BELIEF: A PRAGMATIC PICTURE
A PRÉCIS

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The following paper is part of an author-meets-critics session sponsored by the William James Society and delivered at the 2020 Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Philadelphia, PA. *William James Studies* is pleased to present this session for our readership's enjoyment.

I n *Belief: A Pragmatic Picture,* I defend a "pragmatic" analysis of belief. My aim in this essay is to summarize the conception of belief I advance in this work. I articulate a definition of belief; I explicate the intended concept by applying the definition to a range of cases; show how the concept can be integrated with a number of the cognitive sciences, including cognitive neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, social psychology, and the diagnosis of several psychopathologies; and describe the role played by the resulting "picture of belief" in the development of pragmatism by James, Peirce, Dewey, and the heirs to their school of thought.

I. THE PRAGMATIC DIMENSION OF "BELIEF"

The pragmatic conception of belief revolves around a definition of "belief" as the state of mind a human or other animal occupies when information is poised to guide her self-controlled, attentive actions. To believe something is to have information so poised. Since attention and control admit of degree and are heterogeneous in extension, and since information can guide some but not all of the attentive, self-controlled actions available to an agent at a given time, this definition picks out a paradigm or set of paradigms we can compare against actions for the purposes of determining whether or not their agent believes whatever information those actions manifest. I advance the definition for this purpose.

Since pragmatists do not privilege speech—or communicative action more generally—over other kinds of action in their analyses of belief, we fully acknowledge the difficulty of inferring belief from behavior. We privilege spontaneous assertion and self-report in practice if only to keep our discussions focused on our common problems rather than the degree to which people believe what they've said about these problems. Of course, people often believe what they spontaneously assert. But according to our definition, people do not believe what they've said when the information in question fails to guide most (if not all) of the extra-communicative actions to which that information is relevant.

As a further consequence of deemphasizing assertion in our analyses of belief, pragmatists posit unresolvable vagueness in the informational content of our minds or nervous systems. Consider a standard example in this literature: the dog who perks up when she hears her owner's approach and trots to the door for a greeting. We can't know whether the dog is guided by the fact that her *friend* is home or the recognizably distinct proposition that her *owner* is home, because the distinct concepts we frame with these expressions have no direct corollary within the mind of the dog. But that doesn't mark a distinction in kind between "us" and "them" because human belief is also indeterminate. To cite an important (if loaded) example: there is no fact of the matter as to which population Thomas Jefferson had in mind when he concluded, "All men are created equal." At most, we can say that human thought is more determinate than the thought of other animals. We achieved this greater determinacy together, by establishing "natural" languages. As members of a linguistic community, we each seek to explain and clarify our more automatic communicative acts and non-communicative deeds to one another. These interpretive processes fix the contents of our beliefs in the pragmatic sense at issue when (but only when) a person's self-interpretations guide her actions and she therein comes to believe (in the sense defined) what she has interpreted herself as believing all along.

But there are cases in which there is no real dispute over the information guiding an action, but there is some question as to whether the agent under review *believes* that information. Immoral and socially unacceptable forms of discrimination supply theorists with an extremely important set of examples of this phenomenon. For instance, it may be clear that a person fears black men more than white, holding all else fixed. We can imagine that the subject betrays differential aversive responses to the two parties (or pictures of the two parties), that we detect the neural correlates of greater fear toward one group in comparison to the other, that an introspectively accessible feeling of fear is more pronounced in the presence of members of one group in comparison to the other, and so on. For the purposes at hand, the parties evaluating the agent might agree that

they can adequately describe the information guiding her reactions as "a representation of black men as more dangerous than white." But despite this agreement, we may still wonder whether the content of this representation is something the agent *believes*. Mightn't she remain afraid of someone or something she knows is *not* dangerous? According to its advocates, the pragmatic definition has real utility in these cases. The question is whether the agent under review is so disposed, at the time in question, that she would have brought this representation (of black men as more dangerous than white) to bear on those tasks to which it was then relevant, were she focused on these tasks and executing them as intended. In *Belief,* I propose that "explicit racism" be identified with racist belief (so defined) and "implicit racism" be identified with racist representations that are not beliefs.[1] I leave open the question whether the kinds of representation that together constitute wholly implicit racism are sufficiently unified to warrant coining a term for them, e.g. Gendler's "a-lief."[2]

Though the pragmatic definition was not crafted with racial discrimination in mind, I have argued that pragmatism provides an attractive way of conceptualizing these cases for those of us dedicated to living in racially diverse communities in which each member regards herself as a potential friend of each other member and is therefore dedicated to doing his or her best to regard every other member with a certain basic level of respect. Explicit racism is not compatible with this attitude and consists of racist beliefs (among other things). But as I'd like to use the term, purely "implicit" racism, if there is such a thing, does not involve racist belief at all, and it *is* compatible with a commitment to mutual respect between diverse peoples. We should expect that someone who has made this commitment but has not yet achieved the outcome to which she is committed will have egalitarian beliefs alongside non-egalitarian reactions. But this does not mean that belief in the value of friendship between racially different people is easy. It requires those of us who are implicitly racist to do what we can to quash, subvert, or rid ourselves of attitudes that belie our beliefs. To satisfy the pragmatic definition of "belief," this state of

mind must guide the agent's actions when she is in full possession of herself.

