

MEANING AND PRAGMATISM

JAMES ON THE PRAGMATIC CONSEQUENCES OF BELIEF

(DRAFT – May 2008)

Henrik Rydenfelt

University of Helsinki

Abstract

In the third lecture of his 1907 *Pragmatism*, William James famously presented his pragmatic theory of meaning by posing the simple question “what difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true?” James’s pragmatic method of clarifying the meaning of conceptions was simply to trace what he called their respective “practical consequences.” However, already in 1908, Arthur O. Lovejoy proposed that James confounds two incongruent criteria of the meaningfulness of propositions. According to the first criterion, a proposition is meaningful if it refers to or predicts future experiences regardless of whether the proposition is believed or not; according to the second, a proposition is meaningful if *belief* in that proposition results in some experiences on the part of the believer, despite the fact no predications by way of future experiences can be deduced from its truth. Many sympathetic commentators have since held that there is a duality inherent to James's pragmatism about meaning. Consequently, James has often been regarded as allowing for merely subjective emotions and interests to play a role in the pragmatist determination of not only the meaning but the truth of the proposition. I argue that Lovejoy’s objection is mistaken in its main claim. The two criteria Lovejoy separates are not inconsistent; rather, by pragmatist lights, they are inseparably related. If a proposition has meaning in the light of the first criterion, it is meaningful by the second, and vice versa.

I

In “What Pragmatism Means” William James distinguishes two different but interrelated strands of pragmatism: a theory of meaning and a theory of truth. In the following, I will concentrate on pragmatism in the first sense of the term, as a theory of meaning, although my considerations will have practical bearings on our interpretation of James’s pragmatic theory of truth.

The central idea of James’s pragmatist theory of meaning – or the “pragmatic method” as he calls it – is entailed in James’s famous question: “What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true?”¹ Pragmatism, of course, needs to begin by investigating our initial understanding of and antecedent definitions given to a concept or conception.² However, no mere “word or name” can ultimately solve the question about the meaning of our conceptions. To find out what our conceptions mean, we need to “trace [their] respective practical consequences”.³ If, despite differing verbal expressions, two conceptions or theories result in the same practical effects, they are one and the same conception differently formulated. And if no practical bearings can be traced, the conception is meaningless.

James’s discussion on and applications of the pragmatic method have proved to often invite questions of what exactly is meant by the central concept of “practical consequences”. To clarify what pragmatism really means, James’s interpreters have often drawn from James’s subsequent lectures in the same volume. And indeed, the question of the meaning of pragmatism is not limited to the second lecture: as the pragmatic method is used to clarify a wide range of philosophical debates, it is, in a sense, simultaneously applied to pragmatism itself.

However, looking at James’s particular applications of the pragmatist method has led to a large variety of views and even some confusion about how James understood the central concept of “practical consequences”. In what follows, I will first discuss an objection to James’s pragmatism raised by Arthur O. Lovejoy – a criticism upheld in one way or another by several commentators during the past decades. Secondly, in an attempt to show that Lovejoy’s

¹ James 1907, ch 2.

² It is often forgot by commentators that the pragmatic method can only be applied to conceptions which we are already somewhat familiar with and to which we can give a verbal definition of some sort. Peirce makes this point already in his “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”: according to him, the pragmatist clarification is devised to attain a “third grade of clearness” about a concept or conception (Peirce 1878, 106). For a somewhat contrary reading of James, see Giuffreda and Madden (1978).

³ James 1907, ch 2.

objection is based on a mistaken view of James's pragmatism, I will draw from James's formulations of his position in "What Pragmatism Means". Thirdly, to conclude this discussion, I will briefly consider the reasons that have given rise to Lovejoy's problematic position and made that position attractive for other interpreters.

II

A century ago, in January of 1908, Arthur O. Lovejoy published his article "The Thirteen Pragmatists". As is familiar, Lovejoy discerns altogether thirteen different philosophical positions all of which have at one point or another been labelled pragmatism by that date.⁴ The most central distinction Lovejoy makes, however, is between two ways of understanding James's pragmatist theory of meaning. Lovejoy argues that James's pragmatism is plagued with confusion between two completely different ideas of the central concept of "practical consequences", and, consequently, two completely distinct criteria of meaning.

