

Part I

Pragmatism

The Fixation of Belief

1.1 | Introduction

In "The Fixation of Belief", Peirce:

1. discusses the extent to which human beings reason (logic)
2. provides an account of inquiry characterized as initiated by doubt and aiming at belief
3. outlines four different ways of fixing belief. These are the methods of tenacity, authority, the a priori method, and the scientific method.

Peirce will use conclusions he draws, in this essay, concerning the scientific method to formulate, in the next essay, his pragmatic account of *reality*.

1.2 | Section I

In the first section, Peirce makes several observations about the capacity of human beings to reason:

1. people don't bother studying logic because they think they are already good reasoners
2. people, however, think that others could use a course in logic because others are not proficient in reasoning
3. people tend to develop their powers of reasoning later in life as it is not a natural gift

Peirce then points to several different stages of logic:

1. Romans: all knowledge rests on either authority or reason; but reasoning proceeds from premises and these premises are based on authority
2. Roger Bacon: experience teaches us everything, including a kind of inner illumination that could teach us things not observable to the senses

3. Francis Bacon: logic involves experimentation (a kind of falsification) and the a notion of experience that is not something inherently private but must be open to public scrutiny (verification and reexamination)
4. Early science (Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, Kepler, Galileo, Gilbert): application of mathematics and generality to science

Every great work in science, Peirce claims, illustrates some prior defective stage in reasoning.

Example 1.1: old chemistry

in order to do chemistry, one only need to “read, read, read, work, pray, and read again” while Lavoisier’s method was to carry his flasks into the laboratory and to see what happens when mixing chemicals. Illustrates a new stage in reasoning: reasoning is something to be done by manipulating things with one’s eyes open, rather than trying to imagine what would happen.

Example 1.2: Darwin

Peirce points to Darwin as applying the statistical method to biology.

Exercise 1

The first section offers mostly preliminary remarks about the nature of reasoning and the briefest possible sketch of its historical development.

1. Do you agree with Peirce’s assessment of people in terms of how they self-evaluate their powers of reason and the powers of others to reason?
2. Peirce seems to point to major advancements in science as being the result of an improvement in method. A counterexample would be a case where the advancement is not due to method at all. Can you think of any?

1.3 | Section II

Section II concerns two key topics: (i) the logicity and illogicity of human animals and (ii) some remarks on the nature of logic and reasoning.

1.3.1 | The logicity and illogicity of humans

One of the more interesting points is what Peirce has to say about how logical human beings are. He contends that we generally reason correctly and are logical animals and this is most likely due to natural selection (EP1:112). That is, logicity in practical matters is the **result of an evolutionary process**.

However, Peirce also points out that our logical powers are not perfect especially in two areas:

1. matters that we are unfamiliar with

2. matters that are not explicitly practical (those that knowing how to reason would play no role in natural selection)

Insofar as we do reason correctly on these matters, Peirce claims it “is an accident” (EP1:112). He contends that when faced with these matters we are “like a ship in the open sea, with no one on board who understands the rules of navigation” (EP1:113).

Further, he contends that in the absence of facts or experience, we generally are **much more optimistic** than logic would allow (the sky is the limit to my conclusions!). He writes “[w]here hope is unchecked by any experience, it is likely that our optimism is extravagant” (EP1:112).¹ In fact, he suggests that from an evolutionary point of view “it is probably of more advantage to the animal to have his mind filled with pleasing and encouraging visions, independently of their truth; and thus, upon unpractical subjects, natural selection might occasion a fallacious tendency of thought” (EP1:112).

- P1: There are some matters for which there is no *practical* benefit for thinking one way rather than another.
- P2: Concerning these matters, there is an evolutionary benefit to have optimistic, clam, cheery opinions rather than negative, stressful, pessimistic opinions.
- C: Therefore, we are more likely to be optimistic about matters that have no practical significance.

Exercise 2

It is worthwhile to pause and try to think of areas where we are not shaped to be logical about and where it might be beneficial to have “pleasing and encouraging visions” rather than be logical. What sorts of topics do you think human beings reasons poorly about? What sorts of topics have we evolved a more optimistic tendency of thought?

1.3.2 | Some more points on reasoning

Peirce makes several more remarks on the nature of reasoning.

First, he contends that the goal of reasoning is to **discover something we don’t know from something we do know**, to infer a true conclusion from true premises. And, that contends that reasoning is a **matter of fact**, not of thought. The question is whether B follows from A, not whether we think B follows from A. This allows us to characterize minds as logical or illogical (good or bad): our habit of mind is **good** if it produces true conclusions from true premises.

Second, for any given argument, the reasoning from premises to a conclusion involves **guiding principles**. What Peirce calls a **guiding principle of inference** is nothing more than a proposition that formulates the rule by which we reason.

¹Perhaps an example of this is optimism bias; the tendency to underestimate the time and work involved in the tasks we undertake.

Example 1.3

Suppose I reason as follows:

- P1: Tek died after being stabbed with a knife.
- C: Therefore, anyone who is stabbed by a knife will die.

Peirce suggests that my guiding principle is that “what is true of one knife wound is true of every knife wound.”

Third, one problem then is that there are so many guiding principles. That is, there is a guiding principle for almost every given subject matter. However, Peirce points out that **some facts are absolutely essential as guiding principles**. Namely, one set of these are those principles we need to assume (or take for granted) in even asking whether a certain conclusion follows from a set of premises. Some of these include:

1. states of mind such as doubt and belief
2. the possibility of a passage from doubt to belief
3. the object of thought would remain the same over the course of the passage
4. that the transition would be governed by rules that apply to all minds

Fourth, since we need to assume these facts in order to have a clear conception of reasoning, Peirce contends that “it cannot be supposed to be any longer of much interest to inquire into their truth or falsity” (EP1:113). The idea here is that there is no point in raising skeptical questions concerning these concepts.

Note 1 *There is a sort of worry here about a kind of Cartesian or total skepticism. That is, Peirce seems to suggest here that we can sidestep the question here given that our goal is to talk about the nature of guiding principles (reasoning). For more on Peirce’s response to this skepticism, see his “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man”, “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities”, and the beginning of his “Grounds of the Validity of the Laws of Logic”*

At this point, Peirce offers up the suggestion that we might simply look at how people actually reason and formulate our guiding principles from the process of reasoning. In other words, we could derive logical laws from psychology (this view is sometimes called “psychologism”). He writes:

it is easy to believe that those rules of reasoning which are deduced from the very idea of the process are the ones which are the most essential; and, indeed, that so long as it conforms to these it will, at least, not lead to false conclusions from true premises. (EP1:113)

But Peirce quickly rejects this proposal. He contends that if we analyze how people reason, they are profoundly mistaken on all sorts of things.²

²In “Fixation of Belief”, Peirce points to the example of a **quality**. Peirce seems to suggest that while we do see various colors, e.g. blue, green, red, the quality of being blue, being green, or being red are not things that we see. Instead, they are products of logical reflection. That is, they are abstractions.

Example 1.4: Seen vs. inferred

One set of examples that Peirce often refers to is that people mistake what they see from what they infer.

1. We might contend that we see depth, but, in reality, this is a product of inference.
2. We might think that our visual field is completely unbroken but, in fact, we filter out the blind spot.

Exercise 3

Can you think of other examples of where people contend they have seen something but, in reality, have only inferred it?

1.4 | Section III

This section concerns the distinction between doubt and belief. Peirce begins by distinguishing doubt from belief in three ways.

- we know the sensation of **doubting** because we are inclined to ask questions and we know the sensation of **believing** because we are inclined to make a judgment
- when we **doubt**, we are not inclined to act in a habitual way and when we **believe**, our actions are guided by that belief (e.g. The Assassins who would run to their death)
- when we **doubt**, we are often in an uneasy or dissatisfied state and we aim to free ourselves from this state by believing in something and when we **believe**, we are in a calm, satisfactory state that we don't aim to avoid but instead cling to belief

Given the distinction between doubt and belief, Peirce indicates that each has a different **effect** on us.

In the case of **belief**, he contends that when we believe something, we don't always act on that belief. Instead, when we believe X, we have a disposition to behave in a certain way when circumstances arise. He is thus asserting that **belief is of the nature of habit**: *if x happens, then I will do y.*

In the case of **doubt**, Peirce contends that it is instead not a disposition or habit but a kind of stimulus to action. Namely, it is a kind of irritation that we seek to remove or destroy.

To illustrate both of these points, Peirce offers a physical analogue. In the case of doubt, he points to the irritation of a nerve and its effect on us is our reflex to remove that irritation. For example, if I were to poke you in the arm with a pin, you might wince in pain or pull your arm away.

In the case of a habit, he points to nervous associations. These associations are presumably built up with experience and only arise in certain circumstances. Suppose you love peaches. If you are about to eat a peach and smell it before you eat it, your mouth begins to water.

1.5 | Section IV

Peirce begins this section with his provisional definition of **inquiry**.

Definition 1.1: inquiry

Inquiry is the struggle caused by the irritation of doubt to attain a state of belief

From this Peirce contends that contends that **the goal (or object) of inquiry is nothing more than the settlement of opinion**. That is, whenever we encounter a doubt (a kind of irritation), the aim of an inquiry is to remove that doubt, viz., to replace it with a belief.

Objection 1 *Peirce raises the possible objection that the real goal of inquiry is not the settlement of opinion (the fixation of belief) but instead having a true opinion.*

He goes onto reject this objection. He contends that once an individual has a firm belief (one that they take to be true), they no longer inquire at all. And so, it follows that the real goal of inquiry cannot be some notion of truth beyond the fixation of belief.

Peirce insists on the importance of the claim that the **settlement of opinion is the sole end of inquiry**. He contends that it “sweeps away, at once, various vague and erroneous conceptions of proof” (EP1:115). He offers three illustrations (only two are given here):

Example 1.5: Cartesian skepticism

The first conception of proof is that of the methodological skeptic. The skeptic begins by trying to doubt everything, discovering some proposition that cannot be doubted, and then constructing a system of belief.

Peirce contends that methodological skepticism suffers from a mistaken notion of **doubt** and **inquiry**. If inquiry is the struggle caused by the irritation of doubt to attain a state of belief, then the skeptic fails to produce the necessary state required to induce inquiry. At least according to Peirce, the skeptic’s doubts are **fake doubts** (nothing more than putting propositions into the interrogative form) and so there is no genuine struggle to attain belief.

Example 1.6: Axioms and indubitable propositions

The second conception of proof involves positing some general propositions that are ultimate, fundamental, and cannot be doubted. These either take the form of some first principles or first sensations.

But Peirce contends that this notion of proof is mistaken. If inquiry is the struggle caused by the irritation of doubt to attain a state of belief, then the only necessary starting point for an inquiry are those premises that are free from all doubt. We don’t need to start with first principles, we only need to start with the propositions we believe and only doubt that which we have positive reason to doubt.^a

^aFor more on this, see “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties”, “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities”

Exercise 4

What do you think of Peirce's definition of inquiry? Is all inquiry tied to some doubt? Is what we are after nothing more than the fixation of our belief or do we want something more from belief?

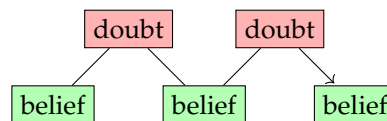
One of the consequences of it is that it seems to do away with the necessity of having some absolutely indubitable starting point for knowledge (e.g. some first sensations or first principles). This is a bold claim since it attacks rationalists and empiricists alike. What else would Peirce have to show in order to make this consequence of his account of inquiry plausible?

1.6 | Section V

Section V is the most famous part of "The Fixation of Belief". It is probably the part that is most discussed. Sometimes the literature seems to ignore Sections I-II altogether.

Peirce begins this section by recalling two earlier propositions:

1. the nature of belief is habit (if X, then Y)
2. the settlement of opinion is the sole object of inquiry



If the nature of belief is habit and if the settlement of opinion is the sole object of inquiry, then we now have a question about how we should go about settling opinion: *What method should we use to fix our beliefs?* In Section IV, Peirce considers **four methods for fixing belief**.

1.6.1 | The method of tenacity

The first method Peirce outlines is the method of tenacity.

In general, the method works as follows: if a doubt arises about X, take a particular position on X, constantly reiterate that position to yourself in a way that you begin to believe X, then shut out anything that might cause you to doubt X.

Peirce makes several observations about this method.

First, the method is *simple* and *direct*.

Second, it is *understandable* given the fact that doubt is uncomfortable. Peirce writes that "the instinctive dislike of an undecided state of mind, exaggerated into a vague dread of doubt, makes men cling spasmodically to the views they already have" (EP1:116).³ In short, we hate doubt so much that we are willing to hold onto anything that removes it.

Third, it is *understandable* given that immovable faith often yields a kind of peace of mind.

³Note that Peirce is suggesting that the method of tenacity explains the status quo bias.

Objection 2 Peirce notes that such faith might give rise to “inconveniences”.

Example 1.7: fire burns

If I believe that fire does not burn, I might not be very careful around a fire and burn myself.

Example 1.8: stomach pump

If I believe that I will be eternally damned unless I receive my nutrition through a stomach pump, I might live a rather painful life.

Peirce’s response, however, is that the individual might take the inconveniences mentioned above to be less than the inconveniences of being in a state of doubt. He writes that

But the man who adopts this method will not allow that its inconveniences are greater than its advantages. [...] And in many cases it may very well be that the pleasure he derives from his calm faith overbalances any inconveniences resulting from its deceptive character.

Let’s put this argument in the following form:

- P1: The inconveniences of doubt is greater than the inconveniences of belief.
- P2: In some cases, it is less inconvenient to hold to a false belief than to be in a state of doubt.
- Therefore, many individuals will simply hold their beliefs rather than doubt.

In short, while the method of tenacity may cause people to hold tenaciously to beliefs that cause them inconvenience, the benefit of having the benefit outweighs the inconveniences of doubt.

