“Pragmatic Theory of Truth” by William James

About the author…. William James (1842-1910) is perhaps the most widely known of the founders of pragmatism. Historically, his Principles of Psychology was the first unification of psychology as a philosophical science. As a teacher of philosophy, he was a colleague of both Josiah Royce and George Santayana. Once Royce was asked to substitute teach for James in James’ Harvard philosophy class which, at the time, happened to be studying Royce’s text. Supposedly, as Royce picked up James’ copy of his text in the lecture hall, he hesitated briefly, and then noted to the class that James had written in the margin of the day’s reading, “Damn fool!”

About the work…. In his Pragmatism,1 William James characterizes truth in terms of usefulness and acceptance. In general, on his view, truth is found by attending to the practical consequences of ideas. To say that truth is mere agreement of ideas with matters of fact, according to James, is incomplete, and to say that truth is captured by coherence is not to distinguish it from a consistent falsity. In a genuine sense, James believes we construct truth in the process of successful living in the world: truth is in

no sense absolute. Beliefs are considered to be true if and only if they are useful and can be practically applied. At one point in his works, James states, “...the ultimate test for us of what a truth means is the conduct it dictates or inspires.” Certainly, one difficulty in understanding James lies in the interpretation of his rhetorical flourishes.

From the reading...

“What, in short, is the truth’s cash-value in experiential terms?”

**Ideas of Interest from *Pragmatism***

1. In James’ view, what are three stages in the normal development of a theory? Can you think of examples of theory-development in accordance with this paradigm?

2. Explain James’ critique of the correspondence theory of truth. Is his characterization of the correspondence theory an oversimplification?

3. How does James define a true idea? Does his characterization clearly distinguish a true idea from a false idea?

4. Explain James’ thesis concerning the pragmatic theory of truth. What do the words “verification” and “validation” themselves pragmatically mean?

5. James writes that “our ideas ’agree’ with reality.” How does this description differ from the suggestion that true ideas correspond with facts?

6. Discuss whether or not there is any difference between the true and the useful for James. How is the verification process related to this interpretation of truth?

7. According to James, what are the main objections of rationalism to pragmatism? How does James answer these objections?
8. Compare the notions of the true, the right, and the good as described by James at the end of this reading selection.

The Reading Selection from
Pragmatism

[Ideas as Copies of Reality]

I fully expect to see the pragmatist view of truth run through the classic stages of a theory’s career. First, you know, a new theory is attacked as absurd; then it is admitted to be true, but obvious and insignificant; finally it is seen to be so important that its adversaries claim that they themselves discovered it. Our doctrine of truth is at present in the first of these three stages, with symptoms of the second stage having begun in certain quarters. I wish that this lecture might help it beyond the first stage in the eyes of many of you.

Truth, as any dictionary will tell you, is a property of certain of our ideas. It means their “agreement,” as falsity means their disagreement, with “reality.” Pragmatists and intellectualists both accept this definition as a matter of course. They begin to quarrel only after the question is raised as to what may precisely be meant by the term “agreement,” and what by the term “reality,” when reality is taken as something for our ideas to agree with.

In answering these questions the pragmatists are more analytic and painstaking, the intellectualists more offhand and irreflective. The popular notion is that a true idea must copy its reality. Like other popular views, this one follows the analogy of the most usual experience. Our true ideas of sensible things do indeed copy them. Shut your eyes and think of yonder clock on the wall, and you get just such a true picture or copy of its dial. But your idea of its “works” (unless you are a clock-maker) is much less of a copy, yet it passes muster, for it in no way clashes with the reality. Even tho it should shrink to the mere word “works,” that word still serves you truly; and when you speak of the “time-keeping function” of the clock, or of its spring’s “elasticity,” it is hard to see exactly what your ideas can copy.
You perceive that there is a problem here. Where our ideas cannot copy definitely their object, what does agreement with that object mean? Some idealists seem to say that they are true whenever they are what God means that we ought to think about that object. Others hold the copy-view all through, and speak as if our ideas possessed truth just in proportion as they approach to being copies of the Absolute’s eternal way of thinking.