According to Lovejoy's first criterion, a proposition is meaningful if it refers to *future experiences* that will be experienced, by someone, regardless of whether that proposition is *believed or not*.⁵ Thus, a proposition has "practical bearings" if experiential predictions of some kind can be deduced from its being true. However, according to Lovejoy's second criterion, a proposition is meaningful if *belief in* that proposition will lead to some experiences. For a proposition to be meaningful, it suffices that it leads to "emotional or other" experiences when believed, no matter if any predictions about future experiences can be deduced from its truth.⁶ Further, Lovejoy is pleased with neither of these criteria: he holds that the first criterion is too limiting and "positivistic", while the second criterion is "so inclusive a doctrine that it can deny real meaning to no proposition whatever which any human being has ever cared enough about to believe".⁷

Several considerations lend support to Lovejoy's view. Firstly, James's other presentations of his pragmatist theory of meaning might be seen to suggest there is a duality of some sort embedded in his view. For example, in Baldwin's *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* James defined pragmatism as

⁴ In the same month, Lovejoy also published another article titled "Pragmatism and Theology", in which the same distinction is presented (Lovejoy 1908b).

⁵ , Lovejoy systematically refers to the bearers of meaning and truth as "propositions". James uses a far wider terminology: in his texts, "ideas", "concepts", "conceptions", "notions", and "hypotheses" can be meaningful or true.

⁶ Lovejoy 1908a, 8; cf. Lovejoy 1908b, 130–131.

⁷ Lovejoy 1908a, 9; Meyers 1971, 371.

“The doctrine that the whole ‘meaning’ of a conception expresses itself in its practical consequences either in the shape of conduct to be recommended, or in that of experiences to be expected, if the conception be true; [...]” (*Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* II, 321).

The either/or distinction James here draws might be interpreted as an endorsement of the view that some conceptions may be meaningful although they do not postulate anything about future experience.

Secondly, in some perhaps a bit carelessly formulated passages James seems to ascribe pragmatic meaning to such conceptions that he himself holds entail no experiential predictions. One important example is in “Pragmatism and Religion”, the concluding lecture of *Pragmatism*, where James discusses the concept of Absolute. James first formulates his pragmatism in a rather allowing form, stating that “[o]n pragmatic principles we cannot reject any hypothesis if consequences useful to life flow from it”. Almost immediately after this, he points out that the concept of Absolute – like the Atman of Vivekananda – is, in James’s words, “indeed not a scientific use, for we can make no particular deductions from it”, and “emotional and spiritual altogether”.⁸ Still, he seems to hold that the concept of Absolute meets the pragmatist criteria of concepts with “practical consequences”.

Thirdly, and most importantly, James himself acknowledged the validity on Lovejoy’s criticism. Prior to the publication of his article, Lovejoy had sent James a lengthy letter explicating his doubts about the tenability of pragmatism. In his reply, admits that “[c]onsequences of true ideas *per se*, and consequences of ideas *qua believed* by us, are logically different consequences, [...]”.⁹ Because of such considerations, Lovejoy’s distinction has managed to stay alive in discussions on James’s pragmatism for the past century, and James has been held suspect of oscillating between two different conceptions of meaning. Lovejoy’s distinction has even been applied in explicating differences between the different forms of pragmatism advanced by Peirce, James and their followers.¹⁰

III

⁸ James 1907, ch 2.

⁹ James to Lovejoy, September 13, 1907 (CWJ XI, 444).

¹⁰ Lovejoys’s distinction has been upheld by at least Paul Henle (1951) and Robert Meyers (1971). Only Giuffreda ja Madden (1978, 24) have criticised this distinction in passing. When elucidating the differences between Peirce and James, Cornelis de Waal (2004, 28) has suggested that Peirce approves of the first criterion only while James accepts both criteria.

But is Lovejoy right? The distinction he draws depends on the thesis that there indeed are propositions or beliefs that can be held meaningful in light of only *one* of the criteria he discerns. This possibility, however, does not seem to follow from James's formulations of his pragmatism. Instead of looking at particular examples of James's applications of his pragmatism, let us recur to the text of "What Pragmatism Means". Consider this central passage in the second lecture:

Mr. Peirce, after pointing out that our beliefs are really rules for action, said that, to develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance. And the tangible fact at the root of all our thought-distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve - what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all.¹¹

Here, three points of considerable importance evince. Firstly, James adheres to the conception – prominently maintained by Peirce – that beliefs are habits or rules of action.¹² To believe a belief is to conduct oneself in some manner in some conceivable circumstances. Secondly, James approves of Peirce's view that the meaning of a conception is to be traced by an investigation into the *conduct* that the conception would result in *if believed*. Thirdly, and most importantly, James, like Peirce, connects the conduct resulting from believing a belief to the experiential consequences that are expected if the belief is true.¹³

In this manner, beliefs considered as habits of action connect the philosophical conceptions James discusses to expectations of what will occur in experience. In James's

¹¹ James 1907, ch 2.

