

Chapter 1

Meaning and Truth



Pragmatism

William James described *pragmatism* as a method of approaching meaning and truth that would overcome the split between scientific and religious thinking. Scientific and religious thought had developed in isolation from each other and each resides in a particular temperament. James called the scientific approach “tough-minded” and pointed out that its adherents tend to be empiricist, determinist, materialist, and pessimistic. The “tender-minded” personality tends to be idealist, believes in free will and the reality of spiritual beings, and has an optimistic outlook. James did not assert that truth depends on temperament but that the kind of proposition that a person more likely *accepts* as true, depends on temperament. The pragmatic method was intended to bridge the gap between the tough- and tender-minded by discerning the meaning and truth-value of any proposition regardless of the temperament of the person who advocates it.

James attributed the origin of pragmatism to his friend, Charles Sanders Peirce. In his essay, “How to Make our Ideas Clear,” Peirce’s starting point was a critique of Rene Descartes. Peirce charged that Descartes offered clarity as the criterion for true ideas, but he did not explain what constitutes a clear idea, or prescribe how we can make our ideas clear. As the title of Peirce’s essay implies, he hoped to remedy the omission he found in Descartes. Peirce suggested that in beginning philosophy, we should dismiss “make-believe” methods such as Descartes’ methodic doubt. Instead, there is only one place from which we can begin, namely, the place in which we find ourselves when we begin. If we look at our minds at any moment, we find two kinds of thoughts, beliefs and doubts. A doubt identifies a state of mind in

which we need to ask a question. A belief is a state of mind in which we can make a statement. Doubt involves uneasiness due to a lack of a rule to determine our action. We do not know what to do aside from clearing up the doubt by finding an answer to the question. We clear up the doubt by "fixing," that is, establishing a belief. A belief is a rule of action. When we have a belief, we know what we would do, given the proper circumstances. We act on our beliefs; otherwise they are not really beliefs. The fundamental principle of pragmatism teaches that we can truly say that we believe a proposition only if we are willing to act on it. The meaning of any belief is precisely the kind of action to which it leads. We make an idea clear therefore, by identifying the action that we would perform if we believe the idea, and the result that would follow if the idea is true.

William James developed pragmatism into a method for determining the meaning and testing the truth of any proposition. Pragmatism means the belief that the whole meaning of any proposition shows itself in the difference that results if the proposition holds true. If anyone asserts anything whatsoever, the pragmatist asks, "So what? What difference will it make in anyone's life if the proposition is true?" That difference constitutes the whole meaning of the proposition. If believing the proposition makes no difference, the proposition is meaningless. When a dispute breaks out the pragmatist asks, "What difference will it make if this or that position stands as the correct one?" If no difference results, the dispute is merely verbal.

According to the pragmatic theory of meaning, ideas are a way to adapt to the environment, that is, to solve problems. The human mind develops abstract concepts that substitute for perceptions and images. The formation of concepts enables us to apply the experience of the past to a wide range of problems and to anticipate problems that have not yet appeared. We have many concepts that we never actually use to solve problems. Just as nature provides an extravagant number of organisms, so human nature extravagantly allows for a large number of concepts that each person is able to master. Nature exhibits, as an operating principle, that in order to assure a sufficient supply of anything we have to have an overabundance. So although many of our concepts are not actually useful to us, concepts as a whole have a practical purpose.

James developed his theory of meaning into a theory of truth. The only things that can be called true or false are beliefs. Reality is not true; it simply is. A belief holds true if it agrees with reality. This formula sounds like the traditional correspondence theory of truth. But James carries it further by asking what it means for an idea to correspond to reality. Sometimes it could mean to copy, as, for example, when I have a mental picture of my wife that corresponds to what she really looks like. When I meet her, for instance, at an airport I recognize her. But most of the time our concepts do not copy reality. For example, our concepts of chemistry or economics are not copies.

We can make true statements about molecular models or supply and demand curves without imagining that they copy the physical or economic world.

What does it mean, then, to say that our concepts correspond to reality? They correspond if they lead us to a satisfactory relationship with reality. Truth is a *leading*. James provides an anecdote to illustrate the meaning of truth as a leading. A lone hiker in the mountains gets lost and feels tired, cold, hungry, and scared. But then he discovers a path, sees evidence of cows, and concludes that he has come upon a cow path and at the end of it he will find a farmhouse. He follows the path to safety. His idea of the cow path validates itself as true because it leads him to where he thought it would. James sees this incident as a prototype of a true idea because all true ideas lead to what we expect. Any false idea will lead us astray or at least to some unexpected aspect of reality. The ideas of the physicist or chemist, for example, hold true to the extent that they enable the scientist to predict or manipulate reality. We evaluate our common sense ideas in the same way. For example, if we take the ideas by which we find our way around a city or plan a career, they hold true to the extent that they lead us to where we want to go.

