AN ACCOUNT OF JAMES' PRAGMATIC VIEW OF TRUTH

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A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Masters of Art

McMaster University

MASTERS OF ARTS (1994)
(Philosophy)

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY
Hamilton, Ontario

Title: An Account of James' Pragmatic View of Truth

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Number of Pages: V, 137

Abstract

Misinterpretations of William James' pragmatic account of truth are due to three main factors. First, the failure to see the connection between James' account of truth and his account of reality (that is, the connection between pragmatism and radical empiricism). Second, the failure to see James' philosophical project as essentially involving the reinterpretation of traditional philosophical concepts. Third, the mistaken belief that pragmatism provides a formula or rule for determining the truth or falsity of beliefs. In this thesis, these three factors provided a framework for my own interpretation of James' account of truth. In the introduction, I briefly discuss the connection between pragmatism and radical empiricism. In the first chapter, I show that philosophical notions like 'consciousness', 'perception', 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity' are reinterpreted in James' account of reality. In the second chapter, I show how his reinterpretations of 'correspondence', 'coherence', and 'utility' lead to what is better called an 'account' of truth instead of a 'theory' of truth. The third chapter provides further elaboration on his account of truth by examining conceptual systems and 'necessary' truths. In the conclusion, I examine the emphasis which separates James'

pragmatic account of truth from other versions, namely, the emphasis on individual experience in determining and constituting truth.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dr. Sami Najm and Dr. Gary Madison for their time and care in reading several drafts of this thesis. Their comments and suggestions enabled me to clarify many rough ideas. I would also like to thank Dr. Barry Allen for consenting to be my third reader.

Personal thanks to my family, especially my mother and father, for their support through the years.

Most of all, loving thanks to Anthony Jenkins. His tenacious questions and encouraging comments were essential to the completion of this thesis.

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Introduction

The problems with interpreting William James' works on pragmatism are exemplified by the number of different accounts given of his theory of truth. His pragmatic account of truth has been characterized as everything from a utilitarian (or instrumentalist) theory to a correspondence theory to even a coherence theory of truth, and in each case there is an abundance of quotations from James' own works to back up each interpretation. John P. Murphy, in Pragmatism: From Peirce to Davidson, describes James' theory of truth in the following utilitarian fashion: "What is true in our way of thinking is the production of beliefs that prove themselves to be good, and good for definite, assignable reasons."[1] He adds that these beliefs must prove to be good in the long-run, as well as now; thus, a calculation of the various long-term and short-term consequences is in order for the verification of beliefs. Further, in Theories of Truth: A Critical Introduction, Richard L. Kirkham cites many passages in James to support his view that James' pragmatic conception of truth

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[1] John Murphy's Pragmatism: From Peirce to Davidson 1990, page 57.

is *primarily* a version of instrumentalism.[2] Besides James' explicit references to utility and instrumentalism,[3] his descriptions of truth as 'satisfactory', 'useful', 'successful', 'profitable' and 'prosperous' lend credence to Murphy's and Kirkham's interpretations. However, in The Radical Empiricism of William James, John Wild argues that James' pragmatic conception of truth involves correspondence or agreement of meaning and being. He says that while "satisfaction is a necessary condition for such verification, it is by no means a sufficient one. The crucial factor is the finding of the meaning of reality. Without this, the theory

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[2] Richard Kirkham's Theories of Truth: A Critical Introduction, 1992. Kirkham symbolizes the general form of James' instrumentalism on page 93 as follows: b is true if and only if (b copies a part of reality or b is a useful belief to have). The first part of the disjunct refers to what Kirkham calls James' 'concession to realism' in his book Pragmatism when James writes, "Our true ideas of sensible things do indeed copy them. Shut your eyes and think of yonder clock on the wall and you get just such a true picture or copy of its dial" (James, 1975, 96) Kirkham is right in suggesting that this example describes the relation between a sensible thing (i.e. an after-image) and itself (the initial perception), rather than describing the relation between ideas or concepts and sensible things. However, instead of dismissing this case as irrelevant to James' pragmatism, Kirkham retains this part of the disjunct with the qualification that it only applies to a very small number of cases. Consequently, he can say that James' pragmatism is primarily instrumentalism and spend the remaining part of the section discussing in detail what usefulness means.

[3] See Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth (1975), pages 32, 34 and 97 where he refers to instrumentalism and page 32 where he refers to utilitarianism.

[or belief] is false."[4] This interpretation is equally plausible given James' description of truth in terms of an 'agreement' or 'commerce' with reality, or a 'leading', 'steering' or 'carrying' to reality. Finally, C.F. Delaney emphasizes coherence in James' account of 'agreement' when he describes truth as a marriage of "recalcitrant experience with the entrenched beliefs."[5] James' emphasis on the 'marriage-function' of old and new beliefs (that is, how new beliefs must 'fit' or 'cohere' with our background set of beliefs) make Delaney's interpretation understandable. Often what accompanies each of these interpretations, however, is the criticism that James' work is vague and inconsistent. Kirkham makes this charge most explicitly, with references to James' work on pragmatism, when he states,

> There is hardly any theory of truth that James did not endorse at one time or another, including the correspondence theory (P, 96), the coherence theory (P, 34-37, MT, 104-105), and a Peircean consensus theory (MT, 142-143). As already noted, we can deal with such a philosopher profitably only by being prepared to ignore some of his remarks as 'not what he meant' and by offering some explanation and integration that the original

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[4] John Wild's The Radical Empiricism of William James 1970, page 332.

[5] Delaney, "Pragmatism and the Meaning of 'Truth'," October 1985, 523. He describes James' focus on the 'phenomenon of accepting a new opinion' in elucidating the meaning of truth.

author does not provide.[6]

At times, James is vague. He is not as careful and consistent with the use of certain terms as he should be. His penchant for metaphors and other colorful phrases is indulged at the expense of the kind of rigor valued by many philosophers. Further, because many of his pragmatic works are lectures given to varying audiences, the sometimes dramatic changes in emphasis may be misleading in relation to his works considered as a whole. As a result, there are times when one must pay more attention to what he means, rather than what he says. However, despite these admissions, I will still argue that the extent of James' inconsistencies is largely exaggerated by many commentators, and, as a result, a distorted interpretation of his pragmatic account of truth is described and criticized. Further, I will argue that many of the vague and seemingly inconsistent passages and concepts in James' pragmatic writings can be made clear by viewing his pragmatism in the context of both his psychology and his radical empiricism.[7]

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[6] Kirkham's Theories of Truth: A Critical Introduction, page 88.

[7] Of the four interpretations mentioned above, I would argue that John Wild's interpretation of James' pragmatic theory of truth makes the most sense out of many passages since he does approach pragmatism from the context of radical empiricism. However, I would agree with Rorty (see introduction to Consequences of Pragmatism 1982, xxix), that pragmatism is not about giving necessary and sufficient

At this point, some remarks should be made regarding the relationship between James' thesis of radical empiricism and his pragmatism. Much of the confusion about this relationship is due to conflicting comments that James makes about his own work. At times, he implies that there is some important connection between pragmatism and radical empiricism. For example, in the Preface to The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to 'Pragmatism', he states that he is interested

> in another doctrine in philosophy to which I give the name of radical empiricism and it seems to me that the establishment of the pragmatist theory of truth is a step of first rate importance in making radical empiricism prevail.[8]

Thus, James seems to imply that his theory of truth is not only consistent with his radical empiricism, but that its acceptance would, in some sense, make radical empiricism more plausible. He also states that "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."[9] In this passage, he seems to equate the pragmatic attitude (not necessarily the pragmatic theory of

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conditions for the truth of a belief.

[8] William James' Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth 1975, page 172.

[9] *Ibid.*, 31.

truth) with radical empiricism. On the other hand, in the Preface to Pragmatism: A New Name For Some Old Ways of Thinking, he states

> To avoid one misunderstanding at least, let me say that there is no logical connexion between pragmatism, as I understand it, and a doctrine which I have recently set forth as 'radical empiricism.' The latter stands on its own feet. One may entirely reject it and still be a pragmatist.[10]

In this passage, James could not say any more emphatically that there is not a necessary connection between pragmatism and radical empiricism. However, I will suggest that James does not mean what he says here. Perhaps, he wished to distance his radical empiricism from his controversial and much-criticised theory of truth; or, maybe, he wanted to distinguish his way of doing philosophy from the logical system-builders of his time. But in either case, this is mere speculation regarding his motives for making a statement which, I will argue, does not fit with anything else he says. But let me try to show why I think there is a necessary connection between James' radical empiricism and his pragmatism.

There are many formulations of the thesis of radical

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[10] *Ibid.*, 6.

empiricism,[11] but one of the most explicit accounts is given in The Meaning of Truth in 1909. There he states that radical empiricism consists of a postulate, a statement of fact and a generalized conclusion. The postulate is "that the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience."[12] Although James holds an agnostic position with respect to unexperienceable things, he restricts the scope of philosophical discourse to things that people can experience. It is this postulate that makes James a thorough-going empiricist. The statement of fact for radical empiricism is that "the relations between things, conjunctive as well as disjunctive, are just as much matters of direct particular experience, neither more so nor less so than the things themselves."[13] Thus, relations are just as experiential (and, thus, just as 'real') as the things connected by relations. This statement of fact makes James 'radical' since many empiricists deny that conjunctive relations can be directly

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[11] See "Radical Empiricism" and "A World of Pure Experience" in The Writings of William James (1977) pages 134-136 and 195-196, respectively.

[12] James' The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition edited by John J. McDermott, 1977.

[13] *Ibid.*, 136.

experienced.[14] Finally, the generalized conclusion of radical empiricism is that "the directly apprehended universe needs, in short, no extraneous trans-empirical connective support, but possesses in its own right a concatenated or continuous structure."[15] In other words, no appeal to a Platonic Form or a Kantian noumenon is necessary in giving an account of the world as experienced. James' pragmatism is directly connected to this thesis of radical empiricism.

In his article, "What Pragmatism Means", James describes two different senses of the word 'pragmatism'. First of all, pragmatism signifies a method for settling metaphysical disputes.[16] Questions such as 'Does God exist?', 'Is the world one or many?', and 'What is substance?' can be

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[14] James is thinking primarily of empiricists like Hume, although he does also mention aspects of Berkeley's and Mill's works (see "A World of Pure Experience"). 'Ordinary' empiricism, according to James, makes the mistake of overemphasizing disjunctive relations (by saying that all we experience are disparate impressions or perceptions), while denying conjunctive relations. James argues that because both types of relations are the same sort of phenomena, the same reasons for saying that disjunctive relations are experienced can be used to include conjunctive relations within the realm of experience.

As we shall see, James' empiricism is radical in another sense. Instead of limiting direct experience to sensations, James will widen his notion of acquaintance to include direct, non-sensory experiences like hallucinations, mystical experiences, and intuitions.

[15] *Ibid.*, 136.

[16] James' Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth 1975, page 28.

answered by asking of each of them the pragmatic question, 'What difference in practise does each concept make?'. Philosophical disputes can be solved by reinterpreting or redefining abstract concepts in more concrete and practical terms. According to James, the attitude expressed by the pragmatic method is a more radical version of traditional empiricism. He states that a pragmatist,

> 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.[17]

Besides expressing a very similar attitude or *Weltanschauung*,[18] pragmatism, in this first sense, is directly related to radical empiricism in two ways. First, the pragmatic method reinforces the postulate of radical empiricism by providing a means for 'bringing' abstract concepts, and thus philosophical discussion to an experiential level. Second, it supports the conclusion of radical empiricism by showing how seemingly abstract concepts can be understood without appealing to 'trans-empirical support'. Thus, the pragmatic method is intimately connected with the

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[17] *Ibid.*, 31.

[18] James calls radical empiricism his Weltanschauung in his article 'A World of Pure Experience' (See McDermott ed. The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition 1977, page 195).

thesis of radical empiricism.

However, it is the second signification of the word 'pragmatism' that is directly relevant to the discussion in this thesis. Besides signifying a method, pragmatism may also refer to an account of truth. But the method and the theory of truth are not entirely disconnected since James' theory of truth is really an application of the pragmatic method to the concept of truth. In "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth", he states

> Pragmatism, on the other hand, asks its usual question. "Grant an idea or belief to be true," it says, "what concrete difference will its being true make to anyone's actual life? ... What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experiential terms?[19]

The answer to this question forms the basis for James' pragmatic account of truth. We could say that his pragmatic theory of truth is indirectly related to radical empiricism through its direct relationship with the pragmatic method. However, I would argue that James' theory of truth is more directly related to his radical empiricism through the definition of truth. In an article, James describes his theory of truth by, first, providing a general definition of truth and, then, by explaining the terms in that definition.[20] He states that truth means an agreement of belief (or idea)

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[19] *Ibid.*, 97.

[20] James' "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth" in Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth (1975), page 96.

with reality. He also says that the notions of 'agreement' and 'reality' require explanation, since different interpretations of these terms could result in very different theories of truth. Since radical empiricism is James' world-view, an understanding of radical empiricism should significantly illuminate his view of reality. Consequently, to obtain an adequate understanding of the pragmatic theory of truth, the thesis of radical empiricism and its implications for the nature of reality must be examined.

In this thesis, I will show that James' account of truth is far more consistent than many critics have suggested. The form of this thesis will reflect the definition of truth mentioned above. In the first chapter, James' account of reality will be discussed in terms of his radical empiricism. I will show that he gives priority to immediate experience and avoids subjectivism and idealism, by radically reinterpreting philosophical concepts such as 'consciousness', 'perception', 'sameness', 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity'. In the second chapter, the traditionally abstract notion of 'agreement' will be brought within experience. As a result, pragmatic truth will be described in terms of correspondence, coherence and utility, each in a reinterpreted form. In the final chapter, James' account of truth will be further elaborated by considering the role of conceptual systems and necessary truths. The scope of pragmatic truth will be explained by

considering in what sense theoretical truth and necessary truths are pragmatic. The thesis will conclude by considering a significant problem, namely, whether James compromises his own pragmatic principles by describing constraints on truth beyond conversational constraints.

Chapter 1: Reality

The concept "reality" has been defined in such abstract terms that its relevance to everyday life may come into question. Although Kant's noumenal reality and Plato's realm of forms have a theoretically interesting connection to experience, the difference they make to individual deliberation and action seems trivial compared with direct experiences like perception and memories. Further, any significance they do have to people's practise seems incidental to their status as realities. Once the pragmatic method is applied to the concept 'reality', this relevance turns out to be the defining characteristic of James' notion of reality. He writes "What is it to be 'real'? The best definition I know is that which the pragmatist rule gives: 'anything is real of which we find ourselves obliged to take account in any way."[1] He adds that "concepts are thus as real as percepts, for we cannot live a moment without taking account of them."[2] In this chapter, I will examine James'

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[1] James, "Percept and Concept - Some Corollaries" in The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition (1967), page 253-254.

[2] *Ibid.*, 254. In earlier works, James held that only percepts were real. In a note at the end of "The Function of Cognition" (see Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth 1975,

notion of reality by considering the two 'coordinate realms' of reality, namely percepts and concepts. In his later works on pragmatism and radical empiricism,[3] James describes reality by radically reinterpreting traditional philosophical notions, such as 'perception', 'consciousness', 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity'. However, these reinterpretations, as given in these later works, are unclear. Consequently, I will argue that ambiguities in his account of reality can only be made clear by an examination of his earlier, psychological works.[4] I will conclude this chapter by considering the scope of his account of reality.

1.1 A percept, for James, is meaningless knowledge. Although it seems strange, and even contradictory, to say that the same thing is a form of knowledge and yet has no meaning, an examination of his account of perception reveals how both descriptions apply. On the one hand, perception is knowledge

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198), James revises his position. He, there, proposes two co-ordinate realms of reality consisting of percepts and concepts.

[3] Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking was originally published in 1907, The Meaning of Truth in 1909, A Pluralistic Universe in 1909, Some Problems in Philosophy in 1911, and Essays in Radical Empiricism in 1912.

[4] The Principles of Psychology was originally published in 1890, while the revised and abridged version, Psychology: A Briefer Course, was originally published in 1892.

by acquaintance, that is, it is a direct and immediate form of knowledge. James states, "these percepts, these terminii, these sensible things, these mere matters-of-acquaintance, are the only realities we ever directly know."[5] A percept is knowledge in the sense that a directly apprehended object is said to be known. On the other hand, a percept has no meaning, since meaning, for James, applies to things which are not immediate and, thus, 'lead' or 'point' to other experiences. He states that the perceptual flux "means nothing, and is but what it immediately is."[6] In perception, an object is directly given, and thus there is no inference or intermediate steps in perceptual knowing. As a result, a percept cannot be true or false, since it simply *is*.[7] Although a direct apprehension of an object constitutes knowledge, it does not and can not constitute meaning as James defines the term.

Two characteristics of percepts are important in distinguishing them from concepts. Percepts, as opposed to concepts, are particular and dynamic. James writes, "the

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[5] James, Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth (1975), 197.

[6] McDermott ed. The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition (1977), 233.

[7] As I shall show in later chapters, James' accounts of meaning and truth overlap. What they both have in common is this characteristic of 'leading' or 'pointing' to other experiences.

percepts are singulars that change incessantly and never return exactly as they were before."[8] Thus, all percepts, whether they are things, qualities or relations, are particulars and in a state of flux. It is for this reason that James refers to the perceptual world in itself as "a big booming buzzing confusion, as free from contradiction in its 'much-at-oneness' as it is all alive and evidently there."[9]

Now it is evident that the world is not a 'big booming buzzing confusion', at least not for most of us. The knowledge which makes it possible for us to organize our perceptions and thoughts is called 'knowledge about' or conceptual knowledge. James writes,

> Out of this aboriginal sensible muchness attention carves out objects, which conception then names and identifies forever - in the sky 'constellations,' on the earth 'beach,' 'sea,' 'cliff,' 'bushes,' 'grass.' Out of time we cut 'days' and 'nights,' 'summers' and 'winters.' We say *what* each part of the sensible continuum is, and all these abstracted *whats* are concepts.[10]

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[8] *Ibid.*, 233.

