

## Does the Pragmatist Theory of Truth ‘Work’?

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**W**illiam James’s pragmatist theory of truth has been a controversial and often misunderstood topic (James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth” 141). Because the theory of truth is central to James’s pragmatism as a whole, rejecting it would have far-reaching implications. I will analyze James’s pragmatist theory of truth and propose an explanation of why it is generally regarded as controversial, and deemed as commonly misunderstood by pragmatists: James’s theory of truth is incoherent. In clarifying what truth is, James takes himself to have given only one account of truth (143). I will argue that James ultimately produced two distinct and incompatible accounts, one which provides congenial results in the sphere of religion, the other in science. Furthermore, I will argue that neither account has a satisfactory interpretation that makes it necessary and sufficient for truth.

### **SECTION I: The Problems of Correspondence and the Need for a Different Approach**

James commences his inquiry by accepting that the basic definition of truth is “agreement with reality” (143). He finds this definition obvious

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but unsatisfactory; by virtue of being a definition, the idea it expresses is not yet fully clear (Peirce 287). As Peirce suggests, to make our ideas thoroughly clear, an abstract definition must be operationalized and the meaning exposed, through a consideration of what practical bearings an idea could have on reality (291). Before explicating his alternative, James provides a metaphysical critique of correspondence theories, which were commonly believed and generally considered the orthodox position, by focusing on the “copy theory” (141).

The copy theory holds that an idea must copy its corresponding reality in order to be true. James objects that this thesis leads to complications because there is no satisfactory way of determining how closely an idea must copy its real counterpart for the relation between the idea and its object to be sufficient for truth (142). When one visualizes a clock on a wall, getting an accurate picture of the dial is effortless. Nevertheless, few people who are not clockmakers have an accurate understanding of the internal operations of the clock. James thinks that to concede that a complete understanding of how the clock functions is required in order to have a true idea of the clock would set an unacceptably high bar. The other alternative would be to argue that one’s idea of the clock copies its “time keeping function” (142). This would require an ontological commitment to the existence of such abstract entities as “time keeping functions” as a part of the furniture of reality, a commitment James is reluctant to make.

Other philosophers who critique correspondence theories similarly rely on the commonplace reluctance to admit abstract entities as “real.” In the domain of ethics, a plain correspondence theory forces one to accept that there are “facts” out there about what we ought to do, which our ideas somehow copy. Many consider this position unappealing since it is perplexing to conceive how external normative facts could actually exist, except in the divine mind of an omniscient God. Furthermore, this view is committed to the belief that everything which is subject to being true or false is a description, and as a consequence, plain correspondence theories like the copy theory make it very difficult to understand mathematics and logic, as we are forced to view them as descriptions of an external and intangible reality (Putnam, “Theories of Truth” 00:04:08–00:05:33). Unless one is satisfied with taking such a metaphysical position, an alternative is needed.

## SECTION II: Usefulness or the Expediency Account

James equates truth, usefulness and verifiability when he asserts that “[y]ou can say of it then either that ‘it is useful because it is true’ or that

'it is true because it is useful.' Both these phrases mean exactly the same thing, namely that here is an idea that gets fulfilled and can be verified" (143). This account is not vulnerable to the same line of criticism which was raised against the copy theory because it does not require similar ontological commitments. Nevertheless, this specific assertion has caused pragmatism much hardship by becoming strongly associated with it (James, "The Pragmatist Account" 1).<sup>1</sup> In addition, the passage above is ripe for confusion because it contains four distinct claims of dubious coherency, which James does not thoroughly clarify.

The first claim is that "true ideas are useful." Although many have argued this assertion is false, it is hardly at the root of the controversy (Haack, "The Pragmatist Theory of Truth" 237). The second claim is the converse, that "useful ideas are true," which appears plainly false. The third posits that the first two claims are equivalent. The final puzzling assertion is that, in addition to their equivalence, the first two claims both mean that an idea can be verified. If these four assertions are to be made coherent, we need a closer inspection of what exactly James could have meant by "usefulness."

