JAMES, PRAGMATISM, AND THE TWO CAMBRIDGES

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William James's pragmatism described truth not as a thing waiting to be discovered but as an increasingly helpful artifact, a thing that we thinkers and believers can be said to *make* for our own purposes. He said that the human believer "engenders" true beliefs upon the experienced world as a way of managing good and bad particular experiences.[1] Those true beliefs and theories are the concrete particular items that go to compose truth in the abstract, and there is no more to truth than the true beliefs we engender. They are useful in thinking and in practical life, and because they are so useful we believers and inquirers go to the trouble of generating them and piling them up in our minds, libraries, and databases.

This idea has figured prominently in philosophical thinking about thought over the past century or so, though mostly as a target of harsh criticism. In the last couple of decades, some of that criticism has originated with Cheryl Misak, who, in her 2016 book *Cambridge Pragmatism*, carries on her campaign to show both the importance of pragmatic thinking and the absurdity of James's best known claims about truth. In her work on pragmatism and its creators, Misak has argued again and again that a plausible pragmatic understanding of truth and meaning originated in the work of C.S. Peirce, was adapted and made much less plausible by James, and has managed to survive to the present day in both plausible and implausible versions.

Cambridge Pragmatism examines underappreciated historical details of this story, evaluating the impact of late nineteenth century Cambridge, Massachusetts, pragmatism on some of the first "analytic" philosophers in early twentieth century Cambridge, England. The pragmatic picture developed in New England by James was dismissively criticized in old England by Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore, but the English philosopher Frank P. Ramsey happened to be an early Peirce scholar, and his distinctly pragmatic theories of probability and semantics later went on to influence Russell, Moore, and Wittgenstein. Thus, Misak explains, the ongoing Anglo-American analytic tradition turns out to have some pragmatic roots.

Cambridge Pragmatism patiently traces lines of influence from one Cambridge to the other, discussing celebrated and not-so-celebrated figures and ideas in both places. Not only James and

Peirce but Chauncey Wright and other members of the Metaphysical Club get a look, and the contributing Englishpersons F. C. S. Schiller, Lady Victoria Welby, and C. K. Ogden get subchapter headings. And the discussion of James and Peirce locates the origin of some of their most famous pronouncements in their less widely appreciated psychological and logical theorizing. However, Misak misrepresents James's view of truth in the story she tells, and thus she misrepresents Peirce and Ramsey when she contrasts their views with his. As it happens, Peirce and Ramsey also misread James in more or less the same way Misak does, and they thereby overlooked substantial points of agreement and disagreement with him. It is therefore especially worthwhile to try to clarify what James actually thought, since we readers may therefore also end up understanding James's fellow pragmatic thinkers better, in one way at least, than they understood themselves.

I

At the beginning of his lecture "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth," James observes that:

> When Clerk-Maxwell was a child it is written that he had a mania for having everything explained to him, and that when people put him off with vague verbal accounts of any phenomenon he would interrupt them impatiently by saying, 'Yes; but I want you to tell me the *particular* go of it!' Had his question been about truth, only a pragmatist could have told him the particular go of it.[2]

The Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell grew up uninterested in "verbal" or merely definitional explanations of the things he investigated, even though those definitions might be necessarily true. He was much less interested in *what things were,* even what they intrinsically, necessarily, or essentially were, than in the particular details of *how things worked* or *how they did what they did*. And the adult Maxwell's famous equations eventually reflected this attitude. They explained light not with an essentialist, necessary definition, but instead in terms of what happens over time as moving electrical and magnetic fields interact. That explanation, now new

and improved over a century later with quantum-mechanical updating, provides the genuinely informative account of light.

Modern science, unlike the Aristotelian natural philosophy that preceded it, does not typically aim at giving the "essences" of the things it explains. It may incidentally manage to do it; maybe the contingent occurrences observed in experiments end up telling truth seekers necessary or definitional truths about things in nature, so that physics can be their metaphysics. Maybe water is essentially or necessarily H_2O, gravity is essentially the curvature of spacetime, and light is essentially the electromagnetic waves described in Maxwell's equations.[3] But maybe not, since it seems eternally debatable what exactly counts as the essence of anything, or even whether there are any real essences. If H_3O exists deep inside the planet Neptune, is it protonated water, or is that *necessarily* false? The picture of gravity as curved spacetime conflicts with quantum mechanics, so is the quantum story *necessarily* the one that needs correcting? Are radio waves, unknown to Maxwell though also described by his equations, *essentially* invisible light, and are radio frequencies *necessarily* invisible colors? One reasonable answer to all these questions is: Who knows, and, so long as we inquirers can make our experienced world better without deciding, who cares? Essences would seem to be beside the point of empirical studies and experiments, and even if Maxwell's "particular go" does not give the essence of light itself, it helps us possessors of eyes and makers of GPS systems generate and manipulate all kinds of EM radiation, giving us lots of power over the world and ourselves. That is, those equations are tremendously *practically informative*. They help us appreciate what light can *mean to us in our lives*. And William James tried to tell a story of truth that would satisfy a Maxwell-type thinker, explaining how truth *works* in our world rather than what kind of *thing* it essentially *is.*[4]