The pragmatic account I defend in *Belief* includes both the first-order definition of belief described above and this avowedly pragmatic (contingent) rationale for adopting the first-order definition; and it advances a consilient scheme of psychological classification. This last bit is necessary, as the kind of conceptual holism embraced by the standard lineup of pragmatist philosophers entails that defining "belief" has ramifications for the reader's conception of perception, memory, self, and the rest. In this respect, the pragmatic account of belief generates a meta-level pragmatism. As a matter of intellectual history, pragmatism began with a "first-order" analysis of belief in "object language" terms, an account that can be easily integrated with cognitive neuroscience because it was introduced by thinkers who had that end in mind. (More on this below.) But pragmatists have come to accept, too, the conceptually distinct "second-order" claim that the pragmatic analysis is one of several "workable" definitions of "belief," each of which is "empirically adequate" in the sense at issue. And pragmatism, as I advance it in *Belief,* includes, too, a frankly normative appeal to the reader to adopt this first-order definition for the way of life it affords. Admittedly, this discursive act presupposes that adopting the pragmatic definition of "belief," and so coming to have certain beliefs about the nature of belief, is itself properly analyzed by the first-order definition in question. In other words, the reader coming to believe the pragmatic theory of belief is itself a matter of her becoming poised to use the definition of "belief" (or the conception of belief that definition affords) to guide her actions when she sufficiently attends to its relevance and exercises control over herself. Because of this consistency between the various components of the pragmatic theory, we can describe accepting the pragmatic definition of belief as adopting a "philosophy" or way of life. Thankfully, we don't have to coin a term here, as the philosophy in question already has a name: "pragmatism."

II. The History of the Definition

As a matter of intellectual history, the pragmatic approach to analyzing belief came into its own in the nineteenth century, when Alexander Bain, the founder of *Mind*, and one of the leading British psychologists and philosophers of his time, argued, in *Mental and Moral Science*, that "what we believe, we act upon."[3] It is fair to say that Bain's work on the topic of belief sparked a pragmatic revolution in psychology and the philosophy of mind that somehow lost its momentum when Bertrand Russell[4] proposed that beliefs are essentially "propositional" attitudes and Frank Ramsey[5] analyzed the attitude in question as the willingness to bet on the truth of a proposition.

To be fair, in their written work, Russell and Ramsey explicitly noted that they did not mean their analyses to apply to beliefs as a whole. For one thing, Russell allowed that some human beliefs lack propositional objects. He even countenanced detached feelings of conviction that lack content of any kind (propositional or otherwise), echoing James on this subject. For his part, Ramsey acknowledged that the other animals have beliefs in a perfectly legitimate sense of the term, and he allowed that these animal beliefs are not fruitfully described as bets on the truth of anything. But many analytic philosophers have now come to assume some form of Jerry Fodor's language of thought hypothesis, which Fodor designed to wed Carnap's equation of beliefs with sentences, with an acknowledgement of animal belief.[6] Can't we reconcile the propositional attitude analysis of belief with evolutionary psychology by allowing that the other animals "grasp" or somehow represent propositions? The main problem with the Fodorian approach is that the language of thought hypothesis is not well confirmed; it is not, as Fodor claimed, "the only game in town."[7] Many researchers have explored the idea that animals think with maps or images or schema of other kinds, and have contrasted these forms of representation with sentences. Of course, one might say that when a rat's neurology contains a map-like representation of its environment, it therein represents those propositions we would articulate to describe what that map represents. The pragmatist

simply insists that the rat doesn't "grasp" or "represent" or "believe" these propositions in any further sense than this. It is appropriate for us to use propositions to depict the rat's mind when that serves our communicative purposes, but it would be more accurate to use a map to explain how the rat in fact represents its environment. Speaking of the rat's representation as itself a propositional attitude, when it is in fact more map-like in structure, courts confusion.

