

## Pragmatism and the Aims of Inquiry Peirce, James and Two Seeds of Death

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Some philosophers have argued that truth is a *constitutive* or *conceptual* norm of belief, assertion, and inquiry. Such views have some strong intuitive appeal. For example in the case of beliefs, if we find out that one or another of our beliefs is untrue, we stop believing that belief, often setting about an inquiry into the matter that has thus become perplexing. Indeed, the claim of untruthfulness is perhaps the most severe form of criticism one may direct against the belief of another. And whatever our other motives and aims may be, if we do not seek to find out the truth about what we are investigating, it seems plausible to say we are not occupied by actual inquiry at all.

This view about the aims of belief and inquiry, however, conceals a deeper problematic. On the one hand, as long as no exact content is being given to the central concept of truth, the idea that truth is an aim becomes a platitude, pretty much the same as saying that we want our beliefs to be like what we want our beliefs to be like, or our inquiries to produce such belief that we want to have. On the other hand, when we attempt to give some more specific idea of what “truth” is all about, it suddenly turns out that many will disagree that *that* is what we want our beliefs to be like. Or at least philosophers will. Controversy about truth is raging, and it is difficult to imagine a consensus over truth’s nature would be reached by philosophical inquirers any time soon.

Perhaps because of similar considerations, Peirce famously argued that the aim of inquiry is *belief*. Whatever we may fancy, the aim of inquiry is not truth in any substantive, interesting sense. And while it is oftentimes difficult to see what unites different philosophical views advanced under the title of pragmatism, I would like to suggest that at least here all pragmatists from Peirce to the likes of Richard Rorty seem

to be in accord. Instead of aiming at some inquiry-transcendent truth, our investigative and cognitive practices are there to fix belief.

However, it would be too hasty to conclude that because of this, truth is a concept better left out from future philosophical vocabularies. Eschewing mystical “correspondence” with an “independent” reality does not entail discarding the concept of truth altogether. That some interpretations of “agreement” or “correspondence” – the concept both Peirce and William James, following Kant’s lead, called truth’s “nominal definition” – seem to make truth either incomprehensible or practically unattainable, does not imply that all attempts to explicate the concept are bound to fail.

Rather, as pragmatist philosophers turn away from philosophical abstractions, the roles beliefs and the notion of truth play in our practical lives and inquiries becomes a natural starting point. Accordingly, most pragmatists – it seems to me even Rorty, at least in his writings of the early 1980s – have opted to call true those beliefs that ultimately satisfy our cognitive desiderata, often pointing out that they must also keep doing so in the long run. Peirce himself defined truth as the opinion that would ultimately be settled at the (ideal) end of inquiry. However, such talk about satisfying what we want of our beliefs again seems rather vague, bringing to the fore a set of interesting questions. Namely, what *are* our cognitive desiderata? How are they fixed? And how are we supposed to know our cognitive desiderata are such as they *should* be? In what follows, I will compare the answers to such questions given by Peirce and James. Consideration of this issue, I hope, may open a perspective from which to locate both some basic agreements and a couple of key differences between the two first pragmatists – differences that have made a difference in the development of later pragmatist views.

### **Peirce and the Fixation of Belief**

To start with Peirce, the key text to this problematic is “The Fixation of Belief” of 1877 and Peirce’s later texts commenting on that piece. Needless to say, various interpretations of “Fixation” have been proposed. But it looks like everyone agrees on one thing: Peirce’s aim in the text is to show that when fixing our beliefs, the fourth, the *scientific* method of inquiry, is preferable to the three other methods he investigates, the methods of tenacity, authority and *a priori*. Exactly how

Peirce attempts to accomplish this – and whether he is successful – is another, sometimes hotly debated question.

Widely speaking, it seems to me two types of readings of “Fixation” have been proposed in recent literature. According to the first reading, the different methods discussed in “Fixation” are simply more or less successful, for various reasons, in *fixing* belief. Despite their other possible advantages, the first three methods simply will not succeed because the belief they fix does not turn out to be such belief we want to have, or what is belief in the first place.<sup>1</sup> In a sense, then, there is a single idea of truth, or what we want by way of belief, looming in the background of the whole of the story about methods – something that only the scientific method can satisfy. And, thus, the “lessons in logic” Peirce claims have constituted “each chief step in science” are mainly revelations by way of how to improve our method to better produce such belief we want to have in the first place, or all along (cf. *EP* 1, 111). But while there is thus a good deal of plausibility to this reading, there are some problematic questions such a take of “Fixation” seems to face. Perhaps the most central of these problems is that Peirce really hasn’t done much philosophical work. If it is a background assumption of the whole text that beliefs simply are best fixed by the scientific method, it is only by begging the question that “Fixation” attains what is usually considered its aim, that is, showing *that* we should prefer the scientific method in fixing our beliefs.