Example 1.9: joys of stomach pump

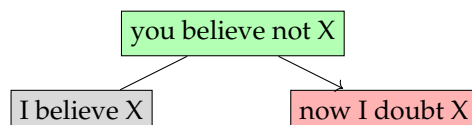
Suppose Tek believes if he takes his food through a stomach pump, he will be granted entrance into heaven. This belief gives him great joy and comfort even though taking food through a stomach pump causes him a fair amount of pain.

Ultimately, Peirce contends that if someone were to go through life by simply burying their head or blocking out any doubts, then **there is no serious point of criticism we can level at this individual**. They have a method that seems to work perfectly for them.

It would be an egotistical impertinence to object that his procedure is irrational, for that only amounts to saying that his method of settling belief is not ours. He does not propose to himself to be rational, and, indeed, will often talk with scorn of man’s weak and illusive reason. So let him think as he pleases (EP1:116)

However, Peirce objects that this method is **nearly impossible to maintain in practice**. He contends that “[t]he **social impulse** is against it” (EP1:116, my emphasis).

The idea here is that while Tek may believe X and try to block out any doubts concerning X, as a human being, Tek is a **social animal**, and so he is bound to come into contact with individuals who do not believe X. Given that he comes into contact with these individuals, Tek may wonder whether or not they are right about X. That is, Tek may think that other people’s opinions are as good as his (at least in some matters) and so he will come to doubt X. While the method of tenacity is perhaps possible if we isolate ourselves from other people and other ideas, Peirce thinks that what other people think influence our own thoughts.



Peirce thus contends that the real question of how to fix belief is not how to fix it in an individual belief but how to **fix the belief of the community**.

Exercise 5

It is easy to think that the manner in which you fix your own belief does not follow the method of tenacity. But recall the very first lines of “The Fixation of Belief”: “Few persons care to study logic, because everybody conceives himself to be proficient enough in the art of reasoning already. But I observe that this satisfaction is limited to one’s own ratiocination, and does not extend to that of other men.”

Perhaps one example of the method of tenacity that is extremely widespread is the *confirmation bias fallacy* (tendency to search for evidence that supports your existing beliefs and disregard evidence that conflicts with those beliefs). For example, you might believe in ghosts and then when you hear a bump in the night, you will take it as evidence that ghosts exist. Can you think of other examples?

1.6.2 | The method of authority

The **method of authority** is a method adopted by various bodies (e.g. religious institutions, the State) that aims to fix the belief of individuals through indoctrination and force. It sets out a set of propositions to be believed, these propositions are reiterated perpetually, taught to young people, and various efforts are aimed at preventing individuals from believing or expressing contrary doctrines.

The State aims to remove even the possibility of thinking differently about the prescribed doctrines. They may simply keep the public ignorant, discourage free expression, engage in coordinated propaganda directed at hating contrary doctrines, or simply use force.

let all men who reject the established belief be terrified into silence. Let the people turn out and tar-and-feather such men, or let inquisitions be made into the manner of thinking of suspected persons, and, when they are found guilty of forbidden beliefs, let them be subjected to some signal punishment. When complete agreement could not otherwise be reached, a general massacre of all who have not thought in a certain way has proved a very effective means of settling opinion in a country (EP1:117).

In terms of **examples**, Peirce points to the fact that various religious and political beliefs have been fixed using this method. He points to Numa Popilius and Pius Nonus and to various aristocracies.⁴

Exercise 6

Peirce's text was published in 1878. We might read his remarks on the method of authority as not applying in our day and age. What present day examples of the method of authority do you see today (e.g. by the State, by the media, by the educational system, etc)?

In terms of its **efficacy**, Peirce notes that the method of authority is far superior to the method of tenacity. He contends that this particular method has yielded "majestic results" pointing to various huge structure (e.g. pyramids) and the longevity of various religions. Further, he notes that it is probably the **best method for the masses**, writing

For the mass of mankind, then, there is perhaps no better method than this. If it is their highest impulse to be intellectual slaves, then slaves they ought to remain (EP1:118).

However, he is quick to note a serious problem with the method.

Objection 3 *Peirce contends that "no institution can undertake to regulate opinions upon every subject" (EP1:118). Since various bodies of authority cannot regulate every possible opinion but instead can only regulate those opinions they take to be most important. This inability to regulate every opinion though creates a further problem.*

The problem is that since (i) not every opinion can be regulated and (ii) one opinion can influence another (social impulse), it follows that (iii) it is possible that the regulated opinions can be doubted.

Example 1.10: Influence of other cultures and ages

Peirce gives an example of how this might occur. Suppose Tek lives in a country where opinion on various topics are highly regulated. He, however, sees people in other countries who believe differently than he does or he reads books about people in different ages who believe differently than he does. He is thus led to believe that his beliefs are nothing more than accident; that is, he only believes what he believes because he lives in the culture that he does. Tek's beliefs thus have some degree of arbitrariness and perhaps determined by the caprice of those in power.

Ultimately then, Peirce thinks that rejecting the method of authority will lead to a search for a new method that not only produces an impulse to believe but "shall also decide what proposition it is which is to be believed" (EP1:118). The method not only will **fix belief** but also make its fixation not due to the caprice of agents of the State.

⁴One interesting point is that he contends that (i) the method almost always invites cruelty and atrocities and (ii) that the agents of this cruelty do not feel justified in sacrificing the interests of society for the sake of mercy. This seems to suggest that the method of authority runs so deep that the agents of the cruelty believe themselves to be doing good rather than harming others.

1.6.3 | The a priori method

The third method that Peirce considers is the **a priori method**. This method is somewhat unclear but Peirce makes several remarks concerning it.

Peirce characterizes the method as a process of unimpeded natural preference or reflection. He contends that the “very essence of it is to think as one is inclined to think.” The idea here is that the method does not rest upon and is not checked (or impeded) by observed facts but instead we simply think through whatever doubt we have until we happen upon a belief that seems right to us. The method is characterized by destroying doubt by finding propositions that are “agreeable to reason”, viz., what we find ourselves naturally inclined to believe

An alternative way that Peirce characterizes this method is that the method is dialogical in nature. That is, belief is fixed through a process of discussion. That is, individuals may have doubts about X and they converse until the point where they reach some sort of consensus about X.

Under these characterizations of the method, the **a priori method** is similar to **method of authority** in that it has the **potential fix belief in the community rather than merely the individual**.

Peirce notes that our conception of **art** and much of **metaphysics** is largely due to this method.

Example 1.11: Plato’s proportionality

distances of the planets are proportional to the distance of different strings that produce harmonious chords

Example 1.12: Self-interestedness

The idea that people only act with the aim of improving their own self-interest (pleasure)

In terms of the **merits** of the a priori method, Peirce notes that it is “far more intellectual and respectable from the point of view of reason” than the other two methods (EP1:119). And, at least on the surface, it looks **more intellectual** in that fixing one’s belief involves a kind of development or process of thought.

Objection 4 (arbitrary, capricious) *But, Peirce notes, that the a priori method is problematic for the same reason that the method of authority is problematic. Recall that Peirce criticized the method of authority because the method did not play a role in what proposition was to be believed. What did dictate the proposition to be believed was some individual or group (e.g. the State). Because of this, beliefs were marked by an arbitrary or capricious element.*

According to Peirce, the a priori method also involves arbitrary or capricious elements and so the method “does not differ in a very essential way from that of authority.” According to Peirce, the manner in which the a priori method develops our opinions to the point of fixation is similar to the development of taste. Peirce contends that

1. *while there is some development of thought and thus removal of arbitrariness, this development only involves the introduction of some other arbitrariness, e.g. cultivation of one’s view on what is*

fashionable

2. *like fashion, Peirce contends there is also a kind of capriciousness which is evidenced by the fact that what is believed often changes*

Again, the problem with the arbitrariness of the method is that **it elicits doubt**. Similar to the method of authority, we only need to have one opinion to create a doubt in an opinion fixed by the a priori method and this can cause us to doubt our belief. For instance, we only need to see that what is **agreeable to our reason is not agreeable to someone else's reason** and assuming we think they are just as reasonable as we are, we have reason to doubt our beliefs.

Example 1.13: Christianity in the Hindoo World

Peirce offers an example of this when he points to the problem of spreading Christianity to the Hindoos. He points out that even if the State plays no role stopping the spread of Christianity to the Hindoo world, their belief that the Christian way of treating women is immoral (a sort of development taste or view) blocks its spreading.

Exercise 7

What beliefs do you think are accepted simply because they seem agreeable to people's "reason" or "taste"? (e.g. the earth is flat).

1.6.4 | The scientific method

The fourth and final method is the **scientific method**.

First, Peirce begins the discussion of the scientific method by pointing out that in order to avoid the problem of arbitrariness and caprice, it is necessary that a method of fixing belief be founded on something our thought has no effect: an **external permanency**.

Second, Peirce is then quick to note that the external permanency in question cannot be some external thing that only one individual can access. He thus rejects the idea of some sort of mystical or religious access to truths given by God. The external permanency in question thus is a **publicly accessible external permanency**. Some thing that affects (or can effect) every individual.

Third, Peirce then notes that the publicly accessible external permanency affects every individual, it need not affect them in exactly the same way. For example, if we are both looking at a blue dress, we need not be effected by the dress in the same way (e.g. you may see the blue as a lighter shade of blue than I do, or it may look more vibrant to you because of where you are standing). Nevertheless, he contends what is important about the external permanency is that **while the affections of the external things may vary, the "method must be such that the ultimate conclusion of every man shall be the same"** (EP1:120). That is, while **real things may impact us differently, the conclusions we draw concerning that object should coincide**. That is, following this method is supposed to take individuals who follow it and **lead them to the same conclusion**.

To summarize, Peirce contends that the scientific method makes the following "fundamental hypothesis":

There are real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those realities affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really are, and any man, if he have sufficient experience and reason enough about it, will be led to the one true conclusion (EP1:120).

In short, the method of science

1. posits the existence of a (i) publicly accessible external permanency (reality), some real things independent of our opinions that influences the senses according to regular laws
2. is capable of taking individuals (who are variously affected by these things) from a state of doubt to a shared opinion

Peirce immediately raises the following objection to this claim.

Objection 5 *If we are to accept the scientific method, then we must believe that there are real things. But how can we know there are real things unless we use the scientific method?*

Peirce has roughly four responses.

First, he contends that the method is consistent with the reality of things when he contends that if the scientific method cannot prove the existence of real things, its use does not lead to a proof that there are no real things. Therefore, the assumption is **consistent** with the method.

Second, he also gives a kind of argument from the success of science. Namely, the use of the scientific method has led to great triumphs in settling opinion and so there is evidence to support the fundamental hypothesis that there are realities.

Exercise 8

There are two other explanations I don't fully follow. Take a look at both of these (EP1:120, W3:254) and see if you can make sense of them.

1.6.5 | Explaining the scientific method

Peirce makes it clear that he wishes to give **a more complete account of the the scientific method**. "The Fixation of Belief" is actually the first of a series of essays aimed at detailing what this fourth method involves. The entire series consists of the following essays:

1. "The Fixation of Belief"
2. "How to Make Our Ideas Clear"
3. "The Doctrine of Chances"
4. "The Probability of Induction"
5. "The Order of Nature"
6. "Deduction, Induction, and Hypothesis"

In "The Fixation of Belief" is merely a preliminary to this more complete description. In this essay, however, he does provide some points of contrast between the scientific method and the other three different methods.

The main point of contrast Peirce notes is that the scientific method **is the only method that presents a right and wrong way of using it.**

1. In the case of the **method of tenacity**, if you have a doubt about your use of the method, you only need to apply the method of tenacity and your doubt about its use is gone. In short, you cannot be wrong about your use of it.
2. In the case of the **method of authority**, the State may try to squash public dissent in a way that (from a rational point of view) is grossly ineffective. But, the only test of the method of authority is what the State thinks and so it cannot be wrong.
3. In the case of the **a priori method**, however you are naturally inclined to think is a correct use of the method. According to Peirce, using the a priori method to analyze how you think, you are inclined to think you are thinking correctly. And so you cannot be wrong in your use of the method.

For Peirce, it is only the **scientific method** that allows for the possibility of being right or wrong about your use of the method. According to Peirce, if you start from known and observed facts and reason to some unknown proposition, whether you reasoned correctly depends upon whether you used rules that lead you from true premises to a true conclusion. And, he contends the only way to test that is to apply the scientific method to your method of reasoning. He writes:

The test of whether I am truly following the method is not an immediate appeal to my feelings and purposes, but, on the contrary, itself involves the application of the method. Hence it is that bad reasoning as well as good reasoning is possible; and this fact is the foundation of the practical side of logic.

Exercise 9

It is not clear to me what Peirce is saying here. On the one hand, he seems to suggest that we can apply the scientific method to the scientific method and this can tell us whether or not we are applying the method correctly. This would be something like, we can give a logical analysis of the scientific method (e.g. were the statistical methods used correctly, etc.).

How do you interpret the idea that the scientific method is the only method can distinguish between a right and wrong way or using it?

While Peirce only points out the fact that the scientific method is the only method that gives you a way of determining if it is applied correctly, from what he says earlier, we can point to a number of other strengths of the scientific method:

1. not determined by human caprice (arbitrariness) because it depends upon an external reality

2. not determined by individual self-consciousness (public, in line with the social impulse)
3. it is the only method that presents a right and wrong way to use it
4. it is the only method that allows for one's belief to coincide with fact
5. capable of fixing not only an individual's belief but the belief of the community

1.6.6 | The strengths of the other methods

Peirce is keen to note that it is not the case that the other three methods have no advantage over the scientific method.

The **a priori method** is advantageous because its conclusions are often comfortable. Peirce seems to imply that the a priori method lends itself to conclusions that make us happy or that inflate our egos. That is, we may be inclined to think that our neighbors are kind, or that driving cars is safe, or that you yourself are a good person. Peirce suggests that the method puts us in a "pleasing dream" until we are woken up by "rough facts".

