

The Meaning of Pragmatism: James on the Practical Consequences of Belief*

O Significado do Pragmatismo: James sobre as Consequências Práticas da Crença

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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?” Accordingly, James’s pragmatic method of clarifying the meaning of conceptions was simply to trace what he called their respective “practical consequences.”

James’s own application of his pragmatic method, however, has turned out to be prone to invite questions of what exactly he understood by the central notion of “practical consequences.” 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 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 followed Lovejoy’s example in holding that there is a duality inherent to James’s pragmatism about meaning. Consequently, James has often be 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.

In this paper, I will argue that Lovejoy’s objection is mistaken in its main claim. The two criteria Lovejoy separates are not incongruent; 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. Aside arguing for the consistency of James’s view, it is shown that his pragmatism is far truer to Charles S. Peirce’s original formulation of the pragmatic “third grade of clearness” than commonly supposed.

Keywords: Pragmatism. Pragmatic maxim. Practical. William James. Charles S. Peirce. Arthur O. Lovejoy. Theory of meaning.

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Resumo: Na terceira palestra de seu Pragmatismo, em 1907, William James apresentou admiravelmente sua teoria pragmática do significado, formulando a simples pergunta: “que diferença prática faria a alguém se esta noção, e não aquela, fosse a verdadeira?” Por conseguinte, o método pragmático de James de esclarecer o significado das concepções foi, simplesmente, determinar o que ele chamou de suas respectivas “consequências práticas.”

Todavia, a aplicação de James do seu próprio método pragmático, todavia, tornou-se propensa a suscitar questões sobre o que ele entendia exatamente por noção central de “consequências práticas?” Já em 1908, Arthur O. Lovejoy propôs que James confundia dois critérios incongruentes da significabilidade das proposições. Conforme o primeiro critério, uma proposição é significativa caso faça referência ou preveja experiências futuras, independentemente de a proposição ser crível ou não; conforme o segundo, uma proposição é significativa se a crença nela resulta em algumas experiências por parte do crente, a despeito do fato de que nenhuma afirmação pode ser deduzida de sua verdade por meio de experiências futuras. Muitos comentaristas solidários, posteriormente, seguiram o exemplo de Lovejoy, sustentando que existe uma dualidade inerente ao pragmatismo de James sobre o significado. Tem sido considerado freqüentemente que, para James, apenas eventos subjetivos e interesses desempenham um papel na determinação pragmatista não só do significado, como também da verdade da proposição.

Neste trabalho, argumentarei que a objeção de Lovejoy é equivocada em sua alegação principal. Os dois critérios de Lovejoy destaca não são incongruentes: pelo contrário, sob uma visão pragmatista, estão intrinsecamente relacionados. Se uma proposição tiver significado à luz do primeiro critério, será significativa pelo segundo, e vice-versa. Além de arguir pela consistência da opinião de James, será demonstrado que seu pragmatismo é muito mais fiel à formulação original do “terceiro grau de clareza” pragmática de Charles S. Peirce, do que comumente se pensa.

Palavras-chave: Pragmatismo. Máxima pragmática. Prático. William James. Charles S. Peirce. Arthur O. Lovejoy. Teoria do significado.

I. The central idea of William James’s pragmatist theory of meaning – or “pragmatic method” – is entailed in his famous question: “What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true?”¹ To find out what our conceptions mean, we need to “trace [their] respective practical consequences”.² 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 a conception is meaningless, if no such practical consequences can be traced.³

¹ JAMES, 1907, ch. 2.

² JAMES, 1907, ch. 2.

³ It is often forgot by commentators that the pragmatic method can only be applied to conception which we are already somewhat familiar with and to which we can give a verbal definition of some sort. Peirce makes this point 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 (PEIRCE, 1878, p. 106). For a somewhat contrary reading of James, see Giuffreda and Madden (1978).

However, consideration of James's particular applications of the pragmatic method has led to a varying interpretations and even some confusion about how James understood the central concept of "practical consequences". Already a century ago, in January of 1908, Arthur O. Lovejoy published his classic piece "The Thirteen Pragmatists". As is familiar, Lovejoy discerns altogether thirteen different philosophical positions all of which had at one point or another been advanced under the label of pragmatism by that date.⁴ Lovejoy's most central distinction, 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 conceptions 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. According to Lovejoy's second criterion, a proposition is meaningful if *belief in* that proposition will lead to some experiences. Even if no predictions about future experiences can be deduced from a proposition's truth, for the proposition to be meaningful it suffices that it leads to what he calls "emotional or other" experiences when believed.⁶ Further, Lovejoy is pleased with neither of these criteria. According to him, the first criterion is too limiting and "positivistic," while the second criterion is, in Lovejoy's words, "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

At least three considerations lend support to the distinction Lovejoy draws. Firstly, James's 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

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, p. 321)

The either/or distinction James here draws might be interpreted as an endorsement of the view that some conceptions may be meaningful although their truth does not predict anything about future experience. Secondly, in some passages James seems to hold pragmatically meaningful also such conceptions that allow of no experiential predictions. For example, in the concluding lecture of *Pragmatism*, he points out that the use of the

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, p. 8; cf. LOVEJOY, 1908b, p. 130–131.