Problems of this sort are the reason why another type of reading of “Fixation” has been attempted. While Peirce’s explicit discussion is centred on the concept of *method* of inquiry, T.L. Short (2000) has argued that the central message of the piece is one about inquiry’s *aims*. According to this second, more nuanced reading, it is not only that the method or methods of inquiry are polished to better function as means to attain our cognitive aims. It is also that the *aim* of inquiry changes, and this change further results in revision of method – or, perhaps better put, the change from one method to something completely different *is* a change also of the aim of inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> Despite their respective differences, the readings I have in mind include e.g. Hookway (1985) and Misak (1991).

Such a reading has some great advantages. Firstly, there is no constant idea of truth lurking in the background of the whole text; rather, the whole concept of truth can be seen as changing when a method is overcome by another. For example, subscribing to the scientific method, we may find it quite natural to ask whether or not inquiries based on other methods are inquiries into *truth* at all. Secondly, this reading makes better sense about why there is so little by way of *argument* for the scientific method in Peirce's text. Namely, if we consistently fix our beliefs according to one method, there is nothing *internal* to that method that would bring about doubt about the method itself. From this it also seems to follow that deserting one method for another is something we may attempt to rationalize only after we have proceeded to another method, and, moreover, such rationalization can only be done from the point of view of the method we follow. Thus, it is only reasonable to expect that Peirce does not attempt the impossible, that is, to argue that one or another of the methods is more or less reasonable from some methodically neutral point of view. And thus it is to be expected that no method-independent argument can be given to prove the supremacy any of the methods.

However, there is something about this reading that arouses uneasiness. Namely, while "Fixation" discusses the merits and demerits of the various methods at length, it seems that it does not exactly answer the question what brings about the change in inquiry's aims. By an answer I do not mean an *argument* for one of the methods, something that would definitely show anyone – that is, anyone following *any* method of inquiry – that they should choose to follow this or that particular method (other than their own). Rather, what is missing from "Fixation" is a careful explication of what exactly it is that *makes* us change the aim of inquiry. This might be what Peirce reflects in a famous letter to William James:

My own view in 1877 was crude. [...] It was not until after that that I obtained the proof that logic must be founded on ethics, of which it is a higher development. Even then, I was for some time so stupid as not to see that ethics rests in the same manner on a foundation of esthetics, – by which, it is needless to say, I don't mean milk and water and sugar. (Peirce to James, November 25, 1902.)

The normative sciences are, then, perhaps supposed to do the work that is still lacking from “Fixation”. But the way in which Peirce founded logic on aesthetics is a complex matter and would occupy more space than I have here. Rather, it is rather time to turn to some of James’s views on the aims of inquiry.

### **James and the Truth as Good by Way of Belief**

If pragmatism is taken in the Peircean sense as a suggestion about the meaning of concepts and propositions as well as, perhaps, the truth of propositions, James’s pragmatism is best viewed as a component of his more general theory of meaning, reference, and truth. What comes to truth, James attempts to apply the pragmatic “rule” of making our ideas clear on the concept of truth itself, in effect asking what it means for “ideas” or “beliefs” to be true. While James has no disagreement with the nominal definition of truth as “correspondence” or “agreement”, his work is filled with attempts of elucidating the concept by way of both general descriptions and particular examples. One famous characterisation of truth can be found in the sixth lecture of James’s *Pragmatism*:

‘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. (James 1907, ch. 6.)

Before proceeding to what I think are the key differences between Peirce’s and James’s views, let me make a couple of remarks on what I think are *not* key differences.

Firstly, although it at times sounds like James is ready to label as true whatever happens to be expedient, to some acting individual right here and now, as the passage quoted above already implies, this was not his sustained view. Instead, quite like Peirce, James makes reference to what would hold true in the long run. Of course we do fix such belief that will later prove to be untrue. But of course neither would object to this fact,

as long as we are ready to correct our beliefs when called upon to do so by further experience.

