the classes, orders, families and genera of plants and animals, and fixed the distances between them. He thought the archetypes of all things, and devised their variations; and when we rediscover any one of these his wondrous institutions, we seize his mind in its very literal intention.

But as the sciences have developed farther, the notion has gained ground that most, perhaps all, of our laws are only approximations. The laws themselves, moreover, have grown so numerous that there is no counting them; and so many rival formulations are proposed in all the branches of science that investigators have become accustomed to the notion that no theory is absolutely a transcript of reality, but that any one of them may from some point of view be useful. Their great use is to summarize old facts and to lead to new ones. They are only a man-made language, a conceptual shorthand, as someone calls them, in which we write our reports of nature; and languages, as is well known, tolerate much choice of expression and many dialects.

Thus human arbitrariness has driven divine necessity from scientific logic. If I mention the names of Sigwart, Mach, Ostwald, Pearson, Milhaud, Poincaré, Duhem, Ruysen, those of you who are students will easily identify the tendency I speak of, and will think of additional names.

Riding now on the front of this wave of scientific logic, Messrs Schiller and Dewey appear with their pragmatistic account of what truth everywhere signifies. Everywhere, these teachers say, 'truth' in our ideas and beliefs means the same thing that it means in science. It means, they say, nothing but this, that ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience, to summarize them and get about among them by conceptual short-cuts instead of following the interminable succession of particular phenomena. Any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other

satisfactory relation  
(esthetic consummation)



part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labour; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, true instrumentally. This is the 'instrumental' view of truth taught so successfully at Chicago, the view that truth in our ideas means their power to 'work', promulgated so brilliantly at Oxford.

Messrs Dewey, Schiller and their allies, in reaching this general conception of all truth, have only followed the example of geologists, biologists and philologists. In the establishment of these other sciences, the successful stroke was always to take some simple process actually observable in operation — as denudation by weather, say, or variation from parental type, or change of dialect by incorporation of new words and pronunciations — and then to generalize it, making it apply to all times, and produce great results by summing its effects through the ages.

The observable process which Schiller and Dewey particularly singled out for generalization is the familiar one by which any individual settles into new opinions. The process here is always the same. The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives. So he tries to change first this opinion, and then that (for they resist change very variously), until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter, some idea that mediates between the stock and the new experience and runs them into one another most felicitously and expediently.

This new idea is then adopted as the true one. It preserves the older stocks of truths with a minimum of modification, stretching them just enough to make them admit the novelty, but conceiving that in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible. An *outrée* explanation, violating all our preconceptions, would never pass for a true account of a novelty. We should scratch round industriously till we found something less eccentric. The most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leave most of

his old order standing. Time and space, cause and effect, nature and history, and one's own biography remain untouched. New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity. We hold a theory true just in proportion to its success in solving this 'problem of maxima and minima'. But success in solving this problem is eminently a matter 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. *everything here is plastic*

The point I now urge you to observe particularly is the part played by the older truths. Failure to take account of it is the source of much of the unjust criticism levelled against pragmatism. Their influence is absolutely controlling. Loyalty to them is the first principle — in most cases it is the only principle; for by far the most usual way of handling phenomena so novel that they would make for a serious rearrangement of our preconceptions is to ignore them altogether, or to abuse those who bear witness for them. *loyalty to the old stock*

You doubtless wish examples of this process of truth's growth, and the only trouble is their superabundance. The simplest case of new truth is of course the mere numerical addition of new kinds of facts, or of new single facts of old kinds, to our experience — an addition that involves no alteration in the old beliefs. Day follows day, and its contents are simply added. The new contents themselves are not true, they simply come and are. Truth is what we say about them, and when we say that they have come, truth is satisfied by the plain additive formula.

But often the day's contents oblige a rearrangement. If I should now utter piercing shrieks and act like a maniac on this platform, it would make many of you revise your ideas as to the probable worth of my philosophy. 'Radium' came the other day as part of the day's content, and seemed for a moment to contradict our ideas of the whole order of nature, that order having come to be identified with what is called the conservation of energy. The mere sight of radium paying heat away indefinitely out of its own pocket seemed to violate that conservation. What to think? If the radiations from it were nothing but an



novel in experience w/ beliefs in stock

escape of unsuspected 'potential' energy, pre-existent inside of the atoms, the principle of conservation would be saved. The discovery of 'helium' as the radiation's outcome, opened a way to this belief. So Ramsay's view is generally held to be true, because, although it extends our old ideas of energy, it causes a minimum of alteration in their nature.