The **method of authority** has its advantage because it has been and always will be the method that will govern the masses. Peirce also offers up several other interesting points on this method:

1. the State will always be inclined to suppress "dangerous reasoning" (EP1:121)
2. that even when the State does not use force to suppress dangerous reasoning, they will use other means: "uniformity of opinion will be secured by a moral terrorism to which the respectability of society will give its thorough approval" (EP1:122).
3. that intellectuals almost never reveal their full thought since they are aware that any sort of tabooed beliefs will mean they will be subjected to a kind of cruelty: "wherever you are, let it be known that you seriously hold a tabooed belief, and you may be perfectly sure of being treated with a cruelty less brutal but more refined than hunting you like a wolf" (EP1:122)

Concerning the **method of tenacity**, Peirce notes that it is advantageous (or admirable) for its "strength, simplicity, and directness". It is the method that Peirce says he admires the most as it takes a level of courageousness to completely dismiss reason and hold fast to one's beliefs.

Exercise 10

Can you think of any other advantages that either Peirce mentions or you can think of about the three non-scientific methods?

How to Make our Ideas Clear

2.1 | Introduction

We analyzed the “The Fixation of Belief”, the first essay of Peirce’s “Illustrations of the Logic of Science”. The second essay in this set of illustrations is Peirce’s “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”. In this essay, Peirce:

1. outlines two grades of clarity concerning the apprehension of ideas
2. articulate a new, third grade of clarity: the pragmatic grade of clarity
3. uses this third grade of clarity methodologically to clarify the notice of hardness, weight, and force
4. also uses this new grade of clarity to clarify the notion of *reality*

This essay is often cited as the first published statement of pragmatism and often taken to be one of the most important essays in classical American philosophy.

2.2 | Section I

2.2.1 | The three grades of clarity

We want our ideas to be clear. We want to know what we mean, what we are talking about, and insofar as ideas are used to certain effect, we want to know the implications of various ideas. In this first section, Peirce outlines two, initial grades of clarity and their problems.

2.2.2 | The first grade of clarity

The first grade of clarity is that of **clearness**.

Definition 2.1: clear idea

According to Peirce, a “clear idea is defined as one which is so apprehended that it will be recognized wherever it is met with, and so that no other will be mistaken for it.” It is marked by familiarity with an idea. It is one that we would never feel that we would fail to recognize and “under no circumstances to mistake another for it” (EP1:124). It is one in which we “have lost all hesitancy in recognizing it in ordinary cases” (EP1:125).

Definition 2.2: obscure idea

An obscure idea is thus one that will not be recognized wherever it is met with and so admits the possibility of being mistaken with other ideas.

Example 2.1: gold for a pawnshop owner

de Waal gives the following example of a clear idea: “The first grade can be exemplified by a seasoned pawnshop owner’s idea of gold. His idea of gold allows him to recognize that an object is made of gold the moment he sees it, and allows him to interpret sentences that contain the word “gold”.^a

^aCornelia de Waal. *Peirce: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 111.

2.2.3 | The second grade of clarity

The second grade of clarity is **distinctness** (or a distinct apprehension of an idea).

Definition 2.3: distinct idea

A distinct idea is “defined as one which contains nothing which is not clear” That is, when we have a distinct idea, “we can give a **precise definition** of it, in abstract terms” (EP1:125, my emphasis), or “an abstract logical analysis of it into its ultimate elements, or as a complete an analysis as we can compass” (CP6.481).

The idea here is that if you have a distinct idea, then you can define the idea itself with a definition. In addition, nothing in your definition is undefined. That is, you can also define all of the constituent ideas you use to define the target idea.

Example 2.2: gold

Gold is the chemical element with atomic number 79 is a distinct idea.

It is worth noting that your idea (i) need not correspond with the ideas of others or (ii) need not be a final definition.

2.2.4 | The natural order of gaining clarity

There is some suggestion that there is a natural order (or set of steps) to gaining clarity concerning our ideas. Peirce notes that “the books are right in making familiarity with a notion the first step

toward clearness of apprehension, and the defining of it the second” (EP1:126). Let’s call these the **first** and **second** grades of clarity.

- First grade of clarity: clear apprehension of an idea
- Second grade of clarity: distinct apprehension of an idea

Example 2.3: clear and distinct idea

First, I may believe that when I know a domestic cat when I see it. This would be a *clear* apprehension of the idea of a cat. Next, I can define a domestic cat as a small, typically furry, carnivorous feline. This would be a *distinct* apprehension of the idea of a domestic cat.

2.2.5 | Problems with clear and distinct ideas

Peirce seems to suggest that there are **problems** with the degree of clarity offered by both kinds of apprehension. In both cases, ideas that have these properties have a greater degree of clarity than those that are obscure but there is still some imprecision.

Objection 6 *subjective feeling of mastery* With respect to **clear ideas**, Peirce contends that the notion of clearness only amounts to a **subjective feeling of mastery** (EP1:125) and so notes that it is a very small merit of an idea to be clear. I may believe myself to be distinguish one cat from another, but this may very well be wrong. The pawnshop owner may believe an item to be gold but the item may not be gold.

In short, the problem with clear ideas is that the clarity is based entirely on subjective considerations. Suppose I think my ideas about taxation, politics, God, or what it means to be a good friend are clear. I may act as though I can always pick out a good friend when I see one, but I may be wrong about the matter.

Objection 7 *distinct ideas are not instructive* With respect to **distinct ideas**, Peirce seems to contend that while a distinct apprehension of ideas can help to organize our thoughts, “[n]othing new can ever be learned by analyzing definitions” (EP1:126). Defining an idea thus cannot bring to light any unclarity in the idea itself.

Example 2.4: domestic cat

My definition of a cat allows me to distinguish cats from other animals (e.g. dogs) but it also lacks clarity that cannot be corrected by analyzing the definition itself: is a small cougar a cat? Analyzing the definition does not tell me.

Example 2.5: sport

I might define a “sport” as a game that involves physical activity. But this definition lacks clarity that cannot be corrected by analyzing the definition by itself: is wrestling with my brother a sport? are esports sports? Analyzing the definition does not tell me.

2.2.6 | Descartes's unclarity

The lack of clarity of ideas manifests itself philosophically. Peirce's example comes from Descartes. On Peirce's analysis Descartes discarded the method of authority for the **a priori method**. With the use of a methodological skepticism to obtain a set of foundational ideas, Descartes claimed to obtain a set of *indubitable* ideas (ideas that cannot be doubted). One criteria for determining that an idea is indubitable is that the idea is **clear**.

Peirce points out two problems with this approach.

First, Peirce reiterates the point he made earlier that the first degree of clarity is nothing more than a subjective feeling of mastery. Peirce notes that Descartes never really distinguished "between an idea *seeming* clear and really being so" (EP1:125). That is, Descartes never doubted that ideas that *seemed clear to him* are, in fact, clear. Another way of putting this is that Descartes was not clear that the ideas he took to be indubitable were, in fact, indubitable.

Second, Peirce notes that Descartes employed a second criteria for ideas being indubitable. Namely, not only should the idea be clear but they also need to be **distinct**. Peirce notes that Descartes is not clear what he means by "distinct" but suggests that the analysis of the definitions of these ideas never bring to light any obscurity. In other words, even if an idea is indistinct, one would never know simply through definitions.

Given the subjectivity problem with clear ideas and the circularity problem with distinct ideas, Peirce contends that these two criteria for clarity are **outdated** and it is "now time to formulate the method of attaining to a more perfect clearness of thought, such as we see and admire in the thinkers of our own time" (EP1:125). In other words, Peirce plans on providing a **third grade of clarity**.

2.2.7 | The importance of clear ideas

One question Peirce considers is: *Why is having more clarity important?* Peirce contends that it is the **role of logic to tell us how to make our ideas clear** and then proceeds to make a few points concerning the topic of having clear ideas:

1. it is better to have a few clear ideas than a lot of confused ideas
2. over time we often get clear on various ideas but it is better to have clear ideas earlier in life than later in life
3. even a single unclear idea can be destructive

Peirce doesn't give a detailed argument for the above claims, but he makes a rather powerful statement concerning the above.

For an individual, however, there can be no question that a few clear ideas are worth more than many confused ones. A young man would hardly be persuaded to sacrifice the greater part of his thoughts to save the rest; and the muddled head is the least apt to see the necessity of such a sacrifice. Him we can usually only commiserate, as a person with a congenital defect. Time will help him, but intellectual maturity with regard to clearness comes rather late, an unfortunate arrangement of Nature, inasmuch as clearness is of less use to a man settled in life, whose errors

have in great measure had their effect, than it would be to one whose path lies before him. It is terrible to see how a single unclear idea, a single formula without meaning, lurking in a young man's head, will sometimes act like an obstruction of inert matter in an artery, hindering the nutrition of the brain, and condemning its victim to pine away in the fullness of his intellectual vigor and in the midst of intellectual plenty. Many a man has cherished for years as his hobby some vague shadow of an idea, too meaningless to be positively false; he has, nevertheless, passionately loved it, has made it his companion by day and by night, and has given to it his strength and his life, leaving all other occupations for its sake, and in short has lived with it and for it, until it has become, as it were, flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone; and then he has waked up some bright morning to find it gone, clean vanished away like the beautiful Melusina of the fable, and the essence of his life gone with it. I have myself known such a man; and who can tell how many histories of circle-squarers, metaphysicians, astrologers, and what not, may not be told in the old German story?
— EP1:127

Exercise 11

Take a look at the above passage. Can you think of any ideas that people are unclear about that have the such a negative impact? Do you agree with Peirce's claim that it would be better for an individual to give up most of their ideas for a few clear ones?

2.3 | Section II

In Section II Peirce articulates **the third grade of clarity**. We will refer to this grade of clarity as the **pragmatic grade of clarity** or **the pragmatic apprehension of an idea** and we will refer to the maxim or rule that formulates this grade of clarity as the **pragmatic maxim**.

2.3.1 | Three fallacies of unclarity

Recall that Peirce contends that it the task of logic to tell us how to make our ideas clear. Perhaps one of the reasons Peirce thinks this is the task of logic is because a lack of clarity about ideas leads to **fallacious reasoning**. Peirce points out three such examples:

1. Reasoning that two beliefs are *different* merely from the fact that they are presented differently
2. Reasoning that because our idea of something is unclear, it follows that the object itself is mysterious or complex or opaque
3. Reasoning from the grammar of a language to the nature of things.

2.3.2 | Case 1: Same belief, different presentations

The first case involves reasoning that two beliefs are different merely from the fact that they are presented differently. Peirce notes that beliefs are sometimes taken to be different when the difference is simply found in the way that the belief is expressed.

To illustrate, suppose someone reasons as follows:

- P1: There are objects arranged in Figure 1

- P2: There are objects arranged in Figure 2
- P3: The objects in Figure 1 and Figure 2 look different in arrangement.
- C: Therefore, the objects are different objects.

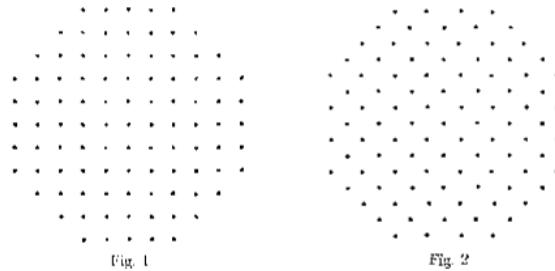


Figure 2.1: Figure 1 and Figure 2

Peirce contends that this argument is invalid (more on why this is later).

Note 2 *The point Peirce is making is slightly different from the one I am saying he is making. Peirce is saying that we cannot reason from the fact that two beliefs are expressed differently (from their mode of presentation) to the conclusion that the beliefs themselves are different.*

Let's consider a different illustration of this same fallacy. Suppose that there is a red dress in a room. Individuals are asked to enter the room, look at the color of the dress, state the color of the dress, and exit the room, and then reenter and perform the same task. Suppose that while they exit the room, we change the lighting in the room so that the dress looks differently.

A person may reason as follows:

- P1: I went into the room at time t_1 and the dress looked red.
- P2: I went into the room at time t_2 and the dress looked green.
- P3: The dress looked different at time t_1 than it did at time t_2 .
- C: Therefore, the dresses are different.

In short, we reason incorrectly about objects given the different modes in which those ideas are presented.

Exercise 12

Peirce notes that the harm caused by thinking *two beliefs that are the same* are different can be as great as the harm caused by thinking *two beliefs that are different* are the same. That is, where $B_1 = B_2$ but where $Pres(B_1) \neq Pres(B_2)$ and so someone infers $B_1 \neq B_2$. Can you think of an some examples of this? One example that occurs to me are cases where people are actually in agreement (they have the same belief) about an issue but seem to argue with each other because Person A expresses belief as X and Person B expresses belief B as Y.

2.3.3 | Case 2: Reading unclarity into the object

The **second** case involves confusing unclarity of thought with the unclarity in the object. Suppose we have an idea of X and our idea of X is highly unclear. Rather than reasoning that perhaps the unclarity of X is *merely subjective*, we may reason that X itself is mysterious or opaque.

- P1: My idea of X is unclear (subjective unclarity).
- P2: Therefore, X itself is unclear (objective unclarity).

Example 2.6: logic formula are mysterious

Suppose David is teaching a symbolic logic course. He gives a precise definition of what it means for a certain set of symbols to be considered a well-formed formula. He further gives precise rules of actions for creating these well-formed formulas. Now suppose Tek is a student. Tek is confused by the notion of a well-formed formula. He has the sensation of feeling confused. He thus draws the conclusion that that the idea of a well-formed formula is unclear or the logic itself is mysterious or unclear.