[9] *Ibid.*, 233. When James uses the term 'much-at-oneness', he is referring to the concatenated or continuous structure of the universe mentioned in the conclusion of the thesis of radical empiricism. For James, the universe is neither a unity nor a disjoint plurality. His compromise is a "partial conflux" or a connected plurality. Thus, in perception, 'much-at-oneness' or connected impressions are experienced, rather than disjoint ones. See the essay "The Thing and its Relations" for some of his discussion on the concatenated universe.

[10] *Ibid.*, 234.

As abstractions from the perceptual flux, concepts have the opposite characteristics of percepts. First, concepts are universal, not particular. Second, concepts are unchanging and discrete in meaning, rather than existing as a continuous flux. Even conceptual relations are universal and fixed. James states, "A concept never varies; and between such unvarying terms the relations must be constant and express eternal verities."[11] Thus, a background of associated concepts may be gradually formed as attention 'carves out' more concepts from the perceptual flux.

The relationship between percepts and concepts is not simply a matter of derivation. Although it is true that concepts are derived or abstracted from perceptual experience, concepts may also affect percepts.[12] James writes, "concepts flow out of percepts and into them again"[13] He describes this 'interpenetration' of percepts and concepts in the following way: "The two mental functions thus play into each other's hands. Perception prompts our thought, and thought in turn

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[11] *Ibid.*, 235.

[12] There is one more story to tell about the relationship between concepts and percepts, namely, how concepts 'lead' to percepts. Since this relationship forms the basis for understanding the notion of 'leading' in James' pragmatic theory of truth, this discussion will be deferred until chapter 2.

[13] *Ibid.*, 232.

enriches our perception."[14] Both forms of knowledge are necessary parts of our experience; "neither, taken alone, knows reality in its completeness."[15]

The last aspect of James' account of percepts and concepts is his neutral monism. Neutral monism is a response to metaphysical dualism in accounts of perception and conception.[16] According to James, theories of cognition, especially of perception, have been plagued with abstract philosophical problems due to the presumption that knower and thing known are metaphysically disjunct. For example, once knower and known are distinguished as 'mental' image and 'physical' thing, problems arise about their connection. How can something physical affect something mental? In what sense can we say that a mental thing 'knows' or 'represents' a physical thing? If cognition is described as 'scheme plus content', how can we understand cognition if we can't understand each element? Can the scheme be described by

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[14] *Ibid.*, 256.

[15] *Ibid.*, 235.

[16] James views his refutation of neo-Kantian dualism as the final step in refuting all dualisms. In the article "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?", James writes, "If neo-Kantism has expelled earlier forms of dualism, we shall have expelled all forms if we are able to expel neo-Kantism in its turn." (McDermott ed. The Writings Of William James 1977, 170) Kantian phenomena, according to James, involve "object-plus-subject" or scheme-plus-content as the minimum of experience. Thus, a fundamental or metaphysical dualism is assumed in Kant's account of perception.

'subtracting' the content? How can we subtract the content if we have no means of characterizing it? James would suggest that with a dualism as the fundamental assumption in cognition, these traditional abstract problems will inevitably arise in explaining how this postulated chasm is 'overcome' in cognition. Often trans-empirical support, like a thing in-itself or a substance, is needed to complete these epistemological theories. James proposes a Copernican-like revolution in theories of cognition. By assuming a metaphysically neutral stuff, what must now be accounted for is the dualism felt in cognition. With such a reversal, James hopes to explain our experience of perception and conception, while exchanging concrete problems for the abstract, metaphysical problems associated with traditional accounts.

In "Does Consciousness Exist?", James answers the question posed by the title in the negative with a qualification. When he says that consciousness does not exist, he means, "only to deny that the word stands for an entity, but to insist most emphatically that it does stand for a function."[17] This function is 'knowing'. What James is saying is that there are not two factors in experience, that is, an entity called "consciousness" (awareness of x, or the 'mental' x) distinct from the content or object of

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[17] *Ibid.*, 170.

consciousness (the x, or the 'physical' x). Rather, knower and known (thought and thing, subject and object) are made of the same "neutral" stuff. What differentiates knower from the thing known is the way this "stuff" is subsequently taken. James states that

> a given undivided portion of experience, taken in one context of associates, plays the part of the knower, or state of mind, of 'consciousness'; while in a different context the same undivided bit of experience plays the part of the thing known, of an objective 'content.'[18]

Each context consists of relations from the percept or concept to 'associated' percepts and concepts. In different contexts, the percept or concept has different external relations, and thus has different properties and obeys different causal laws.

James gives two examples to illustrate the difference in causal laws and the 'functional' difference a percept makes in different contexts. First, the one content 'hard' may be assigned to one of two groups. Taken as 'physical',

> it is 'strong,' it acts 'energetically' and aggressively. Here whatever is hard interferes with the space its neighbors occupy. ... In the mind, on the contrary, the hard thing is nowhere in particular, it dents nothing, it suffuses through its mental neighbours, as it were, and interpenetrates them.[19]

Thus, the 'subject-context' and the 'object-context' may be differentiated by their 'energy' and their regularity in

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[18] *Ibid.*, 172.

[19] *Ibid.*, 272.

following physical and causal laws. Second, James gives the example of a pen which can be taken as physical or mental depending on the 'function' it assumes in different contexts. He writes,

> So far as in that world it is a stable feature, holds ink, marks paper and obeys the guidance of a hand, it is a physical pen. That is what we mean by being 'physical,' in a pen. So far as it is instable, on the contrary, coming and going with the movements of my eyes, altering with what I call my fancy, continuous with subsequent experiences of its 'having been' (in the past tense), it is the percept of a pen in my mind.[20]

Thus, in each context, the percept has a certain function. In its 'physical' capacity, it must perform in a specific manner in accordance with causal laws. In its 'mental' capacity, it functions as a moment in my personal history. Although the above examples pertain to percepts, the same should follow for concepts. We can think of our concept of a pen as having an objective context (as a stable, law-abiding, functional concept) and a subjective context (as an unlawful concept situated in our personal experience). Thus, knower and known, thought and thing, subject and object, and mental thing and physical thing, are features *added on* to an experience which is neutral with respect to these dualisms.

1.2 The main problem with this account of reality involves

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[20] *Ibid.*, 227.

the relationship between sensation and perception. In his later works, James does not clearly differentiate these two notions. In fact, he states in a footnote that "instead of 'percept' I shall often speak of 'sensation', 'feeling', 'intuition' and sometimes of 'sensible experience' or of the 'immediate flow' of conscious life."[21] But, having said this, he leaves the reader in a bad state of confusion about a number of related issues. First, because the relationship between sensation and perception is ambiguous, the very nature of perception becomes confused. Second, with an ambiguous account of perception, questions arise concerning the relationship between percepts and concepts. Finally, because the notion of a 'context of associates' depends on how percepts and concepts are characterized, neutral monism cannot be understood until these grey areas are cleared up. Let me examine these problems in more detail before I turn to James' earlier, psychological works for a solution.

There are three main possibilities regarding the relation between sensation and perception that imply different characterizations of perception. First of all, perception may be, strictly speaking, equal to sensation. In this case, only colours, sounds, smells, tastes and touches are percepts. The world of perception would be a world of sensible impressions,

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[21] *Ibid.*, 235.

and nothing more. However, it seems evident that James wants to include much more in his perceptible world. As the quotation in the above paragraph indicates, 'intuitions' and 'feelings' (or affections) seem to be included as perceptions even though they may not involve the stimulation of sense organs. Further, in The Varieties of Religious Experience, James describes mystical experiences as realities which involve the "absence of definite sensible images."[22] In "Necessary Truths and the Effects of Experience", he speaks of the 'reality' of hallucinations when he distinguishes two types of perceptions; one, in which "the natural agents produce perceptions which take cognizance of the agents themselves [i.e. sensible perceptions]; in the other case, they produce perceptions which take cognizance of something else."[23] He gives as an example of the latter case, drug-induced hallucinations. If intuitions, feelings, mystical experiences and hallucinations are all realities for James, the question is whether they belong to the immediate, changing, particular world of perceptions or the static, universal world of concepts. Given what is known about these experiences, it seems that they are more akin to percepts than

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[22] See "The Reality of the Unseen" in The Varieties of Religious Experience (1961), 60.

[23] James, The Principles of Psychology (1950) vol 2, page 625.

concepts. Thus, it would seem that James' empiricism is a radical version of traditional empiricism in another sense, since it includes non-sensory experiences in the perceptual realm. Therefore, perception is not, strictly speaking, equal to sensation.

However, there are two remaining accounts of the relation between sensation and perception. First, sensation may be one of many kinds of perceptions, but the only way to sensibly perceive. In this case, it would seem that one never perceives a *thing*. Instead of perceiving a tree, for example, 'green-patch-on-top-of-brown-patch' is sensibly perceived. 'Tree' would be a conceptual 'carving up' of the sensible flux. But even this way of describing sensible perception is misleading, since the use of the words, 'green', 'on-top-of' and 'brown' would be conceptual in the same sense as 'tree'. The moment that one calls a sensible impression or group of sensible impressions a 'thing', one goes beyond the mere receiving of sensations by applying a conceptual label to those sensations. The result is an atomistic and reductionist account of sensible perception. All that are perceived are simples, and from those simples, things are inferred. As I shall show, a reductionist account of perception would have problematic effects on other aspects of James' account.

A second possibility is that sensation, as construed above, is a kind of perception, but not the only form of

sensible perception. If this is the case, then sensible perception can be characterized in a non-reductionist manner (so that we may perceive 'trees' and other things). I will argue that this is the case. However, I should note a number of questions that must be answered if sensible perception is viewed in such a relation to sensation. For instance, what distinguishes sensible perception from sensation? What role does each have in experience? Is sensible perception derived or inferred from sensation? If so, in what sense can perception be said to be immediate? Would this mean that percepts can 'lead' or 'point' to other experience (and, thus, have meaning or truth)? Finally, with such an account, does the distinction between perception and conception still hold? These questions must be answered if James' account of perception is non-reductionist.

The nature of perception (whether reductionist or not) affects two other aspects of James theory; namely, the 'interpenetration' of percepts and concepts, and the 'context of associates' in his account of neutral monism. As I mentioned earlier, percepts and concepts interpenetrate each other. James states that "percepts and concepts interpenetrate and melt together, impregnate and fertilize each other."[24] The meaning behind this highly metaphorical

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[24] McDermott ed. The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition 1977, 235.

statement seems to be that percepts and concepts affect, influence or modify each other in some way. With a reductionist account of perception, we can readily see how a percept can affect the formation of concepts. After all, concepts are a result of the 'carving up' of the sensible flux. Consequently, new sensations can 'create' a new concept. However, the effect of concepts on sensation is not so easy to see. Perception is a given, immediate colour, sound, smell, touch, and taste. How can the knowledge that a certain group of sensible impressions is a 'tree', for example, enable me to see different or enhanced impressions? How can a concept affect the passive reception of sense-data? If by 'perception' James means something more than just the reception of a bare sensible impression, then the notion of 'interpretation' has hopes of becoming more cogent. But a complete explanation of this notion must answer two main questions. The first question concerns the immediacy of perception. If conception can affect our percepts, in what sense can those percepts be said to be immediate or given? In other words, how can a concept change or modify a percept without becoming an intermediate step in perception? The second question concerns the relation between perception and conception. If percepts and concepts 'interpenetrate' and 'intermingle', does perception still maintain its sharp distinction from conception, or are they just at different

ends of the same spectrum? I will argue that with a non-reductionist account of perception, all of these questions can be answered.

In James' account of neutral monism, the notion of a 'context of associates' is rather vague, partly due to the inadequate account of the nature of perception. After all, with a reductionist view of perception, it is hard to see how a bare impression brings or 'calls forth' associated concepts and percepts with it. However, even with a non-reductionist account of perception, the 'location' or origin of these contexts is ambiguous. Is each context of associates a product of the world or the mind or something else? Suppose both the subject context and the object context are determined by the same source (i.e. both are either a product of the mind or a product of the world or something else). In this case, why does one context (namely, the object context) seem to be shared by most people, while the other (the subject context) seems to be private? What accounts for this difference? On the other hand, suppose that one context (the subject context) is a product of the mind, while the other one (the object context) is a product of the world. This would explain why one context of associates is shared while the other is not. However, in this case, the monistic character of James' neutral monism becomes questionable since a metaphysical dualism seems to be inherent in such a view. Only once the

nature of perception is disambiguated, can we begin to answer these and the previous questions.

1.3 A certain caution must be kept in mind when using an earlier work to clarify points made in a later work. Often, differences in focus and intention make comparison distortive of both works. William James' early work in psychology and his later work on radical empiricism and pragmatism are concerned with many of the same issues. For instance, both works examine perception and conception in a fair amount of detail. Both works also consider questions about the nature of reality and rationality. There is, however, a difference in focus that must be kept in mind when comparing these phases of his work. In The Principles of Psychology, James, at times, distinguishes his philosophic position from his psychological position. Psychology, for James, is concerned with the mental life, in particular, mental phenomena and their conditions (the brain and other bodily conditions). As a result, the physiological processes that are the preconditions (and sometimes the effects) of mental phenomena are emphasized. In order to keep this focus, certain unphilosophical assumptions must be made. For instance, a psychologist's view toward cognition *must* be dualistic. James writes,

> The dualism of Object and Subject and their pre-

> established harmony are what the psychologist as such must assume, whatever ulterior monistic philosophy he may, as an individual who has a right also to be a metaphysician, have in reserve.[25]

Further, relations such as difference and similarity must be viewed from the psychological point of view. He states,

> We are psychologizing, not philosophizing. That is, we do not care whether there be any real sameness in things or not, or whether the mind be true or false in its assumptions of it. Our principle only lays it down that the mind makes continual use of the notion of sameness, and if deprived of it, would have a different structure from what it has.[26]

Philosophically, both assumptions have been examined and challenged in his later works (he challenges dualism with his theory of neutral monism, and he examines the notion of 'sameness' pragmatically). However, if James' psychological focus and assumptions can be kept in mind, The Principles can provide some insight into his later works.

The main problem with his later work concerned the relationship between sensation and perception. As I showed, ambiguities in this relationship raised questions about the nature of perception, the 'interpenetration' of percepts and concepts, and the notion of 'context of associates'. Therefore, let me begin by examining the relationship between

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[25] James, The Principles of Psychology (1950) vol. 1, 220.

[26] *Ibid.*, 460.

sensation and perception in The Principles.[27] In Chapter 17, James acknowledges that sensation and perception are often used indiscriminately, since both involve the "stimulation of incoming nerves" and the cognition of an 'objective' world.[28] Despite these similarities, he will maintain that they are different cognitive functions. In other words, different mental phenomena result from perception and sensation. In fact, James states, rather provocatively, that a pure sensation is "an abstraction never realized in adult life."[29] The word sensation is used to mean qualities like hot, pain, etc., but the pure quality (i.e. the quality without relations) is never experienced. James gives the example of the pain called toothache.[30] If the pure sensation 'toothache' is experienced, then this distinct quality must be recognizable each time it is present. James describes, metaphorically, how the mind must have a pocket just for that pain, so that whenever that pocket is filled, the toothache is present. This pocket must be independent of all other parts of the mind, so that the presence of the toothache is solely

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[27] See Chapter XVII entitled "Sensation" and Chapter XIX entitled "The Perception of Things" in The Principles volume 2.

[28] James, The Principles of Psychology (1950) vol 2, 1.

[29] *Ibid.*, 76.

[30] See page 5-6 in Chapter 17 of The Principles.

a result of sensational processes, and not due to relations or associations. What James calls the 'paradox and mystery' of this account is as follows:

> If the knowledge of toothache be pent up in this separate mental pocket, how can it be known *cum alio* or brought into one view with anything else? This pocket knows nothing else; no other part of the mind knows toothache. The knowing of toothache *cum alio* must be a miracle.[31]

What he is saying is that pure sensation, properly understood, is the presence of a distinct quality in itself and by itself. However, without any relations to anything else, the knowing[32] of the sensible quality is inconsistent with our experience of toothaches. It would be a pain with no location, degree of intensity, temporality, etc., and, as adults, we never experience such a quality.[33] For this reason, James calls sensation an abstraction never realized in adult life.

Then, why does James need an account of sensation? He states his answer as follows:

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[31] *Ibid.*, 5.

[32] James means 'knowing' in the adult sense of the term. For an infant, as we shall see, is acquainted with sensible qualities but knows these qualities in an entirely different sense than we, as adults, would know a pain. For instance, an adult would know the pain as located in a certain place, at a certain time, while an infant's pain "is for him the Universe." (*Ibid.*, 8)

[33] In Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty makes much the same argument against pure sensation when he argues in Chapter 1 that there is nothing in our experience that corresponds to the description of sensation as a given, undifferentiated, instantaneous, atom of feeling.

> As we can only think or talk about the relations of objects with which we have acquaintance already, we are forced to postulate a function in our thought whereby we first become aware of the *bare immediate natures* by which our several objects are distinguished. This function is sensation.[34]

Thus, sensation is posited in order to account for our ability to perceive and to conceive. James gives an account of the development of perception beginning with the new-born infant.[35] He states, "prior to all impressions on sense-organs the brain is plunged in deep sleep and consciousness is practically nonexistent."[36] After an initial strong impression on the sense-organs, the mind's 'slumber' is broken and an absolutely pure sensation is present. This sensation is without relations and, thus, without distinctions. It is the 'universe', being everywhere and everything for the infant. The main significance of this first experience is the effect this experience has on the cerebral processes of the child. For the first impression leaves a trace which affects the reception of future impressions. He states, "the next impression which a sense-organ transmits produces a cerebral reaction in which the awakened vestige of the last impression

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[34] James, The Principles (1950) vol 2, 3.

[35] While James states that an infant becomes sensibly conscious shortly after birth, it could be argued that this kind of consciousness occurs much earlier (in the womb). However, his account of the development of perception follows regardless of when sensible consciousness is postulated.

[36] *Ibid.*, 7.

plays its part."[37] As more and more impressions leave their traces, habit organizes the various paths in the hemispheres.[38] Only then can higher forms of cognitions like perception occur.

Once these paths are formed, pure sensation cannot occur. James states,

> Any quality of a thing which affects our sense organs does also more than that: it arouses processes in the hemispheres which are due to the organization of the organ by past experiences, and the results of which in consciousness are commonly described as ideas which the sensation suggests.[39]

A percept is the 'idea' of a material thing to which sensible qualities belong. Perception is due to two factors in experience. The first factor is 'sensational processes' or the affection of our sense organs. Here, James is describing a physiological process. It is important to note that this is not sensation, properly so-called. Sensation is a mental

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[37] *Ibid.*, 8.