I need not multiply instances. A new opinion counts as 'true' just in proportion as it gratifies the individual's desire to assimilate the novel in his experience to his beliefs in stock. It must both lean on old truth and grasp new fact; and its success (as I said a moment ago) in doing this, is a matter for the individual's appreciation. When old truth grows, then, by new truth's addition, it is for subjective reasons. We are in the process and obey the reasons. That new idea is truest which performs most felicitously its function of satisfying our double urgency. It makes itself true, gets itself classed as true, by the way it works; grafting itself then upon the ancient body of truth, which thus grows much as a tree grows by the activity of a new layer of cambium.

plastic dialectic

Now Dewey and Schiller proceed to generalize this observation and to apply it to the most ancient parts of truth. They also once were plastic. They also were called true for human reasons. They also mediated between still earlier truths and what in those days were novel observations. Purely objective truth, truth in whose establishment the function of giving human satisfaction in marrying previous parts of experience with newer parts played no role whatever, is nowhere to be found. The reasons why we call things true is the reason why they are true, for 'to be true' means only to perform this marriage-function.

the trail of the human serpent

The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything. Truth independent; truth that we find merely; truth no longer malleable to human need; truth incorrigible, in a word; such truth exists indeed superabundantly — or is supposed to exist by rationalistically minded thinkers; but then it means only the dead heart of the living tree, and its being there means only that truth also has its paleontology and its 'prescription', and may grow stiff with years of veteran service and petrified in men's regard by sheer antiquity. But how plastic even the oldest truths nevertheless really are has been vividly shown in our day by the transformation of logical and mathematical ideas, a transformation which seems even to be invading physics. The ancient

To be true' means only to perform this marriage-function

formulas are reinterpreted as special expressions of much wider principles, principles that our ancestors never got a glimpse of in their present shape and formulation.

Mr Schiller still gives to all this view of truth the name of 'humanism', but, for this doctrine too, the name of pragmatism seems fairly to be in the ascendant, so I will treat it under the name of pragmatism in these lectures.

Such then would be the scope of pragmatism — first, a method; and second, a genetic theory of what is meant by truth. And these two things must be our future topics. method,  
genetic  
theory

What I have said of the theory of truth will, I am sure, have appeared obscure and unsatisfactory to most of you by reason of its brevity. I shall make amends for that hereafter. In a lecture on 'common-sense' I shall try to show what I mean by truths grown petrified by antiquity. In another lecture I shall expatiate on the idea that our thoughts become true in proportion as they successfully exert their go-between function. In a third I shall show how hard it is to discriminate subjective from objective factors in Truth's development. You may not follow me wholly in these lectures; and if you do, you may not wholly agree with me. But you will, I know, regard me at least as serious, and treat my effort with respectful consideration. ①  
JTBW

You will probably be surprised to learn, then, that Messrs Schiller's and Dewey's theories have suffered a hailstorm of contempt and ridicule. All rationalism has risen against them. In influential quarters Mr Schiller, in particular, has been treated like an impudent schoolboy who deserves a spanking. I should not mention this, but for the fact that it throws so much sidelight upon that rationalistic temper to which I have opposed the temper of pragmatism. Pragmatism is uncomfortable away from facts. Rationalism is comfortable only in the presence of abstractions. This pragmatist talk about truths in the plural, about their utility and satisfactoriness, about the success with which they 'work', etc., suggests to the typical intellectual mind a sort of coarse, lame second-rate makeshift article of truth. Such truths are not real truth. Such tests are merely subjective. As against this, objective truth must be something non-utilitarian, haughty, refined, remote, august, exalted. It must be an absolute correspondence of our thoughts with an equally absolute reality. It must be what we ought to think, unconditionally. The conditioned ways in which we do think are so much irrelevance and



matter for psychology. Down with psychology, up with logic, in all this question!

See the exquisite contrast of the types of mind! The pragmatist clings to facts and concreteness, observes truth at its work in particular cases, and generalizes. Truth, for him, becomes a class-name for all sorts of definite working values in experience. For the rationalist it remains a pure abstraction, to the bare name of which we must defer. When the pragmatist undertakes to show in detail just why we must defer, the rationalist is unable to recognize his concretes (from which) his own abstraction is taken. He accuses us of denying truth; whereas we have only sought to trace exactly why people follow it and always ought to follow it. Your typical ultra-abstractionist fairly shudders at concreteness: other things equal, he positively prefers the pale and spectral. If the two universes were offered, he would always choose the skinny outline rather than the rich thicket of reality. It is so much pure, clearer, nobler.

I hope that as these lectures go on, the concreteness and closeness to facts of the pragmatism which they advocate may be what approves itself to you as its most satisfactory peculiarity. It only follows here the example of the sister sciences, interpreting the unobserved by the observed. It brings old and new harmoniously together. It converts the absolutely empty notion of a static relation of 'correspondence' (what that may mean we must ask later) between our minds and reality, into that of a rich and active commerce (that anyone may follow in detail and understand) between particular thoughts of ours, and the great universe of other experiences in which they play their parts and have their uses.