¹² James 1897, 4–5. This idea is, of course, present already in James's psychological work in the 1880's and 1890's, especially in the *Principles of Psychology* (1890, esp. ch. xxi). James also begins his "Will to Believe" (1897) with the thesis that belief is measured by willingness to act. For discussion on the concept of habit and its centrality to Peirce's pragmatism, cf. Houser (1998) and Pietarinen & Snellman (2006).

¹³ In his earlier paper "Humanism and Truth" (1904, reprinted in *The Meaning of Truth*) James had formulated Peirce's "pragmatic maxim" differently: "The serious meaning of a concept, says Mr. Peirce, lies in the concrete difference to someone which its being true will make" (James 1909, 37). James's choice of wording was subsequently criticised by Peirce in a letter of December 6, 1904 (CWJ X, 511–512), and this probably had led James to consult again Peirce's original utterance of the maxim.

words, the “conceivable effects of practical kind” of an object of thought are the “sensations we are to expect from it” and the “reactions we must prepare”.¹⁴ As James rephrases this point later in his lecture, there is “no difference in abstract truth that doesn’t express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere and somewhen”.¹⁵ Of course, by the conduct *consequent* upon the fact James does not refer to conduct that is (necessarily) *temporally* follows from the fact. What James has in mind is our adjustments of conduct so that our actions *anticipate* these differences “in concrete fact”, taking other background beliefs and purposes into account. Thus, via the consideration of how a belief, *if believed*, would change our conduct in different circumstances, we ultimately arrive at the experiences that this conduct anticipates – such experiences that would follow if the proposition be true.

It has, however, seemed plausible to some of James’s readers that our conceptions may have some sort of practical consequences of an “emotional” kind despite the fact they do not entail any reference to anything that may be expected to occur in experience, emotional or otherwise. Of course, our expressions of our beliefs may differ in the emotional reactions to which they give rise: differing expressions of one and the same belief by, say, a scientist and a poet may lead to entirely different aesthetic and emotional reactions. But such emotional adjustments are not part of the meaning of the beliefs expressed. For example, someone might find a string of symbols used in formulae of predicate logic aesthetically pleasurable. Although he may or may not know predicate logic, his aesthetic appreciation of the symbols has nothing to do with the propositions they express: the “emotional” consequences in question are akin to those that may ensue of listening to a piece of music.¹⁶

Admittedly, James might at times be inclined to include such aesthetic appreciations in his wide conception of “practical effects”. However, there is little to suggest that he confuses the meaning of beliefs with the qualities and emotional impact of their *expressions*. While a forceful manner of putting a belief in words may even induce us to believe some beliefs we otherwise would not, our conduct consequent upon this belief in no way depends on the aesthetic qualities of its expressions.

¹⁴ James 1907, ch 2.

¹⁵ James 1907, ch 2.

¹⁶ Peirce, who was typically more precise in such matters, differentiated between three kinds of interpretants to which a sign may give rise in the interpreter. The feeling which the sign arises is labelled, by Peirce, as the *emotional* interpretant; pragmatism in its turn is concerned with the *logical* interpretant, the ultimate form of which is a habit of action. (Peirce 1907, 409–414.) Cf. Short (2007, ch. 7) for a lucid discussion on different types of interpretants.

From these qualifications, severe problems follow for Lovejoy's distinction. Firstly, as beliefs are defined as habits of action, every belief affects the conduct of its believer at least in some (conceivable) circumstances. Secondly, believing a belief always entails experiential expectations of what would happen under some conceivable conditions. If no such predictions could be made, believing the belief would not result in any change of conduct. For these reasons, the two criteria collapse to one: a belief is meaningful in light of the first criterion if and only if it is meaningful according to the second.

Of course, as James himself concedes in his letter to Lovejoy, our expectations of what would occur in experience if a certain proposition is true are "logically different" from how we would alter our conduct if we believed that same proposition to be true. However, these two types of "consequences" or "practical effects" are intimately connected: our conduct is altered because, believing the belief, we expect something to occur in some circumstances. From the pragmatist definition of belief it also follows that every *genuine* belief *is* meaningful: otherwise it would not alter our conduct and, thus, be a belief at all.