While not every belief demonstrates this theory of truth as clearly as the cow path, James holds that all of our beliefs, common sense, scientific, ethical, metaphysical, or religious, have their basis ultimately on this verification process. Although most of our beliefs will never be personally *verified*, they hold true in that they are *verifiable*. A hiker who is not lost may come upon the cow path and not follow it. Yet he believes truly that a house stands at the end of it. This belief is not useful at the time, but could be useful in a future emergency. To say that a belief holds true means that it could lead to an actual verification whether it has in fact done so or not.

The definition of truth, which was developed for the sensible order, also applies to the ideal order. James considered mental relations such as mathematical systems to be real. Just as true ideas of facts can lead us successfully through concrete reality, so true ideas of principles can lead us through abstract reality. False ideas in the abstract order will fail just as false ideas in the perceptual order will fail. In each case, false ideas lead to inconsistency and frustration. As James sums up the importance of truth in the ideal order, "We can no more play fast and loose with these abstract relations than we can with our sense experience. They coerce us: we must treat them consistently whether or not we like the results" (*Prag*, 101).

Radical Empiricism

James's pragmatic theory of meaning and truth was supplemented by his theory of "radical empiricism," which not only clarified some issues regarding our understanding, but also provided content for his view of reality. In the

language of philosophy, he not only clarified some epistemological issues, but also provided metaphysical content as well. James was an empiricist through and through and rejected the notion that we can begin philosophy with abstract concepts. All of our knowledge comes to us in the stream of experience that flows continuously. In our concepts, we break the stream into pieces and freeze it as we do when we take photographic snap-shots of an action scene. A concept consists of a static and discrete bit of mental consciousness that intends to represent a part of the continuous stream of consciousness. For example, such simple concepts as “lake” or “forest” represent tremendous moving streams teeming with life.

James’s radical empiricism differs from the traditional empiricism of John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume because these British philosophers thought that the basic experience consists of a simple idea such as blue or soft. James observed that we experience relationships as primordially as we do the so-called primary and secondary qualities of things. For example, we experience blue in the changing context of a blue object such as a blue sky, a blue pen, or blueberry. The concept “blue” consists of an abstraction distilled from these experiences. Relations are also part of experience rather than mere conceptual tools for organizing experience. Experience flows as a stream that includes conjunctions, copulas, and prepositions as well as verbs, nouns, and adjectives.¹ To illustrate James’s point, when we perceive a “mother and child,” we perceive the relationship as immediately as the two individuals who make up the relationship. We can say the same of the perceptions of inanimate conjunctions such as “hills and valleys” or “wind and rain.”

James’s notion of radical empiricism holds that nothing should count for knowledge unless it is experienced, and everything that is experienced should count for knowledge. The traditional empiricism ignores experienced relationships and change because they do not fit the a priori belief that knowledge is composed of simple ideas. Locke thought that simple ideas reside somehow in our mind like soup cans in a cupboard. They enter the mind through the senses and become the building blocks for all of the more complex ideas. James, by contrast, pointed out that we experience the world first as part of the continuous flow, and then we develop static simple ideas.

To understand the connection between the pragmatic theory and the theory of radical empiricism, we need to examine the roll that concepts play in James’s theory of knowledge. The emphasis on experience provides the reason for the pragmatic theory of meaning. To understand the priority of experience we need a closer look at concepts. At any given time when our attention focuses on concepts, as it does right now, these concepts constitute parts of experience. Take the example of a medical doctor who examines a child’s throat and sees a discoloration that makes her think that the patient suffers from an infection. While she performs the examination, the patient

may be squirming, and, of course, the symptoms of the infection make sense only in the context of a human throat. The doctor, the patient, and the infection all flow in the stream of experience. But when the doctor thinks about a diagnosis and prescription, she uses concepts, perhaps concepts of a particular bacterial infection and the most recent antibiotic. She knows the concepts as clear, distinct, and fixed. She could check them in a medical journal or describe them to a colleague. But even while actively thinking, she still flows in the stream of experience, and the concepts are part of the experience. The main epistemological question concerns the connection between the distinct static concepts and the part of reality to which they refer. That is, what constitutes the connection between the concept of a bacterial infection and the color that the doctor sees in the context of the squirming child?