In this pragmatic story of how truth works, true thoughts and beliefs are tools that work as parts of real life, or the actual daily struggles of intelligent individuals to survive and make the world more satisfactory—satisfactory both to themselves and to others. The true thoughts are the good tools, the ones that actually tend to provide particular thinkers and actors, and the thinkers and actors around them, with lots of satisfactions. The false ones tend to make things worse. And even the most theoretical thinking is best

understood as letting thinkers know what good or bad things they can *expect to experience* if they *act* in certain ways. This claim amounts to a challenge to theories of truth as correspondence to reality; though truth can perhaps be verbally and uninformatively defined as correspondence with, copying, or mirroring the world of real objects, it is typically more helpful, or it gets us closer to spelling out the "particular go" of truth, if we do *not* understand truth as a copy or a mirror—except, that is, to the extent that copies and mirrors are tools, too.

And, as a matter of fact, even copies and mirrors *are* tools. Artifacts like mirrors do their job not simply by resembling, matching, or corresponding to what they mirror, but instead they prepare mirror users for upcoming experiences and indicate appropriate anticipatory actions. This is *why there are* mirrors; otherwise, despite their reflecting and copying power, nobody would ever have bothered manufacturing them and putting them on dressers, car doors, and blind corners in parking garages in the first place.[5] What's more, these mirror-tools can be made out of any kind of reflective stuff, and some high tech rearview "mirrors" on new cars are video systems instead of reflective surfaces. Thus different mirror-tools do not all do the job they were made to do by virtue of sharing either a physical microstructure or any other kind of essence. Mirrors, like pencils and pens, cookies and cakes, gestures and signals, five year corporate plans, universities, and lots of other instruments or tools, share no common essence. They are what they are by virtue of what they *do* and were made to do, not what they *are* or are made of. And, likewise, truths are not what they essentially are but instead are what they do, though part of what they do in some cases may be to reflect or copy the world beyond them. (Or, we might say, the world of which they are a part.) In the end, we believers only create and care about either mirrors or truths because of the useful things they happen to do for us in our life struggles. Thus the most helpful, Maxwell-type understanding of either set of artifacts will explain their "particular go," detailing for us, their creators, how either mirrors or truths do their work and why we therefore make and hold on to them.

James's functionalistic story of truth and meaning is thus an effort to explain why we believers bother trying to believe truths and how we evidently sometimes succeed. One might think that it

therefore gives contingent psycho-historical answers to logical questions, questions that call for logically necessary definitions or analyses; but James is not trying to refute or replace logical analyses of truth, only to supplement them—with a theory that actually does the most important philosophical work. In a well known letter to Peirce, James got emotional as he scorned Bertrand Russell's idea that a logical, definitional, analytical treatment of truth could do what needed doing: "I am *a*-logical, if not illogical, and glad to be so when I find Bertie Russell trying to excogitate what true knowledge means, in the absence of any concrete universe surrounding the knower and the known. Ass!"[6] Philosophical thinking about anything, including truth, should ultimately tell us thinkers what the thing *means to us,* or why we (should) want or deplore it. No purely logical analysis of truth can do this on its own. James's pragmatism will help by pointing us toward concrete, real life circumstances in which particular true beliefs confer particular benefits or disappointments on particular thinkers or faith-havers.

II

Pragmatic concern with what matters to real life thinkers does not originate with James, of course. Misak notes that for Peirce, even a logical idea as abstract as the principle of bivalence, or the claim that any given proposition is either true or false, is more than a truth justified by abstract reasoning.[7] Instead, we particular inquirers, in the course of our actual inquiries, *hope and have faith* that, as we try to salve our irritating doubts, we will always come to satisfying conclusions one way or the other about any given belief. And indeed, after enough investigation, we may someday find that all our doubts are permanently assuaged. This hope or faith, then, having functioned as a norm telling us how we *should* think about the questions we try to answer, will have turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy. This means that if the principle of bivalence—again, a logical truth—turns out in the end to be a true or finally satisfactory thing to believe, it will have been a *product* of our real life human efforts to figure out what to think, say, and do. This true norm, if it really turns out to be true, was never just "out there" waiting to be found, existing in sublime independence of inquirers, their contingent experiences, and their active struggles for satisfaction. Its

truth is, or will be, as much a matter of what we hopers and believers have *made* as of anything we might have *found*.