[38] James gives a physical explanation of habit (see Chapter IV in The Principles). Habit is due to the 'plasticity' of the material, whether that material be organic or inorganic. The brain-matter is essentially plastic to outward agents in the blood or, more often, in the sensory nerve-roots. Once a path has been traced by an incoming current, the same path is more easily travelled a second time by the current. Thus, a network of paths is traced into the hemispheres, loosely dictating the course of incoming currents. New paths are created (though the creation of new paths decreases dramatically with age) and old paths are deepened (affecting the reception of incoming currents).

[39] *Ibid.*, 76.

phenomenon which has as its precondition the physiological process of qualities affecting the sense organs. Perception has the same physiological precondition as sensation; however, due to a second factor in perception, different mental phenomena result. It is for this reason that James writes,

> ... the sensation as such of those qualities does not still exist inside of the perception and form a constituent thereof. The sensation is one thing and the perception another, and neither can take place at the same time with the other, because their cerebral conditions are not the same.[40]

The second factor, which distinguishes perception from sensation, is the reproductive or associative processes 'aroused' in the hemisphere. These processes allow consciousness of further facts related to the object of sensational processes. It is in this sense that James speaks of percepts as being complex or 'full of relations'. As a result, different, more complex mental phenomena result from perception than from sensation.

The relationship between sensation and perception has been disambiguated.[41] Although both sensation and perception

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[40] *Ibid.*, 81-82.

[41] Note that James uses the word 'perception' in a wide and a narrow sense. In the wide sense, perception refers to any experience involving acquaintance with a changing, particular world. Thus, intuitions, mystical experiences, hallucinations, sensations and sensible perceptions are different kinds of perceptions. In the narrow sense, perception refers only to sensible perception. In the passages in The Principles, James uses the word in this narrow sense.

are ways of sensibly perceiving, they signify different processes and different 'mental' phenomena. Sensation represents the earliest stage in the development of our ability to perceive. However, once this ability is formed, sensation is no longer experienced. I will now examine, in more detail, the account of perception that results. There are two main aspects I will consider, namely, the 'background' in perception and the notion of a perceptual 'thing'. The 'apperceptive mass' or 'background' enables James to account for both the associative or reproductive processes in perception and the differences in perception. The 'background' consists of systems of associated concepts developing over the course of a life-time. It is, largely, a result of habit and past experience, as well as abstraction.[42] The first sensations leave traces which habit organizes according to the law of association by contiguity; that is,

> objects once experienced together tend to become associated in the imagination, so that when any one of them is thought of, the others are likely to be thought of also, in some order of sequence or coexistence as before.[43]

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[42] Later, I shall examine James' account of necessary truths and postulates. I shall argue that these truths and postulates have an important role in determining the nature of the background, and thus they affect perception, conception and truth. However, this discussion will be postponed until Chapter 3.

[43] James, The Principles of Psychology (1950) vol. 1, page 561.

This law, together with past experience, forms a changing basis of associations to which further conceptual relations can be continually added. In other words, concepts are abstracted from sensations (and then perceptions) by being fixed in a system of associated concepts. Further abstraction occurs when associations are made among the concepts already found in the background. Education and other media classify and systematize our stock of ideas, providing a common basis for communication in a society. Interest and past experience determine idiosyncratic elements in the background. Together, they form systems of associated ideas and relations, with varying degrees of abstraction, which affect the reception of sensory data.

At one point, James describes the general law of perception as follows: "whilst part of what we perceive comes through our senses from the object before us, another part (and it may be the larger part) always comes (in Lazarus' phrase) out of our own head."[44] Thus, perception is not the passive recording of sensory data on some blank slate; for the mind is neither passive nor blank. James asserts that perception is an apperceptive process since, "incoming ideas or sensations are said to be 'apperceived' by 'masses' of

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[44] James, The Principles of Psychology (1950) vol. 2, 103.

ideas already in the mind."[45] The role of the background in perception can be considered in terms of signs and symbols. The stimulation of the sense organs can be thought of as a sign which 'calls forth' a number of associations formed in the background. The stimulation of our eyes and brain, for instance, brings, among other things, associations like 'green-on-top-of-brown', 'tree', 'three dimensional', 'hard', etc. But note that James does not want to say that we first experience a sense datum like 'green-on-top-of-brown' or 'green', 'on-top-of' and 'brown' and then infer a tree; rather a tree is immediately perceived, and, only through abstraction, do we notice that 'green-on-top-of-brown' is an element of our perception. I shall discuss this point in more detail when I examine the 'object' or 'thing' perceived.

The second aspect that must be examined in James' account of perception is the 'thing' perceived. According to James, we do not perceive a simple 'thisness', rather a particular thing is perceived. A thing, as opposed to a simple thisness, is an object 'full' of relations. But what does it mean to be full of relations? Earlier in The

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[45] *Ibid.*, 107. Note that James reluctantly uses the term 'apperception' since he feels that it has so many different meanings in philosophy that the use of the term may cause more confusion than clarification. Instead of 'apperception, he prefers the words 'preperception' or 'assimilation'. However, with sufficient care, I believe that the term 'apperception' should describe the process in perception more quickly and succinctly than these alternative terms.

Principles,[46] James describes the knowing of an object using terms such as 'halo', 'psychic overtone', 'suffusion' and 'fringe'. He states that the fringe "is part of the object cognized, - substantive qualities and things appearing to the mind in a fringe of relations."[47] To be conscious of a particular thing, is to be conscious of an object with a fringe composed of relations to associated ideas. When I see a book, for instance, I am perceiving a thing that is hard, that is of a certain shape (rectangular), that has weight, that has a certain location, that consists of pages with writing inside, etc. The stimulation of my eyes (and brain) 'aroused' associative processes in the brain resulting in a perception much more involved than a simple sensation. Although associated ideas and relations may not be sensibly present (i.e. they may not involve the physiological stimulation of a sense organ) or they may not even be attended to in perception, yet they are, nonetheless, felt. The 'feeling' of these relations is exhibited in our expectation and anticipation.[48] For instance, in reaching out my hand to

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[46] See Chapter IX, "The Stream of Thought", particularly the section on the feeling of tendency, in The Principles of Psychology (1950) vol. 1.

[47] James, The Principles of Psychology (1950) vol.1, 258.

[48] In Chapter IX, James connects the feeling of expectancy and the role of the fringe with respect to thought and language. He states, "the most important element of these fringes is, I repeat, the mere feeling of harmony or discord,

touch the book, I expect that it is hard. If I were to lift the book, I would be surprised if it did not have a bottom. Further, if I tried to open the book and found that the pages were glued together, I would be disappointed. When James says that a fringe of relations is 'felt' in each act of perception, he does not mean that I actually touch the hardness of the book or see the bottom of the book; rather, in perceiving a book *as a book*, I must intuit or feel certain relations beyond the sensation, and these feelings are, in turn, manifested in my feelings of expectation and anticipation.

James' use of imagery like 'fringe', 'halo' and 'clouds of associates' is not accidental. Such imagery indicates an essential aspect of perception, namely, its indeterminacy. Instead of being sharply defined and fixed, percepts admit of many degrees of complexity. He states that a perception may be "more or less complete; it may be of the mere name of the thing and its other essential attributes, or it may be of the thing's various remoter relations."[49] By 'essential attributes", James is not referring to some scholastic notion of an unchanging, non-contingent essence. Rather, essential

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of a right or wrong direction in thought." (James, 1950, 261) The connection between expectancy (or 'tendency') and fringes of relations can be extended analogously to perception and action.

[49] James, The Principles of Psychology (1981) vol. 2, 76.

attributes are those aspects of a thing that we regard as essential, since they are "more constant, interesting or practically important."[50] Thus, with the sight of a butterfly, for example, a lepidopterist would perceive a much more complex thing than a novice observer. Through education and past, focused observation, the lepidopterist's perception now involves a more detailed system of associated relations and concepts than the novice's perception. However, the difference between these perceptions is not only a matter of degree, but of attention due to interest. The lepidopterist is interested in describing and classifying aspects of the butterfly, thus the insect's size, markings, movements, etc., must be carefully attended to. On the other hand, the novice observer is interested in the aesthetic beauty of the butterfly, and thus he or she attends to the color of the wings and the butterfly's gentle movements. Thus, perceptions differ due to differences in the 'apperceptive mass', as well as interest or purpose.

However, the question arises whether the lepidopterist and the novice, or any two people, can ever have the same perception. This question is further complicated, when we

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[50] *Ibid.*, 76. James emphasizes tangible qualities of things (like tangible shape, size and mass) as essential attributes. However, such an emphasis is perhaps not appropriate since interest or practicality often dictate different attributes for emphasis.

consider James' doctrine of neutral monism. Since thought and thing in perception are features added on to the experience, it would seem that different perceptions imply different things perceived. Thus, it can also be asked whether any two people can ever perceive the same thing. At the root of this question is the notion 'same'. In his later works, James applies the pragmatic rule to the concept 'same' and finds,

> that when we call two objects the same we mean either (a) that no difference can be found between them when compared, or (b) that we can substitute the one for the other in certain operations without changing the result.[51]

Thus, two things are the 'same' if they are indiscernible, or if they can be substituted for each other with no change in effect. It is important to note that both conditions are empirical and practical, not logical or metaphysical. Thus, 'sameness' will depend on the practical context of the comparison. Let me consider the case of the lepidopterist and a novice gazing in the same general direction and seeing a butterfly. As I stated earlier, the contents of their respective perceptions have different emphasis and different degrees of complexity. Further, they are standing in different places, so their view of the butterfly differs (one may see the front of the butterfly, while the other person sees the back, for instance). Thus, if their perceptions are

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[51] James, "Percept and Concept - Some Corollaries" in The Writings of William James (1977), 254.

compared in the context of describing the perceptual phenomena that result, then the lepidopterist and the novice have different perceptions, and, in a sense, perceive different things. If this were the only context from which perceptions could be compared, then it would seem that no two people ever have the same perception (or perceive the same thing). However, the lepidopterist and the novice do perceive the same thing if we compare them in the context of certain operations or functions. The lepidopterist's motions towards the butterfly have the same results as the novice's motions. When asked where the butterfly is located, for instance, both point to the same spot. Regardless of who touches the butterfly, it will respond in the same way. In other words, the butterfly may be substituted into the operations/actions of the lepidopterist or the novice, and produce the same results. The results are the same if they are indiscernible to an observer (which includes either the lepidopterist or the novice). Thus, two people may perceive the same thing if substitution produces results which are indiscernible.[52]

By distinguishing sensation and perception, James characterizes perception in a non-reductionist manner. Perception, unlike sensation, involves the apprehension of

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[52] Note that this is identical with some applications of the pragmatic method. If two concepts 'lead to' the same (or indiscernible), practical consequences, then there is no difference between the concepts.

'things' or objects in a fringe of relations. These particular things cannot be reduced to simples without losing their status as 'things' (and, consequently, without losing their status as perceptions). However, with a non-reductionist account of perception, two questions must be answered. First, is perception still immediate and given? Second, is perception still distinguishable from conception? Closely related to these two questions is an equivocation of the word 'acquaintance' with respect to perception. In The Principles, James distinguishes sensation and perception by calling sensation 'acquaintance with a fact' and calling perception 'knowledge about a fact'.[53] However, as I mentioned earlier, he later distinguishes perception and conception by calling perception 'acquaintance' and conception 'knowledge about'. Because immediacy is associated with acquaintance and the distinction between percepts and concepts is based on the notions of acquaintance and 'knowledge about', only once this equivocation is examined will we have our answers to the two questions above.

In The Principles, James describes two kinds of knowledge.[54] He states, "I am acquainted with many people and things, which I know very little about, except their presence

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[53] James, The Principles of Psychology (1950) vol 2, 2.

[54] See Chapter VII, "The Relations of Minds to Other Things" in The Principles of Psychology (1950) vol. 1.

in the places where I have met them."[55] James mentions things like colors, tastes, time and difference as examples of this type of knowledge. He goes on to mention two other features of acquaintance. First, knowledge by acquaintance is 'dumb'. It only pertains to that which one is directly presented with. Second, knowledge by acquaintance is incommunicable. A person cannot communicate exactly what it is like to taste a pear, for example, to someone who has never had that experience. The person could try to describe the experience in different terms, but something would always be lacking in such a description. All that person could do is try to get the other person in a position to experience the taste. Thus, James writes, "at most, I can say to my friends, go to certain places and act in certain ways, and these objects will probably come."[56] Knowledge about, on the other hand, is 'smart' and communicable. It is 'smart' in the sense that in knowing about a thing, we know much more than what is presented to us; we are aware of the thing and its relations to other things. Further, knowledge about is our primary way of communicating knowledge to other people. Thus, knowledge by acquaintance seems clearly distinguishable from knowledge about.

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[55] James, The Principles of Psychology (1950) vol. 1, 221.

[56] *Ibid.*, 221.

But then, is perception knowledge by acquaintance or knowledge about? The answer is that perception can be considered either as acquaintance or as knowledge about; it depends on the context. James writes,

> in general, the less we analyze a thing, and the fewer of its relations we perceive, the less we know about it and the more our familiarity with it is of the acquaintance-type. The two kinds of knowledge are, therefore, as the human mind practically exerts them, relative terms. That is, the same thought of a thing may be called knowledge-about it in comparison with a simpler thought, or acquaintance with it in comparison with a thought of it that is more articulate and explicit still.[57]

Thus, compared with sensation, perception is knowledge about, while sensation is acquaintance.[58] If the scope of this question is restricted to experiential things (under the doctrine of radical empiricism), everything that is experienced in adult life is either a percept or a concept. In this context, perception is knowledge by acquaintance, while conception is knowledge about. First of all, a concept has a much more complex network of associated relations than what is felt in an act of perception, because in conception,

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[57] *Ibid.*, 221-222.

[58] The only problem with calling perception 'knowledge about' is the property of communicability associated with knowledge about. Although perception is 'smarter' than sensation (and, thus, the term 'knowledge about' applies), I don't think that James could say that perception is communicable at this stage, since he explicitly denies its communicability later.

further associations may be traced as far as one wishes. However, in perception, the associated relations felt are not a matter of inference or conscious choice or attention; rather, the fringe of relations is given immediately as constituting part of the perception.[59] Secondly, a percept is distinguished from conception by being incommunicable. Any form of communication involves concepts, which can only be abstracted representations of percepts; concepts are abstractions since they fix and universalize that which is essentially dynamic and particular. Thus, we have no means to communicate our percepts except by inviting another to get into a position to have the same experience. Although James characterizes perception in a non-reductionist manner, both perception's immediacy and its distinction from conception are retained.

Further, with such an account of perception, the 'interpenetration' of percepts and concepts becomes more coherent. Perception 'prompts our thoughts' by signifying further associations. For instance, when the lepidopterist

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[59] James does not use the term 'given' to suggest that the mind passively receives percepts. Obviously, attention and background associations have a role in forming a perception. However, he does want to say that a percept is given in the sense that it is beyond our control. Although we may choose to attend to certain aspects of the perception (and in this sense we can shape the perception), we cannot 'make' or determine the thing attended to (including what associations will arise).

notices certain markings on a butterfly, this brings thoughts of how it should be classified, or where it evolved. Thought 'enriches our perception' by focusing our attention to different aspects of a thing. With a system of classification already in the background, the lepidopterist focuses his or her attention to the detailed markings on the butterfly. James writes, "the more we see, the more we think; while the more we think, the more we see in our immediate experiences, and the greater grows the detail and the more significant the articulateness of our perception."[60] Because perception is essentially tied up with the conceptual background, the interpenetration of percepts and concepts is understandable.

Finally, James' notion of a 'context of associates' is clarified once it is understood in terms of this non-reductionist view of perception. However, a specific problem arises when his psychological work is used to clarify aspects of neutral monism; because neutral monism directly contradicts the basic assumption in James' psychology (i.e. a 'thoroughgoing dualism' in cognition), one may wonder if his psychological account of perception is compatible with neutral monism. In other words, is James' view of perception based on the assumption of dualism? Certainly, his account of perception is filled with references to a fundamental dualism.

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[60] James, The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition (1977), 256.

However, his method for investigating psychological concepts is independent of this assumption. As I stated earlier, the psychologist first studies 'mental' phenomena, and then examines both the preconditions and effects of these phenomena. The first part of this method is purely descriptive, while the latter part attempts to explain what is described by considering physiological processes. For James, the phenomena of perception are best described as objects in a 'fringe of relations'. Whether the experience of these phenomena presupposes a dualism or not is something to be considered within the realm of metaphysics. Philosophically speaking, there is nothing in his descriptive method to prevent a monistic interpretation of perceptual phenomena. In Psychology: A Briefer Course, James examines the 'mental' phenomena of perception metaphysically and discovers that just such a monistic interpretation of perception is plausible. He describes the experience of blue as follows:

> The fact is that such an experience as *blue*, as it is immediately given, can only be called by some such neutral name as that *phenomenon*. It does not *come* to us *immediately* as a relation between two realities, one mental and one physical. It is only when, still thinking of it as the *same* blue, we trace relations between it and other things, that it doubles itself, so to speak, and develops in two directions; and taken in connection with some associates, figures as a physical quality, whilst with others it figures as a feeling in the mind.[61]

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[61] James, Psychology: A Briefer Course (1961), 332.

This 'metaphysical' account of perceptual phenomena is identical to his later account of neutral monism. Thus, James' early, psychological view of perception is compatible with neutral monism.

With a non-reductionist account of perception, James' two contexts of associates can be understood without presupposing any underlying dualism. 'Physical' and 'mental' are concepts associated with other concepts and beliefs, forming two contexts of associations in our background. For example, physical things obey certain causal laws (like laws of gravity and motion). Thus, physical things function in definite, and often predictable, ways. Further, physical things can be shared by different people. Mental things, on the other hand, need not obey causal laws, and are often properties of individuals. Mental things, as opposed to physical things, have a necessary and intimate connection with a person's mental history. A percept (or even a concept) is one thing which can be taken or understood in two different contexts, as physical or as mental. However, the thing's 'physicality' or 'mentality' is not presupposed in experience, but something added on to the initially neutral experience. Thus, it is not accidental that a physical thing is shared, since that is a characteristic of the context in which the thing is taken. Similarly, it is not coincidental that all physical things obey causal laws while mental things don't,

since that is how the mental and physical contexts are distinguished. The differences in properties of physical and mental things are not due to some underlying dualism in experience, but to a dualism in associations additional to the experience.