Example 2.7: vague objects

Perhaps the willingness to posit the existence of *vague objects* is another example. Let's take the idea of a *mountain*. A mountain is defined as "a large natural elevation on a large body's (planet's) surface that rises abruptly from the surrounding parts of the body". But it is unclear where the boundary is between a *mountain* and *large hill*. Given this unclarity, we might thus contend that mountains themselves are *vague objects*, viz., they have *fuzzy boundaries* (like a cloud).⁴

⁴For more on vague objects, see Evans, Gareth. 1978. Can there be vague objects? *Analysis*. 38(4):208. Keil, Geert. 2013. Introduction: Vagueness and Ontology. *Metaphysica*. 14(2):149-164.

Exercise 13

Can you think of any examples where we might infer that an object is mysterious simply because our idea of that thing is unclear?

Peirce thinks that this second case is particularly problematic in metaphysics and this type of argument is used by opponents of rational thought. He writes:

Instead of perceiving that the obscurity is purely subjective, we fancy that we contemplate a quality of the object which is essentially mysterious; and if our conception be afterward presented to us in a clear form we do not recognize it as the same, owing to the absence of the feeling of unintelligibility. So long as this deception lasts, it obviously puts an impassible barrier in the way of perspicuous thinking; so that it equally interests the opponents of rational thought to perpetuate it, and its adherents to guard against it.

We might try to capture what Peirce in mind with the following dialogue:

- A: The notion X is very mysterious.
- B: No, it isn't at all. X can be clarified as follows: x, y, z .
- A: Ah! that is a very clear account of an idea, but it cannot be X since when I think about X , I have a feeling of unclarity and your definition lacks any unclarity and so your account of X cannot be X .

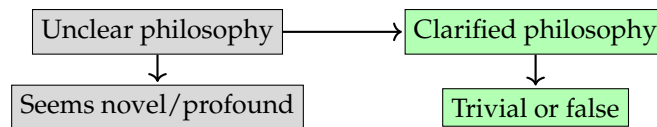


Figure 2.2: Peirce suggests that certain philosophies have unclear ideas. The unclarity of these ideas often have power in that they allow for drawing certain conclusions that are against reason. The ideas themselves may seem profound, novel, or exciting. Peirce notes that the attempt to clarify these ideas will strike many as not as a clarification but as a different idea altogether since the clarified idea lacks the unclarity of the original.

2.3.4 | Case 3: The representational fallacy

The **third** case is not very clear to me. Peirce seems to be saying that it is fallacious to read off various linguistic features of words into their nature. He might be trying to formulate a specific form of the **representational fallacy**. This is the general approach of reading metaphysics off of language.

Example 2.8

In the English language, sentences have **tense** (e.g. past tense, present tense, and future tense). We might read off of the tense of a language to the fact that there is, objectively speaking, something like objectively real past, objectively real present, and objectively real future.

- Present tense: John **is** running to the store is *true* iff John runs to the store in the present moment.
- Future tense: John **will** run to the store is *true* iff John runs to the store in future.
- Past tense: John **ran** to the store is *true* iff John runs to the store in the past.

This would contrast with the idea that the past, present, and future are subjective or perspectival notions and that, objectively speaking, the only thing that is real are temporal relations between events.

It may be the case that there is an objective past, present, and future but it would be fallacious to say that **because language has tense, reality has tense**.

Exercise 14

I don't understand Peirce's illustration of this third sophism. He writes "When I just said that thought is an *action*, and that it consists in a *relation*, although a person performs an action but not a relation, which can only be the result of an action, yet there was no inconsistency in what I said, but only a grammatical vagueness. Can you make sense of this?"

2.3.5 | The third grade of clarity

Peirce's text is somewhat hard to understand on its own so I'm going to give you an interpretation that takes into account some later work by Peirce.

First, let's start out with the maxim that is supposed to clarify how to make our ideas clear according to the third grade of clarity. This maxim is later referred to as **the pragmatic maxim** but here it is referred to as the "third grade of clearness of apprehension".

Definition 2.4: pragmatic maxim

"Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object" (EP1:132).

Exercise 15

The formulation of the pragmatic maxim is one of the most famous lines in all of American philosophy. This passage here is said to begin a distinctly American form of philosophy: pragmatic philosophy. Take a look at it and try to formulate it in your own words

The pragmatic maxim might be said to have two parts: (i) the **methodological part** and (ii) the **metaphysical part**.

2.3.5.1 | The methodological part

The methodological part pertains to **how to pragmatically clarify an idea**. It tells you what you need to do to make your idea clear.

The methodological part of the pragmatic maxim refers to this part: "Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have."

One way to apply the pragmatic maxim is to take an idea, predicate it of something (or define it using the second grade of clarity), then put it in a conditional where the **antecedent of the conditional** specifies an experiential circumstance (or conditions) and the **consequent of the conditional** specifies the experiential result.

Note 3 *The pragmatic maxim refers to conceivable practical effects and here we are interpreting this as experiential effects as Peirce seems to use the terms synonymously (sometimes he refers to "sensible effects"). Nevertheless, one open question is what Peirce means by "practical effects" or "experience"*

Here is an example from Albert Atkin's entry "Charles Sanders Peirce: Pragmatism." See <https://www.iep.utm.edu/peircepr>

from the use of "vinegar" in definitional propositions like "vinegar is diluted acetic acid" and "vinegar is sharp to taste," I can derive a list of conditional propositions which indicate what to expect from actions upon, and interactions with, this concept.

So, for instance, “vinegar is acetic acid” would lead me to form the expectation that “If vinegar is acetic acid, then if I dip litmus paper into it, it will turn red.”

Thus:

- 2nd grade: vinegar is acetic acid
- 3rd grade: if vinegar is acetic acid, then if I dip litmus paper into it (antecedent condition), it will turn red (consequent)

Note, however, if we wish to obtain a third grade of clarity about *vinegar*, we would list off **all** of the conditional propositions that detail what would happen given some circumstance. That is, we would provide a list of sentences that have the following form:

if vinegar is acetic acid, then if I X occurs (antecedent of the conditional), Y will occur (the consequent of the conditional), where X and Y are both experiential in nature

Another example is *lithium*. Lithium can be given a **second grade of apprehension** by giving it an abstract definition. Such a definition would be something like: the chemical element with atomic number 3. However, lithium can also be defined pragmatically by specifying **what experiential effects would result under various circumstances**. Here is Peirce’s definition:

if you search among minerals that are vitreous, translucent, grey or white, very hard, brittle, and insoluble, for one which imparts a crimson tinge to an unluminous flame, this mineral being triturated with lime or witherite rats-bane, and then fused, can be partly dissolved in muriatic acid; and if this solution be evaporated, and the residue be extracted with sulphuric acid, and duly purified, it can be converted by ordinary methods into a chloride, which being obtained in the solid state, fused, and electrolyzed with half a dozen powerful cells, will yield a globule of a pinkish silvery metal that will float on gasolene; and the material of that is a specimen of lithium (CP2.330).

2.3.6 | The advantage of pragmatic ideas

Recall that Peirce complained that the first grade of clarity was problematic because it relied wholly on a subjective feeling of mastery and the second grade of clarity was problematic because we could never add anything new through definitions. This is not a problem for the pragmatic view for pragmatic definitions **are connected to experience and thus our ideas of things are capable of growing as we learn more about those things**.

Example 2.9: growth of ideas

Suppose Tek has just learned that vinegar is diluted acetic acid. His apprehension of vinegar is at the second grade of clarity. Now suppose that he tries to clarify his idea of vinegar pragmatically. To his idea of vinegar, he applies the pragmatic maxim and so now his idea of vinegar includes a host of conditionals, e.g. if vinegar is acetic acid, then if I pour a base like baking soda into it, there will be a bubbling. But later, with more experience, he can add more conditionals to his conception of vinegar, e.g. "If vinegar is diluted acetic acid, then if I dip litmus paper into it, it will turn red."

As de Waal (p.113) puts this same point:

The definition of lithium shows that pragmatistic definitions are open-ended. Over time, we may come to know much more about lithium, and that will force us to expand or refine our definition. In this way, what our terms mean [...] is a *product* of inquiry, and not something that is determined independent of and antecedent to inquiry.¹

2.3.6.1 | The metaphysical part

The metaphysical portion of the pragmatic maxim makes a statement about the content of our ideas.

Recall the pragmatic maxim noting the emphasized portion: "Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, **our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object**" (EP1:132, my emphasis).

If the methodological part of the pragmatic maxim concerns the clarification of ideas to a new (third) grade of clarity using conditionals, the metaphysical portion makes the assertion that **our conception of these effects (in the form of conditionals) is our entire understanding of the conception**. That is, there is nothing more to our idea than all of the conditionals that list the experiential effects.

Thus, our idea is nothing more than the conceivable sensory or experiential effects of the object given certain conditions.

2.3.7 | Transubstantiation: a return to the sophisms

Recall that Peirce thinks that keeping the above in mind will guard against various sophisms (fallacies). To illustrate, Peirce considers the Catholic view on **transubstantiation**. According to Peirce, Catholics think that in the course of a mass, bread and water are transformed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ, respectively. However, they contend that while a transformation has occurred, there is no transformation in terms of the sensible qualities of the bread and wine. That is, there is no assertion that the wine now has the sensible qualities of blood or the bread has the sensible qualities of human flesh.

So what we have here is:

¹Waal, *Peirce: A Guide for the Perplexed*, p. 113.

1. A belief that here are objects that are bread and wine and experientially they are bread and wine
2. A belief that here are objects that are body and blood but experientially they are bread and wine

If we apply the pragmatic maxim (the **methodological part**) to both of these beliefs, we find that they have the same experiential effects:

1. If these objects are **bread and wine** and experientially they are bread and wine, then if I do X, Y should result
2. If these objects are **body and blood** and experientially they are bread and wine, then if I do X, Y should result

Now applying the metaphysical part, it follows that our conception of the effects (the conditionals) is the whole of our conception of the objects (the bread/body, wine/blood). But since the **effects are absolutely identical**, there is no meaningful difference between the bread and wine that looks like bread and wine *and* the body and blood that looks like bread and wine.

Peirce expresses this as follows:

we can consequently mean nothing by wine but what has certain effects, direct or indirect, upon the senses; and to talk of something as having all the sensible characters of wine, yet being in reality blood, is senseless jargon (EP1:131)

While Peirce takes the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation to be nonsense, he is not trying to engage in religious argumentation. Instead, he is trying to make a point about **ideas** or **concepts**. He is arguing that our idea of something is nothing more than our idea of that thing's conceivable sensible effects.

One might object as follows:

Objection 8 *When I consume the body and blood of Christ, I feel differently than I do when I eat bread and wine. And so, there must be a difference between the body and blood of Christ as it is consumed during mass as opposed to bread and wine.*

Peirce's response is that this confuses the **sensations or experiences we have that accompany our experiences (or thoughts)** with the **effects of the object** itself. That is, our feelings about the bread and wine are not effects of the objects but are simply additional thoughts we have while consuming the bread and wine during mass.

Our idea of anything *is* our idea of its sensible effects; and if we fancy that we have any other we deceive ourselves, and mistake a mere sensation accompanying the thought for a part of the thought itself (EP1:132).

Here Peirce is distinguishing between *X*'s **sensible effects** and the various **thoughts/feelings we have when we think about those sensible effects**.

Example 2.10: yogurt and Penn State football

Suppose I am thinking about yogurt. I may pragmatically analyze my idea by thinking about the sensible effects of yogurt but I may also think about Penn State football whenever I am thinking about yogurt. Penn State football is simply a thought that accompanies my thought of yogurt's sensible effects. **It forms no part of the meaning or the idea of yogurt itself.**

Exercise 16

What do you think of Peirce's use of the pragmatic maxim to show that transubstantiation is metaphysical mumbo-jumbo? Can you think of any other philosophical (or non-philosophical) ideas that the pragmatic maxim might show reduce to senseless jargon?

2.4 | Section III

In this section, Peirce offers up some examples where he applies the pragmatic maxim. He applies the maxim to the following notions:

1. hardness
2. weight
3. force

We will look at hardness and weight.

Note 4 *I don't fully follow Peirce's application of the pragmatic maxim to the notion of force. This might be a good idea for a paper if you have a good understanding of physics (or the history of physics).*

2.4.1 | Hardness

Peirce begins with what he takes to be the simplest possible illustration. The notion of *hardness*, pragmatically considered is nothing more than *it will not be scratched by many other substances*.

We can formulate this pragmatically as follows: *if a substance is hard, then if it is rubbed against another object with pressure, it will not be scratched by many other objects*.

Again, note that the meaning of *hardness* is unpacked in terms of a conditional that specifies what experiential effects will occur (non-scratching) given certain **antecedent conditions** (the substance being rubbed against another object).

Recall that earlier pointed out certain sophisms regarding our ideas. In the discussion of hardness, he offers another. Namely, he considers whether there is any difference between the following two beliefs:

1. hard things are hard

2. hard things are soft until they are touched, and when they are touched, they become hard

Peirce says that these two beliefs are pragmatically identical since they have the same conceivable effects. For Peirce, the only difference is that the second belief involves a more complicated arrangement of facts.

2.4.2 | Weight

Peirce offers a pragmatic clarification of weight as follows. To say an object is heavy is to say that if that there is no opposing force on that object, that object will fall.

Again, he clarifies the meaning of *weight* or *heaviness* in terms of its experiential effects given some antecedent condition.

2.5 | Section IV

It is perhaps natural to interpret the meaning of **physical terms** (e.g. hardness, weight, force, lithium) in terms of their sensible effects. But, Peirce, extends the use of pragmatic maxim to **philosophical terms**.

In this section, Peirce uses the pragmatic maxim to clarify the notion of **reality**.

Peirce's method of applying the pragmatic maxim to **reality** proceeds in a step by step fashion.

First, he notes that everyone has a grasp of reality according to the first grade of clarity (familiarity). That is, we feel as though we recognize things that are real from those that are fictitious. Even children believe themselves to distinguish between real things from make-believe things.

Second, he notes that our understanding of reality according to the second grade of clarity is not very common. That is, very few people have taken the effort to give an abstract definition of reality. When they do, there definition is something like the following.