⁷ LOVEJOY, 1908a, p. 9; MEYERS, 1971, p. 371.

concept of the 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”; rather, it is “emotional and spiritual altogether”.⁸ Still, James seems to hold that the concept of Absolute meets the pragmatist criteria of concepts with “practical consequences”. Thirdly, James himself acknowledged the validity of Lovejoy’s criticism. Prior to the publication of his 1908 article, Lovejoy had sent James a lengthy letter describing his doubts about the tenability of pragmatism and presenting his distinction between two types of “practical consequences.” In his response, James admits that the “[c]onsequences of true ideas *per se*, and consequences of ideas *qua believed* by us, are logically different consequences ...”.⁹

II. In more recent literature, Lovejoy’s distinction has managed to continue its existence, 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 advocated by Peirce, James and their followers.¹⁰ But is Lovejoy right? It is crucial to note that 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 pragmatist maxim. In a central passage of the second lecture of *Pragmatism*, James describes the roots of his pragmatic conception of meaning in Charles S. Peirce’s work as follows:

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 emerge. Firstly, James adheres to the conception – prominently maintained by Peirce – that beliefs are habits or rules of

⁸ JAMES, 1907, ch. 2.

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

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

¹¹ JAMES, 1907, ch. 2.

action.¹² To believe *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 to the experiential consequences that are to be expected if the belief is true.¹³

In this manner, beliefs as habits of action connect the philosophical conceptions James discusses to expectations of what will occur in experience. In James's 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 sometime".¹⁵ Of course, by the conduct *consequent* upon the fact James does not refer to conduct that (necessarily) *temporally* follows from the fact. Rather, we adjust our conduct so that our actions *anticipate* these differences "in concrete fact" (also taking other background beliefs and purposes into account). 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 practical consequences of an "emotional" kind despite the fact they do not entail any reference to future experience, emotional or otherwise. Of course, 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 qualitative features are not part of the (pragmatic) 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

¹² JAMES, 1897, p. 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, p. 37). James's choice of wording was subsequently criticised by Peirce in a letter of December 6, 1904 (CWJ, X, p. 511-512). This probably had led James to consult again Peirce's original expression of the maxim.

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, p. 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 circumstances. Secondly, believing 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.

As James himself concedes in his letter to Lovejoy, our expectations of what would occur in experience if a certain proposition is true indeed 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* we expect something to occur in some circumstances. From the pragmatist definition of belief it also follows, *contra* Lovejoy, that every *genuine* belief *is* meaningful: otherwise it would not alter our conduct and 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 intends 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 proposition "gremlins exist" allows of no predictions that could be verified in experience. Thus, a 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 most of us, it is still mysteriously maintained that *belief in* their existence leads to some practical consequences. 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 be altered or emotional life 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 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 so conduct ourselves lest for the reason that having gremlins accompany us on our flights could lead to some rather unpleasant experiences.

III. 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, this is largely due to two accounts. Firstly, James is seldom prepared to abandon any philosophical conceptions as *meaningless*, but, rather, interested in extracting

¹⁷ MEYERS, 1971, p. 330-331.

the practical kernel of *any* philosophical debate. James's pragmatist project is *reconstructive* rather than *deconstructive*: he aims at redefining old conceptions by searching for any conceivable practical applications they might 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 quite clearly have bearings upon our conduct, while it is notoriously difficult to make sense of the experiential expectations involved. This is especially true in the case of religious belief, a topic most central to James's philosophy. It is apparently for this reason that James often rests content with discussing only the difference in conduct that ensues of religious belief. Still, in his clearest formulations 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 – in effect formulating 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 James here clearly intends to draw a connection between experiential expectations and our conduct that anticipates those experiences.

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 momentous pragmatic value". Although the "immediate sensible properties" of the bread used in the sacrament are in no way differ from ordinary bread, the participant of the Eucharist "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

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, p. 71; cf. PERRY, 1935, p. 450). But while differentiating between these two Jamesian positions is certainly in order, it does not follow that religious belief acquires any special position: some "practical consequences" must follow from a religious belief for it be meaningful.

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

²¹ JAMES, 1907, ch. 3.

²² Peirce takes up the question of transubstantiation as an example in his "How to Make Our Ideas Clear", claiming that the theological "talk of something as having all the sensible characters of wine, yet being in reality blood, is senseless jargon" (PEIRCE, 1878, p. 108). Although Peirce's and James's views might at first glance seem diametrically opposite, this is not 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

In conclusion, it seems clear Lovejoy does not succeed 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 argues are two separate types of “practical consequences” are actually connected with one another. However, 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. Many of James’s applications of the pragmatic method may have been insufficiently detailed – and 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, adopted 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.

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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 theirsensible effects, here and hereafter” (PEIRCE, 1878, p. 109, emphasis added).

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

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