These views, you see, invite pragmatistic discussion. But the great assumption of the intellectualists is that truth means essentially an inert static relation. When you’ve got your true idea of anything, there’s an end of the matter. You’re in possession; you know; you have fulfilled your thinking destiny. You are where you ought to be mentally; you have obeyed your categorical imperative; and nothing more need follow on that climax of your rational destiny. Epistemologically you are in stable equilibrium.

[Truth as Verification]

Pragmatism, on the other hand, asks its usual question. “Grant an idea or belief to be true,” it says, “what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone’s actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth’s cash-value in experiential terms?”

The moment pragmatism asks this question, it sees the answer: True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot. That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known-as.

This thesis is what I have to defend. The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its veri-fication. Its validity is the process of its validation.
But what do the words verification and validation themselves pragmatically mean? They again signify certain practical consequences of the verified and validated idea. It is hard to find any one phrase that characterizes these consequences better than the ordinary agreement formula—just such consequences being what we have in mind whenever we say that our ideas “agree” with reality. They lead us, namely, through the acts and other ideas which they instigate, into or up to, or towards, other parts of experience with which we feel all the while—such feeling being among our potentialities—that the original ideas remain in agreement. The connexions and transitions come to us from point to point as being progressive, harmonious, satisfactory. This function of agreeable leading is what we mean by an idea’s verification. Such an account is vague and it sounds at first quite trivial, but it has results which it will take the rest of my hour to explain.

Let me begin by reminding you of the fact that the possession of true thoughts means everywhere the possession of invaluable instruments of action; and that our duty to gain truth, so far from being a blank command from out of the blue, or a “stunt” self-imposed by our intellect, can account for itself by excellent practical reasons.

[Truth as the Useful]

The importance to human life of having true beliefs about matters of fact is a thing too notorious. We live in a world of realities that can be infinitely useful or infinitely harmful. Ideas that tell us which of them to expect count as the true ideas in all this primary sphere of verification, and the pursuit of such ideas is a primary human duty. The possession of truth, so far from being here an end in itself, is only a preliminary means towards other vital satisfactions. If I am lost in the woods and starved, and find what looks like a cow-path, it is of the utmost importance that I should think of a human habitation at the end of it, for if I do so and follow it, I save myself. The true thought is useful here because the house which is its object is useful. The practical value of true ideas is thus primarily derived from the practical importance of their objects to us. Their objects are, indeed, not important at all times. I may oil another occasion have no use for the house; and then my idea of it, however verifiable, will be practically irrelevant, and had better remain latent. Yet since almost any object may some day become temporarily important, the advantage of having a general stock of extra truths, of ideas that shall be true of merely possible situations, is obvious. We store such extra truths away in our memories,
and with the overflow we fill our books of reference. Whenever such an extra truth becomes practically relevant to one of our emergencies, it passes from cold-storage to do work in the world, and our belief in it grows active. You 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. True is the name for whatever idea starts the verification-process, useful is the name for its completed function in experience. True ideas would never have been singled out as such, would never have acquired a class-name, least of all a name suggesting value, unless they had been useful from the outset in this way.

From this simple cue pragmatism gets her general notion of truth as something essentially bound up with the way in which one moment in our experience may lead us towards other moments which it will be worthwhile to have been led to. Primarily, and on the common-sense level, the truth of a state of mind means this function of a leading that is worthwhile. When a moment in our experience, of any kind whatever, inspires us with a thought that is true, that means that sooner or later we dip by that thought’s guidance into the particulars of experience again and make advantageous connexion with them. This is a vague enough statement, but I beg you to retain it, for it is essential.

Our experience meanwhile is all shot through with regularities. One bit of it can warn us to get ready for another bit, can “Intend” or be significant of that remoter object. The object’s advent is the significance’s verification. Truth, in these cases, meaning nothing but eventual verification, is manifestly incompatible with waywardness on our part. Woe to him whose beliefs play fast and loose with the order which realities follow in his experience: they will lead him nowhere or else make false connexions.