Famously, Fodor did not limit his endorsement of the language of thought to the thin thesis described above. Though his arguments for the thesis were fairly *a priori* (the "only game in town"), he regarded the hypothesis as itself *a posteriori*: he posited an amodal structure, downstream from sensory perception and upstream from motor control, where tokens in the language of thought interact when we think, reason, and infer.[8] In contrast, the pragmatist does not rest the case for animal belief on the discovery of an amodal, extrasensory, pre-motor language of thought. Even if my dog thinks in images rather than words, and his thoughts are only "propositional" in the sense that we (humans) can use propositions to describe what he is thinking, still, he will regularly come to believe that I'm home and that I'm about to serve dinner.

It is well known that Descartes argued that from their communicative limitations that animals don't think at all, and equally well known that Hume belittled this position as ignorant beyond measure. It is perhaps less commonly reported that a century later, Charles Darwin leaned on a philosopher of mind—Bain—to confirm Hume's observations on animal belief. The origins of American Pragmatism in Bain's work are also less well known. But according to C.S. Peirce, it was Bain's work on belief that drew Peirce and James into agreement with the other members of Harvard's "Metaphysical Club" and thereby occasioned pragmatism as a philosophical movement. This pedigree justifies my use of "pragmatic" to describe the definition of "belief" I defend in *Belief,* and it supplies the first mark in favor of the conception on offer. Bain designed his analysis to provide a bridge between evolutionary biology, neuroscience, experimental psychology, and sociology, which are now all relatively well-regarded sciences that we

(theorists) are supposed to cross pollinate to construct a comprehensive science of cognition or mentation. As a matter of intellectual history, the pragmatic conception of belief had its genesis in this explanatory paradigm, a paradigm Peirce and James found in Bain's two major works on the mind. A paradigm which is now beyond serious question within the academy.

III. PRAGMATISM AND BEHAVIORISM

Pragmatism is not behaviorism. According to this school of thought, the actions relevant to determining what an animal believes include both its bodily movements and those mental actions it can perform when entirely paralyzed.

The use of "attention" and "control" in the analysis allows the pragmatist to distinguish between our belief-guided actions on the one hand and, on the other hand, instincts, reflexes, mere habits, mindless routines, and relatively automatic reactions. To be fair, pragmatists have all along acknowledged the fuzziness of the boundary between action and reaction. Attention can be more or less divided; and practice enables growing levels of control over an action's trajectory. There are no sharp cutoffs. While acknowledging borderline cases, the pragmatist maintains that focusing attention on a stimulus and exerting control over our responses to it are the means by which we (and the other animals) bring our beliefs to bear on our thoughts and movements as they unfold over time. In consequence, full engagement is diagnostic for belief.

When they turn to the metaphysics of mind, pragmatists assume that an animal's mind is her nervous system and that states of her mind, including her beliefs, are "more or less" states of that mind/nervous system. In fact, Bain embraced a dual aspect theory according to which psychological and neurological predicates are used to pick out differing aspects of a single biological reality. Because of this equivalence between the mental and the neurological (however rough), we can usefully define an animal's beliefs at a given time as any state of an animal's nervous system that encodes information poised to guide a sufficiently extensive

range of those attentive, self-controlled actions available to her at that time. This makes belief "natural" in several important respects: belief evolved before humans, it manifests itself in processes that can be both observed and introspected, and it has both spatial location and temporal duration.

IV. THE UTILITY OF THE DEFINITION

Given the poor track record of conceptual analyses, one might doubt whether "belief" really can be defined. But from a pragmatic perspective, this depends on how we define "definition." Though the more famous pragmatists, from Bain to Quine, rejected many aspects of the traditional Kantian distinction between analytic and synthetic truths, and for this reason rejected a classical Platonic conception of definitions, pragmatists can coherently advance, embrace, and urge the adoption of definitions when we think we can gain something good from the endeavor. The pragmatic definition of belief articulated above is offered in this spirit. It is a solution to a problem or set of problems that arise in "real" life.

But this definition of "belief" cannot achieve the desired effect without augmentation. Bain's definition is not self-standing. Instead, a definition of "belief" is just one component of a pragmatic philosophy founded in a fleshed-out theory of belief and related phenomena. The meaning of the pragmatic definition, and the shape of the theory in which it plays its part, is further specified by applying the definition to cases, which is one of the main goals I pursue in *Belief*. And because "belief" is an exceedingly general term, with an exceedingly varied extension, there are an enormous number and variety of cases to consider. "Belief" is used in academic and non-academic contexts. It is used in philosophy of mind, epistemology, philosophy of language, and philosophy of religion; it is used in psychiatry, ethology, anthropology, and cognitive neuroscience; it is used in confessionals and poems and law courts and legislative chambers. It is used to report the news, recall ancient history, predict the weather, and anticipate the financial markets. So, the conceptual "wiggle room" between non-

deviant use of the expression and the minds or brains of those it describes is close to maximal.