1.4 Reality, for James, is what we must take account of both in terms of action and thought. Thus, percepts and concepts are 'co-ordinate realms' of reality. In the preceding pages, I examined the nature of these two realms of reality. I have shown how James' non-reductionist account of perception is wider than traditional accounts, by including perceptible relations and non-sensory perceptions. Further, with such an account, I have shown both how percepts and concepts 'interpenetrate' and build on each other, and how the notion of a 'context of associates' is related to perception and conception. In this concluding section, I will examine some implications of James' account of reality by considering 1) the notions of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' and 2) why, for James, perception has priority over conception. By considering these questions, not only will his account of reality be clarified, but his pragmatic theory of truth will be understood in its proper context.

By making percepts and concepts the two realms of reality, James may seem in grave danger of making individuals

the makers or determiners of what is real. Not only is reality equated with experienceable reality, but experienceable reality seems to be largely a result of an individual's past experiences. Thus, subjectivism and, more extremely, solipsism raise their ugly heads. But I would argue that to accuse James of either subjectivism or solipsism is to misunderstand the implications of his doctrine of neutral monism and his pragmatically redefined notions of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity'. As I stated earlier, James' neutral monism is an attempt to put dualisms in their proper place: additional to, not underlying or fundamental to, experience. Thus, a percept or concept may be, subsequently, understood as 'physical' in one context of associates or as 'mental' in another context. The same holds for the notions of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity'. Traditionally, a thing is called 'objective' if it is independent of the mind, and a thing is 'subjective' if it depends on the mind. However, for James, both a mind independent of the world and a world independent of a mind are abstractions of an experience which essentially involves a 'being-in-the-world', so to speak. From James' 'being-in-the-world' (i.e. perception), we abstract associations of concepts, including the notions of a mind (and a percept's 'subjectivity' or what represents) as distinct and independent of a world (and a percept's 'objectivity'- what is represented). Thus, James states that

a percept's subjectivity and objectivity are only 'functional attributes'[62] and "the difference between [its] objective and subjective extension is one of relations to a context solely."[63] This is not to say that there are no such things as subjects and objects; for perceivers and things perceived are real. However, the nature of these realities is conceptual and not perceptual; they are ways of dealing with our perceptions, not prior to perception. Consequently, at the center of his theory of reality, James is no more a subjectivist (or solipsist) than he is an objectivist.[64]

Although James states that conception is just as real as perception, he gives priority to the role perception has in our experience. In his articles on percepts and concepts[65], James emphasizes both the importance and the limits of

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[62] James, "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" in The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition 1977, 177.

[63] *Ibid.*, 180.

[64] In "The Pragmatist Sieve of Concepts: Description versus Interpretation," Seigfried makes a similar point about idealism and realism. She states that pragmatism cannot be described as either a version of idealism or a version of realism since "its analysis of concrete human experience rejects the metaphysical assumptions on which the distinction is based." (Seigfried, 1990, 585) She also describes James' starting position as a 'being-in-the world' instead of a subjective or objective position (see page 591).

[65] James, "Percept and Concept - The Import of Concepts," "Percept and Concept - The Abuse of Concepts" and "Percept and Concept - Some Corollaries" in The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition 1977.

concepts. As abstractions from the perceptual flux, concepts enable us to organize and understand our perceptions. As I stated earlier, without concepts, the world would be a 'booming, buzzing confusion'. Once abstracted, new relations can be constructed based on these abstractions until conceptual systems are formed. The world of physics, the world of mathematics and logic, the supernatural world of religions, and the 'common sense' world are examples that James gives of conceptual systems. These systems are valuable instruments for dealing with both our theoretical and practical life. Further, since the conceptual order is more constant and universal, it is often taken to be more real and more essential to knowledge than the perceptual realm. However, James asserts that "the 'eternal' kind of being which they [concepts] enjoy is inferior to the temporal kind, because it is so static and schematic and lacks so many characters which temporal reality possesses".[66] First, as I stated before, concepts fix and generalize percepts which are essentially dynamic and particular. Thus, concepts cannot 'represent' percepts without changing the nature of perceptual reality.[67] Second, conceptual systems extend to the

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[66] *Ibid.*, 254.

[67] What seems to be at the center of James' criticism of conceptual representations of perceptions is the Bergsonian observation that logic and philosophy has and always will fail to represent change itself. Any conceptual representation of

perceptual world, only by denying the reality of percepts that 'don't fit'. Finally, the conceptual order lacks one of the most important elements of our perceptual experience, namely, novelty. James states, "we cannot explain conceptually how genuine novelties can come; but if one did come we could experience that it came. We do, in fact, experience perceptual novelties all the while."[68] Novelties are important, not only because they must be taken account of, but because they show us that reality is open with possibilities and cannot be confined or fixed by a conceptual system. Thus, the perceptual realm can never be entirely transcended; we must return to our perceptions, not only to find the full meaning and significance of our concepts, but also to determine the truth of our beliefs.

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change will take away its dynamic character by treating change as if it were a slide show; change becomes the sum total of a series of still shots depicting various phases in a process. Zeno's paradox becomes a paradigm for describing change. However, what is lost in such a representation is the very thing that was supposed to be represented. James departs from Bergson's criticisms of conceptual representation by emphasizing the value of concepts and language, and by stating that symbols should not and can not be dispensed with in metaphysics. See Bergson's "Introduction to Metaphysics."

[68] *Ibid.*, 269.

Chapter 2: Agreement and Truth

In the traditional manner, James defines truth as the agreement of belief (or idea) with reality. Once the terms of this definition are clarified, a nontraditional account of truth emerges. In the first chapter of this thesis, James' co-ordinate realms of reality, percepts and concepts, were described. I showed how his account of perception differs from the common use of the term in three respects. First, perception includes nonsensory, as well as sensory perceptions. Thus, hallucinations and mystical experiences are just as 'real' as seeing a chair or hearing a bell. Second, relations, both conjunctive and disjunctive, are perceived along with the terms related. James' nonreductionist account of perception (which states that 'things', rather than 'sense-data', are perceived) is based on the notion that an object is perceived in a fringe of relations. Finally, perception is not a subjective or mental condition; rather, it is a neutral experience which may be subsequently taken as 'subjective' or 'mental' and 'objective' or 'physical'. James' radical version of empiricism is exemplified by his reinterpretation of the term 'perception'. In the first chapter, I have also shown how abstractions from

perceptions form a 'background' of associated concepts which may, in turn, affect perception. It is the nature of concepts, as opposed to percepts, to be meaningful, and thus they alone can be true or false.[1] Consequently, James' complete account of conception can not be given until the role of concepts in meaning and truth is considered in this chapter. What can be concluded from Chapter 1 is that agreement with 'reality' must mean agreement with both percepts and concepts. In other words, our beliefs and ideas must 'agree' not only with our perceptions (in this wide sense), but also with other conceptual ideas, beliefs and truths. In this chapter, James' account of truth will be examined by considering the nature of 'agreement'. But does this mean that his pragmatic theory of truth is a version of correspondence theories of truth?

Throughout his discussion of truth, James makes statements which seem to imply that pragmatism is a version of a correspondence theory, a coherence theory and a utilitarian theory of truth. On the surface, it seems that these statements are inconsistent. After all, utilitarian and

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[1] Properly speaking, not all concepts are true or false. Only beliefs are true or false, while ideas like 'God' or 'chair', though meaningful, are true or false only in the sense that they may be stated as a belief like 'God exists' or 'the chair exists'.

coherence theories of truth are traditionally described in terms of their opposition to correspondence theories. Utilitarian theories may also call certain beliefs true even though they don't cohere with other beliefs. Finally, according to traditional correspondence theories, a belief that corresponds to reality is called true regardless of its apparent utility or coherence. I would agree that in their traditional forms, these theories of truth often oppose one another, and thus James' statements would be inconsistent. However, I would also point out that James often does not use terms in traditional ways. As I showed in the first chapter, he reinterprets traditional terms like 'perception', 'subjectivity', 'objectivity', 'mental', and 'physical', and ends up with a nontraditional account of reality. In this chapter, I will argue that James' pragmatic theory of truth is internally consistent by showing how he reinterprets 'correspondence', 'utility' and 'coherence' such that each element refers to different aspects of the same thing. In other words, the same "workings" and "leadings" can be conceptually understood from these three different perspectives. In the first section of this chapter, James' notions of "workings" and "leadings" will be examined by considering the meaning of concepts. In the second section, his pragmatic account of truth will be elaborated by considering truth from the three perspectives mentioned above.

In the final section, I will examine his account of truth as a whole by considering some possible objections.

2.1 Once James finds that the pragmatic meaning of 'truth' is the 'ordinary agreement-formula', he defines 'agreement' in the following, unordinary way; he states,

> To 'agree' in the widest sense with a reality, *can only mean to be guided straight up to it or into its surroundings, or to be put into such working touch with it as to handle either it or something connected with it better than if we disagreed.* Better either intellectually or practically![2]

He goes on to say that "the essential thing [in this definition] is the process of being guided."[3] In this and other essays, James defines 'agreement' using terms such as 'guiding', 'leading' and 'workings'. Consequently, an understanding of these terms is required for a full understanding of 'agreement' and truth. But James' account of truth is not the only context in which these terms are used. In his discussion of the pragmatic meaning of concepts, the 'workings' of concepts and the, subsequent, 'leading' are central. In order to understand what 'leading' means in the case of truth, I will first consider the more straightforward case of the 'leading' of concepts.

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[2] James, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth" in Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth (1975), 102.

[3] *Ibid.*, 102.

In his essay, "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?", James describes two 'intentions' of concepts. In their first intention, concepts are considered by themselves, apart from their relation to percepts. We restrict ourselves "to a world merely 'thought of' and not directly seen."[4] In the first chapter of this thesis, I described concepts, primarily, as they are apart from percepts. As a result, the universal and static nature of concepts and conceptual systems, as well as the 'neutral' character of conceptual experience were discussed. Although I did describe part of the relation between percepts and concepts (i.e. how they 'interpenetrate' or affect one another - concepts are abstracted from percepts, and percepts are 'apperceived' by concepts), their fundamental relation (determining the pragmatic meaning of concepts) was left until this chapter. In their second intention, the pragmatic meaning of concepts determined by their relation to perceptual experiences is explained in terms of 'leadings' and 'workings'.

Concepts lead to or terminate in percepts which they are then said to 'represent'. Thus, my concept of a tiger, for example, 'represents' an actual, living tiger, not by presenting the absent tiger in the form of an image, but by 'pointing' or 'leading' to the perceptual experience of the

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[4] James, "Does 'Consciousness' Exist" in The Writings of William James (1977), 174.

tiger or its 'surroundings'. The meaning or 'significance' of a concept is determined by this leading process. James describes this 'pointing' or 'leading' as,

> a procession of mental associates and motor consequences that follow on the thought, and that would lead harmoniously, if followed out, into some ideal or real context, or even into the immediate presence, of the tigers.[5]

There are four aspects of this description that need to be clarified. First, how do mental associates and motor consequences "follow on" a conceptual thought? Second, what is the difference between being lead to the "real context" and to the "immediate presence" of the object? Third, what does it mean to be led into an "ideal context", as opposed to a real one? Fourth, in what sense can it be said that the meaning of a concept is determined by a perceptual terminus or its surroundings? I shall consider these points in order.

To see how mental associates and motor consequences "follow on" a conceptual thought, James' account of thought and, in particular, the 'workings' of concepts must be understood. In The Principles, he describes a concept and a percept in analogous ways; that is, both a concept and a percept can be understood as an object in a fringe of relations. The differences between concepts and percepts change the way in which this description is to be understood.

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[5] James, "The Tigers in India" in Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth (1975), 200.

Associated concepts make up conceptual systems which, in turn, comprise the 'background' or 'apperceptive mass'. When a concept is 'brought before the mind', the object is conceived with associated relations constituting a 'fringe' surrounding the object. A feeling of tendency or direction of thought is felt in the fringe. This is not to say that by attending to the associations 'called forth' by a concept, a direction to thought is subsequently inferred; but that we actually feel a tendency of thought by feeling or being aware of associations accompanying the concept. For example, when someone says 'the tiger', my mind is immediately 'thrown' in a certain direction based on associations in my background mass of ideas. I not only expect a verb, but I expect verbs of certain kinds, and not others. Then, the person says 'is behind you'. Not only is the fringe of tiger 'cleared up' or made determinate by excluding irrelevant associations, but the expectation of certain perceptual experiences suggests a motor response on my part (namely, to turn around to see if there is, in fact, a tiger). By itself, a concept is accompanied by an indeterminate fringe of associations, which vaguely suggest a direction to thought. As a context or 'topic' of the thought becomes defined, the fringe becomes more determinate, suggesting not only more definite 'mental' associations, but also suggesting possible courses of action or responses. Such associations and responses are what James calls the concept's

'workings'.[6] Because the 'workings' of a concept are made determinate by context (whether the context is conceptual or perceptual), the leading that results, and, consequently, a concept's meaning are context dependent.

Through the 'workings' of a concept, a person may be lead to the "immediate presence" or to the "real context" of the object. For James, the difference between being led to the immediate presence and being led to the real context is the difference between direct and indirect leading. Let me, again, use the example of a tiger in order to illustrate this difference. If I consider the concept of a tiger by itself, I have in mind an object with a number of associations which may or may not be relevant in given contexts. A tiger means, among other things, an animal that is big, that is striped, that has sharp teeth and claws, that growls, and that is dangerous. In the case of direct leading, the concept of a tiger 'leads' to the "immediate presence" or the perception of the tiger, that is, to the sight of a big, striped animal with sharp teeth and claws and to the sound of growls. Further, certain motor responses like running away or falling

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[6] In an article "Professor Pratt on Truth" in Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth (1975), James describes the workings of an idea as follows: "the idea has associates peculiar to itself, motor as well as ideational; it tends by its place and nature to call these into being one after another; and the appearance of them in succession is what we mean by the 'workings' of the idea." (James, 262)

to my knees and praying to God for mercy follow from such a direct leading process. By perceiving a tiger and responding to it, I not only add new dimensions to my concept of a tiger, but I also have directly reinforced the meaning of the concept. Although the meanings of most of our concepts are never directly reinforced, many of them are indirectly strengthened by leading to the "real context" of the object. When I see a picture of a tiger on T.V. or in a magazine, when I point to a lion and say that it is not a tiger, when I learn that tigers are in the cat family, etc., I am indirectly reinforcing the meaning of a tiger by following the consequences of the associations of the thought to the context or surroundings of the actual tiger. Thus, I indirectly reinforce the meaning of the concept 'tiger' by directly reinforcing the meaning of an associated concept or belief. In this indirect manner, I am led to the surroundings or the 'real' context of the actual tiger.

But James further distinguishes a thought leading to a "real" context and a thought leading to an "ideal" context. At the heart of this distinction, is the distinction between actual and potential or possible leadings. However, in order to understand this distinction, James' notion of concrete possibility must first be explained. In "Pragmatism and Religion", he describes two senses of the word possibility, a negative, abstract sense and a positive, concrete sense.

James states, "the absence of real grounds of interference may thus be said to make things *not impossible*, possible therefore in the *bare* or *abstract* sense."[7] Positively and pragmatically speaking, possibility "means, not only that there are no preventive conditions present, but that some of the conditions of production of the possible thing actually are there."[8] James gives the example of a possible chicken which means an actual egg with a sitting hen or incubator. Further, he states, "as the actual conditions approach completeness the chicken becomes a better-and-better-grounded possibility."[9] Although actual conditions can suggest a future state, all the actual and past conditions together cannot determine what the future holds; for, James' universe is open, with new and chance experiences occurring all the time. All that can be said is that y is a concrete possibility, since we now have condition x and, in the past, x led to y.

The meaning of a concept is determined by leading processes. Our concept of a tiger actually leads to the perception of a tiger (direct leading) or actually leads to the tiger's surroundings or associations (indirect leading) through transitions which we experience (that is, experienced

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[7] James, Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth (1975), 136.

[8] *Ibid.*, 136.

[9] *Ibid.*, 136.

mental associates and motor consequences). However, James wants to maintain that the meaning of a concept remains even if no actual leading process is occurring. For this reason, he introduces the notion of potential leading. Our concept of a tiger potentially leads either to the tiger or to the surroundings of a tiger if the conditions of the actual leading are present, but no actual leading takes place. For a concept to potentially lead, we must have the concept in a fringe of relations (i.e. with nascently present 'mental' associations and motor consequences) which has, in the past, either directly or indirectly led to the experienceable object. As these conditions approach completeness (i.e as the meaning of the concept has been more and more reinforced), the possibility of the leading becomes better grounded. But keep two points in mind. First, no matter how well-grounded a possibility is, there is no guarantee that such a leading will occur in future practise. Second, a concept cannot potentially lead, if it has never been entertained (either directly or indirectly) by someone, somewhere. Thus, James' notion of leading, whether actual or potential, is grounded in concrete experience.

Finally, how does this account of leading relate to meaning? Through his discussion of leading, James wants to make two main points, a general point and a more specific point, about the pragmatic meaning of concepts. Generally

speaking, he wants to make a concept's relevance to experience and practise essential to his pragmatic account of meaning. James describes the meaning of concepts by a leading process which begins, ends and is itself experienceable. By making meaning entirely explicable in experiential terms, its relevance to practise is evident in the very process of its reinforcement. But, more specifically, James wants to emphasize the relationship between meaning and 'concrete' experience or practise. By the word 'concrete', he is referring either to immediate experience (i.e. perception in the wide sense) or to practise involving perception. While other theories of meaning would make the perception of facts incidental to the meaning of concepts, James makes perception the basis for calling concepts significant or meaningful. If perceptions were not taken into account when the meaning of concepts is considered, all meaning would be static and unchanging, for that is the nature of conception. Only through perception, is the dynamic and open character of reality experienced. Thus, without perception, meanings would gradually become insignificant as the reality which we must continually take account of changes.