Secondly, as already pointed out, at least in any Peircean sense of the word, pragmatism is only a part of the story about meaning and truth in James's case. As evidence for this view, it can for example be noted that after his 1890 *Principles of Psychology*, James makes little use of the concept of a *habit*, except for when he is talking more or less explicitly about Peirce. However, the generic pragmatist idea of beliefs as habits is clearly in the background (cf. Rydenfelt 2009).

Thirdly, much fuss has been made about the fact that some of James's utterances seem to imply the mutability of truth. Peirce himself protested (*EP* 2, 457–458; cf. *EP* 2, 450). But it is difficult to see James can have meant more than the fact that some of our beliefs can be, if not quite true, closer to the truth than other beliefs. There is a concept of *truthlikeness* implicitly operative in James's work: a scaling of truth and falsity.

Simply put, there is a great deal in common to Peirce and James. According to James, true beliefs are those that would meet experience "satisfactorily", or are "expedient", or get "verified". Despite the fact all kinds of interpretations have been attempted, James does not mean to say anything more than this: true beliefs are those that would keep meeting future experience and results of future inquiry so that nothing will make us *doubt* or correct *those* beliefs. To this extent, then, Peirce and James are in agreement.

## Two Seeds of Death

But then, where are the notorious "seeds of death" Peirce said James's pragmatism involves (cf. *EP* 2, 450)? I think the *interesting* differences between Peirce and James begin to emerge when we take a closer look at how James would answer the question why we *should* opt for fixing belief in a manner that is sensitive to future experience. There are two types of considerations of this question detectable in James's writings; and what I'm going to suggest is that each of them includes a seed of death by Peirce's lights (although it is to be noted I do not mean to discuss the seeds of death Peirce himself distinguished).

Firstly, James was less reluctant than Peirce to derive philosophical conclusions from psychological premises, or results of natural science. It

is his suggestion that the more theoretical forms of inquiry and truth-seeking are simply an outgrowth of some requirements we are disposed to place for beliefs for practical and “natural” reasons. Discussing the satisfaction involved in theoretical truth-seeking, which James views in terms of a drive for intellectual consistency and pleasure of finding out what is the case, James says (and from this passage it should also be evident that James is not as thorough-going a nominalist as often supposed):

And are not both our need of such consistency and our pleasure in it conceivable as outcomes of the natural fact that we are beings that do develop mental **habits** – habit itself proving adaptively beneficial in an environment where the same objects, or the same kinds of objects, recur and follow “law”? If this were so, what would have come first would have been the collateral profits of habit as such, and the theoretic life would have grown up in aid of these. In point of fact, this seems to have been the probable case. (James 1909, 58)

Certain kinds of beliefs – beliefs that are consistent and expedient – are simply beneficial to our endeavours. And for that reason, we have become adapted to adopting such beliefs.

Peirce might agree with some of these claims (cf. *EP* 1, 112). But there is a clear difference of emphasis. With considerations like these in the background, in *Pragmatism*, James argues that there is no intrinsic value to truth:

It is quite evident that our obligation to acknowledge truth, so far from being unconditional, is tremendously conditioned. [...] A truth must always be preferred to a falsehood when both relate to the situation; but when neither does, truth is as little of a duty as falsehood. (James 1907, ch. 6.)

Truth, for James, then, is not to be valued unconditionally, but its worth is subordinate to other values – ultimately, I presume, to what we find worth pursuing in our lives. Of course, it might turn out we have no working procedure of deciding which truths will be needed to get what we want. Experience, as James put it, has its ways of boiling over. Because of this, it might be that we need much more truth than we might expect. But the central point remains the same: truth is not our goal as such. This is certainly a view Peirce would not take. Rather, in Peirce, we can find the at least occasional suggestion that the greatest good is the

growth of concrete reasonableness – a view that can be easily seen as implying an unconditional appreciation of truth or, at least, the advancement of science without hindsight to practical interests and purposes (*EP* 2, 252–255). For James, however, our interest in truth is always subject to considerations of practical kind.