Definition 2.5: reality, second grade of clarity

The real is that whose characters are independent of how you or I (or anybody) may think them to be

Peirce contends that this does not make the idea of reality perfectly clear and so it is necessary to apply the pragmatic maxim to the abstract definition.

Third, recall that according to the pragmatic maxim, our conception of something is found in **its experiential effects**. The manner in which this is formulated is as a conditional. Let's provide a schema of a pragmatic clarification of reality:

if the *real* is that whose characters are independent of how you or I (or anybody) may think them to be (second grade of clarity), then if **antecedent condition**, then **consequent condition**.

Next, let's fill in this schema. Peirce contends that the particular effects of real things are to produce *true beliefs*. Thus,

if **X is real** and thus it is that whose characters are independent of how you or I (or anybody) may think them to be (second grade of clarity), then if **antecedent condition**, then **X will produce the true belief Y**.

There are still two things missing from the above clarification of *reality*:

1. the antecedent conditions required for real objects to produce true beliefs
2. what we mean by true beliefs (a clarification of it as an experiential effect)

For Peirce, at least one part of the antecedent conditions are the various methods we might take. Let's plug the various methods into Peirce's pragmatic formulation and how the various methods would understand truth (I leave out the part that defines the meaning of the real).

1. **Method of tenacity**: if **X is real**, then if **the method of tenacity is pursued**, then X will produce a true belief about X (and this true belief is whatever belief I am tenaciously holding about X).
2. **Method of authority**: if **X is real**, then if **the method of authority is pursued**, then X will produce a true belief about X (and this true belief is whatever belief agents of the State choose to enforce).
3. **A priori method**: if **X is real**, then if **a priori method is pursued**, then ?

Objection 9 (contradiction) *Note that the methods lead to contradiction. For example, concerning the method of tenacity, it is inconsistent to say*

1. *the real thing X determines a true belief about X, and*
2. *it is simply me who is determining a true belief about*

Similarly, concerning the method of authority, it is inconsistent to say that the real thing X determines a true belief about X but it is simply agents of the state who determine the truth about X.

When following the method of science, the effect of the real on belief is to lead **those who follow the method to some ultimately fated opinion or belief**. That is, the experience effect of the real is to lead us to an ultimate convergence of opinion, a "fated" opinion, an ultimately fixed belief. In short, the experiential effect of the real is to lead us to the truth and the truth for Peirce is the opinion that is fated to be ultimately agreed upon by all those who investigate (follow the scientific method)

Definition 2.6: reality pragmatically clarified

If **X is real**, then if **the method of science is pursued** sufficiently far, then X **will** lead those who follow the method to some final opinion (some ultimately fixed belief, which is the same as a true belief).

Note that Peirce says:

1. the experiential effect of the real is to lead us to a destined opinion
2. that in order for the real to have this effect, the scientific method must be pursued sufficiently far
3. provided the scientific method is pursued sufficiently, the destined result **will** occur

Thus, for Peirce, what is meant by **truth** is “the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate” and reality is nothing more than “the object represented in this opinion” (EP1:139).

Definition 2.7: reality, third grade of clarity

The real is the object that is represented in the final (destined, fated) opinion

2.5.1 | Objections

In this section, we consider various objections to Peirce’s claim that:

if **X is real**, then if **the method of science is pursued** sufficiently far, then **X will** lead those who follow the method to some final opinion (some ultimately fixed belief, which is the same as a true belief).

2.5.1.1 | Conflicts with the definition of reality

Objection 10 (opposed to the definition of reality) *Recall that the definition of **reality** (according to the second grade of clarity) was **that whose characters are independent of what anybody may think them to be**. But here the real appears to depend upon what will be ultimately thought.*

Peirce’s reply is that while **reality is not independent of thought in general**, it is **independent of what you or I or any finite number of people think about it**. Reality thus depends upon what the final opinion is, but does not depend upon what any particular person thinks about it.

Objection 11 (Species extinction) *Let’s assume that **X is real**, and that **the method of science is pursued** sufficiently far insofar that human beings as a species push it as far as they are able. But now suppose that the human species goes extinct before they reach some ultimate fixation of belief.*

If this is the case,

1. *the method of science is pursued sufficiently far*
2. *the real did not fix belief*

Peirce responds as follows:

[I]f, after the extinction of our race, another should arise with faculties and disposition for investigation, that true opinion must be the one which they would ultimately come to. "Truth crushed to earth shall rise again,"

In other words, he substitutes (1) for (2) below:

1. if **X is real**, then if the method of science is pursued sufficiently far **by human beings**, then **X will** lead those who follow the method to some final opinion (some ultimately fixed belief, which is the same as a true belief).
2. if **X is real**, then if the method of science is pursued sufficiently far **by any beings that can pursue the scientific method**, then **X will** lead those who follow the method to some final opinion (some ultimately fixed belief, which is the same as a true belief).

Objection 12 *Let's assume that X is real, and that the method of science is pursued sufficiently far by any beings that can pursue the scientific method. But now consider that there are certain realities that are closed off to human inquiry, viz., buried secrets. If this is the case, then there would never be a fixed opinion regardless of how far the method was pursued.*

Example 2.11: buried secret

Whether Napoleon winked while sleeping in a room that was totally dark.

Example 2.12: buried secret

Whether Napoleon winked while sleeping in a room that was totally dark.

Peirce responds to this type of objection in at least two ways.

First, Peirce contends that we don't need to test objects directly to know if they have certain properties. For example, suppose a diamond was untouched and burned up before there was an opportunity to test its hardness. Peirce argued that we could determine that the untouched diamond was hard because the *hardness of a diamond* is inseparable from other properties known to belong in diamonds.

[b]eing a diamond, it was amass of pure carbon, in the form of amore or less transparent crystal (brittle, and of facile octahedral cleavage, unless it was of an unheard-of variety), which, if not trimmed after one of the fashions in which diamonds may be trimmed, took the shape of an octahedron, apparently regular (I need not go into minutiae), with grooved edges, and probably with some curved faces. Without being subjected to any considerable pressure, it could be found to be insoluble, very highly refractive, showing under radium rays (and perhaps under 'dark light' and X-rays) a peculiar bluish phosphorescence, having as high a specific gravity as realgar (CP5.457).

A **second** reply that Peirce gives is that we cannot say for certain whether **any particular fact** will never be known. The reason for this that there are numerous cases whether individuals

pointed out that something would never be known, only for it to be discovered in a relatively short time thereafter. The idea then is that there may be future advancements to science that will allow us to discover facts that we previously thought to be unknowable.

Objection 13 *This reply is unsatisfactory since it may prove that we cannot know whether any particular fact will be unknowable but it doesn't prove that there are no unknowable facts. In other words, it is simply a call for inquirers to hold out hope for the ultimate fixation of all true propositions.*²

2.6 | Some final remarks

Peirce's further application of the pragmatic maxim to reality is important because it can be said to mark an important moment in philosophy in the United States. It marks what is sometimes considered the first original contribution made to philosophy by an American. This philosophy is **pragmatism**.

How one ought to understand pragmatism is an open question.

First, one can take pragmatism in a **narrow** or **methodological way** by taking it to be nothing more than a way of making certain ideas clear. As Peirce put it:

Pragmatism makes or ought to make no pretension to throwing positive light on any problem. It is merely a logical maxim for laying the dust of pseudoproblems, and thus enabling us to discern what pertinent facts the phenomena may present. But this is a good half of the task of philosophy. (CP8.186)

Second, one can take pragmatism in a **broader** or **metaphysical way**. On this treatment of pragmatism, pragmatism refers does not simply clarify our ideas, but also tells us which ideas are true or false. Peirce's pragmatism makes no such pretension for at the end of "How to Make Our Ideas Clear", he writes:

We have, hitherto, not crossed the threshold of scientific logic. It is certainly important to know how to make our ideas clear, but they may be ever so clear without being true. (EP1:141)

Pragmatism as a branch (or school) of philosophy refers to the use of some form of pragmatic analysis to clarify philosophical concepts.

²For Peirce's response, see (Ryan Pollock and David W. Agler. "Hume and Peirce on the Ultimate Stability of Belief". In: *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 97.2 [2016], pp. 245–269. ISSN: 02790750. DOI: [10.1111/papq.12118](https://doi.org/10.1111/papq.12118). URL: <http://doi.wiley.com/10.1111/papq.12118> [visited on 02/27/2019])

What Pragmatism Means

3.1 | Pragmatism and the squirrel example

James begins his “What Pragmatism Means” with an illustration of his method. Here is the opening quotation:

SOME YEARS AGO, being with a camping party in the mountains, I returned from a solitary ramble to find every one engaged in a ferocious metaphysical dispute. The corpus of the dispute was a squirrel – a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree-trunk; while over against the tree’s opposite side a human being was imagined to stand. This human witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving rapidly round the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps the tree between himself and the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught. The resultant metaphysical problem now is this: Does the man go round the squirrel or not? He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree; but does he go round the squirrel? In the unlimited leisure of the wilderness, discussion had been worn threadbare. Every one had taken sides, and was obstinate; and the numbers on both sides were even. Each side, when I appeared therefore appealed to me to make it a majority. Mindful of the scholastic adage that whenever you meet a contradiction you must make a distinction, I immediately sought and found one, as follows: “Which party is right,” I said, “depends on what you practically mean by ‘going round’ the squirrel. If you mean passing from the north of him to the east, then to the south, then to the west, and then to the north of him again, obviously the man does go round him, for he occupies these successive positions. But if on the contrary you mean being first in front of him, then on the right of him, then behind him, then on his left, and finally in front again, it is quite as obvious that the man fails to go round him, for by the compensating movements the squirrel makes, he keeps his belly turned towards the man all the time, and his back turned away. Make the distinction, and there is no occasion for any farther dispute. You are both right and both wrong according as you conceive the verb ‘to go round’ in one practical fashion or the other.”

Although one or two of the hotter disputants called my speech a shuffling evasion, saying they wanted no quibbling or scholastic hair-splitting, but meant just plain

honest English 'round', the majority seemed to think that the distinction had assuaged the dispute.

Exercise 17

James introduces his pragmatism with an example about a squirrel going around a tree. Explain this example.

3.2 | The pragmatic method clarified

James characterizes pragmatism **primarily** as a **method** for **settling disputes**.

Definition 3.1: the pragmatic method

The pragmatic method is a method of settling disputes that otherwise seem to be interminable.

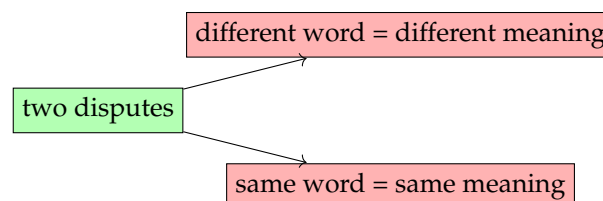
3.2.1 | The origin of disputes

Before discussing how the method works, it is important to note how disagreements emerge in the first place. James's examples tend to focus on two different types of examples, both involving **words**. The first are cases where two people use two different words and infer that since they are using different words, they mean different things.

- P1: X and Y are two different words or theories or ideas.
- C: Therefore, X and Y mean different things or are different theories or are different ideas.

The second are cases where two people use the same word and infer that since they are using the same word, they mean the same thing.

- P1: Person S1 uses word X.
- P2: person S2 uses word X.
- C: Therefore, S1 and S2 mean the same thing when they use word X, or express theory X, or think idea X.



3.2.2 | Two applications of the pragmatic method

We can consider two different ways that the pragmatic method might dissolve debates.

First, it might show that two ideas are equivalent in meaning. The idea here is that we can pragmatically analyze two ideas that look different but turn out to express the same content. James suggests this when encourages us to trace the consequences of the idea (p.45) and considers what difference would be made if one idea rather than the other idea were true. If there is no difference, then there is no difference in the ideas.

Example 3.1: abstract example

Suppose two ideas **A** and **B**. In addition, suppose **A** is true but **B** is not. Then suppose **B** is true but **A** is not. If there is no difference in how things look, then there is no difference in the ideas. If there is a difference, then that difference is the total difference between **A** and **B**.

Example 3.2: bread rising

Consider the phenomenon of bread rising. Suppose there are two hypotheses about what causes bread to rise. Two people make disagree about what causes bread to rise.

- Hypothesis 1: an invisible brownie is responsible for the bread rising
- Hypothesis 2: an invisible elf is responsible for the bread rising

Let's let hypothesis 1 be true and hypothesis 2 false. Now let hypothesis 2 be true and hypothesis 1 be false. The concrete practical consequence of both are exactly the same. The disagreement then about the hypotheses is only linguistic.

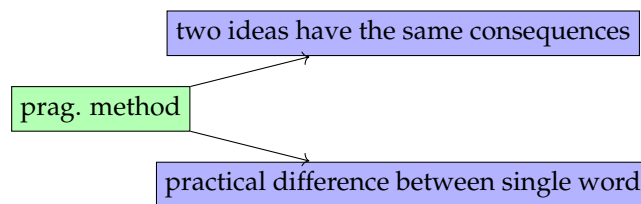
Second, the pragmatic method might show in what respects two ideas differ. This might deal with a disagreement where people are using the same term but in two different ways. If we consider the consequences of the idea, or the **concrete respects** in which the world be different if one idea over another were true, then we could get at the precise difference between each idea.

Example 3.3: X is the best

Suppose two fans Tek and Liz disagree about who is "the best soccer player". Liz thinks Cristiano Ronaldo is the best. Tek thinks Lionel Messi is the best. They disagree with each other and spend hours yelling at each other. But we might ask what would it mean for someone to be "the best". Liz might contend that "the best soccer player" would *practically speaking* score a lot of goals per game. Tek might contend that "the best soccer player" would *practically speaking* score a high number of goals and high number of assists per game. Pragmatically then, their disagreement could be dissolved if we looked at the concrete practical consequences of their ideas.