Although James' account of the pragmatic meaning of concepts is fairly straightforward, one important question arises. Does he mean to suggest that the pragmatic meaning of a concept is the only meaning that a concept has? In other

words, if a concept does not lead to perceptions of some sort, does this mean that the concept is meaningless?[10] The answer depends, in part, on how narrowly or widely pragmatic meaning is construed. For example, suppose the terminal perceptions in meaning include the perception of written or spoken words, as well as of other particular objects. In other words, conceptual meaning may be determined by leading not only to perceived things, but also to perceived words. In this case, I would argue, almost any concept linguistically expressible has pragmatic meaning. The concepts of Julius Caesar, heaven, complex numbers, round squares and monads have pragmatic meanings. Further, their meanings could be highly abstract and irrelevant to concrete practise and still be pragmatic. For example, the concept 'monad' leads to the perception of the words "simple substance" or "true Atoms of Nature" in Leibniz's works,[11] and despite its apparent irrelevance to any practise (except, perhaps, the philosophical study of Leibniz), the concept is pragmatically meaningful. If, on the other hand, the pragmatic meaning of concepts is construed more narrowly to exclude leadings to the perception of words,

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[10] In The Origins of Pragmatism pages 45-47, Ayer asks a similar question of Peirce's account of meaning. Since a belief is meaningful only to the extent that it 'leads' to action, the scope of meaning, for Peirce, seems overly narrow.

[11] Leibniz, "The Monadology" in The Rationalists 1960, 455.

then it would seem that the concept 'monad' is not only unpragmatic, but that it is also meaningless. Many philosophical, theological and scientific concepts would likewise be meaningless. Further, some seemingly important aspects of pragmatically meaningful concepts would also be essentially meaningless. Historical and fictional concepts like 'Julius Caesar' and 'heaven' can conceivably affect concrete practise, but are such effects the sole meanings of the terms? Perhaps the concept 'Julius Caesar', through historical documentation and Shakespeare's writings, teaches us about the bitterness of betrayal and, as a result, affects the way we perceive and react in analogous situations. If so, is this practical effect the sole meaning of the concept 'Julius Caesar'? Further, the concept 'heaven' may pragmatically mean a feeling of hope in the present, even amidst pain and death. Theological accounts of the resurrection of the body and the nature of time and space in heaven, which have no relation to immediate experience, would not only be irrelevant, but they would be meaningless. Thus, there is a dilemma: either pragmatic meaning is construed widely and any linguistically expressible concept is pragmatic; or, pragmatic meaning is construed narrowly, and many concepts (especially, fictional, historical, and highly abstract concepts) are either meaningless or meaningful only to the extent that they lead to perceptions in practise.

One way that James could get out of this dilemma is by admitting that concepts have meaning beyond their pragmatic meaning. At the beginning of this section, I described two intentions of concepts: concepts may be conceived in relation to other concepts or in relation to percepts. In their second intention, the pragmatic meaning of concepts, narrowly construed, is described.[12] In the first intention, I would suggest that concepts are conceived in terms of their 'abstract' meaning, that is, how they are related to other concepts.[13] In practise, the abstract and pragmatic meanings of a concept overlap and influence each other. Changes in pragmatic meaning affect changes in more abstract levels of meaning, and vice versa. However, such a distinction is important in cases where concepts have no pragmatic meaning or

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[12] The perception of words differs from reading words. Words can be perceived without being read. To simply perceive words (by themselves, apart from considering their meanings), belongs properly to the perceptual realm. I can perceive Chinese words, for instance, without reading them. However, once one becomes versed in a language, the perception of words is almost always accompanied by interpreting words conceptually. Reading words belongs more properly to the conceptual realm of thinking than the perceptual flux of experience. As a result, the connection between concepts and the perception of words is appropriately part of the second intention of concepts, while the connection between concepts and reading words is part of the first intention.

[13] Thus, in one sense, the meanings of concepts change and, in another sense, meaning is static. Considering concepts by themselves, meaning is eternal since concepts are, by nature, static. Considering concepts in their relation to percepts, pragmatic meaning changes since percepts are, by nature, dynamic.

their pragmatic meaning is denied. When James calls abstractions 'vicious', he is not criticizing abstractions as such. Even highly abstract definitions may be valuable tools for dealing with reality. Abstractions become vicious only when their pragmatic meaning is denied. In his essay, "Abstractionism and 'Relativismus'", James describes 'vicious abstractionism' as follows:

> We conceive a concrete situation by singling out some salient or important feature in it, and classing it under that; then, instead of adding to its previous characters all the positive consequences which the new way of conceiving it may bring, we proceed to use our concept privatively; reducing the originally rich phenomenon to the naked suggestions of that name abstractly taken, treating it as a case of 'nothing but' that concept, and acting as if all the other characters from out of which the concept is abstracted were expunged.[14]

James would not want to say that vicious abstractions are completely unintelligible or meaningless; rather, in these cases, the concepts have lost all significance or relevance since they explicitly deny any connection to our concrete practise.

An example of such an abstract definition is in John Murphy's account of James' pragmatic method. He states that James' pragmatic method is the application of 'James's Principle of Credibility' which states:

(JPC) If one can define accurately all the possible

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[14] James, Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth (1975), 301.

> worlds and possible lives in which a sentence is true, one will have therein a complete account of the credibility of what the sentence says.[15]

Such a principle is itself 'in the air', so to speak; but even the application of the principle calls for an abstract analysis of worlds which don't exist (and thus have no relevance to us), when the only world that needs to be taken account of is the world we experience. [16] Although this principle has no pragmatic meaning, it is still understandable and, abstractly speaking, meaningful. But the pragmatic meaning is the test of its value as a conceptual definition since only through a concept's relation to the changing realm of perception can concepts have or retain their significance.

2.2 James has transformed the relation between a concept and what it represents from a static, abstract relation to a dynamic, experienceable one. As a result, the pragmatic meaning of concepts is brought completely within the bounds of his radical empiricism. As I shall show, James will bring

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[15] Murphy, Pragmatism: From Peirce to Davidson (1990), 47.

[16] Murphy's account of the pragmatic method has some textual basis, especially where James considers metaphysical concepts. When James describes the pragmatic difference between materialism and theism, he considers a world where there is no future (where the contents of the world are given) and a world viewed with a future, and he gets different results. However, the experienced world, the world that makes a difference to us, is a world with a future, and thus the only results that matter are those based on our experienceable world.

truth within these bounds by not only reinterpreting the traditional correspondence relation of truth, but also by reinterpreting coherence and utility. In this section, I will describe James' pragmatic theory of truth, and, in the process, three perspectives for viewing truth will emerge (i.e. his reinterpretations of correspondence, coherence and utility). I will argue that these perspectives are consistent with one another by examining their interdependence and by considering possible objections to this interpretation.

In his essay, "What Pragmatism Means", James describes the effect of his pragmatism on the traditional account of correspondence. He states,

> it [pragmatism] converts the absolutely empty notion of a static relation of 'correspondence' ... 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.[17]

Traditional correspondence involves a relation between a belief or proposition and an independent reality. James describes this correspondence relation as 'saltatory' or discontinuous, since an abstract, metaphysical gap is presumed between belief (as well as believer) and reality, requiring a

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[17] James, Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth (1975), 39.

similarly abstract and metaphysical relation to overcome it.[18] Both reality and the correspondence relation are independent of any believer. Thus, the truth relation 'holds' whether or not any believer knows it or not. As a result, James maintains that the traditional correspondence relation is both static and empty of significance. Because correspondence, pragmatically reinterpreted, involves a relation between belief and reality entirely within the bounds of human experience, a radically new form of truth emerges.

Agreement, and consequently truth, is an 'affair of leading', whether this leading is direct or indirect, actual or potential. If a belief is true, then the belief should, through associations and motor responses, lead actually or potentially to the object or its surroundings. A false belief will not 'agree' with or lead to reality. However, the way in which reality is characterized affects the nature of this leading process. As I showed in the first chapter, the two co-ordinate realms of reality, for James, are the realms of percepts and concepts. Both percepts and concepts are realities to which our true beliefs must correspond. If a belief leads to a percept, then the case is very similar to the leading of concepts to percepts. Just as the concept

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[18] See "A Word More About Truth" in The Meaning of Truth where James borrows Professor Strong's distinction between 'saltatory' and 'ambulatory' relations.

'tiger' leads through felt associations to a big, black and orange striped cat or its surroundings, the belief that a tiger eats meat leads through felt associations and motor responses either to the actual tiger eating meat or to its surroundings. My belief is verified directly if I actually perceive a tiger eating meat. My belief is verified indirectly if, for example, someone else perceives a tiger and confirms my belief by telling me that a tiger eats meat. In both these cases, the 'agreement' between belief and reality involved an actual leading process. But the truth of my belief is affirmed by a possible leading, if the conditions of the actual leading process are present. Most of our stock of beliefs are true in this possible sense. These beliefs are on the 'credit system'; they are called true as long as reality doesn't demand a change. My belief that tigers eat meat, for instance, may have been actually verified (either directly or, more often, indirectly) in the past. However, I can say right now that my belief is true, not because an actual leading is occurring, but because the conditions (i.e. the belief with associations that have, in the past, led directly or indirectly to actual tigers) are present. Because potential leading processes are based on conditions of the present and the past, the truth is affirmed but not confirmed. Only through a belief's actual leading to reality can the truth of a belief be 'made' or a belief's falsity determined. Thus,

James states, "beliefs verified concretely by someone are the posts of the whole superstructure."[19]

When the truth of a belief consists in its relation to perceptual reality, the mutability of the perceptual realm affects a mutability in the correspondence relation, and, consequently, in truth. The truth of my belief that tigers eat meat, for example, is subject to the contingencies of the perceptual flux - there may come a time when tigers stop eating meat. In this case, James would say that my belief was true, and now it has become false. Just as the truth of a belief is 'made' through verification, it can be 'unmade' through similar processes. Thus, when the truth or falsity of a given belief depends on its relation to perception, the correspondence relation and, consequently, truth are dynamic. On the other hand, if a belief leads to another concept (for instance, another belief or idea), the relation may not be dynamic. In the essay, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth", James states that "*relations among purely mental ideas* form another sphere where true and false beliefs obtain."[20] Even in this case, truth is still an 'affair of leading'; however, leading here must be understood in the context of conceptual systems, like scientific (logical, mathematical, physical,

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[19] *Ibid.*, 100.

[20] *Ibid*, 100.

etc.,), aesthetic and ethical systems. James maintains that we have a 'ready-made ideal framework' that must be taken into account when the truth of a belief comes into question. He states,

> we can no more play fast and loose with these abstract relations than we can do so with our sense-experiences. They coerce us; we must treat them consistently, whether or not we like the results.[21]

Because concepts are abstracted from the flux of perceptual experience, once a conceptual relation holds between two concepts, it shall always hold as long as the concepts remain the same. In the case of the correspondence between beliefs and other concepts, if the transitions between the belief and the concept are entirely conceptual, then the relation should be static. Examples which James uses are the truths of mathematics and logic. He states that "truth here has an 'eternal' character"[22] However, if the transitions between belief and concept involve perception (which they often do in the cases of physics, biology, chemistry, etc.,), then the correspondence relation takes on the same dynamic character that it does in the case of correspondence with perception. While the truths of mathematics and logic are static in the context of mathematical and logical systems, the truths of

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[21] *Ibid.*, 101.

[22] *Ibid.*, 101.

science, ethics and aesthetics which must, in part, take account of our perceptions are dynamic.[23]

Whether truth is determined by a belief's 'agreement' with percepts or concepts, a background or 'apperceptive mass' made up of coherent systems of beliefs and concepts is presupposed. Any seeker of truth, comes with a background of accepted beliefs or 'prejudices' and 'preconceptions' which affect the reception of new experiences and beliefs. As a result, what beliefs are accepted as true depends, for a large part, on how these beliefs 'fit' with background beliefs. James states,

> what actually *does* count for true to any individual trower, whether he be a philosopher or common man, is always a result of his *apperceptions*. If a novel experience, conceptual or sensible, contradict too emphatically our pre-existent system of beliefs, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it is treated as false. Only when the older and the newer experiences are congruous enough to mutually apperceive and modify each other, does what we treat as an advance in truth result.[24]

James describes truth as a 'marriage' of new beliefs with old, inspired by two very human desires. On the one hand, we desire a certain amount of continuity and consistency in our beliefs. If there are 'gaps' in our system of beliefs, we

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[23] In Chapter 3, the nature of the 'background' of conceptual systems, and, as a result, the nature of scientific, aesthetic and ethical truths will be examined in more detail.

[24] *Ibid.*, 242.

long for that gap to be filled. If a belief contradicts important beliefs or systems of beliefs, then it will be rejected as false. On the other hand, we also desire stability. Thus, any belief whose acceptance would require great upheaval in our belief system will also be rejected as false. James states, "the most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leave most of his old order standing."[25] Only those beliefs that are 'congruous enough' with our accepted beliefs so as to show "a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity"[26] will be taken as true and, thus, will be true.

To successfully minimize jolt and maximize continuity, as well as enable us to deal with reality is the value or utility of truth. Thus, utility is described in terms of coherence and correspondence. James has taken Mill's 'Greatest Happiness Principle' from the context of right and wrong actions to the context of true and false beliefs.[27] If Mill's account of utility is extended intact, a belief is true to the extent that it maximizes or promotes happiness for individuals or for societies, regardless of whether or not

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[25] *Ibid.*, 35.

[26] *Ibid.*, 35.

[27] He states that the true "is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as 'the right' is only the expedient in the way of our behaving." *Ibid.*, 170.

beliefs 'cohere' with one another or correspond to some reality out there. However, James not only puts utility in a different context, but he pragmatically reinterprets Mill's account in order to bring this 'Greatest Happiness Principle' down to concrete experience and practise. More specifically, for utility to be significant to questions of truth, it must take account of both the believer with background beliefs and a reality that is dynamic and open.

To describe the usefulness of a belief without reference to how it 'fits in' with other beliefs in a person's background is to talk about truth abstractly, that is, apart from concrete believers. James states that satisfaction "is no abstract satisfaction *uberhaupt*, felt by an unspecified being, but is assumed to consist of such satisfactions (in the plural) as concretely existing men actually do find in their beliefs."[28] All believers are concretely situated in a certain time in history, with a certain status in a certain society, evidenced by a background of culturally and experientially influenced beliefs. For utility to be more than some abstract calculation of pleasures and pains, it must be grounded on the experience of such concretely situated believers. In other words, the usefulness of true beliefs must, in part, relate to the way in which these beliefs cohere

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[28] *Ibid.*, 270.

with background beliefs. A belief is useful if it enables us to deal 'satisfactorily' with other beliefs in the background; such a belief would maximize continuity and minimize upheaval in our systems of beliefs. In his description of various satisfactions, he states that

> above all we find *consistency* satisfactory, consistency between the present idea [or belief] and the entire rest of our mental equipment, including the whole order of our sensations, and that of our intuitions of likeness and difference, and our whole stock of previously acquired truths.[29]

Further, he states that in order for a preserved belief to be satisfactory, "it must not contradict other realities outside of it which claim also to be preserved."[30] Coherence, for James, indicates a kind of utility that beliefs have in relation to other beliefs. A true belief 'fits' into our background beliefs, and thus it 'works' by facilitating the movement of our thought through our background set of beliefs.

However, to describe utility without reference to the dynamic and open nature of perceptual reality is also to abstract from experience by making usefulness only relevant to a static and unchanging realm. The only way for utility to take account of a changing world is by describing usefulness in terms of the relation between beliefs and perception.

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[29] *Ibid.*, 271.

[30] *Ibid.*, 226.

Because true beliefs lead to reality (whether perceptual or conceptual), the possession of true beliefs is the possession of valuable 'instruments of action'.[31] James describes the leading of true beliefs as 'agreeable', 'satisfactory', 'worthwhile', and 'prosperous'. Only beliefs which 'agree' with reality can 'prosperously' influence our expectations and our decisions for action, when confronted with reality. Such beliefs are 'conceptual shortcuts' enabling us to deal successfully and more efficiently with our perceptions since these perceptions were, in a sense, foreseen by our true beliefs. Thus, a concrete account of the utility of true beliefs is inextricably tied up with both the 'agreement' of beliefs with reality and the coherent set of beliefs that make up the background.

Because of the traditional opposition between utility and correspondence, one might argue that there still seems to be a basic inconsistency between a belief's correspondence to reality and its 'satisfactoriness'. Are not there some cases in which holding a belief is satisfying even though it doesn't correspond to anything. For example, to believe in an after-life is soothing and comforting, even if there is, in fact, no after-life. The same could be said for the beliefs in God and in Santa Claus, which are satisfying even if they don't

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[31] *Ibid.*, 97.

correspond to anything. One may also ask if there are not some cases in which a belief leads to reality but is unsatisfying. Doesn't truth sometimes hurt? For example, the realization that I am not the athlete that I thought I was, is a bitter truth. The belief that I am a bad athlete may correspond to reality, but it is most unsatisfying. Although beliefs which correspond to reality are often satisfying and vice versa, there seem to be some cases in which correspondence and utility are inconsistent with one another.

A way to deal with this objection in Jamesian language is to ask whether there can be 'agreeable nonleadings' and 'unagreeable leadings'. In both cases, I will argue that they are contradictions in terms. In the first case, the problem that arises is determining the source of the satisfaction or comfort in these beliefs which don't 'lead to' anything. There is already an obvious contradiction in the way this problem is phrased. A belief that doesn't lead to anything, can't lead to anything satisfactory. For a belief to be satisfactory, some leading must occur. However, the problem can be rephrased by asking what is the source of satisfaction in a belief that doesn't lead to what it 'represents'. This problem assumes that the belief's emotional effect is different than the represented 'object' of the belief. But is this assumption warranted? What a belief concretely 'represents' is what it pragmatically means. Thus, if a

belief leads to something satisfying, then such satisfactions are, at least, part of what the belief represents.[32] A belief's 'satisfaction' must be accompanied by the belief's 'agreement' with reality. Perhaps I am considering the problem too abstractly. Let me consider the example of my belief in an after-life. I will presume that this belief is satisfactory since it is the source of hope and comfort for me. Although, abstractly speaking, the concept 'after-life' signifies, among other things, a state transcending ordinary space and time, its sole pragmatic meaning is determined by the belief's 'leading to' immediate experiences like feelings of hope and comfort, and concrete practises like comforting others at funerals.[33] Further, whenever I or others are comforted by the belief in an after-life, the meaning and the truth of my belief are verified. In other words, my belief in an after-life does lead to what it represents; however, what it concretely represents is not some peaceful, cloudy kingdom in the sky, but rather my (and other people's) feelings of

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[32] In the first section of this chapter, the meaning of concepts was described in terms of a leading process. Although a concept may have many abstractly meaningful associations, the pragmatic meaning of a concept is shown through its relation to perceptual experience (including emotional effects). Thus, what a concept concretely represents is what the concept pragmatically means.