So that was the first seed of death. The second seed is closely related. However, I would like to pursue a bit more elaborate route to uncover it. For, like in the case of Peirce, it might be asked that even if Peirce and James are correct and our beliefs are of the nature of habits or at least involve habits, what is it that forces us to believe those beliefs that indeed are “expedient” or meet experience “satisfactorily”? It seems to me James did notice that some further justification of his pragmatic conception of truth might be called for. In addition to arguments from psychology and other special sciences, he offers an interesting suggestion according to which pragmatism *itself* is pragmatically true:

[The pragmatist] finds it ultra-satisfactory to accept [his own idea of truth], and takes his own stand accordingly. But, being gregarious as they are, men seek to spread their beliefs, to awaken imitation, to infect others. Why should not **you** also find the same belief satisfactory? thinks the pragmatist, and forthwith endeavors to convert you. (James 1909, 108)

James goes as far as to claim that pragmatism may be the only view about truth that is “irreproachably self-consistent” (James 1909, 108). Pragmatism, which holds that true conceptions meet experience satisfactorily, *itself* meets experience satisfactorily, in James’s opinion. This suggestion might not be completely unrelated to Peirce’s view. What James seems to have in mind is that we can, in a sense, attain a third grade of clearness about pragmatism itself, applying pragmatism on pragmatism by living by it. In real life, so to speak, James thinks conceptions of belief and truth other than the pragmatist one will fail in practice; that ultimately all who inquire will, by one way or another, become convinced that pragmatists are right about what it is we want to have by way of belief.

Now, I do find this suggestion enticing, and something that should be looked into more carefully than I am currently able to. But it seems to bring with it some difficulties, which have to do mainly with James’s concept of satisfaction. All this because of a very simple question: what *is* satisfaction? In his 1904 paper “Humanism and Truth”, James defines



truth as conformity to a reality, and conformity as “taking account of” or “being satisfactory about” a reality. And then he continues, saying

To ‘take account-of’ and to be ‘satisfactory’ are terms that admit of no definition, so many are the ways in which these requirements can practically be worked out. (James 1909, 60.)

This does not sound like what James should be doing. After all, was not he supposed to somehow elucidate the meaning of truth by way of pragmatic clarification instead of giving just more words to go by? Of course, writing a book, James has to make his point in words. However, “satisfaction” looks like the concept on which James’s spades are turned, to use Wittgenstein’s phrase. This is not a welcome development. At times, the term “satisfaction” becomes so vague James might quite as well opt for “correspondence”. It is close to becoming a platitude of the sort I described at the beginning of this talk: true beliefs are simply such beliefs we want to have, or it is desirable or good to have.

It seems to me James oscillates between two types of descriptions of “satisfaction”: the more concrete characterisations of particular truths and their “workings”, and the more abstract kind of “satisfaction” that he wishes to say covers all kinds of truths. But of this latter “satisfaction”, little can be said. The same applies to the sort of satisfaction that James thinks is involved in our choice of what kind of beliefs to have. Perhaps pragmatism is true by its own lights, but it does remain a bit murky what those lights are supposed to be.

The second seed of death is related to the problems of James’s concept of satisfaction. One of his key interests in his *Pragmatism* to find a way to account for the truth and usefulness of both common-sensical ideas as well as scientific conceptions. Let me quote a passage from the fourth lecture, “Pragmatism and Common Sense,” where James says:

There is no **ringing** conclusion possible when we compare these types of thinking, with a view to telling which is the more absolutely true. Their naturalness, their intellectual economy, their fruitfulness for practice, all start up as distinct tests of their veracity, and as a result we get confused. Common sense is **better** for one sphere of life, science for another, philosophic criticism for a third; but whether either be **truer** absolutely, Heaven only knows. (James 1907, ch. 4.)

Why does James think only heaven knows which is true, common sense or science? I do not think this is because an ideal limit of inquiry has not been reached on any particular question that we can approach, alternatively, by the means of common sense or science. Nor does this mean that scientific theories and our commonsensical understanding of the world are what has become to be called incommensurable. Nor does James wish to claim that common sense and science are perspectives so widely different that they have no points of contact whatsoever; after all, common sense and science can both deal with and offer explanations of the same phenomena of experience.

Instead, James here points out that there are different tests for the veracity of beliefs or hypotheses inside these “types of thinking.” The differences between these different perspectives are to be found in their differing aims, or cognitive desiderata effective in the investigative practices involved. Now my suggestion would be that James attempts to use his concept of “satisfaction” to point out what is common to such desiderata: in each type of inquiry, there is something satisfactory about proceeding along certain lines producing a certain kind of belief. But if that attempt turns out to be a lost cause – and I think there is reason to hold that it might – there is a seed of death involved: an endless plurality of aims of inquiry. And with such a plurality of cognitive aims, obtaining a single final truth about any issue becomes impossible.

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