The idea that inquirers make norms in hopeful pursuit of satisfactions is at the heart of the way Peirce understands not only logical but natural-scientific truth. In "The Fixation of Belief," Peirce dubs this pursuit, which James will eventually call the search for pragmatic truth, "the method of science."[8] He argues that scientific inquirers consciously aim at "realities" as they develop their beliefs, and this seems to Misak and others to entail an objective realism about truth diametrically opposed to James's desire-based relativism; ultimately, however, Peirce's "real things" matter to scientific thinkers only because pursuit of them evidently happens to yield, in the long run, the inquirers' real goal: the psychological satisfaction of stable belief. Tenacity, authority, and pure a priori reasoning, the alternatives to the scientific method, are also motivated by the desire for satisfying belief, but those methods, as it happens, fail to deliver. Eventually users of those alternative methods meet other inquirers fancifully devising and tenaciously gripping and enforcing contrary beliefs, and irritating doubts ensue on both sides. Scientific thinkers, by contrast, with their idea of objectively real things detectable from all perspectives, will develop their beliefs about those realities open-mindedly. Rather than ignoring or suppressing any beliefs other than their own, they will take account of what makes those other beliefs attractive, aspiring to come up in the end with beliefs that tend to satisfy everybody and cause nobody the pain of doubt. But their real, observable guides in this process, whether or not they know it, will be their own desires for wider satisfactoriness, not any putatively objective realities.

Peirce, following the pragmatic maxim that he introduced in "How to Make our Ideas Clear," thought of beliefs generally as habits, imperatives, or rules of behavior—we might call them norms—that inclined their holders to act in certain ways if they wanted certain experienced results. He says that "The essence of belief is the establishment of a habit, and different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise."[9] Inquirers generate scientific beliefs with the not-necessarily-conscious goal of tending to act so that they achieve an experiential psychological state—namely, the peace of mind that comes with the end of doubt. Thus, the beliefs that scientific inquirers devise may

match objective realities and they may not. It doesn't matter, since that kind of objectivity is not the real point of scientific thinking and inquiry.

This is evident, "Fixation" informs us, because if we inquirers watch ourselves as we actually investigate the world, we see that even if we tell ourselves that our goal is objective truth rather than mental satisfaction,

> … put this fancy to the test, and it proves groundless; for as soon as a firm belief is reached we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief be true or false. And it is clear that nothing out of the sphere of our knowledge can be our object, for nothing which does not affect the mind can be the motive for a mental effort.[10]

Later in life Peirce looked back at "Fixation" and pointed out approvingly that it

> assumes, for no better reason than that real inquiry cannot begin until a state of real doubt arises and ends as soon as Belief is attained, that 'a settlement of Belief,' or, in other words, a state of satisfaction, is all that Truth, or the aim of inquiry, consists in.[11]

Scientific inquirers are not trying to use their minds to relate themselves to objects as they exist independently of their minds, because that project is self-evidently absurd. Instead, scientists, and inquirers and believers generally, are actually looking for satisfactory beliefs, or habits of action that are useful because they lead us to satisfactions.

Moreover, in "Fixation," the candidate beliefs to be assessed by this conversational, consensus-seeking "method of science" include the dogmas of the Assassins who followed the Old Man of the Mountain, the economic doctrine that free trade is better than protectionism, the credos of the great religions of history, and Kepler's nested-spheres theory of the planetary orbits. Peirce will go on to blow hot and cold over the years about the usefulness of this "logical" method in thinking about "vital" religious or moral topics,[12] but here, at the dawn of pragmatism, any seeker of any kind

of truth will find that the method of science is the only effective one. And the key axiom of this "human logic," as Ramsey would come to call it, is that even in matters of deductive or inductive reasoning, we believers do and should believe the beliefs that satisfy us. Ramsey's fellow early analytic philosophers Frege and Russell, as they adapted mathematical methods of definition and analysis to deal with the abstract propositions expressed in language, sometimes gestured beyond the world of our experience to a platonic realm of transcendent, quasi-mathematical, and humanly indifferent realities and relations; but not even our logical and scientific ideals of truth hail from any such region, according to the pragmatists.[13] Instead the truth we seek will be found in our real lives of experience, especially our experiences of frustration and satisfaction.

III

This Peircean attitude toward logic, science, and truth made an impact on Ramsey, who made an impact in turn on Russell and Wittgenstein. It takes work, however, to see the "analytic" philosophy of Cambridge, England, as having originated even partly in this kind of practical and psychological storytelling. Frege and Russell famously set out not to practice any kind of psychologism but to bury all varieties of it. Frege criticized Husserl and thus branched off from "Continental" philosophy in the German idealist tradition, and both Russell and Frege criticized Mill's empiricist treatment of mathematical thought.[14]

Frege and Russell founded the analytic tradition by developing theories of logical "propositions" whose existence, relations, and truth were independent of any psychological facts about what particular thinkers ever actually believed or inferred. Russell, in 1901, offered formal propositional logic as the basis of the ultimate philosophical method. As logic-based analysis of names, descriptions, and relations proceeded, he said:

> there is every reason to hope that the near future will be as great an epoch in pure philosophy as the immediate past has been in the principles of mathematics. Great triumphs inspire great hopes; and pure thought may achieve, within our

> generation, such results as will place our time, in this respect, on a level with the greatest age of Greece.[15]

And the rules of this method were not to be found by psychological observation of the way thinkers and believers actually talked and believed; instead these logical rules would provide norms that would *correct* real life talking and thinking.