[33] A belief in an after-life may also be verified by a mystical experience or the report of other people's mystical experiences. However, in this example, I will just consider the more common experience of feeling hope and comfort.

comfort and hope in the present. The same analysis could be given for my beliefs in God and Santa Claus. Although such comforting beliefs may not 'correspond' to a metaphysical or magical carbon-copy 'out there', they do lead to the concrete realities which they represent.

Just as 'agreeable nonleading' is a contradiction in terms, so is 'unagreeable leading'. It is important to remember that the satisfactoriness of a belief is not determined by feelings of pleasure (or the absence of pain), but by the nature of the belief and the experience that such a belief leads to.[34] A belief that works gets us into 'satisfactory' relations with reality by facilitating movement in both our background beliefs and our actions. A belief that leads to reality 'works' since such a belief automatically gets us into better relations with that reality (whether perceptual or conceptual). As a result, the more a given belief 'fits' with or is connected to various beliefs and perceptions, the more satisfactory or useful is the belief (since it enables us to deal with more experiences). In the case of my bitter truth, such a belief enables me to handle reality better than holding on to a delusion. My belief that

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[34] As the previous paragraph indicates, a belief may lead to emotional feelings like hope or comfort. Such feelings are necessitated by associations of the belief. However, a belief may still 'work', yet not lead to physical pleasure or positive emotions.

I am a bad athlete may cause me a certain amount of emotional pain; however, it still enables me to handle reality better by making my experiences more consistent and predictable. To hold on to a delusion that I am a great athlete despite my experiences of bad performances and the lack of praise, would mean either ignoring these experiences or accepting inconsistencies in my beliefs. Such a belief would not 'work' as well as the contrary, since it gets me in satisfactory relations neither with my experiences (like my athletic performances) nor my other beliefs (like my belief that a good athlete can win). Thus, only a belief that leads to reality enables me to deal with reality successfully.[35]

2.3 At the heart of James' pragmatic account of truth is the attempt to describe and do justice to the concrete experience of truth. The history of philosophical truth, for James, could be characterized as a history of vicious abstractions. Theories of truth are ultimately the result of

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[35] There are two important points that must be kept in mind in this discussion. First, my belief that I am a good athlete is called a 'delusion' only because I realize that I affirmed the belief despite my experiences to the contrary. A delusion is not described in terms of the relation between beliefs and a 'fact' beyond the experience of the deluded believer. Second, even such a deluded belief can be said to 'work' and thus be 'true' to the extent that the belief gives me pleasure. However, I later reject the belief and call it 'false' since I can no longer reconcile such a belief with my experiences. Accepting the bitter truth enables me to deal with reality better.

both the examination of the experience of accepting, rejecting and holding beliefs, and the, subsequent, abstract conceptualization of the experience. After finding diverse elements in this experience, philosophers, in their desire to make experience simple and static, often pick out a dominant element which is conceptually used to describe the entire phenomenon. Some see that truth must take account of the world. They, then, conclude that truth is nothing but the correspondence between belief and reality. All other aspects of the experience, including its justification and its value are considered secondary or even accidental. Others notice that a belief is 'true' if it 'fits' with current systems of beliefs. They conclude that coherence with other beliefs is the only relevant feature of the truth experience that needs to be considered. As a result, coherence is abstracted from our experience of truth and all other elements are subordinated or denied. Finally, many realize that truth is useful or valuable; it is a source of success and satisfaction. Again, this observation is abstracted from the actual experience by making utility the sole definition of truth. However, in each case, a part of the experience of truth is given the name of the whole, resulting in a distortive picture of the experience. But, further, this distorted picture which is based on the actual experience is touted as more real than the experience itself.

James examined the experience of accepting, rejecting and holding beliefs, and he found that the experience encompassed diverse elements. The only way for him to do justice to this experience, was to present the experience with all its diversity. By viewing truth through different interrelated perspectives, he hoped to give his readers insight into the concrete experience of truth, as well as insight into the false pretensions of traditional philosophical theories of truth. James was aware of the misunderstandings that arose from the use of terms in nontraditional ways. However, such contrast in terminology was needed to describe and emphasize the all-encompassing nature of the experience. He writes,

> there is, in short, no *room* for any grade or sort of truth outside of the framework of the pragmatic system, outside of that jungle of empirical workings and leadings, and their nearer or ulterior terminations, ...[36]

James' pragmatism encompasses other 'sorts' of truths by reinterpreting these truths to fit the world we experience.

However, even if one accepts that the nature of truth is best described by the experience of accepting, rejecting and holding beliefs, then it could be argued that James' account seems to fall short in three respects. First, if all truths involve a concrete verification, then beliefs about the

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[36] James, "A Word More About Truth" in Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth (1975), 255.

past can only be verified indirectly, through historical documentation, artifacts, and other evidence that we presently have access to. However, one often says that although the truth of the belief that Caesar crossed the Rubicon is verified by present evidence, the truth is constituted by the past event (whether or not Caesar did, in fact, cross the Rubicon). Second, if the truth of a belief is determined by a leading to a changing reality, then it would seem that a belief can be true, then false, then true again. However, one would not normally say that a belief that is found to be false, was previously true. Once a belief is shown to be false, then it always was false. Third, it seems obvious that one has, at one time or another, held false beliefs, but according to James' own account of truth, to hold a belief is to hold a true belief. The 'falsity' of a given belief seems to be determined only retroactively. Thus, James' pragmatic account of truth, which claims to describe the experience of accepting, rejecting and holding beliefs, fails to take adequate account of our experience of the truth of historical beliefs, the permanence of the truth (or falsity) of a given belief, and the holding of false beliefs.

Two kinds of responses to these objections are warranted. First, the objector is right in saying that according to common ways of speaking about truth, we don't say that the truth of historical beliefs is determined and

constituted by present evidence, and we don't say that a given belief was true and now is false, and we don't say that we only hold true beliefs. Language is an important part of our experience of truth; however, it can and should be reinterpreted to 'fit' more accurately our experience. Traditional philosophical accounts of the nature of truth have, in the past, influenced religion and literature, which, in turn, have influenced the language in society. It should not be surprising that James' radical reinterpretation of traditional philosophical notions like truth should conflict with a language based on these traditional accounts.

Second, if the actual practise of 'trowers' is considered, the experience of truth that emerges contrasts sharply with common ways of speaking about this experience. Let me first consider the case of historical beliefs. In an essay, "The Existence of Julius Caesar", James explicitly deals with the objection that the truth of the belief that Julius Caesar existed must depend on the fact that Caesar really did exist over 2000 years ago. But what sort of relation could connect a long dead person with a believer or belief today? James responds by saying that only an absolute mind could create a connection which, in effect, transcends space and time. When his concrete, finite experience is considered, he finds,

> Caesar *had*, and my statement *has*, effects; and if

> these effects in any way run together, a concrete medium and bottom is provided for the determinate cognitive relation, which, as a pure *actio in distans*, seemed to float too vaguely and unintelligibly.[37]

Without the introduction of some absolute, transcendent relation, the only connection that can be experienced between a historical fact and a present belief is through the effects (historical documentation, witnesses, and other evidence) that remain in the present. Despite our language to the contrary, the truth of historical beliefs is both determined and constituted by present evidence.

Our language and our experience become even more contradictory in the case of the last two objections. According to common parlance, a belief that was true cannot become false; if the belief is found to be false, then it always was false. As a result, false beliefs can be held by believers. Pragmatism denies both statements; the truth and falsity of beliefs do change, and the 'falsity' of a belief is determined and constituted only by those who reject the belief. Both these pragmatic statements will be accepted only if reality is viewed as a process, not as some static picture that beliefs either grasp or not. If reality is, in some sense fixed, then, of course, a belief 'about' that reality is either true or false, as long as reality remains

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[37] James, "The Existence of Julius Caesar" in Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth (1975), 287.

fixed. A belief cannot change its truth or falsity, since the 'corresponding' reality is static. Further, because many people have conflicting beliefs about reality, some of these people must hold true beliefs, while others must hold false beliefs. However, what evidence do we have for believing that there is an unchanging reality beyond the reality experienced? Our inability in the past and in the present to grasp this unchanging reality suggests caution against assuming such a reality. Further, the beliefs that are presently called 'true' are those which 'fit' or enable us to deal, not with an unchanging reality, but with the changing reality that is experienced. Thus, present 'truths' do not seem to require, either for their determination or for their constitution, the postulate of an unchanging reality. These points will not convince a Platonist, but for those that believe that the nature of truth is best described by our concrete experience of truth, these points should have some weight. Although the language commonly used reflects more traditional accounts of truth, James' pragmatic account of truth calls for a reinterpretation not only of truth but of the language of truth.

In this chapter, an interpretation of James' account of truth, together with some possible objections, were explained and elaborated. However, as given, this interpretation is inadequate since it fails to deal with two significant

objections to his pragmatic account of truth. The first objection is similar in form to the objection against James' account of the pragmatic meaning of concepts.[38] Briefly put, this objection asks how widely should 'practise', and, consequently, the pragmatic account of truth, be construed? If 'practise' is construed too widely, then it would seem that almost any train of thought determines a pragmatic truth. If 'practise' is construed too narrowly, then there is the danger that theoretical truths (like those of physics, mathematics, logic, etc.,) are beyond the scope of James' account of truth. How can his pragmatic theory of truth encompass theoretical truths without compromising its 'practical' nature? In Chapter 3, the scope of 'practise' will be examined by considering the nature of conceptual systems and necessary truths. In the concluding chapter, I will deal with a second objection, arising, in part, from his account of necessary truths. Does James' account of 'givens' like perception and necessary truths compromise his own pragmatic principles? By answering this question, the role of both the individual and society in determining truth will become clear.

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[38] See the end of section 1 in this chapter.

Chapter 3: Pragmatism and the Background of Concepts

In the previous two chapters, the notion of a 'background' of ideas, although presupposed, was not explained in detail. In the first chapter, I showed how concepts are abstracted from perceptual experience to form a background of associated beliefs and ideas. This background or 'apperceptive mass' is presupposed in any act of perception. It is against this background of ideas that people perceive 'things', instead of 'sense-data'. As a result, percepts and concepts 'interpenetrate', since changes in perception affect changes in the background ideas, while changes in the background affect changes in perception. In the second chapter, the background of associated ideas is presupposed in James' account of truth. In order to understand how actual leadings (either direct or indirect) work, a background of associated beliefs and concepts must be presupposed. Further, utility becomes abstract unless based on an account of a believer as historically and culturally situated (that is, with systems of beliefs). Thus, the notion of a 'background' is important both for James' account of reality and his account of truth. In this chapter, I will examine the nature of the 'background' in more detail by examining both the

origin and the development of conceptual systems and 'necessary' truths and postulates. In the first section, the relationship between conceptual systems in the 'background' and reality will be examined. In the second section, the notion of the 'background' will be further elaborated by considering James' account of necessary truths. In the final section, the consequences of this account of the 'background' on James' pragmatic account of truth will be elucidated.

3.1 What distinguishes James' account of truth from other accounts given before and during his time is the marked emphasis on the 'practical'. In his essay "What Pragmatism Means", he states that a pragmatist

> 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.[1]

Generally speaking, the pragmatist seems to be turning away from theory and towards practise. Further, the truth of a belief, for James, is determined and constituted by the belief's 'practical' effects. Even the name 'pragmatism' suggests an opposition to strictly theoretical or abstract forms of argumentation. As a result, a common criticism of James' account of truth is that pragmatism ignores the

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[1] *Ibid.*, 31.

theoretic interest.[2] In various places, James responds to this criticism. In his essay "The Pragmatist Account of Truth and its Misunderstanders", he acknowledges that his use of the word 'pragmatism', as well as other habits of speech, may have suggested an opposition to theory, when, in fact, no such opposition was meant. In a letter responding to R.B. Perry's articles on his pragmatism, James states that Perry's articles make him "realize how unlucky a word pragmatism has been to attach to our theory of truth. It seems to most people to exclude intellectual relations and interests ..."[3] Further, in an "Interview in [the] New York Times, 1907" James acknowledges that his emphasis on action may have lead to an overly narrow interpretation of his account of truth. He states,

> It is true that pragmatist writers have laid more stress than any previous philosophers on human action. But nothing could be more ludicrous than to call this their primary interest, or to explain it by their belief that purely theoretical knowledge of reality, and truth as such, are unattainable.[4]

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[2] See James' essay "The Pragmatist's Account of Truth and its Misunderstanders" in Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth (1975) where he lists as the seventh misunderstanding of his pragmatism that "pragmatism ignores the theoretic interest." p.277

[3] Ralph Barton Perry, The Thought and Character of William James (1935) vol. 2, 475.

[4] William James, "Interview in [the] New York Times, 1907" in The Writings of William James (1977), 448.

Although James does want to maintain an opposition between practise and a 'vicious' abstractionism or theorizing,[5] he intended the term 'practise' to encompass theoretical practise, as well. In order to understand how theoretical activity can be pragmatic, I will consider, in this section, James' account of the origin of conceptual systems and their relation to reality and truth.

In Chapter 1, the general relationship between conceptual reality (concepts and conceptual systems) and perceptual reality was briefly examined. James calls perceptual reality a 'much-at-oneness', a 'plenum' or a 'flux' of particulars. Without conception, reality would be a 'big booming buzzing confusion'. Through conception, connections are made and experience becomes structured. With perceptual reality as a constraint, different ways of structuring or interpreting reality are possible. These different 'ways' are conceptual systems like science, ethics and aesthetics. Each system is formed by a process of 'selection and emphasis', where elements are abstracted from experience (while other elements are ignored), and connections are drawn between these abstracted elements. Different conceptual systems are formed because different practical and emotional purposes guide this process. James states,

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[5] See Chapter 2 for the discussion of 'vicious abstractionism'.

> the conceiving or theorizing faculty works exclusively for the sake of ends that do not exist at all in the world of the impressions received by way of our senses, but are set by our emotional and practical subjectivity. It is a transformer of the world of our impressions into a totally different world, the world of our conception; and the transformation is effected in the interests of our volitional nature, and for no other purpose whatsoever. Destroy the volitional nature, the definite subjective purposes, preferences, fondness for certain effects, forms, orders, and not the slightest motive would remain for the brute order of our experience to be remodelled at all.[6]

Like Bacon, James' thinker is a bee, instead of a spider or an ant. Instead of constructing an ideal world, entirely from within (like a spider) or manipulating a world passively received (like an ant), a conceptual world is constructed based on experienced reality for specific purposes. While a bee uses the world's materials and constructs a bee hive for the purpose of making honey, humans have many different purposes, necessitating diverse constructions. I will now examine three constructions, science, ethics (or morality) and aesthetics, in more detail.

In The Principles of Psychology, James states that "the order of scientific thought is quite incongruent either with the way in which reality exists or with the way in which it comes before us."[7] Scientific thought, like other forms of thought, are constructions governed by specific purposes.

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[6] James, *The Principles of Psychology* (1981), 1231.

[7] *Ibid.*, 1230.

Generally speaking, science seeks general laws of nature making prediction and, thus, manipulation of nature possible. In order for these laws to hold unconditionally, many aspects of our experience must be ignored. James states,

> The most persistent outer relations which science believes in are never matters of experience at all, but have to be disengaged from under experience by a process of elimination, that is, by ignoring conditions which are always present.[8]

Qualities like beauty or sacredness are irrelevant for the general purposes of science. Although they may be attributed to the object, they are ignored or, in effect, eliminated from the scientific object in order to better facilitate prediction and manipulation.[9] James states that scientific objects like atoms, heat, and gases are "artificial devices" which gain a constancy in numbers that perceptual experience doesn't show.[10] For more specific tasks in science, a more specific domain of objects is required. The science of biology, for instance, seeks general laws which predict, and thus facilitate manipulation of organic matter. The domain of objects in biology is further specified by more specific

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[8] *Ibid.*, 1233.

[9] Dewey makes much the same point in his book Reconstruction in Philosophy (1920) when he states that an object reduced to its mechanical properties (i.e. neglecting 'qualities' of the object) "better renders nature amenable to human control." p.71

[10] *Ibid.*, 1250.

tasks. Thus, scientific reality, comprised of scientific objects and methods, is determined by the aims sought by science in general and specific branches of science.

With its experimental method, truth in science seems more obviously pragmatic than truth in ethics and aesthetics. Hypotheses, once proposed,[11] must run the 'gauntlet' of tests. As a result, they are either verified or rejected. When hypotheses are verified, they are considered to be 'true'. However, no experiment or verification process can ever make a scientific belief absolutely true. Thus, 'truths' and results in science are continually subject to revision. One example that James often refers to is the scientific hypothesis of 'ether', which is particularly telling given its present status in science. In an essay entitled "Ether and the Theory of Relativity", Albert Einstein describes the history, so far, of ether. He begins by asking,

> How does it come about that alongside of the idea of ponderable matter, which is derived by abstraction from everyday life, the physicists set the idea of the existence of another kind of matter, the ether?[12]

He then describes how ether was postulated in order to explain

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[11] James describes the genesis of scientific hypothesis as a 'spontaneous variation' like 'flashes of poetry'. Of course, the difference between science and poetry, is that once the 'flash' occurs, science must verify its results according to scientific methodology, while poetry need not.