To elucidate this point, an example drawn from Robert G. Meyers might be helpful. Meyers accepts Lovejoy's distinction, and his example is meant to show that Lovejoy's two criteria are incongruous – exactly the thesis I have argued against. According to Meyers, believing the belief "gremlins exist" might bring someone "a feeling of comfort and ease". Because of this, the belief would be meaningful according to Lovejoy's second criterion. However, according to Meyers, the belief "gremlins exist" is all the while a proposition which allows of no predictions that could be verified in experience. Thus, the belief about gremlins is meaningless in the light of Lovejoy's first criterion.¹⁷

Examples such as this are, however, deceitfully devised. While the very idea of gremlins is undoubtedly unclear for the most of us, it is still mysteriously maintained that *belief in* that proposition leads to some practical consequences in the life of someone who believes that proposition. The question the pragmatist should pose is this: why, if nothing whatsoever can in any conceivable situation follow from the truth of "gremlins exist", should anyone's conduct or emotional life be altered or transformed by believing that "gremlins exist"?

It is only when some definitional meaning is added to the idea of gremlins that the proposition will turn meaningful in light of *either* of the criteria. By looking up "gremlins" from Wikipedia, we will find out that the creatures in question are especially interested in hiding in airplanes and sabotaging their engines so that the planes will eventually crash. Now, if we

¹⁷

Meyers 1971, 330–331.

believe in the existence of such mischievous beings, we are likely to take measures to insure none of them will sneak on our airplanes – and why else would we conduct ourselves so other than for the reason that having gremlins accompany us on our flights could lead to some rather unpleasant experiences.

IV

If James's conception of meaning is not at all incoherent, why, then, has there been so much confusion around his discussions on the meaning of philosophical conceptions? In my view, there are two main reasons for this state of affairs. Firstly, James is seldom prepared to abandon any philosophical conceptions as meaningless, but, rather, interested in investigation into the practical kernel of *any* philosophical debate. For this reason, James's pragmatist project is *reconstructive* rather than deconstructive: he aims at redefining old conceptions by searching for any conceivable practical applications they could have.¹⁸ To imitate the subtitle of James's book, it is often his task to find "new meanings for some old ways of thinking".

Secondly, some of our beliefs seem quite clearly to have bearings upon our conduct, but it may still be notoriously difficult to make sense of the experiential expectations involved. This is especially true in the case of religious belief – such beliefs that are most central to James's philosophy. It is apparently for this reason that James often contents himself with discussing the difference in conduct that ensues of religious belief, leaving the question about experiential expectations somewhat open. Still, in his clearest formulations of his view of the nature of such beliefs, James holds that also the "religious hypothesis" must postulate something by way of experience.¹⁹ In the *Varieties*, he contends – and in effect formulates the essence of his pragmatic maxim – that "[The world interpreted religiously] must be such that different events can be expected in it, different conduct must be required".²⁰

A good example of both James's reconstructive ambitions and his ambiguity about "practical consequences" is the discussion on the notion of substance in the third lecture of *Pragmatism*. While James denounces most uses of this philosophical notion, he holds that in the case of "the mystery of the Eucharist", the concept of substance "would appear to have

¹⁸ This view has been consistently advanced by Sami Pihlström (cf. Pihlström 2008, esp. ch. 3 & 5).

¹⁹ The most classical of James's interpreters, Ralph Barton Perry warns us of confusing James's pragmatism and "will to believe", referring to the latter as James's "fideism" (Perry 1958, 71; cf. Perry 1935, 450). But while differentiating between these two Jamesian positions is certainly in order, it does not follow that religious belief acquires any special position: for a religious belief to be meaningful, some "practical consequences" must follow from it.