But even as the young Ramsey contributed to the development of this "analytic" method, J. M. Keynes observed his departure "from the formal and objective treatment of his immediate predecessors."[16] Misak agrees with Keynes that under the influence of Peirce, Ramsey's reaction to Russell and the Tractarian Wittgenstein was a move "towards what he himself described as a sort of pragmatism," one that distinguished "human logic" from "formal logic."[17] Human pursuit of truth was not to be understood as an effort to grasp logically connected true propositions. Instead, truth itself was to get both a deflationary analysis—"'It is true that Caesar was murdered' means no more than that Caesar was murdered"—and a psychologistic treatment in terms of belief and assertion. For Ramsey, a true belief was a "set of actions," or, ultimately, a set of dispositions or tendencies to act in various ways, that had "utility" thanks to various "objective factors" and to "experiential states" associated with those factors.[18]

A given belief or set of action-tendencies could be distinguished from other beliefs by the observable causes and effects associated with it, including behavioral effects like assertions in language. Thus beliefs, like the truth those beliefs might possess, were natural, experienced phenomena, not transcendent entities known only to pure logical reasoning. Still, despite having an observable subject matter, Ramsey's "human logic" remained normative rather than merely descriptive. An observably developed and displayed belief might turn out not to be useful in dealing with the world of real things and facts, and thus that belief might turn out not to be related in the right way to the real world and its objects. Ramsey's pragmatism thus clearly preserved the possibility of objective truth and objective falsehood—unlike the pragmatism of James. Truths for James seemed to be beliefs that we individual believers could use "satisfactorily," where that meant "more satisfactorily to our individual selves." Individual thinkers would "emphasize their

points of satisfaction differently," and so truth was "plastic" or changeable by different believers at different times and places.[19] Ramsey's understanding of truth, by contrast, featured a norm of pragmatically objective correctness.

Moreover, since Ramsey, in "Truth and Probability," introduced Bayesian probability theory into his account of inquiry, his resulting objective pragmatism, according to Misak, advanced beyond both James's and Peirce's. It identified rational degrees of confidence in hypotheses according to mathematically specifiable axioms of probability, and it thereby implicitly acknowledged that inquirers are rational to seek partial beliefs of appropriate strength rather than the full, never-to-be-overthrown beliefs that Peirce identified with truth and took to be the goal of inquiry. According to Peirce, beliefs were habits of action, and true beliefs were satisfactory dispositions that would never lead inquirers to surprises or disappointments. Misak follows Russell in taking this to mean that any doubt mixed into our beliefs would lead to paralysis. At a fork in the road without a full belief about which way to go, a person would have no guide to action and would therefore be stuck waiting for certainty to appear somehow. But while Ramsey also understands beliefs in terms of actions, he "improves on Peirce's position by turning our attention away from full belief that is or is not toppled by experience, and toward degrees of belief, emphasizing that when we are uncertain of the truth, we need to take in more evidence and keep our degrees of belief consistent."[20] Ramsey, like Peirce, understood beliefs in terms of actions, but he saw that rational inquirers are in fact Bayesian updaters who act without waiting for certainty. They risk specifiable amounts of effort, money, time, or other resources on outcomes of specified probability.

However, this contrast reflects a misreading of Peirce, who fully appreciated the role of partial, somewhat doubtful beliefs in real human life. In his picture we living inquirers are indeed looking for the ultimate set of full beliefs that will never be called into question by doubt-inducing surprises, but we often fall far short of that ideal in daily life—maybe we will forever fall short of it—and sometimes we have rigorously arrived-at scientific beliefs that we put to good practical use while still finding them partly dubious. (Beliefs about how entanglement and gravity work among subatomic particles might seem currently to fit this description.) Peirce thinks that far

from paralyzing us, our doubts irritate us and motivate us to act—specifically, to act to get rid of those doubts. According to "Fixation," again:

> "both doubt and belief have positive effects upon us, though very different ones. Belief does not make us act at once, but puts us into such a condition that we shall behave in a certain way, when the occasion arises. Doubt has not the least effect of this sort, but stimulates us to action until it is destroyed."[21]

Doubt prods us on the spot to generate new tentative beliefs or hypotheses and test them by acting and seeing whether our resulting experiences bring us satisfaction or new irritations. When we are in doubt at a fork in the road we will not starve to death like Buridan's ass between haystacks; obviously, we will instead ask a passing stranger for directions, recheck our road map or GPS, more or less randomly pick a road to go down looking for landmarks (even many non-human animals will do that much), or do any of the other things we thinking beings really do. And we can understand these tendencies to tentative action as doubt-motivated, partial, somewhat probable beliefs. We inquirers and believers generate these halting tendencies to act, and then we, if usually only informally and without doing any math, update prior probabilities as more evidence comes in. This means that Peirce's original basic story of inquiry is perfectly compatible with the idea that thinkers often can, do, and should display broadly Bayes-like rationality both in science and in ordinary life.