[12] Einstein, Sidelights on Relativity 1983, page 3.

two sorts of problems.[13] First, ether was postulated to explain immediate action at a distance. At one time, all actions were considered to be the result of 'contact forces'. However, with Newton's theory of gravitation, apparent action at a distance needed to be explained. To remain simple and consistent in explanation, either all contact forces must be viewed as actions at a distance, or all actions at a distance must be viewed as contact forces, conveyed through a medium. This medium, scientists proposed, was ether. By postulating 'ether', actions at a distance could be made consistent with the current view of forces (i.e. as contact forces). Second, the undulatory theory of light requires an elastic and inert medium (i.e. ether) through which light passes. The nature of ether was further elaborated by this theory of light. Because light is capable of polarisation, the medium must have the nature of a solid body, and yet not take part in the movement of bodies. Thus, the 'quasi-rigid' luminiferous ether was born. However, from this point on, experiments in electricity and dynamics began to show that ether could not possess mechanical properties. Einstein writes,

> As to the mechanical nature of Lorentzian ether, it may be said of it, in a somewhat playful spirit, that immobility is the only mechanical property of which it has not been deprived by H.A. Lorentz. It may be added that the whole change in the conception of the ether which the special theory of

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[13] *Ibid.*, 3-7.

> relativity brought about, consisted in taking away from the ether its last mechanical property, namely its immobility.[14]

Einstein ends by retaining the notion of 'ether' as endowed with physical qualities (allowing for the propagation of light and the existence of standards of space and time), but without the qualities characteristic of ponderable media (like motion/or the lack thereof). However, since Einstein's time, other experiments (Michelson's and Morley's attempts to measure the motion of the earth through ether) have led scientists to the conclusion that ether does not exist. Different explanations for the propagation of light, without the presupposition of ether, have resulted.

The point of discussing ether's history in science is to illustrate four points made earlier about the nature of science. First, scientific concepts or hypotheses are proposed for specific purposes like explaining immediate action at a distance or how light travels. Second, the nature of science's objects is determined by their use in specific tasks. Thus, the nature of 'ether' changed as its applications increased. Third, with "artificial" constructs like ether, prediction and manipulation of nature is possible. Not only did the presupposition of ether explain light travel, but it made possible calculations involving the speed of

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[14] *Ibid.*, 10-11.

light. Finally, postulating ether worked or was verified, and thus was true, since it facilitated prediction and manipulation. Because 'ether' was found to have limited applications, the hypothesis of ether is now considered to be false. Thus, even though scientific practise is thought to involve a higher degree of theory or abstraction than more commonplace beliefs, scientific truths are just as pragmatic as everyday truths.

Although science forms a framework in which an ordered reality can be constructed, it only 'works' by ignoring parts of reality that don't fit into its construction. Nonsensory experiences, for example, are scientifically explained away in subjective or psychologistic terms. Thus, mystical experiences are hallucinations due to stress or a chemical imbalance in the brain. Beauty is only 'in the eye of the beholder' and thus irrelevant to questions of knowledge. Religion is 'scientifically' explained in terms of psychological angst or primitive fear of nature. However, because science's domain and methods are determined by a context of 'scientific' aims or purposes, to extend results of science to other purposes requires qualifications. For instance, in The Varieties of Religious Experience, James describes the illogic of refuting a mystical experience or religious state of mind by attributing it to a physiological

cause.[15] All human experiences are accompanied by physiological reactions. This does not imply that some experiences will not have more meaning or value than other experiences. What experiences are more valuable for a good or moral life, is not a question that science generally seeks to answer. Further, the legitimacy of answering this ethical question and other aesthetic questions in terms of scientific objects and methods is questionable considering the narrowness of science's perspective.[16] For James, such unscientific questions determine other contexts of purposes constituting ethical and aesthetic perspectives of reality.

The theological, moral and ethical principles of institutions and practises that comprise an ethical conceptual system are 'secondary formations' from personal religious experience. He states, "religious experience ... spontaneously and inevitably engenders myths, superstitions,

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[15] James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (1961), 30.

[16] In an interesting passage, James states

> the aspiration to be 'scientific' is such an idol of the tribe to the present generation, is so sucked in with his mother's milk by every one of us, that we find it hard to conceive of a creature who should not feel it, and harder still to treat it freely as the altogether peculiar and one-sided subjective interest which it is. (*Ibid.*, 1236)

With such a 'one-sided' interest guiding its very nature, the legitimacy in extending science's results to other interests comes into question.

dogmas, creeds, and metaphysical theologies, and criticisms of one set of these by the adherents of another"[17] These secondary formations can be viewed as two sorts of intellectual operations.[18] First, there are those intellectual operations which consciously presuppose immediate experience. Second, there is another sort of intellectualism that claims to derive ethical principles from the 'resources of logical reason alone' and not from immediate experience. The second form of ethical intellectualism is an example of what James earlier called 'vicious' intellectualism, since it denies the primary relation of principles to the changing realm of immediate experience. If ethics is viewed in this second sense, then pragmatic verification is explicitly and dogmatically denied. However if ethics is viewed, properly, in the first sense, then ethical principles can and should be verified by experience. This does not mean that ethical principles are ever completely verified (since no belief, not even scientific beliefs, is completely verified) or that ethical principles should be 'scientifically' verified (since such verification occurs in the context of different sorts of questions). However, ethical principles and beliefs do find

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[17] James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (1961), 339. See also page 42 of The Varieties where he calls theologies, philosophies and ecclesiastical organizations 'secondary' growths.

[18] *Ibid.*, 339.

their verification to the degree to which they 'work' in experience. As a result, significant ethical principles are pragmatic and thus have all the character of pragmatic truths.[19]

James' account of the aesthetic view of reality has a more vague and peculiar nature than other constructions of reality. As examples of aesthetic principles, he gives more concrete principles like 'a note sounds good with its third and fifth' or 'a potato needs salt' and more abstract principles like 'Nature is simple and invariable' or 'Nature is rationally intelligible'.[20] He does not explicitly state what these aesthetic principles have in common, but he seems to suggest that both concrete and abstract aesthetic

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[19] In The Principles, James is particularly vague on the subject of ethical or moral truths. On page 1235, he states that while scientific truths do not conflict with the order of experience (and thus they can be verified by experience), ethical and aesthetic principle do conflict with the order (and thus they cannot be verified?). Further, on page 1269, he says that moral and aesthetic principles remain postulates, not propositions with respect to the 'real world outside' (but what about science?). If by the 'order of experience' James means perceptual reality, then neither principles in science nor principles in ethics and aesthetics 'copy' or 'reflect' this order. If 'not conflicting with the order of experience', means that such principles 'lead to reality', then it would seem that both scientific beliefs and ethical beliefs (not vicious ethical beliefs) lead to reality. In other works (including The Varieties, "Pragmatism and Religion", and "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life"), James treats ethical and moral principles pragmatically.

[20] See pages 1264-1265 of James' Principles of Psychology (1981).

principles are, in some sense, their own justification for being pleasing or desirable. However, not all aesthetic principles owe their desirability to the same source. While the more concrete aesthetic principles are a result of habit and association, the more abstract principles express "our sense of how pleasantly our intellect would feel if it had a Nature of that sort to deal with."[21] As a result, many of these abstract aesthetic principles are assumed in the construction of other conceptual systems. For instance, James mentions 'aesthetic delight' as a main reason for classifying experiences.[22] He also states that "the so-called metaphysical principles are at bottom only expressions of aesthetic feeling."[23] In The Varieties, James mentions as "aesthetic motives" for constructing religion, the aim for "intellectual purity and simplification" and the aim for "richness."[24] However, these two aesthetic motives, far more than being the basis for religious construction, seem to be the very basis for rationality. In an essay, James states that the 'Sentiment of Rationality' may be obtained in two

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[21] *Ibid.*, 1265.

[22] *Ibid.*, 1242.

[23] *Ibid.*, 1265.

[24] James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (1961), 358.

ways, based on two passions.[25] The first passion is the 'theoretic' need to reduce the diversity of sensations to simplicity. The second, 'sister' passion is the 'practical' need for distinguishing, that is, "to be acquainted with the parts rather than to comprehend the whole"[26] Often the second passion is considered secondary or base; however, a balance of both passions is required for a 'sentiment of rationality' that is significant to practise.[27] Thus, abstract aesthetic principles have the curious status of not only constructing a world that is pleasing to the intellect, but of constructing a world that makes constructions possible.

At this point a new problem arises for James' pragmatic account of truth. Are these basic aesthetic principles, which underlie not only science and ethics, but our very rationality, pragmatic? For instance, is the principle that 'the world is rationally intelligible throughout', which James calls the "widest postulate of rationality", pragmatic? One

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[25] James, "Sentiment of Rationality" in The Writings of William James (1977), especially pages 318-319.

[26] *Ibid.*, 319.

[27] In "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy," James seems to echo the same sentiment when he distinguishes two 'temperaments' resulting in two ways of philosophically constructing reality. The 'tender-minded' and the 'tough-minded' roughly correspond to the passion for simplicity and the passion for diversity or richness. James 'offers' pragmatism as "a philosophy that can satisfy both kinds of demands." (Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth, 1975, 23)

may ask the same question with respect to the basic principles of logical reasoning, like the law of noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle. Are logical truths pragmatic? What is the status of the mathematic truths which guide science? In the second section of this chapter, these questions will be answered by considering James' account of necessary truths.

3.2 William James' pragmatic account of truth is directly opposed to an absolute, unchanging notion of truth. Beliefs are 'made' true through various processes of verification. Truth is not something fixed and unchanging; truth is contingent, grounded in the changing world of experiences. However, in The Principles of Psychology, James seems to espouse a theory of truth contradictory to his pragmatic theory. In a chapter entitled "Necessary Truths and the Effects of Experience," he states, "it is a familiar truth that some propositions are necessary."[28] James wants to assert that there are some ideas or beliefs in science, as well as in aesthetics, which are necessarily true.[29] However,

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[28] James, The Principles of Psychology (1950) vol. 2, 617.

[29] Two points need to be made. First, James distinguishes necessary truths and necessary postulates (necessary truths are the truths of the pure or 'a priori' sciences, while necessary postulates relate to aesthetic, metaphysical and ethical propositions). Because all truths are, in a sense, postulates with respect to a changing reality, such a

he also wants to say that all truth is pragmatic in nature, and thus contingent. In order to reconcile his theory of necessary truths with his pragmatic theory of truth, he would have to assert that some truths are both necessary and contingent. But to call the same thing both contingent and necessary, seems, at first glance, to be a contradiction in terms or, at least, an equivocation. In this section, I want to show, first, in what sense 'necessary truths', like the fundamental truths of the pure sciences and aesthetics, are contingent and consistent with his pragmatism. Second, I will show how his pragmatic account of truth is affected by the presupposition of necessary truths.

For James, the nature of necessary truths is intrinsically connected with their origin. In the last chapter of The Principles, he gives an account of the origin of necessary truths which occupies a middle ground between the accounts given by an 'a priorist' and an evolutionary empiricist. Both the a priorist and the evolutionary empiricist agree that there are propositions that are necessary and other propositions that are "dubious." James

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distinction, I believe, is unwarranted. Second, James calls some ethical and metaphysical principles 'necessary'. However, because he states that ethical and metaphysical principles are based on aesthetic principles or passions, their truths don't seem to be as 'necessary' as aesthetic truths. Thus, I will limit my discussion to the necessary truths of aesthetics and the 'a priori' sciences.

gives the following examples of necessary and dubious associations:

> we must attach the predicate 'equal' to the subject 'opposite sides of a parallelogram' if we think those terms together at all, whereas we need not in any such way attach the predicate 'rainy,' for example, to the subject 'tomorrow.'[30]

Both the a priorist and the empiricist would agree that dubious associations are a result of experience, and more certain associations are due to structures of the mind. However, the dispute between the a priorist and the empiricist arises when they consider the origin of these structures. By briefly examining each account of the mental structure's genesis, I shall be able to show how James' account occupies the middle ground between the two by 'borrowing' a little from each. As a result of this examination, the nature of 'necessity' will become apparent.

By an 'a priorist', James is thinking of philosophers following Kant, who hold that necessary truths are a result of fixed categories of the mind. These categories are "supposed by the so-called a priorists to be of transcendental origin, or at any rate not to be explicable by experiences."[31] Thus, the cause of the fixed mental structures is independent of any and all experience. This a priori account of mental

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[30] *Ibid.*, 617.

[31] *Ibid.*, 617.

structures has two main implications for the necessary truths which are derived from these structures. First, because the structures are fixed and unchanging, the truths which are necessary (i.e. which are derived from these categories) are also fixed and unchanging. Second, because the structures are independent of experience, necessary truths are likewise independent of experience. The a priorist's account of the origin of mental structures is in direct opposition to the account given by an empiricist and, in particular, the account given by an evolutionary empiricist.

By an evolutionary empiricist, James has philosophers like Herbert Spencer in mind. Spencer is an empiricist in the sense that experience is the primary factor in the change or development of organisms. However, he is also evolutionary in the sense that it is not simply individual experience that must be taken into account, but also the experience of our ancestors. Thus, for an evolutionary empiricist, mental structures are due not just to the experience of an individual, but "to that of his ancestors as far back as one may please to go."[32] Experience fixes these structures by habit and associations. James writes,

> Any ordinary Spencerite will tell you that just as the experience of blue objects wrought into our mind the color blue, and hard objects got it [the mind] to feel hardness, so the presences of large

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[32] *Ibid.*, 617.

> and small objects in the world gave it the notion of size, moving objects made it aware of motion and objective successions taught it time. Similarly in a world with different impressing things, the mind had to acquire a sense of difference, whilst the like parts of the world as they fell upon it kindled in it the perception of similarity.[33]

Thus, because we (as individuals and our ancestors) frequently experience certain things associated with others, an 'inner' or mental relation is formed. The strength of this inner relation is directly proportionate to the frequency with which this association is encountered in experience.

The account of the origin of our mental structures given by the evolutionary empiricists also has implications for their account of necessary truths. First, because the mental structures are evolving, the necessary truths derived from these structures are also evolving. Thus, necessary truths are not fixed or unchanging. Second, because the structures of the mind are ultimately the result of habit and association, necessary truths, like the less certain, dubious truths, are also based on habit and association. Thus, for an evolutionary empiricist, necessary truths are not of a different nature from other kinds of truths; rather, they are of a different degree. With necessary truths, the mental relation is more fixed because of the frequency with which the 'outer' relation was experienced. In the case of dubious

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[33] *Ibid.*, 629-630.

truths, the mental relation is not so fixed because the 'outer' association was not experienced so frequently. To call a truth necessary or dubious is to refer to the probability of its occurring (of being true) now or in the future based on the frequency with which it occurred in the past. Thus, the a priorist and evolutionary empiricists hold contradictory views not only about the origin of necessary truths, but also about the very nature of these truths.

In order to explain his 'middle-of-the-road' account of necessary truths, James notes that it is necessary to consider the two different ways in which things enter the mind. He states, "no one can successfully treat of psychogenesis or the factors of mental evolution without distinguishing between these two ways in which the mind is assailed."[34] Nature can produce the same effect on the mind with two different methods; for example,

> she may make our ears ring by the sound of a bell, or by a dose of quinine; make us see yellow by spreading a field of buttercups before our eyes, or by mixing a little santonine powder with our food.[35]

According to James, things enter the mind through the 'front-door' or the 'back-door', and both of these natural 'methods' can be used to explain the occurrence of traits in the animal

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[34] *Ibid.*, 627.

[35] *Ibid.*, 625.

race.

With the front-door mode, "natural agents produce perceptions which take cognizance of the agents themselves."[36] He goes on to say that what is taught to the mind in the first case is "the order of experience itself."[37] This order of experience is the order of time- and space- relations. Thus, the front-door mode is experience in the strict sense; it is the way of experiencing through the five senses, and thus James calls it 'experience proper'.[38] An evolutionary empiricist can maintain that the mental structures are a result of experience proper through the Lamarkian theory of adaptation which can be considered to be an application of front-door origin on the evolutionary level. According to this theory, an individual organism, when confronted with experience proper, adjusts to fit this environment. These modifications may, in turn, be passed on to successive generations through some hereditary process.[39] Although James would say that some mental phenomena pass through the front-door, many forms of thought, including necessary truths, cannot be explained in this way.

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[36] *Ibid.*, 625.

[37] *Ibid.*, 625.

[38] *Ibid.*, 628.

[39] *Ibid.*, 626.

With the back-door mode, the natural agents "produce perceptions which take cognizance of something else."[40] Thus, something is in the mind, but we are not immediately aware of the natural agent which produced this effect. The cause of a back-door effect is often inaccessible or hidden. Darwin's theory of accidental variation is an example of back-door origin at the level of zoological evolution. According to this theory, certain young are born with 'accidental variations' which may or may not help them survive in a given environment. Those traits which are passed on, are those that Nature selects by deeming them advantageous to the individuals that posses them. James wants to argue that our higher intellectual life, as well as our higher aesthetic and moral life,

> seems to be made up of affections of this collateral and incidental sort, which have entered the mind by the back stairs, as it were, or rather have not entered the mind at all, but got surreptitiously born in the house.[41]

Thus, James wants to say that some of our elementary forms of thought appeared accidentally, and, proving themselves to be advantageous, were subsequently passed on to later

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[40] *Ibid.*, 625.

[41] *Ibid.*, 627.

generations.[42] Further, our necessary truths and postulates are derived from these elementary, a priori categories.

One example of necessary truths are the truths of the 'a priori' sciences of classification, logic and mathematics. James makes two claims regarding these pure sciences. First, the pure sciences are not reproductions of the order of experience. In fact, they reflect experience even less than the natural sciences. Second, the pure sciences are based on a function of comparison which is itself a back-door effect. He states,

> the pure sciences express the results of comparison exclusively; comparison is not a conceivable effect of the order in which outer impressions are experienced - it is one of the house-born portions of our mental structure."[43]

Thus, the comparison function needs to be examined in more detail.

James argues that comparison originally entered into the mind through the back-door; for it could not be argued intelligibly that comparison is a front-door effect. If someone argued that our sense of difference, for example, arose from experiencing a world of black things differing from white things, there could only be a subjective or an objective

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[42] James gives a list of these a priori forms of thought or 'elementary mental categories' in volume 2 of The Principles, page 629.