James intends the pragmatic method as a way of settling everyday debates but also to solve ancient philosophical debates.

1. are we fated or are we free?



2. is the world many or is it one?
3. we material or spiritual?

Exercise 18

First, form a group of two-to-four people. Next, construct your own example of one of the two types of disagreements. Draw a picture to illustrate your example. Finally, illustrate how this disagreement might be resolved by using the pragmatic method. Put your example on the board. Hint: think about something people disagree about on a regular basis and then think about key terms/ideas that are used (e.g. health, good/evil, nice, friend, loyal, danger, free, privacy). The pragmatic method doesn't determine the facts of the word but is a method for clarifying ideas.

3.3 | Pragmatism as expressing a broader philosophy

While James characterizes the pragmatic method as a method for settling debates, he tries to characterize the general ideology behind the pragmatic method. That is, James characterizes pragmatism as a kind of **attitude, orientation, or temperament**. He characterizes it as a turning **away from**:

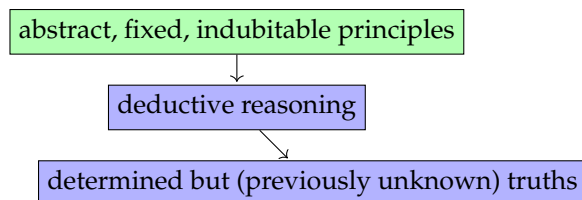
1. inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers
2. abstraction and insufficiency
3. verbal solutions
4. bad a priori reasons
5. fixed principles, categories, supposed necessities
6. closed systems
7. pretended absolutes and origins

Meanwhile, pragmatism is a turning *toward*:

1. concreteness and adequacy
2. fruits, last things, consequences, facts, actions
3. power
4. empiricism
5. open systems and possibilities (so against dogma, and finality in truth)

One difference in particular that James insists upon is that **non-pragmatists aim to give final solutions to various problems by reasoning from fixed principles (axioms)**. The nature of these

principles tend to be highly abstract in nature and products of a priori reasoning. The rationale seems to be that if we want to reason to a metaphysical conclusions our reasoning must proceed from highly abstract principles that are either independent of reason or take into account all possible experience. The systems or theories are thus said to be closed in that they admit no future revision.



In contrast, the pragmatist sees any theory or concept as **merely a tool or instrument** to be used and is merely as a **program** for doing more work as new experience arises. In contrast to the professional philosopher, James characterizes the pragmatist's view as open and his/her theories **sensitive to the stream of experience**. James insists that pragmatism is **a method only** (p.51) and "at, the outset, at least, it stands for no particular results. It has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method" (p.54).

non-pragmatic	pragmatic
fixed results	open-ended
indubitable	fallible
first principles	current beliefs
abstract principles	concrete beliefs
theories as answers	theories as tools
rationalist	radically empiricist

Table 3.1: James tries to characterize not only the pragmatic method but a broader pragmatic spirit and a broader pragmatic philosophy

Exercise 19

What do you think of James's general characterization of the pragmatic philosopher? Is it too general and vague to be useful? Is it helpful for understanding what American philosophers were committed to in general?

3.4 | Pragmatism as a theory of truth

In addition to being understood as a method, and a general philosophy, pragmatism is also taken to be a **genetic theory of truth**. At least according to James then there are three different interpretations we might give to what "pragmatism" means:

- pragmatism as a method for dealing with disputes
- pragmatism as a broader philosophy with its commitments to empiricism, concrete particulars, fallibilism, etc.
- pragmatism as a theory of truth.

In this section, we will look at pragmatism as a theory of truth.

3.4.1 | What is the pragmatist's theory of truth?

First, James points out that there has been a shift from thinking that mathematical, logical, and natural laws are in line with the thoughts of God (laws must be exact, well-ordered, follow by deduction from a few general axioms, and display a kind of perfection) to being:

- approximations
- plentiful in nature
- sometimes in conflict with each other.

Second, he points out that modern laws are nothing more than human creations accepted at given points in time for their **usefulness**.

Third, James theory of truth is sometimes referred to as an instrumental theory of truth or a pragmatic theory of truth. According to James, an idea is true provided it fulfills a certain concrete practical function.

“ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience, to summarize them and get about among them by conceptual short-cuts instead of following the interminable success of particular phenomena” (p.58)

James thus defines a true belief/idea in terms of the following three functions:

1. **marriage function**: whether or not it is useful to an individual in that it mediates between their existing lot of beliefs and new experiences¹
2. **productive function**: whether it successfully takes us from one part of our experience to another part
3. **simplification function**: whether it simplifies how we think about things (conceptual shortcuts)

Example 3.4: marriage function

John believes Liz loves him. He has a lot of experience to support this. However, Liz is mean to him one day but nice to him many days after this. He has the idea that she was having a bad day. This idea is true as it allows him to **marry** his old beliefs (as well his current beliefs) to that strange experience.

¹“It makes itself true, gets itself classed as true, by the way it works; grafting itself then upon the ancient body of truth, in which thus grows much as a tree grows by the activity of a new layer of cambium” (p.64). “For ‘to be true’ *mean* only to perform this marriage function (p.64)

Example 3.5: productive

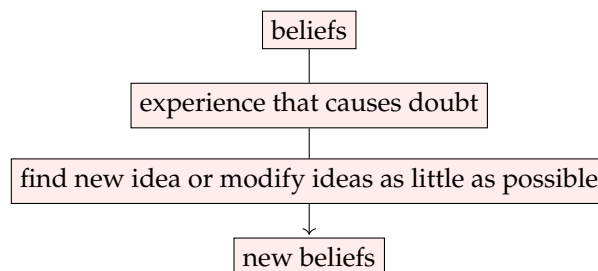
Liz believes that Channel 6 weather has competent meteorologists working for them. She relies on their forecasts for what to wear, when to take an umbrella, etc. This leads (more often than not) to her having pleasurable (rather than less pleasurable) experiences when it comes to the weather. The idea is true as it is productive. It successfully takes her from one part of her experience to another.

Example 3.6: simplification

Liz isn't sure how to understand a variety of John's actions. He seems angry, chaotic, annoyed, etc. She learns that he just lost his job and so formulates the hypothesis that losing his job has caused him to behave in the way he has been behaving lately. The idea is true as it allows her to simplify a lot of data that was unorganized or scattered or unexplained.

Ideas are not true or false all on their own and independent of human beings. Instead, **they come to be true** through a process. For this reason James theory is thought to be a **genetic theory of truth**. The process works similar to Peirce's account of how beliefs are fixed:

1. we start with old opinions
2. we encounter a new experience that causes us to doubt
3. adopt and modify the existing mass of our opinions as little as possible (conservatism) in trying out new ideas that would eliminate the doubt
4. provided the new idea eliminates the doubt, we graft the new idea onto the existing stock of ideas



For James then, a new idea is said to be **true** to the extent that it marries our old ideas with new experiences. An idea is true if it functions to help put us in a better relation with the world.²

3.4.2 | An objection to James's theory of truth

James makes the truth of an idea hinge on the degree to which it can "lean on old truth and grasp new fact" (p.63), viz., the degree that it can be dispel doubt without upsetting old beliefs.

²James contends that the **new idea** is "adopted as the true one" (p.60) and that "[a] new opinion counts as 'true' just in proportion as it gratifies the individual's desire to assimilate the novel in his experience to his beliefs in stock" (p.63).

And, James notes that the “pragmatist talk[s] about truths in the plural” (p.67). For James then, the pragmatist notion of truth is **relativistic** and **pluralistic** and **subjectivistic**.³

One objection to this account is that James conflates **what is good in the way of belief** with **what is true**. For some, however, the notion of truth is independent of its relation to fixing belief or coordinating our ideas with experiences. To put it simply, there are ideas that might be good to believe but they are not necessarily true. The basic argument is this.

- P1: James contends that an idea is true if and only if believing in that idea is beneficial to an individual.
- P2: There are some beliefs that are good or irresistible or that are attractive, but do not correspond with reality.
- C: Therefore, James’s conception of truth is flawed.

Here is how James himself raises this objection:

This pragmatist talk about truths in the plural, about their utility and satisfactoriness, about the success with which they ‘work,’ etc., suggest to the typical intellectualist mind a sort of coarse lame second-rate makeshift article of truth. Such truths are not real truths. Such tests are merely subjective. As against this, objective truth must be some non-utilitarian, haughty, refined, remote, august, exalted. It must be an absolute correspondence of our thoughts with an equally absolute reality. It might be what we *ought* to think unconditionally. The conditioned ways in which we *do* think are so much irrelevance and matter for psychology. Down with psychology, up with logic, in all this question!

In other words, the objection then is that an idea is not true just because it functions to put us in a more desirable state of experience or belief. Rather, the truth is some exact and abstract state of correspondence between our minds and reality.

3.4.3 | James’s response

James is explicit that he thinks a belief is true provided that belief is profitable. In other words, a belief is true provided it is better for us to have that belief than not have that belief. His argument in support of this view goes something like this (although it isn’t clear):

- P1: We ought to believe that which is better for us to believe (we ought to believe what is good to believe).
- P2: It is better for us to have a true belief than a false belief.
- Therefore, the truth is that which is better for us to believe.

The key point that James insists upon is that there cannot be a complete divorce between what is true and what is good for us to believe. The idea is that if there were some idea that had

³When old truth grows, then, by new truth’s addition, it is for subjective reasons” (p.63) and “[t]he trail of the human serpent is thus over everything” (p.64).

no practical benefit for us to believe, then we simply have no incentive, motivation, or reason to believe it.

However, it is important to know that James's view does not imply that we can believe whatever we want. Not only are our beliefs shaped by our experience but our beliefs are also influenced by our other beliefs.

- It might be good for me to have belief B_1
- It might be good for me to have belief B_2
- But, it might not be good for me to have both belief B_1 and B_2 because they contradict.

Example 3.7

It might be good for me to believe that the Eagles are the best team. It might also be good for me to believe that the Cowboys are the best team. But, it wouldn't be good for me to have both beliefs.

Example 3.8

It might be good for me to believe that I should run everyday. It might also be good for me to believe that I should bike everyday. But, it wouldn't be good for me to have both beliefs (I would overdo it and get injured).

Exercise 20

James does not provide a full response to this objection in "What Pragmatism Means". He postpones responding to this particular objection to later essays. However, he does provide a sort prima facie case that what is true must be a species of the good. That is, What is true is just what is good in the way of belief. How convincing do you find this argument?

3.5 | Pragmatism and belief in God

The last topic to consider is the relation of pragmatism to religion. James contends that pragmatism is a kind of **empiricism**. It is a philosophy which is a "fact-loving temperament" (p.69). At first glance, this seems problematic since it seems completely at odds with any religious orientation. In short, there is the idea that **if you are a pragmatist, then you should not believe in God**.

A simple version of this argument is as follows:

- P1: All knowledge comes from experience (empiricism)
- P2: Pragmatism is committed to empiricism (the meaning of terms/ideas are unpacked in terms of concrete particulars, experiences, etc.).
- P3: We have no experience of God.
- C: Therefore, we ought to not to believe in God's existence.

There are at least two ways James might object the above argument:

1. **Reject P3:** he could claim that some people have had an experience of God (e.g. religious experience)
2. **Reject validity:** As we saw from James's "Will to Believe" argument, since we also don't have any experience that God doesn't exist, then the agnostic and atheistic positions are just as implausible (or plausible).

Rather than focusing then on whether we should or should not believe, we might raise a different objection against believing in God. This is that **there is no practical consequence to believing in God because God has no practical role in our daily lives**. In other words, pragmatism makes the belief in God **meaningless**.

- P1: Pragmatism analyzes ideas/terms/theories in terms of their practical consequences.
- P2: Belief in God has no practical consequence.
- C: Therefore, the conception of God is meaningless.

But before considering James's response to the above argument, it is worthwhile to follow the way in which James articulates why P2 is true. James will do this in two steps:

1. Show how Darwin undermines the old theistic view where God plays a concrete role in our lives (no longer designs objects).
2. Show how current philosophical views on God are so abstract that they have no relation to our lives (too abstract).

3.5.1 | Darwin and the argument from design

One approach to religion is what James calls the **old-fashioned scientific theism**. On this view, while God may seem highly abstract, depersonalized, and unconnected to the world, God is still connected to the world. This connection is forged by the **argument from design**. This argument puts God in connection with the concrete particulars of the world.

James notes that old fashioned scientific theism was toppled by Darwinism. One such example involves the effect of Darwinianism to the argument from design.

- P1: There are complex and simple objects.
- P2: It is implausible to think that complex objects come about by the random operations of physical laws.
- P3: The best explanation is to think that complex objects were created by a designer (e.g. if you found a watch on the ground, you would assume that it was designed rather than the product of random physical forces).
- P4: There are a number of unbelievable complexities in the natural world that are beyond the scope of any human designer, e.g. biological complexities (the human eye).
- P5: The best explanation for these complexities is a divine designer.
- C: Therefore, God exists.

The problem with the above argument is with **P5**. While a number of artifacts (e.g. watches) may imply designers, Darwin's theory gave us an explanation of certain biological complexities. The result then is that Darwinism disconnected God from the natural world.

3.5.2 | God and idealism

At James's time, the old-fashioned scientific theism was replaced by an **idealistic pantheism**. The idea here is that (i) objects of reality are of the nature (or dependent upon) the mind and (ii) all of these ideas are a part of God. What this implies is that God is everywhere and everything implies God's existence.

For James, this particular approach to religion is inhospitable to pragmatism largely because of its abstractness. As James writes:

the brand of pantheism offered is hard for them to assimilate if they are lovers of facts, or empirically minded. It is the absolutistic brand, spurning the dust and reared upon pure logic. It keeps no connexion whatever with concreteness. Affirming the Absolute Mind, which is its substitute for God, to be the rational presupposition of all particulars of fact, whatever they may be, it remains supremely indifferent to what the particular facts in our world actually are. [...] You cannot redescend into the world of particulars by the Absolute's aid, or deduce any necessary consequences of detail important for your life from your idea of his nature.