Peirce was aware of formal Bayesian probability theory, with its "subjectivistic" treatment of probabilities as partial beliefs; and though he rejected that theory and was a "frequentist" instead, his philosophical attitude toward the nature of probability was nevertheless compatible with using "priors" on occasion and updating them as necessary, either as a matter of informal guessing and testing or of formal hypothesizing and data crunching.[22] In this, Peirce's outlook was like that of many contemporary statistical researchers who reject or are agnostic about Bayesian subjectivism. Those researchers still sometimes put aside their *p*-values and confidence intervals and use Bayesian methods to analyze data and make statistical inferences, especially now that computers can do

the complicated calculations involved. (Some of these researchers identify themselves as "pragmatists" about probability.)[23] Likewise, though Peirce did not see the nature of probability in a Ramseyan-Bayesian way, he did appreciate the importance, in both scientific thinking and in ordinary life, of partial beliefs and degrees of belief that change with new evidence.

Thus we might say that Ramsey's more analytical Bayesian pragmatism is not a more realistic or plausible outlook than Peirce's because Peirce could approve of it. While researchers patiently pile up and deploy evidence in their efforts to cure their own and others' doubts, they can, more or less tentatively, be subjectivists or frequentists about probability, religious believers or atheists, free-traders or protectionists, and so on. Peirce's "scientific method" directs anyone who wants to end up believing the final truth to experiment with tentatively held hypotheses concerning those or any other things. We inquirers are to hold out hope for a final truth that will close all these cases; but pragmatism itself does not say before the final comparing of notes what that truth will be, even regarding interpretation of the laws of logic or the axioms of probability. It does not even promise that there actually will be a final truth.

IV

Peirce did not think that he shared this outlook with James. He understood James to take the lunatic step of defining true beliefs as whatever rules for action might happen at any given moment to provide individual believers with good consequences, so that truths for this believer this week may not be truths for the next believer next week. James's own claim that the truth is "mutable" seemed to Peirce to confirm this reading.[24] There is no normativity in this picture, no getting things really wrong or right; there are only beliefs that are relatively or subjectively "true for you" or "true for me."[25] Believers cannot really clash in disagreement as they believe different things, and so there is none of what Huw Price has called the "convenient friction" provided by the goal of objective truth.[26] Peirce thought that such conflicts among seekers of the truth were necessary motivations in the creation of true beliefs and theories.[27]

And Ramsey thought James's view of truth was "ludicrous" for this Peircean reason.[28]

Here, Ramsey explains his own un-Jamesian pragmatic view, in which even a chicken can have a pragmatically true belief if it habitually abstains from eating a certain kind of caterpillar and thereby avoids unpleasant experiences:

> The mental factors in such a belief would be parts of the chicken's behaviour, which are somehow related to the objective factors, viz. the kind of caterpillar and poisonousness. … [T]he relation between the chicken's behaviour [i.e., its belief] and the objective factors was that the actions were such as to be useful if, and only if, the caterpillars were actually poisonous."[29]

James's version of this "truth is useful, mutable belief" story mentions no relationship that could make the chicken's "mental" belief true of "objective," or not-merely-mental, poisonous caterpillars. It thus makes truth about caterpillars, ludicrously, a mental matter relative to any individual chicken benefitted by the belief.

Curiously, this was not quite Peirce's own complaint about James's pragmatism. Instead, he thought James got the role of "habit" wrong in the pragmatic story of meaning and truth. Peirce's pragmatic maxim entailed that beliefs had meaning only as rules establishing habitual expectation and action under certain circumstances; James, however, "does not restrict . . . 'meaning,' . . . as I do, to a habit, but allows . . . complex feelings, endowed with compulsiveness, to be such."[30] James seemed to Peirce to interpret beliefs in terms of particular feelings and the particular acts they actually happened to motivate, not in terms of general *habits*. This meant that *true* beliefs would be whatever action-motivating feelings happened, in individual cases, to lead individuals to other feelings of satisfaction. James seemed thus to relativize truth to individual believers and whatever happened to satisfy them in their particular cases.