But enough of this at present? The justification of what I say must be postponed. I wish now to add a word in further explanation of the claim I made at our last meeting, that pragmatism may be a happy harmonizer of empiricist ways of thinking, with the more religious demands of human beings.

Men who are strongly of the fact-loving temperament, you may remember me to have said, are liable to be kept at a distance by the small sympathy with facts which that philosophy from the present-day fashion of idealism offers them. It is far too intellectualistic. Old fashioned theism was bad enough, with its notion of God as an exalted monarch, made up of a lot of unintelligible

or preposterous 'attributes'; but, so long as it held strongly by the argument from design, it kept some touch with concrete realities. Since, however, Darwinism has once for all displaced design from the minds of the 'scientific', theism has lost that foothold; and some kind of an immanent or pantheistic deity working in things rather than above them is, if any, the kind recommended to our contemporary imagination. Aspirants to a philosophic religion turn, as a rule, more hopefully nowadays towards idealistic pantheism than towards the older dualistic theism, in spite of the fact that the latter still counts able defenders.

But, as I said in my first lecture, the brand of pantheism offered is hard for them to assimilate if they are lovers of facts, or empirically minded. It is the absolutistic brand, spurning the dust and reared upon pure logic. It keeps no connection whatever with concreteness. Affirming the absolute mind, which is its substitute for God, to be the rational presupposition of all particulars of fact, whatever they may be, it remains supremely indifferent to what the particular facts in our world actually are. Be they what they may, the absolute will father them. Like the sick lion in Aesop's fable, all footprints lead into his den, but nulla vestigia retrorsum. You cannot redescend into the world of particulars by the absolute's aid, or deduce any necessary consequences of detail important for your life from your idea of his nature. He gives you indeed the assurance that all is well with Him, and for his eternal way of thinking; but thereupon he leaves you to be finitely saved by your own temporal devices.

Far be it from me to deny the majesty of this conception, or its capacity to yield religious comfort to a most respectable class of minds. But from the human point of view, no one can pretend that it doesn't suffer from the faults of remoteness and abstractness. It is eminently a product of what I have ventured to call the rationalistic temper. It disdains empiricism's needs. It substitutes a pallid outline for the real world's richness. It is dapper; it is noble in the bad sense, in the sense in which to be noble is to be inapt for humble service. In this real world of sweat and dirt, it seems to me that when a view of things is 'noble', that ought to count as a presumption against its truth, and as a philosophic disqualification. The prince of darkness may be a gentleman, as we are told he is, but whatever the God of earth and heaven is, he can surely be no gentleman. His menial

Contra  
Bergson's  
absolute  
concrete  
duration

true  
empiricism



services are needed in the dust of our human trials, even more than his dignity is needed in the empyrean.

pragmatism  
vs. empiricism Now pragmatism, devoted though she be to facts, has no such materialistic bias as ordinary empiricism labours under. Moreover, she has no objection whatever to the realizing of abstractions, so long as you get about among particulars with their aid and they actually carry you somewhere. Interested in no conclusions but those which our minds and our experiences work out together, she has no *a priori* prejudices against theology. If theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much. For how much more they are true, will depend entirely on their relations to the other truths that also have to be acknowledged.

transcendental  
idealism What I said just now about the absolute of transcendental idealism is a case in point. First, I called it majestic and said it yielded religious comfort to a class of minds, and then I accused it of remoteness and sterility. But so far as it affords such comfort, it surely is not sterile; it has that amount of value; it performs a concrete function. As a good pragmatist, I myself ought to call the absolute true 'in so far forth', then; and I unhesitatingly now do so.

a moral holiday But what does true in so far forth mean in this case? To answer, we need only apply the pragmatic method. What do believers in the absolute mean by saying that their belief affords them comfort? They mean that since in the absolute finite evil is 'overruled' already, we may, therefore, whenever we wish, treat the temporal as if it were potentially the eternal, be sure that we can trust its outcome, and, without sin, dismiss our fear and drop the worry of our finite responsibility. In short, they mean that we have a right ever and anon to take a moral holiday to let the world wag in its own way, feeling that its issues are in better hands than ours and are none of our business.

The universe is a system of which the individual members may relax their anxieties occasionally, in which the don't-care mood is also right for men, and moral holidays in order - that, if I mistake not, is part, at least, of what the absolute is 'known-as', that is the great difference in our particular experiences when his being true makes for us, that is part of his cash-value when he is pragmatically interpreted. Farther than that the ordinary lay-reader in philosophy who thinks favourably of

*closes thought*  
 absolute idealism does not venture to sharpen his conceptions. He can use the absolute for so much and so much is very precious. He is pained at hearing you speak incredulously of the absolute, therefore, and disregards your criticisms because they deal with aspects of the conception that he fails to follow.