The first possibility is that the term "useful" carries its ordinary meaning, that useful ideas are those which can be used for practical purposes. There have been many objections raised against James's usefulness account based on this interpretation, chiefly on the grounds that usefulness is neither necessary nor sufficient for truth (Haack 237). On the necessity side, G. E. Moore argues that in addition to some true beliefs being unuseful, other true beliefs can be "positively in the way" (Haack 237). We can imagine an example of such a belief in a reckless scuba diver who has their only tank of air malfunction and drop into the abyss while diving alone at 40 meters. Suppose that the diver had the belief: "I have a very low chance of surviving this, since my making it up to the surface on my last breath is improbable and I would have to deal with serious decompression sickness even if I did." In this case, the diver's belief would be true. But even if true, holding such a belief could prove to be disastrous because the anxiety which would follow from accepting that idea as true could easily send the diver into panic, guaranteeing their demise. Even against crushing odds, believing that one could make it to the surface and deal with decompression sickness is a superior approach because slim chances of survival are preferable to certain death, provided

<sup>1</sup>For example, the Turkish word for pragmatism is "faydacılık" which stands for "useful-ism."

one wishes to stay alive. In this instance the useful is in line with what one *ought to believe*, instead of what is *true*.

Moving to the sufficiency side of the problem, Bertrand Russell argues that James's account of truth implies that belief in the existence of an entity can be "true" even if that entity in fact does not exist ("William James's Conception of Truth" 148). As an example, Russell suggests that belief in the existence of other people may be useful, if it makes one happier. Consequently, the belief would "work" in this way, regardless of whether other people actually exist (148). If truth is "only the expedient in the way of our thinking" (James 150), it follows that this belief is true. However, Russell asserts that for someone actually troubled with solipsism, learning that the belief that other people exist is "true" in this pragmatic sense does nothing to alleviate the suffering caused by their sense of loneliness (143). In addition, when James says that "[o]n pragmatistic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true," the hypothesis being "true" in this way is not the conclusion that religion desires (Russell 143). Instead, Russell argues that the desirable conclusion would be "God exists" (143). Yet, pragmatism does not seem to be concerned with providing an answer to the ontological question. I agree with Russell that any theory of truth, which may regard belief in an entity as "true" even if that entity does not exist, must be rejected as a result of its absurdity.

Russell advances another line of criticism by arguing that if a belief's "working satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word" is in fact the meaning of truth, then the aforementioned quote from James is a mere tautology, asserting that "if the hypothesis of God works, . . . then it works" (143). He adds that if our idea of truth *was* indeed "working" in this way, then this proposition would be obvious and there would be no need to even assert it (143). Russell concludes that if James's argument about the truth of one's belief in God has any use or appeal, it is achieved through equivocation, or an "unconscious play upon words" (143). Although the word "true" is understood in an unusual way through pragmatism, the usual sense of the word creeps back in order to hint at the profitable conclusion that God exists (143).

As a way of resolving the tension between the four claims and avoiding the criticisms directed towards the usefulness account, Haack argues that the terms "useful" or "expedient" are not used in the ordinary senses of the words (237). Haack claims that "when James says that true beliefs are 'useful' he should be understood to mean that they are useful in the sense of being guaranteed against overthrow by subsequent experience" (237-38). She points out that there is textual support for this as James immediately follows his identification of truth with expedience by

the assertion that “expedient in the long run and on the whole of course; for what meets expediently all the experience in sight won’t necessarily meet all farther experience equally satisfactorily. Experience, as we know, has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas” (234). It is clear in this passage that James emphasizes the significance of a belief’s being safe from the threat of inconsistency with subsequent experience. Therefore, I will consider Haack’s interpretation as fair and proceed to critique it.

Although Haack’s interpretation strengthens the usefulness account by protecting it from criticism along the lines of Moore, it has the objectionable consequence that in certain cases, two contradictory beliefs may simultaneously be “true.” Regardless of how the precise meaning of a belief’s being “safe from overthrow by subsequent experience” is ultimately fleshed out, I think it is uncontroversial that evidence-transcendent beliefs would satisfy this condition. For instance, a belief like (P): “the world sprang into being five minutes ago, [and at no other time,] exactly as it then was, with a population that ‘remembered’ a wholly unreal past” (Russell, “Memory” 132), would be true because it cannot be overthrown by any amount of subsequent experience. This means that the same could be said of (P’), a belief identical to (P) save for claiming that the world was created seven minutes ago instead of five. It is significant to note that in addition to going against the law of non-contradiction, this consequence is incompatible with the verificationism that James simultaneously holds. Finally, this problem is not limited to (P) and (P’), but can be expanded to any pair of propositions where one affirms and the other denies a skeptical claim like the brain in a vat hypothesis.