As I argued above, defining "belief" is compatible with a thoroughgoing semantic holism in which the meaning of the term and the meanings of the terms used to define it are neither static nor fully given to speakers in advance, even those speakers who understand these terms sufficiently well to be credited with "speaking English" in any non-ideal sense. Semantic competence is compatible with significant indeterminacy. Of course, the meaning of "belief" must have a certain level of determinacy to enable communication. When a word could mean pretty much anything in a given context, a speaker must turn to other words, symbols, intonation, and gestures to use that word to communicate her thoughts or wishes. But though words must have relatively determinate standing meanings to enable communication, communication rarely requires precise coordination in the standing meanings speakers attach to a term. So, we shouldn't be surprised to discover differences in usage among native English speakers and corresponding differences in their "intuitions" about who believes what in cases both actual and hypothetical. Semantic indeterminacy of this kind isn't inherently problematic. But we have several reasons for wanting to lend "belief" further definition.

I've already described one of these reasons: we need determinacy to analyze cases of implicit racism (and implicit cognition more generally) in the moral and legal worlds. But an epistemic ideal known as "the unity of knowledge" premises a distinct, if connected, aim. Many of us would like a unified understanding of our minds, one that unites the cognitive sciences, including contemporary biology, with the conceptualization of one another we bring to bear when we explain our words and deeds in the course of daily life and therein make claims about what we do and don't believe or think. This is a real need precisely because we use claims about what someone thought or believed when acting to regulate or condition praise and blame, punishment and reward. As Aristotle remarked, the audience pities Oedipus because Oedipus *believed* he was killing one stranger and bedding another. If the

audience conceptualized Oedipus as knowingly killing his father and bedding his mother, they would experience outrage instead. Indeed, an audience will remain scandalized to a certain extent even if Freud instructs them to locate Oedipus's knowledge of his incestuous patricide "beneath" consciousness, however "consciousness" is given spatial interpretation. The same is true outside the theatre. If Bill thought he was bombing a terrorist training camp when he bombed a mosque, that's one thing. This is especially true if Bill's mistake was non-culpable because the terrorists disguised the mosque as a training camp to provoke the tragedy. We must mourn the loss of innocent life and so must Bill, but blame directed at Bill for the tragedy would be misplaced. It is quite another thing to say that Bill knew (and so believed) he was bombing the mosque, even if we locate that knowledge "deep down" in Bill's mind.

The beliefs implicated in these morally weighty actions and reactions are commonly described as "intentions in action." They capture the agent's understanding of what she is doing when acting in the manner under judgment. But these are not the only kinds of beliefs implicated in our judgment of one another. We care about what other people believe about us, and they care about what we believe about them. We need a definition of "belief" to help us think about these socially crucial conceptions in a consistent, coherent manner.

Of course, the meaning of "science" is itself a matter of philosophical dispute. But reflection on the use of "belief" in social life makes manifest a relatively clear sense in which the nature of belief is not a matter for science alone. Because our adoption of a definition of "belief" will impact our thinking about one another, we cannot responsibly answer questions about the nature of belief without considering the consequences of those answers on our lives together. And once we start evaluating these consequences of adopting a theory of the mind, we are no longer engaged in the science of mind proper. The relevance of "belief" to our interpersonal (or inter-animal) relationships lends theorizing about

the nature of belief both its pragmatic point and extra-scientific (indeed extra-academic) character.

It is with this end of unifying the sciences of the mind with social life that the pragmatists began their attempts to define "belief." Adopting a developmental perspective, Bain observed that mammals are born in action: sucking, swallowing, rooting, and so on. But belief does not guide these initial actions until some interruption or obstacle prevents instinctive behavior from serving an animal's need for nourishment, security, and affection. Because of inevitable environmental irregularities, an animal must draw on sensorimotor memories and expectations to gain control over its initial attempts to move and feed. As these memories and expectations are representations of its past and future actions and observations, they do "reference" a time beyond that at which they occur. Memories and expectations are therefore an animal's most basic beliefs. Human minds are indeed variations on this theme.

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NOTES

[1] Zimmerman, *Belief*, 110-111.

[2] See Gendler, "Alief and Belief."

[3] Bain, *Mental and Moral Science*, 372.

[4] See Russell, *Analysis of Mind*.

[5] See Ramsey, "Truth and Probability."

[6] Fodor took a different approach, later in life, when he argued against the utility of the Darwinian approach to both biopsychology and biology more generally (see Fodor and Piattelli-Palmarini, *What Darwin Got Wrong*). But this work was sharply criticized by philosophers of biology and few analytic philosophers followed Fodor down this path.

[7] See Fodor, *Language of Thought*.

[8] See Fodor, *Language of Thought Revisited*.