In James's epistemological theory, concepts *represent* percepts. To say that they represent percepts means that they substitute for them; they take their place. When we want to think about an experience, we may think instead about a concept, which we intend to take the place of that percept. For example, in planning a trip, concepts of highways railroads and airports can take the place of actually traveling each of them. In choosing between two routes, we do not have to physically travel both before making a decision. We do not even have to go over each route in our imagination. A set of concepts that includes a flight number, time of departure, and destination substitutes for an enormous perceptual reality. If our beliefs about these concepts hold true, then by acting on them we arrive at our desired destination. Students and other readers often ask whether the ideas lead us because they hold true, or do they hold true because they lead us. For James, the *leading is the truth*. The effectiveness of concepts in leading to reality is what it means to say that the concepts hold true. The truth of a concept consists of its agreement with reality and our concepts agree with reality by leading us to the reality to which they refer.

The example of ideas leading to a geographical destination may seem commonplace and perhaps trivial. But it provides a clear analogy to the way that concepts lead us through the stream of experience to the experience that we seek. If a concept refers to no experience, and cannot conceivably lead us to any experience, and the truth or falsity of the concept makes no difference, then the concept is meaningless. The pragmatic axiom is that "there is no difference which does not make a difference." Aimless verbal disputes that people sometimes mistake for philosophical disputes are in fact meaningless.² There can be no difference between two concepts except that which makes a difference in how we relate to the perceptual world.

James illustrates his method with an explanation of human activity. In an essay titled "The Experience of Activity," James explicitly said that he would explain both the meaning of human activity and his method. He

describes the pragmatic method in which we find the meaning of each idea by searching for its consequences. He calls radical empiricism a methodological postulate and defines it as follows: "Nothing shall be admitted as a fact except what can be experienced at some definite time by some experiment; and for every feature of fact ever so experienced, a definite place must be found somewhere in the final system of reality" (ERE, 160). The description of activity illustrates how the method of pragmatism and the postulate of radical empiricism fit together.

We can distinguish every activity as either aimless or directed. If directed, it may or may not be resisted. If it goes unresisted, we will usually carry it out without much thought. If it is resisted, we might quit or continue with effort. If we continue with effort, we may or may not overcome the resistance and achieve our intended purpose. The prototype of all activity in the universe shows itself in "this dramatic shape of something sustaining a felt purpose against felt obstacles and overcoming or being overcome" (ERE, 168).

The point of radical empiricism affirms that the felt activity can be taken as real. Reality includes the desire for the intended purpose, the rub of the obstacle, the decision to work against the obstacle with effort, the strain, and the final overcoming or being overcome. Our knowledge of causality flows from our subjective experience of effective activity. Radical empiricism states that these experiences cannot be thrown out of court simply on the grounds that they are subjective. We really do experience them and, because they are experienced, they have a place in an adequate understanding of reality. An explanation of what really happens must give an account of the purpose, the effort, the strain, and the triumph or defeat.

James's method can also be illustrated by the way he treats the relationship between the knower and the known. According to the hypothesis of radical empiricism, nothing that is not experienced may be included in a philosophical view, and nothing experienced may be excluded. It follows that knowledge requires that both the knower and the known must constitute parts of experience (ERE, 196). The relationship between knower and known itself stands as a portion of experience.

Conceptual knowledge constitutes the other way in which portions of experience can relate to each other as knower and known. Concepts make up parts of experience, and we experience them as knowledge of percepts or of other concepts. The concepts know the percepts by substituting for them. As in the example given above, the concept by which a person begins to plan a journey knows the whole flow of concepts and percepts, which conclude in the experience of arrival at the conceived destination. Concepts represent other parts of experience. We can distinguish concepts from the parts of experience that they represent and thereby we experience the distinction between knower and known.

To summarize James's methodological principles, namely, pragmatism and radical empiricism, concepts are portions of experience, and we find their meaning in the experienced concepts and percepts to which they lead. Concepts enable us to find our way through experience, which is continuous, always flowing, and abounding in chaos. We form concepts by abstracting from the stream of experience, isolating portions of it, and stopping the action. The concepts then substitute for large portions of experience. The "cash value" or *pragmatic meaning* of any concept resides in the percept that it leads us to expect and the actions that it enables us to prepare. An idea that has no such pragmatic meaning is meaningless. We find the *truth* of a meaningful idea in how well it leads us through experience. James's approach to meaning provides a unified theory that applies to all thought including common sense, science, and metaphysics.