If the absolute means this, and means no more than this, who can possibly deny the truth of it? To deny it would be to insist that men should never relax, and that holidays are never in order. *relaxation holidays (occasionally)*

I am well aware how odd it must seem to some of you to hear me say that an idea is 'true' so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives. That it is good, for as much as it profits, you will gladly admit. If what we do by its aid is good, you will allow the idea itself to be good in so far forth, for we are the better for possessing it. But is it not a strange misuse of the word 'truth', you will say, to call ideas also 'true' for this reason?

To answer this difficulty fully is impossible at this stage of my account. You touch here upon the very central point of Messrs Schiller's, Dewey's and my own doctrine of truth, which I cannot discuss with detail until my sixth lecture. Let me now say only this, that truth is *one species of good*, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and co-ordinate with it. *the good*  
The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons. Surely you must admit this, that if there were no good for life in true ideas, or if the knowledge of them were positively disadvantageous and false ideas the only useful ones, then the current notion that truth is divine and precious, and its pursuit a duty, could never have grown up or become a dogma. In a world like that, our duty would be to shun truth, rather. But in this world, just as certain foods are not only agreeable to our taste, but good for our teeth, our stomach and our tissues; so certain ideas are not only agreeable to think about, or agreeable as supporting other ideas that we are fond of, but they are also helpful in life's practical struggles. If there be any life that it is really better we should lead, and if there be any idea which, if believed in, would help us to lead that life, then it would be really better for us to believe in that idea, unless, indeed, belief in it incidentally clashed with other greater vital benefits.

'What would be better for us to believe?' This sounds very like a definition of truth. It comes very near to saying 'what we



ought to believe': and in *that* definition none of you would find any oddity. Ought we ever not to believe what it is better for us to believe? And can we then keep the notion of what is better for us, and what is true for us, permanently apart?

psychically  
causal

Pragmatism says no, and I fully agree with her. Probably you also agree, so far as the abstract statement goes, but with a suspicion that if we practically did believe everything that made for good in our own personal lives, we should be found indulging all kinds of fancies about this world's affairs, and all kinds of sentimental superstitions about a world hereafter. Your suspicion here is undoubtedly well founded, and it is evident that something happens when you pass from the abstract to the concrete, that complicates the situation.

something  
happens  
abstract →  
concrete

I said just now that what is better for us to believe is true unless the belief incidentally clashes with some other vital benefit. Now in real life what vital benefits is any particular belief of ours most liable to clash with? What indeed except the vital benefits yielded by other beliefs when these prove incompatible with the first ones? In other words, the greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths. Truths have once for all this desperate instinct of self-preservation and of desire to extinguish whatever contradicts them. My belief in the absolute, based on the good it does me, must run the gauntlet of all my other beliefs. Grant that it may be true in giving me a moral holiday. Nevertheless, as I conceive it – and let me speak now confidentially, as it were, and merely in my own private person – it clashes with other truths of mine whose benefits I hate to give up on its account. It happens to be associated with a kind of logic of which I am the enemy, I find that it entangles me in metaphysical paradoxes that are unacceptable, etc., etc. But as I have enough trouble in life already without adding the trouble of carrying these intellectual inconsistencies, I personally just give up the absolute. I just take my moral holidays; or else as a professional philosopher, I try to justify them by some other principle.

If I could restrict my notion of the absolute to its bare holiday-giving value, it wouldn't clash with my other truths. But we cannot easily thus restrict our hypotheses. They carry supernumerary features, and these it is that clash so. My disbelief in the absolute means then disbelief in those other supernumerary

I just take my moral holidays.

features, for I fully believe in the legitimacy of taking moral holidays.

You see by this what I meant when I called pragmatism a mediator and reconciler and said, borrowing the word from Papini, that she 'unstiffens' our theories. She has in fact no prejudices whatever, no obstructive dogmas, no rigid canons of what shall count as proof. She is completely genial. She will entertain any hypothesis, she will consider any evidence. It follows that in the religious field she is at a great advantage both over positivistic empiricism, with its anti-theological bias, and over religious rationalism, with its exclusive interest in the remote, the noble, the simple, and the abstract in the way of conception.

In short, she widens the field of search for God. Rationalism sticks to logic and the empyrean. Empiricism sticks to the external senses. Pragmatism is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses, and to count the humblest and most personal experiences. She will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences. She will take a god who lives in the very dirt of private fact — if that should seem a likely place to find him.

Her only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience's demands, nothing being omitted. If theological ideas should do this, if the notion of God, in particular, should prove to do it, how could pragmatism possibly deny God's existence? She could see no meaning in treating as 'not true' a notion that was pragmatically so successful. What other kind of truth could there be, for her, than all this agreement with concrete reality?

In my last lecture I shall return again to the relations of pragmatism with religion. But you see already how democratic she is. Her manners are as various and flexible, her resources as rich and endless, and her conclusions as friendly as those of mother nature.