By “realities” or “object” here, we mean either things of common sense, sensibly present, or else common-sense relations, such as dates, places, distances, kinds, activities. Following our mental image of a house along the cow-path, we actually come to see the house; we get the image’s full verification. Such simply and fully verified leadings are certainly the originals and prototypes of the truth-process. Experience offers indeed other forms of truth-process, but they are all conceivable as being primary verifications arrested, multiplied or substituted one for another.
[Unverified Truth]

Take, for instance, yonder object on the wall. You and I consider it to be a “clock,” altho no one of us has seen the hidden works that make it one. We let our notion pass for true without attempting to verify. If truths mean verification-process essentially, ought we then to call such unverified truths as this abortive? No, for they form the overwhelmingly large number of the truths we live by. Indirect as well as direct verifications pass muster. Where circumstantial evidence is sufficient, we can go without eye-witnessing. Just as we here assume Japan to exist without ever having been there, because it works to do so, everything we know conspiring with the belief, and nothing interfering, so we assume that thing to be a clock. We use it as a clock, regulating the length of our lecture by it. The verification of the assumption here means its leading to no frustration or contradiction. Verifi-ability of wheels and weights and pendulum is as good as verification. For one truth-process completed there are a million in our lives that function in this state of nascency. They turn us towards direct verification; lead us into the surroundings of the objects they envisage; and then, if everything runs on harmoniously, we are so sure that verification is possible that we omit it, and are usually justified by all that happens.

Truth lives, in fact, for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs “pass,” so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them. But this all points to direct face-to-face verifications somewhere, without which the fabric of truth collapses like a financial system with no cash-basis whatever. You accept my verification of one thing, I yours of another. We trade on each other’s truth. But beliefs verified concretely by somebody are the posts of the whole superstructure.
Another great reason—beside economy of time—for waiving complete verification in the usual business of life is that all things exist in kinds and not singly. Our world is found once for all to have that peculiarity. So that when we have once directly verified our ideas about one specimen of a kind, we consider ourselves free to apply them to other specimens without verification. A mind that habitually discerns the kind of thing before it, and acts by the law of the kind immediately, without pausing to verify, will be a “true” mind in ninety-nine out of a hundred emergencies, proved so by its conduct fitting everything it meets, and getting no refutation.

Indirectly or only potentially verifying processes may thus be true as well as full verification-processes. They work as true processes would work, give us the same advantages, and claim our recognition for the same reasons. All this on the common-sense level of matters of fact, which we are alone considering.

[Truth Is Made]

Our account of truth is an account of truths in the plural, of processes of leading, realized in rebus, and having only this quality in common, that they pay. They pay by guiding us into or towards some part of a system that dips at numerous points into sense-percepts, which we may copy mentally
or not, but with which at any rate we are now in the kind of commerce vaguely designated as verification. Truth for us is simply a collective name for verification-processes, just as health, wealth, strength, etc., are names for other processes connected with life, and also pursued because it pays to pursue them. Truth is made, just as health, wealth and strength are made, in the course of experience.

From the reading…

“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.”

Here rationalism is instantaneously up in arms against us. I can imagine a rationalist to talk as follows:

“Truth is not made,” he will say; “it absolutely obtains, being a unique relation that does not wait upon any process, but shoots straight over the head of experience, and hits its reality every time. Our belief that your thing on the wall is a clock is true already, altho no one in the whole history of the world should verify it. The bare quality of standing in that transcendent relation is what makes any thought true that possesses it, whether or not there be verification. You pragmatists put the cart before the horse in making truth’s being reside in verification-processes. These are merely signs of its being, merely our lame ways of ascertaining after the fact, which of our ideas already has possessed the wondrous quality. The quality itself is timeless, like all essences and natures. Thoughts partake of it directly, as they partake of falsity or of irrelevancy. It can’t be analyzed away into pragmatic consequences.”

The whole plausibility of this rationalist tirade is due to the fact to which we have already paid so much attention. In our world, namely abounding as it does in things of similar kinds and similarly associated, one verification serves for others of its kind, and one great use of knowing things is to be led not so much to them as to their associates, especially to human talk about them. The quality of truth, obtaining ante rem, pragmatically means, then, the fact that in such a world innumerable ideas work better by their indirect or possible than by their direct and actual verification. Truth ante rem means only verifiability, then; or else it is a case of the stock rationalist trick of treating the name of a concrete phenomenal reality as an independent prior entity, and placing it behind the reality as its
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explanation. Professor Mach quotes somewhere an epigram of Lessing’s:

Sagt Hänschen Schlau zu Vetter Fritz,
"Wie kommt es, Vetter Fritzen,
Dass grad’ die Reichsten in der Welt,
Das meiste Geld besitzen?"