In short, modern religious philosophy posits an abstract Absolute (God) that underpins (and is presupposed by) all concrete realities but cannot be used to derive concrete particular facts. In short, God is necessary but seemingly plays no role in our lives.

3.5.3 | James on pragmatism and God

First, according to James, pragmatism, while empiricist, is not biased toward materialism and so does not resign all religious beliefs to the metaphysical dumpster. As James puts it:

[pragmatism] has no objection whatever to the realizing of abstractions, so long as you get about among particulars with their aid and they actually carry you somewhere. Interested in no conclusions but those which our minds and our experiences work out together, she has no *a priori* prejudices against theology (p.72-73)

Next, recall that James thinks that **an idea is true provided it is beneficial in the way of belief**. And note that a belief can only be beneficial in the way of belief if it performs a **concrete function** or **practical effect** on human life. So what then is the effect of believing in God?

According to James, the practical effect of the belief in God is that it provides the believer *religious comfort*. To clarify this further, James contends that

in the Absolute finite evil is 'overruled' already, we may, therefore, whenever we wish, treat the temporal as if it were potentially the eternal, be sure that we can trust its outcome, and, without sin, dismiss our fear and drop the worry of our finite responsibility (pp.73-74).

The idea here then is that since God will rectify all wrongs in the end (punish the evil doers and reward virtue), we can temporarily take a break from having to rectify all these wrongs ourselves. As James puts it, belief in the absolute provides comfort in that it allows us to take a “moral holiday” (p.74).

1. belief in God: God is this all knowing, all loving, all powerful, all good being. Hyper abstract. Seems divorced from reality
2. pragmatically analyzed: the practical effects of taking on this belief is the feeling of comfort in taking a moral holiday (God will take care of the sinners and reward the righteous so I don't have to)

Exercise 21

James suggests that the religious comfort one gets from a belief in God is that one has the right to take a moral holiday. It is unclear whether James is applying the pragmatic maxim to *God* or *religious comfort*. What do you think?

3.5.4 | Dismissal of God

James goes on to say that he **does not believe in God**. He simply takes the practical benefit of taking a moral holiday without accepting the other aspects of believing in God. His argument is personal in nature but seems to have the following structure:

- P1: The truth is a species of the good, viz., a belief is *true* if accepting that belief benefits us unless that belief conflicts with the benefits provided by our other beliefs
- P2: Belief in God benefits James insofar as it allows him to take a moral holiday but other aspects of that belief conflict with other beliefs he has.
- C: Thus, “God does not exist” is true for James even though he takes his moral holiday anyway (or provides another justification)

The curious premise is P1 in that he contends that he defines a proposition P as true for a subject S if and only if:

1. believing in P would make S better off (“in the way of belief”, see p.76)
2. belief in P would not conflict with the benefits of S's other beliefs (pp.76-78)

Exercise 22

Do you think P1 is true?

Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered

In “Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered”, James aims to apply his pragmatism to a variety of metaphysical notions.

4.1 | Substance

First, let’s begin with the notion of **substance**. Objects are said to have **properties**. These properties are often called: accidents, modes, attributes, affections.

Example 4.1: Crayon

The properties of a crayon are: whiteness, friability, cylindrical in shape, insolubility in water, etc.

A **substance** is said to be a thing *distinct* from its properties. The *bearer* of these properties is the object’s **substance**. The properties *inhere* in the substance.

We can think of two related arguments for the reality of substance.

First, there is the argument from language. If we take the example “snow is white” (S is P sentences) we have a grammatical subject “snow” and a grammatical predicate “is white”. The argument then is just as it nonsensical to talk about unpredicated “whiteness” (viz., it is meaningless to utter “is white” without a subject), it makes no sense to talk about unembodied properties (viz., it is meaningless to say that a property like *whiteness* can exist without being embodied in a substance).

Second, there is a related argument from conceivability. The argument is simply that whenever we think of a property of something, we always conceive it as being embodied in a thing or substance. When we think of whiteness, we cannot think of the property in itself, we conceive of it being embodied in snow, or in a piece of paper, or in a crayon, or in space. Thus, since it is impossible to conceive of properties without being embodied in something, substance must be real.

Traditionally, there is said to be two basic substances: **matter** and **spirit**.

Example 4.2

The substance of the properties of the chalk is *matter* (spatial extension/location and impenetrability).

Example 4.3

The substance of the properties of the thought is *the spirit*.

There are a number of different philosophical positions when it comes to substance:

- Substance dualism: both matter and mind are real and they are independent of each other
- Monism (materialism): only matter is real
- Monism (idealism): real objects are of the nature of ideas

4.1.1 | Nominalism and realism on substance

Nominalism contends that there is no such thing as substance.

- P1: People think there is substance because we think there is a thing corresponding to every name.
- P2: All we have are properties clustered together, not a thing that holds them together.
- C: There is whiteness, friability, cylindrical in shape, insolubility in water that is clustered together but there is no *chalkness*.

Scholasticism contends that there are substances.

According to James, **pragmatists** seem to reject the idea of substance since, according to James, the scholastic view of substance has almost **no pragmatic consequences** since the sole cash value of the substance are the *cluster* of attributes. As James writes “the bare cohesion itself is all the notion of the substance signifies. Behind that fact is nothing.” He points out that:

1. if we were to eliminate the substance but keep the properties, our experience would stay the same
2. if God were to send us clusters of properties but annihilate the substance, there would be no practical difference to us.

Thus, it appears that if one is a pragmatist, one is committed to nominalism.

4.1.2 | The exception

However, James makes **one exception** and this involves the case of **transubstantiation**, the bread-substance is replaced by divine substance without any change to the sensible properties. James writes:

But tho these [sensible properties] don't alter, a tremendous difference has been made, no less a one than this, that we who take the sacrament, now feed upon the very substance of divinity. The substance-notion breaks into life, then, with tremendous effect, if once you allow that substances can separate from their accidents, and exchange these latter (p.88).

Exercise 23

James's view on transubstantiation differs from Peirce in at least one critical way.

1. For James, if Tek believes in the substance change of the bread and wine for the divine body and blood, then this has a practical effect for me.
2. For Peirce, there are no practical differences between (i) bread and wine and (ii) divine body and blood

Whose take on transubstantiation do you prefer and why?

4.1.3 | Criticism of material substance

James contends that Berkeley's criticism of matter was "absolutely pragmatic".¹ It isn't entirely clear how James understands Berkeley's argument against materialism but it seems to be something along the following lines:

- P1: we have ideas of properties of things (sensations): color, figure, hardness
- P2: the only practical meaning of material substance is that which *produces* our ideas of properties of things
- P3: We could replace the idea of a material substance with a divine substance.
- Therefore, we can get rid of the idea of material substance and replace it with God (they both have the same pragmatic function).

What we see then is that Berkeley's criticism of material substance is on **pragmatic grounds**.

- Material substance: whole practical effect is to produce sensible properties
- Divine substance: whole practical effect is to produce sensible properties
- Since the ideas are interchangeable, they have the same meaning

4.1.4 | Criticism of spiritual substance

James also contends that Locke makes use of a **pragmatic criticism of spiritual substance**, particularly the nature of the soul. To see this criticism clearly, let's first introduce the general problem of diachronic personal identity.

Let's consider three birthdays of Tek: Birthday 1 is in 2017, Birthday 2 is in 2018, Birthday 3 is in 2019. Let's call each birthday t_1, t_2, t_3 , respectively. We assume that Tek is the same person

¹For more on Berkeley's criticism of substance, see *An Essay toward a New Theory of Vision, A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*.

in 2019 as Tek in 2018 as he is in 2017. The question then is what criterion allows Tek to preserve his identity over time?

Next, let's introduce **Locke's theory** (the memory theory of personal identity). According to Locke, Tek at t_3 is identical as Tek at t_2 because Tek at t_3 **remembers** the experience of Tek at t_2 . And Tek at t_2 is identical to Tek at t_1 because Tek at t_2 remembers the experience of Tek at t_1 . Thus, according to Locke, what allows Tek to preserve his identity over time is **his capacity to remember** (or more generally: psychological connectedness).

Now, let's introduce the **soul theory of personal identity**. The soul theory argues that what preserves identity over time isn't a chain of memories but **a soul substance** that endures through time. For consider that we don't remember what it is like to be a baby and we often forget things in our life. Tek at t_3 is identical with Tek when he was a baby or when he was drunk last night. In short, under the same soul theory, *A* is the same person as *B* iff *A* and *B* have the same *soul*. Thus, another option for explaining how we preserve our identity over time is that we have the same soul.

Locke argued against the soul theory of personal identity and James takes this criticism to be **pragmatic in nature**. Let's consider a few variations on this argument:

Let's suppose that two bodies switch souls but the memories remain the same. That is, there is soul-switching but no memory-switching between two bodies.

- P1: The soul is independent of the body
- P2: Take two people A and B. Now switch the souls of two people. Put soul A in body B and soul B in body A (but leave their memories untouched).
- P3: Body B that has soul A will continue to think they are person B (there will be no perceivable practical difference)
- P4: Body A that has soul B will continue to think they are person A (there will be no perceivable practical difference)
- C: Therefore, there is no additional (pragmatic) meaning to the soul theory beyond the capacity to remember.

Next, let's consider memory-transfer without soul-switching or body-switching.

- P1: The soul is independent of the body
- P2: Take two people A and B. Now suppose the memories of A are inserted into Body B (but no soul transfer) and the memories of B are swapped into the body of A (but no soul transfer).
- P3: Body B - Soul B with the memories of A will think they are A and Body A - Soul A with the memories of B will think they are B.
- C: Therefore, there is no additional (pragmatic) meaning to the soul theory beyond the capacity to remember.

Finally, let's consider a scenario involving reincarnation.

- P1: The soul is independent of the body

- P2: Let's suppose that *A* dies and in the death of *A*, all of the memories of *A* are erased
- P3: Let's suppose that the soul of *A* enters a new body *B* (a baby) at a future time
- P4: Even though *A* and *B* have the same soul, *B* at t_2 has no memory of any of the experiences of *A*
- P5: We don't think *B* deserves to be held responsible for any actions of A^2
- C: Therefore, there is no additional (pragmatic) meaning to the soul theory beyond the capacity to remember.

Exercise 24

Pick a pragmatic criticisms of either material or spiritual substance. Articulate the pragmatic criticism in your own words.

4.2 | Naturalism vs. spiritualism

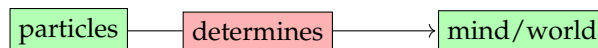
James mentions that the discussion of materialism takes many forms. One form is a debate between naturalism (scientific materialism) and spiritualism (theism).

Definition 4.1: naturalism (scientific materialism)

Higher (more complex) phenomena are completely determined by smaller, blinder phenomena that are governed by the laws of physics.

As James puts it:

The laws of physical nature are what run things, materialism says. The highest productions of human genius might be ciphered by one who had complete acquaintance with the facts, out of their physiological conditions, regardless whether nature be there only for our minds [...]. Our minds in any case would have to record the kind of nature it is, and write it down as operating through blind laws of physics.



In contrast to naturalism is spiritualism. James's definition of spiritualism is rather brief. He writes:

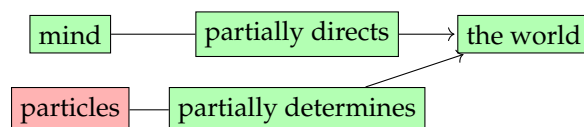
Spiritualism says that mind not only witnesses and records things, but also runs and operates them: the world being thus guided, not by its lower, but by its higher element (Some Metaphysical Problems, p.93)

²Locke writes: "Suppose it to be the same soul that was in Nestor or Thersites at the siege of Troy [...] which it may have been, as well as it is now the soul of any other man. But he now having no consciousness of any of the actions of either of Nestor or Thersites, does or can he conceive himself the same person with either of them? Can he be concerned in either of their actions, attribute them to himself, or think them his own more than the actions of any other men that ever existed? Thus, this consciousness not reaching to any of the actions of either of those men, he is no more one self with either of them than if the soul or immaterial spirit that now informs him had been created and began to exist, when it began to inform his present body [...]" (Locke, Essay II.XXVII.14).

Definition 4.2: spiritualism

Spiritualism is the view that minds, spirits, purposes, and/or God are not fully determined by the laws of nature and microphysical particles but play an active, directing, or guiding role in the world.

It looks like he suggest that spiritualism suggest a view of dual-control over the world. The world is partially determined by the smaller particles and partially determined by higher objects (minds, spirits, etc.).



James contends that when this debate is treated unpragmatically (intellectually/abstractly), it often seems “little more than a conflict between aesthetic preferences.” He characterizes the difference more in terms of **preference or choice**. A proponent of spiritualism argues:

- P1: Matter is crass, muddy, gross while spirit is pure, elevated, and noble
- P2: It is more in harmony with the dignity of human beings and the universe to prefer what is better or superior.
- C: Therefore, we must accept spiritualism.

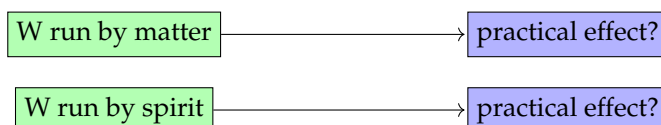
Objection 14 (P1 is false) *First, James points out that matter may be considered fine and noble. James draws on Spencer, writing that “he shows us that a ‘matter’ so infinitely subtile, and performing motions as inconceivably quick and fine as those which modern science postulates in her explanations, has no trace of grossness left” (p.94). Even further, it is sacred for “any one who has ever looked on the face of a dead child or parent the mere fact that matter could have taken for a time that precious form, ought to make matter sacred ever after.*

Next, he asserts that spirit may be considered crass. It is too simplistic a notion to explain the complexity and “exquisite tenuity of nature’s facts” (p.95)

Given this objection then, it seems, as though it makes no difference whether the world is determined by spiritual or natural forces.