However, far from relativizing truth to individuals, James identified his final goal of inquiry thus:

> The 'absolutely' true, meaning what no farther experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge. It runs on all fours with the perfectly wise man, and with the absolutely complete experience; and, if these ideals are ever realized, they will all be realized together. Meanwhile we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood.[31]

Inquirers look for beliefs that turn out to be satisfactory or useful "in the long run and on the whole of course," not just useful at any single moment for any particular believer or group of believers. That is, they are *typically* useful; they have the *tendency* to satisfy believers in the long run. James did speak of beliefs that were only "true for me" or "true for you," but, in the long run, those beliefs would turn out to be mere "half-truths" that we had only called "true" on our way to the "absolutely" true beliefs. Inquirers will find the latter only at a Peircean ideal end of inquiry.

This quasi-absolute truth is not a particular occurrent phenomenon; and, moreover, it is *we* inquirers and believers who will—or, better, would—devise this final truth if it is—or were—ever generated. Particular wants and feelings drive individual inquirers to dream up initially satisfactory beliefs, but unless those different inquirers irritate and help each other by sharing their different beliefs and experiences, no progress toward this ideal will be made. So James's final truth is clearly not something individual persons or chickens come up with entirely inside their own "mental" conditions.

V

James explicitly accepted Peirce's pragmatic maxim, which made beliefs into *general* rules for or habits of action.[32] But this means that both James and Peirce understood truth in psychological terms. Both saw the sort-of abstract, sort-of absolute truth possessed by some belief-habits as one big tendency, or habit, of those habits—namely, the habit of providing satisfactory experiences, or "verifications," to believers. James spelled this out by comparing truth with other habits or tendencies. Health, wealth, and strength are tendencies that some people have to do particular things, like

digest food well, hand over cash, and lift heavy objects as needed. Truth is, analogously, a habit or tendency of some beliefs to provide results believers like.[33] One case of good digestion or one 300-lb. dead lift does not make health or strength, and, likewise, one ocurrently satisfying belief does not make truth; but just as there is no abstract Platonic entity in which people participate and thereby become healthy or strong, neither is there one in which beliefs participate and thereby become true. Particular acts and particular resulting experiences play central roles in the ongoing creation and development of (health, wealth, strength, and) truth—which means that for James, and for Peirce as James understood him, the creation and development of truth is a contingent psychological process, one that cannot be understood using logical definitions alone.

This is neither a Platonistic nor a traditionally empiricist understanding of truth. Instead it is, we might say, a Darwinian natural history. Truth is like a successful plant or animal species that comes into existence, mutates, and evolves by natural selection. Like particular beliefs, individual conspecifics live and die by how well they do in the environment into which they are born, and the species itself grows as it adds more and more successful members. It has no existence apart from the individuals that make it up over its natural history, but it cannot be "reduced" to any number of those currently existing members. There will in the future be members of the species that do not exist now; and, moreover, abstract species do things that individual organisms do not do on their own. Sometimes they take over environmental niches, for example, exemplifying survival of the fittest by driving their ancestor species and other competitors out of existence. Analogously, individual "truths" are born as mutant beliefs that survive by providing satisfactions. Those satisfactory beliefs then multiply as believers interact, share their various truths, and then generate new generations of beliefs that are, we might say, the better adapted offspring of the old mutants. In this process abstract truth comes to be, changes, grows, and drives falsehood out of the intellectual ecosystem.

This abstract truth could not exist without individual beliefs and believers, but that obviously does not entail that whatever those believers happen to believe at any given moment is *eo ipso* true. There exists "convenient friction" because we different believers can share our different experiences of the world in support of our

different views and in criticism of (ourselves and) others. However, this is still not the story of a search for an "objective" truth now sitting external to us subjects waiting to be found. Neither does this story describe a truth relation that exists somewhere and somehow as a bridge between representations "inside" us or our minds and either abstract or particular objects "outside" us. Truth is not even a relation connecting two sets of "inner" things (like beliefs or concepts and Kantian "phenomena") or two sets of "outer" things (like representations in brains and represented distal objects). Pragmatic truth is not any kind of relation, and hence it is not a bridge across any kind of divide.

VI

The story of truth as a mysterious bridge or relation is a kind of fantasy. It appeals to a reader or hearer as the way things must fundamentally be, though it is lacking in evidence and familiar common sense details. What real, observable difference to real life would it make if that invisible truth-connection were not there? Pragmatism, by contrast, represents truth and meaning as tools inquirers use every day. It features a special kind of attention to particulars—the kind that William James's brother Henry, the novelist known as an originator of nineteenth century literary realism, conscientiously bestowed on his characters and scenarios.[34] Henry explicitly renounced romantic literary flights of imagination, and instead he anchored his fiction in familiar details of human interactions. He thereby helped his audience acknowledge and appreciate the way things really worked in their psychosocial world. And William's philosophical thought paid analogous attention to "the particular go" of truth and meaning. It showed believers and thinkers how they in fact develop their true beliefs and use them to search for ever-better ways of thinking and living. Henry acknowledged this similarity between his and his brother's work when he described himself as having "pragmatized" throughout his career as a writer of realistic fiction.[35] William James's pragmatism was also, one might say, "realistic" in this way.