[43] *Ibid.*, 641.

reason for this difference 'popping' in our heads when black and white are thought together. Either the mind has a structure by which black and white can be distinguished or "the difference was always there, with these colors, outside the mind as an objective fact."[44] But in the first case, the ability to differentiate is a prerequisite for experiencing the difference, and thus such an ability is not originally a front-door effect. In the second case, there is no explanation at all for the origin of our sense of difference; it simply states that the mind has to know a difference that is in our outer experience. James' conclusion is that

> the only clear thing to do is to give up the sham of a pretended explanation, and to fall back on the fact that the sense of difference *has* arisen, in some natural manner doubtless, but in a manner which we do not understand.[45]

Thus our sense of difference and all comparison functions originally entered the mind through the back-door. In evolutionary terms, this means that our ability to compare was, originally, an accidental variation which gave those who possessed this ability a significant advantage for survival.

With such a function, concepts or ideas in the mind are compared, not empirical objects.[46] When black is said to

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[44] *Ibid.*, 643.

[45] *Ibid.*, 643.

[46] *Ibid.*, 643-644.

differ from white, a black empirical thing is not distinguished from a white empirical thing, rather the ideal objects are being compared. If all black things suddenly disappeared from our experience, black would still differ from white. Thus, the comparing function has as its objects ideas and concepts, rather than empirical data.

James wants to argue that all rational propositions are the result of comparison. He begins by showing how two basic principles are derived directly from the ability to compare. These principles will form the 'basis' for constructing the pure sciences. The first principle is the *axiom of constant result*. Because comparison is an act on ideal objects, not only will the objects of comparison be unchanging, but the result of the comparison is unchanging. If a different result occurs on different occasions, then the comparison is not being made with the same objects. Thus, James can formulate his first principle; "the same objects compared in the same way, always give the same results."[47] He adds that the axiom of constant result holds through all our intellectual operations. The second principle is the *principle of mediate comparison* or, more generally, the *axiom of skipped intermediaries* (or the *axiom of transferred relations*). The second principle is based on the mind's ability to form

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[47] *Ibid.*, 644.

series. In the act of comparison, not only ideal objects are compared, but the results of comparison may be, subsequently, compared. In other words, "the operation of comparing may be repeated on its own results."[48] By doing this, series of similarities and differences with two characteristics can be formed. First, the relation between the terms must be of the same kind, so that the terms differ from each other in the same way. Second, the relation between the terms must move in the same direction. Once the mind grasps this type of series, the *principle of mediate comparison* follows. For if A differs from B and B differs from C, and the differing is the same kind and in the same direction, then the difference between A and C is greater than the difference between A and B. But this is just a particular form of the *axiom of skipped intermediaries* which states that "in a series of homogeneously related terms, ... skipping intermediary terms leave the relation the same."[49] Thus, if A differs from B which differs from C (and the differing is of the same kind and in the same direction) then A differs from C.[50] James calls this axiom

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[48] *Ibid.*, 645.

[49] *Ibid.*, 646.

[50] James later notes that this axiom doesn't follow for all increasing, homogeneous series. He states that there are some relations which are 'intrinsically transferable', while other relations are not. "Nothing but the clear sight of the ideas themselves shows whether the axiom of skipped intermediaries applies or not." (*Ibid.*, 661.)

the "broadest and deepest law of man's thought."[51]

From this point on, James shows that these two axioms make possible the construction of hierarchical classification systems, as well as logical and mathematical (including arithmetic and geometric) systems. It would be a mistake to assume that James wants to or can derive our present day systems of logic and mathematics from the axioms of 'constant result' and 'skipped intermediaries'. These two axioms are not the foundations for the systematization of logic or mathematics. However, James does want to argue that these axioms (and our ability to compare) explain our natural capacity for thinking logically and mathematically. Most people, regardless of their education, have some sense of the 'truth' of some basic logical and mathematical propositions. Although they may not know their names or their relation to systems of logic, many people reason using *reductio ad absurdum* arguments or can detect the sophistry of *straw man* formulations of arguments. Many people with little mathematical training can see the truth in the proposition that two plus two equals four, and will continue to equal four as long as the same two's are added together. People were thinking logically and using mathematical principles before the systems of Euclid, Archimedes and Aristotle were formed.

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[51] *Ibid.*, 646.

Further, James would argue that this pre-systematic 'intuition' of logic and mathematics is due to some natural a priori capacities, like our abilities to compare and to form a series. Aesthetic principles like 'Nature is simple and invariable' are also pre-systematic 'intuitions' of what constitutes a rational world. As a result, systems of mathematics, logic and classification, as well as systems of science, ethics and metaphysics, could be constructed based on our natural capacities and intuitions.

As I explained earlier, James' account of the 'necessity' of certain truths, like the intuitive truths of the pure sciences or those basic truths of aesthetics, occupies a middle-ground between the a priorist and the evolutionary empiricist. For the a priorist, necessary truths are absolute, unchanging and a priori. As a result, necessary truths are of a different type from other truths. Like the a priorist, James holds that the structures leading to necessary truths originally entered the mind independently of experience proper, that is, by the 'back-door'. It is this independence from experience proper, that gives necessary truths both their intuitiveness and their different status from other truths resulting from habit and association. But does this mean that necessary truths have nothing to do with experience? James, like the evolutionary empiricist, would say that truths are contingent (grounded in experience), but in a very different

sense from the empiricist. The evolutionary empiricist holds that necessary truths are contingent since they are derived from a mental structure whose origin is empirical (that is, the mental structure is a result of the experience proper - of individuals and their ancestors). The mental structure may have been the result of a process of 'adaption' where the environment molds the individual in the first instance, and adjustments are passed on to successive generations. As I showed earlier, the structures of the mind, for James, were originally accidental variations (i.e. back-door effects) in an organism which proved their worth by being passed on to further generations. Thus, the structures of our mind were verified in the first instance, and were, consequently, passed on. For example, our ability to compare objects was originally an accidental variation in an individual that enabled him or her to survive and bear children with this same trait. This ability was so successful that it became a relatively fixed feature of the human race. Aesthetic capacities, like our passions for simplicity and richness in our concepts, were originally the result of accidental variations which have proved their usefulness by being passed on through successive generations. This does not mean that a new structure might not develop which better enables humans to survive, or that reality might not change drastically requiring a change in our capacities for survival. The

structures of the mind are not absolute or unchanging (as an a priorist would hold), for a new and 'better' structure could replace the old structure. Rather, our a priori capacities themselves are contingent in the sense that their success (in terms of being passed on) is a result of a continual verification process in experience. Thus, necessary truths are grounded in experience in the sense that the mental structures from which they are derived require empirical verification. It is in this sense that necessary truths are contingent.

3.3 In one passage, James states,

> The whole universe of concrete objects, as we know them, swims, not only for such a transcendental writer [as Emerson], but for all of us, in a wider and higher universe of abstract ideas, that lend it its significance. As time, space and ether soak through all things so (we feel) do abstract and essential goodness, beauty, strength, significance, justice, soak through all things good, strong, significant, and just. Such ideas, and others equally abstract, form the background for all our facts, the fountain-head of all the possibilities we conceive of.[52]

In the two previous sections, James' account of the 'background' was further elaborated by considering the origin and development of conceptual systems and necessary truths. There are three main implications this discussion has for his

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[52] James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (1961), 61.

pragmatic account of truth. First, beliefs must take account of perceptions which are, themselves, affected by a conceptual background. Because perception presupposes this background, theoretical disciplines like science, ethics and aesthetics shape our perceptions of reality. We can actually perceive objects scientifically or ethically, and this is as essential to our percept as is its incommunicable, everchanging character. Thus, when James states that beliefs must take account of perceptual reality, it is not a perceptual reality completely alien to our beliefs and concepts, but a reality which interacts or interpenetrates with our conceptual world.

Second, the notion of 'practise' was widened to include theoretical practise. The realms of science, ethics and aesthetics were shown to be human constructions designed to achieve distinct purposes. The truth of theoretical principles must be determined in their context of purposes or tasks. Thus, conceptual systems act as flexible constraints on truths for their respective domains. They determine what beliefs or principles will be accepted as true (and thus what is true) and what is false. These constraints are 'flexible', since the nature of the conceptual system changes with each addition. But in all cases, truth is pragmatic since it must 'lead' to reality and, as a result, enable us to deal with experience.

Third, necessary truths act as a more fixed constraint

on the truth of beliefs. As I stated earlier, truth, for James, is a matter of degree. Some true beliefs enable us to deal with reality better than other true beliefs. These more important or useful beliefs act as constraints on other beliefs. 'Necessary' truths, which have proved their worth throughout the ages, offer a more fixed set of beliefs which most truths must adhere to. It is for this reason, that they form the basis for our notions of rationality and 'coherence'. Aesthetic, logical and mathematical principles constrain our thought. However, like all constraints and truths, they also are subject to a changing world of experience.

Conclusion

James' pragmatism makes two main contributions to the practise of philosophy. First, it criticizes the pretensions of traditional philosophy which claims to know, through, for instance, a transcendental argument or through philosophical dialectic, an absolute or unchanging realm of reality, meaning or truth. Its criticism is twofold. Pragmatism questions the very possibility of knowing such an absolute, unchanging realm given our present historical, contingent and imperfect situation. And, more importantly, pragmatism seriously questions the need for postulating such 'trans-empirical support'. By describing reality, meaning and truth entirely in empirical terms, James is criticizing other accounts which need to postulate transcendent realities. Second, pragmatism makes traditionally abstract philosophical concepts significant to concrete practise by emphasizing the pragmatic meaning of 'reality', 'meaning' and 'truth'. Reality is whatever we must take account of. Meaning, pragmatically understood, is constituted by a concept's relation to perceptual experience. Finally, because truth is constituted by an 'agreement' of belief with reality, true beliefs enable us to deal with our experience. The value or significance of

philosophical accounts of reality, meaning and truth does not come into question since it is precisely this value or significance that constitutes the pragmatic meaning of these concepts. Pragmatic writers since James have made and continue to make similar contributions to the study of philosophy.

However, James' pragmatism has an emphasis which distinguishes it from other forms of pragmatism. In an essay, "Pragmatism, Relativism and Irrationalism", Rorty describes three general characteristics of pragmatists.[1] While the first two characteristics are exemplified by James' account of pragmatism, the last is not a part of his pragmatic account of truth. Rorty states, first, that pragmatism is 'anti-essentialist' with respect to 'truth', 'knowledge', 'morality', etc. James has done away with absolute or fixed essences by bringing the notion of 'essence' within the changing world of experience. The 'essence' of things, as I showed in Chapter 1, is determined not only by a social and historical context, but by a more specific context of purposes. Thus, a traditional account of 'essence' is repudiated, since, pragmatically speaking, 'essences' change in time and for different tasks. Second, Rorty states that for a pragmatist, there is no epistemological difference

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[1] Rorty's "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism" in Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980), 162-166.

between is and ought, no metaphysical difference between facts and values, and no methodological difference between morality and science. For James, truths about what 'ought' to be done and truths about what 'are' done are determined and constituted by the same empirical processes of verification. Further, as I showed in Chapter 3, once science and ethics are viewed as constructs designed for different purposes, neither has priority with respect to knowledge or truth. Finally, Rorty states,

> there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones - no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or from the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow inquirers.[2]

Further, he states that this third way of characterizing pragmatism should be preferred since it accepts the "contingent character of starting-points" by acknowledging "our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance."[3] But is the 'conversation' or 'remarks' of fellow inquirers the only constraint for James? Besides conceptual constraints, he describes two other constraints on truth that seem to be contradictory to Rorty's account. First, perceptual experience, which is to some extent incommunicable, is a

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[2] *Ibid.*, 165.

[3] *Ibid.*, 166.

constraint on the truth of beliefs. Second, 'necessary truths' resulting from adapting 'mental' structures also act as constraints on truth. Is James betraying the pragmatic character of his account by proposing perceptual and 'mental' constraints on truth?

Let me first consider the case of 'mental' constraints. Rorty suggests that by proposing 'mental' constraints on truth, the 'contingent starting point' of inquiry will be compromised. But does James 'evade' this contingency by describing 'mental' constraints on truth? In the previous chapter, I showed that basic aesthetic, mathematical and logical truths receive their 'necessity' by being derived from 'a priori' mental structures. These necessary truths act as constraints on the truth of other beliefs. However, James' 'a priori' structures differ from Kant's a priori categories since they are not fixed or transcendent. James' 'mental' structures are 'a priori' in the sense that they originally are a result of 'back-door' effects (that is, initially independent of experience proper). But they are changing and 'contingent' in the sense that, once formed, they must continually prove their worth in a changing environment. As a result, the 'necessary' truths derived from this 'a priori' structure are also contingent. Thus, the 'contingent starting point' of inquiry is not compromised by acknowledging the constraint of necessary truths and 'a priori' structures.

But doesn't the presupposition of 'mental' constraints make humans 'pre-programmed machines'?[4] To suppose so would be to misunderstand James' purposes for describing a priori structures. James would suggest that we naturally share some basic capabilities and ways of constructing and dealing with reality. Just possessing the 'body' that we do, capable of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching and smelling, affects what beliefs and conversation we have about the world. Possessing a 'mind' capable of comparing, simplifying and unifying experiences, affects the truth of beliefs.[5] The purpose of describing necessary truths and 'mental' structures is not to suggest that by finding these mental structures we can determine the truth or falsity of beliefs. The purpose is not to provide the ultimate court of appeal for questions of truth. Rather, James describes 'a priori' structures in order to show why some beliefs, like logical, mathematical and aesthetic beliefs, seem more solid or fixed than other beliefs. They are not necessary because they are transcendent or absolute or because they 'mirror' reality, but because they

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[4] Rorty suggests that the attempt to evade the contingency of starting points by describing mental constraints on inquiry is "to hope to become a properly-programmed machine." (*Ibid.*, 166)

[5] The notions of 'body' and 'mind' are, for James, human constructions of an experience which is neutral with respect to its 'mentality' or 'physicality'. These notions are useful because they enable us to talk about different aspects of our experience.

flow quite naturally from our common ways of thinking and feeling. James does not compromise his own pragmatic principles by describing necessary truths and 'mental' structures; instead, he reinforces the contingency of *all* truth, while giving an account of the 'necessity' we feel about some truths.

What seems to be more problematic for James is his account of perceptual constraints on truth. As I showed in Chapter 1, perception, for James, is incommunicable. Although I can get another person in a position to have the 'same' perceptual experience, I cannot 'give' the experience to another through words without abstracting from the everchanging particularity of the perception. Something is always lost in a linguistic representation of perceptual experience. It is for this reason that language and concepts are so valuable since they form 'conceptual shortcuts' through the changing diversity of perceptual experience. However, James also maintains that the meaning and truth of beliefs are constrained by perceptual experience. Does the presupposition of nonverbal constraints, namely, perception, compromise Rorty's 'contingent starting point' of inquiry?

The truth of beliefs is constrained, among other things, by perception. But perception itself is not a static, ahistorical given in our experience. Rather, perception is contingent since it is presupposed by a background of beliefs;

it is dependent on the beliefs in a given society, at a time in history. As I showed in the first chapter, perception is affected by a background of beliefs. Background beliefs were abstracted from and thus influenced by other perceptions which were, in turn, affected by other beliefs. In other words, both conception and perception develop over a lifetime from an interchange of perceptual and conceptual experiences. In a sense, there is a bottom to this development of beliefs and perceptions. Because perception is developed over a lifetime, the first sensation felt by the fetus begins the process. But once the process has begun, the initial 'given' sensation plays no role in experience. Thus, sensation is not a foundation of knowledge in the traditional sense of the word. Sensation is not the ultimate court of appeal for determining the truth or falsity of a belief. It would be like trying to understand the ever-changing and developing fire, by considering the match which started the fire and was, subsequently, thrown away. Sensation is simply a way of understanding how perception can possibly develop; it has no role in explaining the meaning or truth of beliefs. Only 'contingent' experiences, like perceptions and beliefs, have a role in constraining truth. Although perception is, to an extent, nonlinguistical, it is still historical and contingent. Thus, the 'contingent starting point' of inquiry is not compromised by proposing perceptual constraints on

truth.

At the heart of James' motives for describing perceptual constraints on truth is his desire to emphasize the role of individual experience in determining and constituting truth. But is there a tension between the role of the individual and the role of society in matters of truth? For James, it would be a form of vicious abstractionism to speak of 'societies' or 'institutions' determining truth without reference to individuals. And, although he did not give enough emphasis to the role of society and its institutions, it would be a similar form of vicious abstractionism to talk about individuals determining or constituting truth without due reference to society. Individuals can not determine truths in a vacuum; but vague societal processes can't determine truths either. It must always be individuals in a given society or in a given social class or in an institution that must be considered in discussions of truth.

A few points must be made regarding James' emphasis on individual experience. First, this emphasis on the individual does not mean that individuals can 'make' true any belief they want. Previously, I considered the case of the bitter truth of my belief that I am a bad athlete. No matter how much I may want to believe that I am a good athlete, reality (both in terms of my actions and beliefs, as well as other people's responses) force me to accept the truth. James emphasizes the

coerciveness of both our societal beliefs and our perceptions; an individual cannot play 'fast and loose' with reality successfully. Further, the emphasis on the individual does not mean that most truths are idiosyncratic. When James describes indirect verification of beliefs, he is acknowledging the fact that the verification of most beliefs is 'borrowed' and thus truths are shared. Individuals don't have the time or ability to verify all their beliefs. People must rely on the research and expertise of others in society. Through education, mass media, and simply talking to other people, a fair amount of uniformity of beliefs is maintained in a given society. Finally, what this emphasis on the individual experience does suggest is the importance of idiosyncratic experience. One might argue that idiosyncratic experiences, if there are such experiences, have no role in constituting truth. For James, idiosyncratic experience acts as a catalyst for change in the beliefs of an individual. Further, I would argue, that such experiences act also as a catalyst for change in the beliefs of society. The mechanisms for dramatic change cannot be found in the current methods of an institution. The status quo methodology dictates not only current practise, but the direction of progress or change in institutional practise. Only the idiosyncratic experience of people inside the institution and from without can affect changes in method, and thus change the direction in which

future practises are headed. The idiosyncratic experience of scientists, religious leaders, and artists have, in the past, affected the course of change in their respective disciplines. They have influenced what truths we, as a society, have accepted. It is part of the value of James' version of pragmatism, to give an account of progress or change of beliefs in which the immediate experience of individuals is central.

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