### SECTION III: Verificationism in James

In line with the methodology and spirit of pragmatism, the verificationist account is arrived at when the pragmatic maxim is applied to the idea of truth. The pragmatic maxim asserts that one ought to “[c]onsider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (Peirce 291). Though both James and Peirce accept that truth is agreement with reality (Haack 242), James takes it further and argues that when one considers what practical bearings the idea of truth could have, they will inevitably arrive at the verification condition (James 142). Since we do not have direct access to reality “as it is,” the best we can do is verify those ideas

empirically. This implies that whatever practical bearings the idea of truth has must come from verification.

James sets verifiability as a necessary and sufficient condition for truth when he asserts that “[t]rue ideas are those that we can validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we can not” (James 142). This passage implies that (1) an idea is true if we can verify it, and (2) false if we can not. A substantial consequence is that, unless it can both be true that we can verify an idea and that we cannot, the conjunction of (1) and (2) leaves no room for a third truth value, *affirming bivalence* as a result. If this assessment is correct, then James’s view is vulnerable to numerous counterexamples. Furthermore, if we were to apply this criterion of truth to evidence-transcendent hypotheses such as (P) and (P’), provided that we cannot verify them, the hypotheses would be false. We may now see that the verificationist account is incompatible with Haack’s interpretation of the expediency account, as the two produce contradictory results in at least these cases. However, to go further, we need to disambiguate what sense of the word “can” is at play.

Haack argues that certain objections are inadequate—objections which assert that there may be true beliefs which never get verified. She explains that these objections are inadequate because James equates the truth of an idea with its *verifiability* instead of its *actually having been verified* (Haack 239). Consequently, as long as a belief is verifiable, it can be true without ever being verified (239). If by luck, I correctly guess that the card on the top of the deck is the three of spades, but no one bothers to confirm my assertion and the deck is later shuffled, my belief would be true, yet unverified. Truth as verifiability would work just fine in this instance because, although unverified, my belief was still verifiable.

Nevertheless, Putnam argues that there are such things as *unverifiable* truths (Putnam, “Is Truth an Idealization of Rational Acceptability?” 00:01:28–00:1:46). As an example, one could hold the belief that there is no extraterrestrial life in the universe; however, if this belief is true, our best physical theories suggest that we could never verify it (00:01:50–00:02:34). In cosmology, the concept of an *event horizon* divides all events into those which an observer could possibly observe and those which they will never be able to (Rindler 663). Thus, the event horizon imposes a “limit” on their relative “future observable universe,” making anything beyond their event horizon forever inaccessible (Margalef-Bentabol et al. 5–6) In light of this, if true, a belief that “there is no extraterrestrial life” would be *unverifiable*

and, therefore, this belief must be false under the verifiability account.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, since it was established that (1) and (2) taken together affirm bivalence, the verifiability account implies the following conclusion: if the belief that "there is no extraterrestrial life" is false, then "there is extraterrestrial life" must be true.<sup>3</sup> This paradoxical conclusion strongly suggests that the verifiability account of truth is erroneous; it is absurd to derive positive proof from ignorance.

#### SECTION IV: Squaring Usefulness and Verifiability

I have pointed out that when James equates truth with usefulness, he also states that usefulness simply means verifiability (143). If we take him at his word and accept that this is indeed the case, one wonders why James bothered to give a usefulness account of truth at all, considering that James's equating of truth and expediency has been vehemently objected to and gave pragmatism a poor reputation (James, "The Pragmatist Account" 1). However, I believe there is a satisfactory explanation for James's choice if the expediency account helps in an area where verificationism does not produce optimal results.

James seems to apply the expediency account to the sphere of religion. Provided that the hypothesis of God is not empirically verifiable, save through personal experience, there is no verificationist basis on which to deem someone's belief in God to be true. Since one's personal experience is necessarily a subjective phenomenon (inaccessible to other minds), it would fail to meet any objective standard of verification which may be imposed upon other beliefs. Therefore, accepting personal experience as genuine verification in this case would be unjustified. In contrast, it can be argued that belief in God "works" insofar as it is useful to the person having it and does not contradict more important beliefs. However, as Russell argues, unless it implies the existence of God, the "truth" of the belief in the existence of God in this pragmatic way is not appealing to religion either ("William James's Conception of Truth" 143). If James

<sup>2</sup>Although this particular belief is unverifiable iff there is no extraterrestrial life, a belief like "the planet most distant from Earth has life" would be unconditionally unverifiable, and the problem persists.