Frank Ramsey, in his unfortunately short career, began to offer a picture of science, language, and truth as parts of human life rather than abstract sets of ideal procedures. He identified himself as a distinctive kind of philosophical realist because of this. In ordinary

usage, "Be realistic!" means something like, "Stop fantasizing!" Ramsey tried to display this ordinary realism in his philosophy, famously criticizing a particular approach to general statements because it did not display the "realistic spirit."[36] Misak argues that Ramsey's ordinary "realism" is the pragmatism he picked up from Peirce.[37]

However, in criticism of what he took to be Ramsey's idea that mathematical calculations were habits of thought that could be assessed empirically for how well they worked, Wittgenstein famously remarked: "Not empiricism, yet realism. That is the hardest thing. (Against Ramsey.)"[38] Empiricism is philosophy's first pass at this ordinary realism; it renounces Platonistic fantasies of certainty, or of knowledge untainted by contingent experiences and interests. However, empiricism features its own philosophical fantasies of foundational sense-certainty, and a genuinely realistic philosophical approach has to leave those behind, too. Ramsey thought his own Peircian realism did that, but Wittgenstein disagreed, and it was in trying to display an even-more-realistic spirit that he turned against not only his own earlier Tractarian idealizations of language but also Ramsey's empiricist-sounding pragmatism. [39] Going forward he would pay attention to particulars and assemble reminders concerning the way speakers really do use language—a way unsupported by any certainties at all.

William James likewise enjoins his readers to pay close attention to the way things are in their own real life practices of thought and inquiry instead of trying to impose norms or ideals from above those processes. However, if we philosophical thinkers take this advice, don't we give up the possibility of correcting and improving the ways believers actually happen to speak and think? Not at all; in real life, of course, *normative criticism and correction are part of our everyday procedures*. James's story of those procedures explains the "particular go" of those criticisms; it helps us see that when we do criticize others' beliefs—or our own—our real critical guides are neither abstract forms, phenomenal sense-data, nor extramental physical things. Whether or not any or all of those items exist, they are not the things that are, or should be, in charge of belief. Instead, believers' own irritations and satisfactions are, as James put it, the *causa existendi* first of our beliefs and then of our true beliefs.[40] They motivate us first to create ideas and then to hold on to the good

ones and weed out the bad. And those may be beliefs concerning any things we care about, including gross injustices, mathematical matrices, the gods of Homer, the dialectic of absorption and theatricality, and communities of nation-states. That is, we can come to develop absolutely true beliefs about "things" that are hard to see as "objective realities."

James's absolutely true belief does not yet exist in its final form and may never do so, and thus talk of it is understandable as a non-referring imperative to stay open-minded—very much like the Peircean-Ramseyan normative logical principle of bivalence mentioned above. Neither of these ideals is or depends on a static, unchanging truth awaiting discovery. Each is entirely compatible with the idea that truth has to be brought into existence as beliefs are forged and reshaped over and over.

CONCLUSION

Cambridge Pragmatism is valuable but significantly flawed. It is important to know that Russell's and Moore's scorn for James was not the only reaction to pragmatism in England at the dawn of analytic philosophy, but as Misak recounts this clarifying history she obscures the real philosophical value of pragmatism. Peirce and James shared the key insight that the truth about everything is best understood as no more, and no less, than a developing lot of beliefs that tend to satisfy believers; and as the old pragmatists spread this idea, they did more than pave the way for Ramsey's mathematically precise pragmatic epistemology. They also challenged the perennially troublesome idea that truth is a relation to reality, especially a reality made of things that are independent of truth seekers and their poor unstable experiences and desires. If studying paleo-pragmatism helps us see a way past this idea, we may have more to learn from it than who thought what and when.

NOTES

[1] From James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking,* 106 : "In our cognitive as well as in our active life we are creative. We *add,* both to the subject and to the predicate part of reality. The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands. Like the kingdom of heaven, it suffers human violence willingly. Man *engenders* truths upon it."

[2] James, *Pragmatism*, 95.

[3] Saul Kripke championed this kind of natural-science essentialism in much of his philosophical work. See his *Naming and Necessity*, for example, throughout.

[4] There is a longstanding debate among interpreters about what exactly James's "theory of truth" is supposed to be or to provide. That debate is summarized nicely in Capps, "The Pragmatic Theory of Truth." And an account of pragmatic truth similar to the Maxwellian one offered here is found in: Cormier, *The Truth is What Works*, esp. ch. 2; Capps, "A Pragmatic Argument for a Pragmatic Theory of Truth"; and Capps, "A Common-sense Pragmatic Theory of Truth."