4.2.1 | Pragmatism on the debate (the past)

James turns to the notion of matter and attempts to analyze it *pragmatically*. He asserts: that **at least according to past events, it does not make a difference as to whether it was the work of matter (physical laws) or divine spirit.**



First, according to James, it makes no difference with respect to the **past**. That is, if we only think about how past events came about (e.g. imagine that the world ended right now), he contends that provided they could explain the past events equally well, **their practical consequences would be the same**. That is, their whole practical effect would be to **explain how events in the past occurred**: “Matter and God [...] mean exactly the same thing—the power, namely, neither more nor less, that could make just this completed world.”

And so, James contends that there is no pragmatic difference in terms of each theory relative **past events**. They are pragmatically equivalent and so any dispute is meaningless.³

Exercise 25

Given that James has shown that the debate between materialism and spiritualism is meaningless with respect to the past, do you think that this result counts in the favor of materialism? Explain your reasoning.

4.2.2 | Pragmatism on the debate (the future)

Nevertheless, James contends that there is a **deep practical issue at stake** (even if it is a distant and remote one) relative to **the future**. For James, naturalism and spiritualism take two different outlooks on the following question: **what does the world promise?**

For the **naturalist**, the future is one of “death tragedy” as the second law of thermodynamics is taken by philosophers of his time to indicate that the world is moving steadily toward a **heat death** (thermodynamic equilibrium, maximum entropy). This means that the world will move to a nothing, a chaos, a wreck, all finite achievements will be swept away, anything we regard as precious destroyed. The lower order is taken to be eternal not the higher, moral, mental, spiritual order.⁴ A James puts it:

the vast driftings of the cosmic weather, though many a jewelled shore appears, and many an enchanted cloud-bank floats away, long lingering ere it be dissolved—even as our world now lingers, for our joy—yet when these transient products are gone, nothing absolutely *nothing* remains, to represent those particular qualities, those elements of preciousness which they may have enshrined. Dead and gone are they, gone utterly from the very sphere and room of being. Without an echo; without a memory, without an influence on aught that may come after, to make it care for similar ideals. This utter wreck and tragedy is of the essence of scientific materialism as at present understood.

The **spiritualist** contends that scientific materialism is insufficient in that it cannot provide justification for our “ideal interests” or “remotest hopes.” Another way of putting is that while

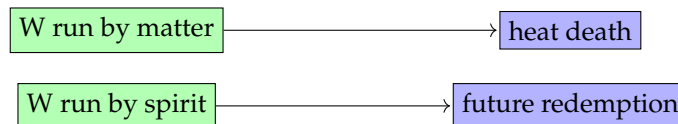
³“It makes not a single jot of difference so far as the *past* of the world goes, whether we deem it to have been the work of matter or whether we think a divine spirit was its author. [...] The pragmatist must consequently say that the two theories, in spite of their different-sounding names, mean exactly the same thing, and that the dispute is purely verbal.” (p.97)

⁴“For, according to the theory of mechanical evolution, the laws of redistribution of matter and motion, though they are certainly to thank for all the good hours which our organisms have ever yielded us and for all the ideals which our minds now frame, are yet fatally certain to undo their work again, and to redissolve everything that they have once evolved” (p.103-104)

the hypothesis of God is a lot more unclear than various mathematical-physical notions, it has **practical superiority** over these notions in that it can ground these hopes by guaranteeing that even if the world is ultimately destroyed, the ideal, moral order will be preserved in some way, shape, or form. That is, while the spiritualists may agree that the world itself may “burn up or freeze”, the “tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution not the absolutely final things” (p.106). The spiritualist thus contends that something is preserved beyond the end of the universe, something along the line of redemption, salvation, justice, the preservation of the moral order, etc.

James thus contends that the real difference between naturalism and spiritualism can be seen in a future practical difference:

- Naturalism is the denial that the moral order is eternal and that all ultimate hopes will be cut off or destroyed.
- Spiritualism is the affirmation of an eternal moral order and the holding on of hope.



In response to this pragmatic differentiation, James considers an objection.

Objection 15 (Difference too remote) *The difference between the two lies not in the past but in the future, and not in the near future but in the extremely distant future. This is not a practical difference that can have meaning to a sane person.*

James’s response is rather caustic. He replies:

Well, I can only say that if you say this, you do injustice to human nature. Religious melancholy is not disposed of by a simple flourish of the word insanity. The absolute things, the last things, the overlapping things, are the truly philosophic concerns; all superior minds feel seriously about them, and the mind with the shortest views is simply the mind of the more shallow man (p.108).

Exercise 26

First, when people debate about religion, they often debate about the **past**, e.g. whether God created the universe and how. James believes in Darwinian evolution and so he thinks the creationist issue is settled. For James though, what is of more practical concern are not debates about the past, but about the **future**. Which of the two views (naturalism or spiritualism) is correct and why?

4.3 | The argument from design

We took a look at the **argument from design** already in “What Pragmatism Means”. There we discussed (i) the argument from design, (ii) the impact that Darwinian theory had on this

argument, (iii) the shift toward idealistic or pantheistic arguments that make God an abstract entity, (iv) James's criticism of this shift, and, finally, (v) James assertion that the pragmatic meaning of God is its capacity to allow for a moral holiday.

In "Some Metaphysical Problems", James recalls (i) and (ii). He notes that from the religious perspective, there has always been an effort to fit God in nature. James points to one way this has been done: design in nature. Namely the argument for God's existence from design.

- P1: There is design in nature. Various natural facts are fitted together in harmony, e.g. the "the woodpecker's bill, tongue, feet, tail, etc., fit him wondrously for a world of trees, with grubs hid in their back to feed upon" (p.100), objects are co-adapted to each other and to nature (p.100)
- P2: The only thing that can explain this design is God.
- C: Therefore, God exists.

But **P2** is shown to be false via Darwinian evolution. Darwin showed:

- the appearance of design (fit, harmony, co-adaption) can occur via chance and lack of fitness
- that if objects, if they were truly designed by someone, would be designed by someone with some evil in their hearts: for Darwin "also emphasized the number of adaptations which, if designed, would argue an evil rather than a good designer. [...] To the grub under the bark the exquisite fitness of the woodpecker's organism to extract him would certainly argue a diabolical designer" (p.101)

Given the death of the argument from design, James contends that the religious perspective needs to take a different approach. Rather than arguing against mechanism and evolution, one needs to show that God is present *in the mechanism*. That is, rather than seeing an object and arguing that it could not come about by mechanism and so much be designed, one need to see **God's purpose through the mechanism**.

James initially offers up an analogical argument.

- P1: **The goal** of a football team is **not simply** to get the football in the end zone (If that were the case, they would sneak it there before or after the game had ended).
- P2: Instead, **the goal** is to get it into the end zone given the rules and constraints of the game.
- P3: The same can be said of God. If God wanted to make us good, God could simply do it in an instant. Rather, God's goal is to make humans and save them "through the sole agency of nature's vast machinery. Without nature's stupendous laws and counter-forces, man's creation and perfection, we might suppose, would be too insipid achievements for God to have proposed them" (p.112).
- C: Therefore, the best way to understand God is as working through the machinery of nature.

There are a couple interesting features to this argument.

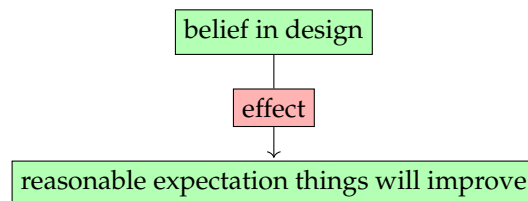
First, the argument is in line with God's greatness. James says that God could both create humans and make them good immediately, but this would be an insipid achievement (lacking flavor, too easy, and not an indication of God's greatness). But if God could create us and perfect us given the vastness and complexity of the universe and the laws of nature, this would be a great achievement.

Second, it removes the anthropomorphism of the previous design argument. In the previous design argument, God's creations (the eye, the body, the universe) are much like our creations (watches, phones, etc.). But in James version of the argument, God's creations are now much more complicated and reflective of a larger evolutionary project. The complexity of God's design no longer allows us to determine the character or mind of God. Instead, we can only recognize that there is a designer but not the purpose of the design. James writes:

The designer is no longer the old man-like deity. His designs have grown so vast as to be incomprehensible to us humans. The *what* of them so overwhelms us that to establish the mere *that* of a designer for them becomes of little consequence in comparison.

Third, James seems to suggest that simply knowing that there is design, however, is pragmatically empty. We could look at various actions and whether they are designed or the result of random chance would have no effect in our lives. He contends that the **notion of design is pragmatically empty**. In short, then the notion of design has no pragmatic consequence because it permits any possible practical result and so it cannot be distinguished from non-design.

Nevertheless, James suggests that anyone who *believes in a divine designer* gets the earlier pragmatic benefit from this belief. Namely, the faith in a divine designer gives us a kind of **confidence** that the universe is not simply governed by *blind forces* but there is a *seeing force* working through the laws of nature and so we can be confident that the future will be better.



Exercise 27

As we can see, James argues against the **argument from design** and he thinks that talking about things being **designed** is pragmatically empty. However, he contends that belief in a divine designer has a pragmatic benefit. Namely, that we can rationally partake in a certain kind of **optimism** about the future.

- is this optimism justified?
- would a pessimism be justified?

4.4 | Free will

The last metaphysical problem that James analyzes is the problem of free will. Traditionally there are two different positions (we will use James's terminology)

- determinists: every action is determined by the prior state of events and the laws of nature
- free-willists: there is an additional faculty added to humans that (i) makes them not determined and (ii) capable of creative acts

4.4.1 | James's evaluation of the free will debate

First, this problem might be considered aesthetically. According to James, most of us already believe in free will and this is because if we were not free, we would be nothing more than mere matter in motion. And since we cannot stand to think of ourselves in this way and because having free will would add to our dignity or value, we believe in it.

- P1: Intuitively we believe we are free.
- P2: We cannot stand to think ourselves as mere matter in motion (it would decrease our dignity/value).
- C: Therefore, the burden of proof is on those that reject free will.

Second, James contends that free will has received a type of pragmatic analysis which he disagrees with. To see this more clearly, let's consider the argument that free will is necessary for ethics (moral responsibility).

- P1: Moral praise and blame require responsibility / accountability.
- P2: The notion of responsibility requires free will. For we cannot hold someone responsible for something that they cannot control. And one cannot control something if they are not free.
- P3: Free will is sheer novelty.
- C: Therefore, moral praise and blame require free will.

The crux of the above argument turns on P2. James considers two different theories concerning P2. For the free-will position, **P2** is true and we are free:

Free-will means novelty, the grafting on to the past of something not involved therein. If our acts were predetermined, if we merely transmitted the push of the whole past, the free-willists say, how could we be praised or blamed for anything? We should be 'agents' only, not 'principals,' and where then would be our precious imputability and responsibility?

Thus, free-willist contends that to be free is to engage in a kind of novel behavior and this novelty allows for the possibility of responsibility.

In contrast, James contends that determinists contend that accountability/responsibility is actually inconsistent with free will. That is, if humans are to be held morally accountable, then we must accept determinism:

If a 'free' act be a sheer novelty, that comes not *from* me, the previous me, but *ex nihilo*, and simply tacks itself on to me, how can *I*, the previous I, be responsible? How can I have any permanent *character* that will stand still long enough for praise or blame to be awarded? The chaplet of my days tumbles into a cast of disconnected beads as soon as the thread of inner necessity is drawn out by the preposterous indeterminist doctrine (p.117)

- P1: Moral praise and blame require responsibility / accountability.
- P2: Holding someone accountable for an act requires that they committed the act. But if someone acts freely, their act is not determined by features *in them* (the prior state and laws of nature) but instead are determined by sheer chance (novel action).
- C: Therefore, moral praise and blame require determinism.

Exercise 28

Do you think that moral responsibility (and also legal responsibility) better fits with the individual who posits free will or the one who posits determinism?

- If free will, what is your response to the argument that if you are free, then the action is not determined by you, and so you shouldn't be held accountable?
- If determinism, what is your response to the argument that if you are determined, then you had no control or choice in the action, and so you shouldn't be held accountable?

James objects to this analysis of the pragmatic meaning of free will. He contends that the entire discussion amounts to an **ad hominem** (you can't account for moral responsibility!). In its place, he contends that the practical effect in the belief in free will is not found in its capacity to account for **moral accountability** because moral accountability could be explained by use of **instinct** or **utility**.

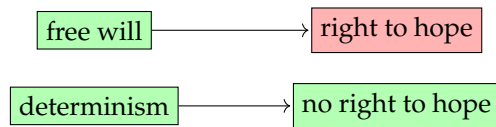
4.4.2 | The pragmatic import of free will

James contends the real pragmatic ground of free will is not in the right to punish or appraise but the concrete difference that belief in free will involves is a belief that **things can get better than they have been**. As James puts it:

Free-will pragmatically means *novelties in the world*, the right to expect that in its deepest elements as well as in its surface phenomena, the future may not identically repeat and imitate the past. (p.118-119)

James contends that the belief in free will has the effect of believing that there is real chance in both micro and macro phenomena.

Thus, for James, the debate over free will boils down to a debate over whether one **has a right to hope that the world will get better**. For determinists, one does not have such a right for possibility is merely an illusion. For the free-willists, one can hope that things will get better because the future is not destined to repeat the past.



James contends that free will has no “inner content” when taken abstractly and so implies we can only understand free will by taking it pragmatically. However, he rejects the pragmatic analysis of the debate over free will as a debate over its place in explaining moral responsibility. Instead, he contends that the real practical difference boils down to whether one has the right to believe in the possibility that things can get better through chance.

Exercise 29

What do you think of James’s dismissal of the free will debate as it is involved in ethics? Is James right to say that the core practical issue involved with debates over free will is over whether we are justified in our belief that the world can get better?

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