<sup>3</sup>I would like to remind the reader that this claim depends on my previous assessment that James's famous passage implies (1) and (2). Though the conjunction of (1) and (2) does indeed rule out the possibility of a third truth value if contradictions are not allowed, if something like "we can verify this idea" could both be true and false, this conclusion would not follow. However, attributing dialetheism to James would surely be a stretch and considerations of the resulting paraconsistent logic are beyond the scope of this paper.

made the move towards expediency to reconcile religion and science, it is difficult to say it satisfied either.

As a contrast, the verification account is congenial in the sphere of science, where there is less concern for whether a belief is true, but more so for whether it “works” (Russell 138–39). As an example, if it has been determined through verification that a certain theory in physics “works” better than previously existing theories, this is sufficient for further inquiry to operate using that theory over those which produce inferior results. Truth is not relevant in this context because the scientists need not concern themselves with whether or not there could be such a thing as an absolutely true physical description of the “laws” of the universe in order to be able to do science. Even if there were such laws that all things in the universe necessarily conformed to, the assumption that these laws ought to be comprehensible to humans would be both substantial and unjustified. If the scientist waited for a conclusive answer to this metaphysical question, they would likely be waiting for a long time. Despite verificationism’s usefulness as an operating principle in science, when applied to the nature of *truth itself*, it proves unsatisfactory.

I would like to point out that, similar to James, I have used the concept of “working” when discussing both the usefulness and the verifiability accounts. How are we to respond to the suggestion that “working” is the concept that bridges the gap between the two accounts and makes them equivalent? The proposal would be that an idea is useful if it “works,” and that we can know that it works through verification. Unfortunately, the issue is that the term “working” is ambiguous. It was understood as “the general agreeableness of the results of a hypothesis” when applied above in the case of solipsism as well as the existence of God, while it means “the conformity of these results with observed phenomena” in the context of scientific inquiry (Russell 139). “Agreeableness” is a subjective predicate which has more to do with coherence with the rest of one’s beliefs than with truth; “conformity with observed phenomena” is an objective standard, subject to empirical investigation. When one is aware of the two different senses of the word, the use of the term “working” could not be said to be bridging any gap, except by equivocation.

## SECTION V: Concluding Remarks

I have argued that James has failed to show either that the usefulness account implies the verificationist account or the converse. These two accounts are not only incompatible, but each of them are individually inadequate. The usefulness account is undoubtedly vulnerable to



devastating objections if "useful" is taken to have its ordinary meaning. Haack's attempt to redeem the usefulness account by interpreting "useful" to mean "guaranteed from overthrow by subsequent experience" fails because it affirms all evidence-transcendent hypotheses as true, which leads to contradictions since some such hypotheses are mutually exclusive. On the other hand, the verificationist account produces the opposite result in these cases because it deems all unverifiable statements false. I have argued that this is unacceptable because there may be unverifiable truths.

Though I am dissatisfied with James's account of truth, it is worth noting that there is a peculiar problem which arises for any account of truth. When one puts forward a theory of truth, if the reflexive question of "is the theory you have put forward true?" is posed, there are two possible grounds on which a positive answer may be given. The first would be to argue that "it is true according to how truth is understood in my theory," the other would be to appeal to a different account of truth. The first choice begs the question while the second is self-defeating. As a result, it appears to me that the only possible way to give a "true" account of the nature of truth involves begging the question. Though this approach is valid reasoning,<sup>4</sup> it is undesirable because it is utterly unpersuasive for those who do not already accept said theory of truth or its assumptions. The reflexive question can be raised for every statement one puts forth while weaving the theory together, which makes it apparent that the entire doctrine is built on a question-begging assumption which is, by its nature, impossible to justify. This suggests that whether one accepts James's pragmatist theory of truth or not, coming up with a theory of truth that is "true" is no easy task.

<sup>4</sup>Any argument which includes its conclusion as a premise is trivially valid since it is impossible that its premises could be true and the conclusion false.

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