[5] James makes this point, indicating the way correspondence, copying, or mirroring exists because of utility, in James, *Pragmatism*, 112-113: "I try to imagine myself as the sole reality in the world, and then to imagine what more I would 'claim' if I were allowed to. If you suggest the possibility of my claiming that a mind should come into being from out of the void inane and stand and copy me, I can indeed imagine what the copying might mean, but I can conjure up no motive. What good it would do me to be copied, or what good it would do that mind to copy me, if farther consequences are expressly and in principle ruled out as motives for the claim … I cannot fathom."

[6] Cited in Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 368.

[7] See Misak, *Cambridge Pragmatism: From Peirce and James to Ramsey and Wittgenstein*, 48-51.

[8] Peirce, *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition, Volume 3, 1872-1878*, 253-254.

[9] Peirce, Writings of Charles S. Peirce, 263-264.

[10] Peirce, Writings of Charles S. Peirce, 247-248.

[11] Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Volume 2, 1893-1913* ,449.

[12] Peirce begins his Harvard lectures by expressing regret that his talks will touch in part on what he identifies as "Topics of Vital Importance." He thinks that his methods of reasoning, including the method of belief-testing that he had called the method of science and that James came to call pragmatism, are ill-suited to those topics, which are better left to instinct and sentiment. See "Lecture One" in Peirce, *Reasoning and the Logic of Things*, esp. 108-111.

[13] Frege committed himself in his *Begriffschrift* to the objective reality of abstract mathematical objects, and Russell committed himself in his theory of definite descriptions to the supramental reality of abstract propositions. Frege, *Conceptual Notation and Related Articles*, and Russell, "On Denoting" contain the classic texts.

[14] The actual history of who was practicing psychologism and who was fighting it is, of course, more vexed than this. Kusch, *Psychologism: A Case Study in the Sociology of Philosophical Knowledge*, contains one account of the complications.

[15] Russell, *Mysticism and Logic*, 96.

[16] Keynes, *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, 338. Cited in Misak, *Cambridge Pragmatism: From Peirce and James to Ramsey and Wittgenstein* ,158-159.

[17] Misak, *Cambridge Pragmatism*,158-159.

[18] Misak, 170.

[19] James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, 35. Cited in Misak, *Cambridge Pragmatism*,4.

[20] Misak, 178-179.

[21] Peirce, *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition, Volume 3, 1872-1878*, 247.

[22] Peirce accepted the same axioms of probability as the Bayesians, and he accepted Bayes's theorem itself, which follows from those axioms and the definition of conditional probability. He would also have had no objection to "Bayesian updating" as a way of trying to approach objective probability, though he rejected the idea that a subjective "prior" of .5 can be calculated with no

sampling evidence whatsoever, and he thought that the objectively understood probability P(B|A) was in the end the best measure of what degree of belief it was rational to give to B given A. (See Burch, "If Universes Were as Plenty as Blackberries", 431-432 and 438.)

[23] See Albers *et al.,* for example.

[24] Peirce complains in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Volume 2, 1893-1913*, 450, that James's doctrine of the mutability of truth is one of the "seeds of death" for pragmatism that are promoted by younger pragmatists than he. James says that "the truths men gain about [reality] are everlastingly in process of mutation" in James *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, 107.

[25] Misak, *Cambridge Pragmatism*, 61: "[James] distinguishes himself from Peirce by taking the consequence a belief might make to a particular individual as pivotal for determining the belief's truth or falsity."

[26] See Price, "Truth as Convenient Friction", throughout.

[27] Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Volume 2, 1893-1913*, 450.

[28] Ramsey, *F. P. Ramsey: Philosophical Papers*, 91. Cited in Misak, *Cambridge Pragmatism*, 208.

[29] Ramsey, *F. P. Ramsey: Philosophical Papers,* 40; cited in Misak, *Cambridge Pragmatism* 169.

[30] Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. *Volumes 5 and 6*, *Pragmatism and Pragmaticism and Scientific Metaphysics* 494.

[31] James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, 106-107.

[32] See James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking,* 28-29.

[33] James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking,* 106: "All such qualities [as health and wealth] sink to the status of habits between their times of exercise; and similarly truth becomes a habit of certain of our ideas and beliefs in their intervals of rest from their verifying activities. But those activities are the root of the whole matter, and the condition of there being any habit to exist in the intervals."

[34] Cormier, in "Jamesian Pragmatism and Jamesian Realism," argues for the shared literary realism of the James brothers.

[35] Hocks, *Henry James and Pragmatistic Thought*, 40; cited at Cormier, "Jamesian Pragmatism and Jamesian Realism," 288.

[36] Ramsey, *F. P. Ramsey: Philosophical Papers,* 160.

[37] Misak, *Cambridge Pragmatism*, 188, 236, and elsewhere.

[38] Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, 325, part VI, §23.

[39] See Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind,* 39-72 for a version of this story that portrays Ramsey as falling short of genuine ordinary realism precisely because of his Peircean tendencies.

[40] James, *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to Pragmatism,* 146-147.

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