²⁰ James 1902, 408. A similar view was proposed by James in his first "pragmatist" essay, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results" (1898).

momentous pragmatic value”. Although the “immediate sensible properties” of the bread are in no way differ from the usual, it is not mere bread that is being consumed at the Eucharist; the participant “feed[s] upon the very substance of divinity”.²¹ Here, as elsewhere in his work, James reinterprets the notion at hand with a view on the role the concept has played in the beliefs and practices of those who have entertained it. Still, he refrains from explicating the expectations of future experiences the consummation of the Eucharist entails to those involved.²²

Because of James’s sometimes confusing and diversely interpretable applications of his pragmatist conception of meaning, Lovejoy’s criticism is helpful in clarifying our ideas about James’s pragmatism. Lovejoy does fail in showing that for James, pragmatism as a theory of meaning means two different things. James does not maintain two distinct criteria of meaning: what Lovejoy imagines as two separate types of “practical consequences” are connected with one another. However, Lovejoy’s criticism brings to the fore the fact many of James’s applications of the pragmatic method have been insufficiently detailed. It is perhaps for this reason that, in his letter to Lovejoy, James remarks that “[...] the whole ‘will to believe’ business has got to be re-edited with explicit uses made of the distinction”.²³ The task of the Jamesian pragmatist is to find out not only how philosophical conceptions, assumed as beliefs, would influence our conduct, but also to investigate the practical bearings of these conceptions in what we may expect to occur in experience.

References

GIUFFREDA, Robert & MADDEN, Edward H. James on Meaning and Significance. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 12:1, 18–36, 1975.

HENLE, Paul. Introduction on William James. *Classical American Philosophers*, ed.

²¹ James 1907, ch 3.

²² Peirce takes up the question of transubstantiation as an example in his “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”, renouncing the idea that the theological “talk of something as having all the sensible characters of wine, yet being in reality blood, is senseless jargon” (Peirce 1878, 108). Although Peirce’s and James’s view might at first glance seem diametrically opposite, this is not necessarily the case. While James seems to be addressing the whole concept of the Eucharist, Peirce is interested in the question whether the difference between a Catholic view (which includes transubstantiation) and a Protestant view (which doesn’t include transubstantiation) of the sacrament is merely verbal, concluding that it is “foolish for Catholics and Protestants to fancy themselves in disagreement about the elements of the sacrament, if they agree in regard to all their sensible effects, here and *hereafter*” (Peirce 1878, 109, emphasis added).

²³ James to Lovejoy, September 13, 1907 (CWJ XI, 444).

Max H. Fisch. Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, 1951.

HOUSER, Nathan. Introduction. *The Essential Peirce Vol. 2*, ed. by the Peirce Edition Project. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.

JAMES, William. *The Will to Believe*. Ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, & Fredson Bowers & Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1897.

JAMES, William. Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results. Reprinted as “The Pragmatic Method”. In: *Essays in Philosophy*. Ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, & Fredson Bowers & Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1898.

JAMES, William. *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, & Fredson Bowers & Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1902.

JAMES, William. *Pragmatism*. Ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, & Fredson Bowers & Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1907.

JAMES, William. *The Meaning of Truth*. Ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, & Fredson Bowers & Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1909.

JAMES, William. *Correspondence of William James*. Ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis & Elizabeth M. Berkeley. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia. (Cited as CWJ.)

LOVEJOY, Arthur O. The Thirteen Pragmatisms I–II. *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, 5:1, 5–12; 5:2, 29–39, 1908a.

LOVEJOY, Arthur O. Pragmatism and Theology. *The American Journal of Theology*, 12:1, 116–143, 1908b.

MEYERS, Robert G. Meaning and Metaphysics in James. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 31:3, 369–380, 1971.

PEIRCE, Charles Sanders. How to Make Our Ideas Clear. In: *The Essential Peirce Vol. 1*. Ed. by Christian Kloesel & Nathan Houser. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.

PEIRCE, Charles Sanders. Pragmatism (MS 318). In: *The Essential Peirce Vol. 2*. Ed. by the Peirce Edition Project. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1907.

PERRY, Ralph Barton. *The Thought and Character of William James*. New York: Little, Brown, and Co, 1935.

PERRY, Ralph Barton. *In the Spirit of William James*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958.

PIETARINEN, Ahti-Veikko & SNELLMAN, Lauri. On Peirce's Late Proof of Pragmatism. In: *Truth and Games. Essays in Honor of Gabriel Sandu*. Ed. by Tuomo Aho & Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen. Helsinki: Acta Philosophical Fennica, 2006.

PIHLSTRÖM, Sami. "The Trail of the Human Serpent Is Over Everything". *Jamesian Perspectives on Mind, World, and Religion*. Lanham: University Press of America, 2008.

SHORT, T.L. *Peirce's Theory of Signs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

DE WAAL, Cornelis. *On Pragmatism*. Belmont: Wadsworth., 2004.