Hänschen Schlau here treats the principle “wealth” as something distinct from the facts denoted by the man’s being rich. It antedates them; the facts become only a sort of secondary coincidence with the rich man’s essential nature.

In the case of “wealth” we all see the fallacy. We know that wealth is but a name for concrete processes that certain men’s lives play a part in, and not a natural excellence found in Messrs. Rockefeller and Carnegie, but not in the rest of us.

Like wealth, health also lives in rebus. It is a name for processes, as digestion, circulation, sleep, etc., that go on happily, tho in this instance we are more inclined to think of it as a principle and to say the man digests and sleeps so well because he is so healthy.

With “strength” we are, I think, more rationalistic still, and decidedly inclined to treat it as an excellence pre-existing in the man and explanatory of the herculean performances of his muscles.

With “truth” most people go over the border entirely, and treat the rationalistic account as self-evident. But really all these words in truth are exactly similar. Truth exists ante rem just as much and as little as the other things do.

From the reading...

“‘The true,’ to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as ‘the right’ is only the expedient in the way of our behaving.”

The scholastics, following Aristotle, made much of the distinction between habit and act. Health in actu means, among other things, good sleeping and digesting. But a healthy man need not always be sleeping, or al-
ways digesting, any more than a wealthy man need be always handling money or a strong man always lifting weights. All such qualities 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.

[Truth as Expedience]

“The true,” to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as “the right” is only the expedient in the way of our behaving. Expedient in almost any fashion; and 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 experiences equally satisfactorily. Experience, as we know, has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas.

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. Ptolemaic astronomy, euclidean space, aristotelian logic, scholastic metaphysics, were expedient for centuries, but human experience has boiled over those limits, and we now call these things only relatively true, or true within those borders of experience. “Absolutely” they are false; for we know that those limits were casual, and might have been transcended by past theorists just as they are by present thinkers....

[Truth as Good]

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

From the reading...

“True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot.”

“What would be better for us to believe!” This sounds very like a definition of truth. It comes very near to saying “what we ought to believe”; and in that definition none of you would find any oddity. Ought we ever not to believe what it is better for us to believe? And can we then keep the notion of what is better for us, and what is true for us, permanently apart?

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

I said just now that what is better for us to believe is true unless the belief incidentally clashes with some other vital benefit. Now in real life what vital benefits is any particular belief of ours most liable to clash with? What indeed except the vital benefits yielded by other beliefs when these prove incompatible with the first ones? In other words, the greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths. Truths have once for all this desperate instinct of self-preservation and of desire to extinguish whatever contradicts them.
Related Ideas


William James (http://www.emory.edu/EDUCATION/mfp/james.html). Professor Frank Pajares at Emery University includes letters, essays, reviews, texts, links, and other resources.

Harvard Medical School, (detail) NIH

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Can you identify any differences between James’ description of the pragmatic theory of truth as represented in this reading with C. S. Peirce’s oft-quoted statement of pragmatism? C. S. Peirce wrote:

   Consider what effects which 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.²

2. Charles Sanders Peirce. “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” in Philosophical Writings

Reading For Philosophical Inquiry: A Brief Introduction 13
2. Discuss whether or not you think James would concur with Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous statement on truth:

   Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live. The value for life is ultimately decisive.¹

3. Compare Emerson’s epistemological pragmatism as shown in the following quotation with James’ characterization of the “absolutely” true as “that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge”:

   We live in a system of approximations. Every end is prospective of some other end, which is also temporary; a round and final success nowhere. We are encamped in nature, not domesticated.⁴

4. James writes:

   I said just now that what is better for us to believe is true unless the belief incidentally clashes with some other vital benefit. . . . In other words, the greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths.

Discuss whether this concession to the coherence theory of truth requires that pragmatism is merely the free play inherent in the practical, circumstantial application of the coherence theory of truth.

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