

Phenomenology of certainty and belief. Reading William James

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Abstract

This essay studies the analysis that the psychologist and philosopher William James applies to the function of belief in relation to his concepts of the stream of thought and process of knowledge. Furthermore, it pays attention to James's phenomenology of certainty within experience and to the explanation of the foundational place of feelings in experience. In James's thought we may call certainty only what can provide a knowledge which stands in immediate relation to the inner state: the images provided by individual depths are both the locus of perplexity and the spring of certainty. The truth of beliefs is in this sense provisional upon the outcome of the continuing experience of understanding and of the continuing process of critical scrutiny.

Keywords: James, belief, feeling, certainty, truth, pragmatism

Language is the most imperfect and expensive means yet discovered for communicating thought.
~William James~

The flow of experience and continuity of consciousness

With his analysis of stream of consciousness and the processes related to the problem of personal identity, William James calls for a return to individual, immediate experience to derive its richness and make explicit the horizon of fruitful implications that it contains. In the *Principles of Psychology (1890)* James is the first to appreciate, descriptively or introspectively, the processes of psychic life as facts. The perspective entails a method of objectification of consciousness, so that one

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can impersonally observe it, just as in the observation of the processes of nature. The premise from which the psychologist begins is not then *I think*, he rather starts from and takes into account the anonymous nature of the process of thought and the fact that there are states of consciousness that we experience. The phenomenological data for analysis lie in the existence of states of consciousness, which in their course constitute the stream of consciousness. The *Principles of Psychology* is first charged with this task within a strategy of discourse that wants to be a description of the reality of those states, observed in terms both of their specificity and of their genetic conditions. The method for James, is to distinguish, without separating, phenomenology and genealogy of consciousness.

In view of this argument, there is also the fact that consciousness always coincides with the ego, that the organization of thought has a tendency toward a personal conscience, that the only states of consciousness with which we are dealing are those in personal consciousnesses, minds, and personalities, in actual and particular individuals. In addition to the tendency of thought, which is to be configured in the form of a personal consciousness, there is its state of continuous change. Consciousness, in an introspective analysis, is not presented as part but, using the metaphors of the *river* or *current*, it is to James something which *flows*. Therefore, James speaks of stream thought, of consciousness and subjective life. More accurately, the flow of the stream of thought – since it presents a way of joining and separating the different parts – conveys an image that involves two distinct but related forms of experience: one that relates to what is changeable, interrupted, singular, and the one that is related to the duration and continuity of the return of the identical.

This perspective assumes that each sensation is not an atomic unit, but exists always within a field of certain feelings; what most attracts our attention is its relation to any other impression that we can have at the same time. For James, emphasizing this connection between identity and change in our perception of the immediate experience of life is to imply the inability to meet the reality outside the subjective filters through which reality offers itself. The investigation carried out by James supports the so-called world-of-life as the originating soil where each cognitive process takes place. This world of life is in opposition to the world-of-objects from which protrudes a conscience *intellectually* connoted. The return to the original experience of life is also the condition for a recovery of the psychic function of feeling as well as for a distinction of this state of mind, characterized by inner activity and passion, from the mental state of the neutral and detached thinking.

In order to grasp the richness of stimuli and prospects offered by the Jamesian discourse on the proper sense of experience, it is necessary to refer to his thesis of

“radical empiricism”. That summarizes his lesson on thought and life. It is very easy to formulate: empiricism is radical if its construction does not admit any evidence which is not directly experienced and does not exclude any element that is directly experienced. For such empiricism the same relations that connect experiences must have an experimental character and a real value like any other element in it. It is not only the hypothesis of the classic dualism between inner and outer, between consciousness and the world, to be called into question, but also that of a subject that would claim to have everything, while the only thing he has is to “touch only the outer surface of reality” (James 1907/1977, 111).

On the one hand, in fact, an object is always perceived from a precise point of view. On the other, it is important to avoid the fragmentation of our perceptual experience and to preserve the identity of the object, recognizing it as the same object to which others may refer in their experience. Above all, however, it ought to be explained how it is possible to communicate with each other around the same object and, therefore, live in a common world, leading to an *improvement* through mutual cooperation and dialogue, searching not for a lasting foundation but proceeding on the basis of knowledge to be acquired gradually and experimentally, in the hope of success in the next attempt.

James’ problematization of the notion of truth is clearly inscribed in this framework. Starting from the recognition of a connection between knowledge and interest, and showing how at the base of the search for truth there is a will to survive and a man’s attempt to adapt to the conditions of the world-environment, James stresses the importance of an approach to the problem of truth that takes into account the concrete process through which an idea is accepted as true. Such an interpretative scheme is strongly inspired by and intertwined with a certain Darwinism although purified from any shadow of mechanical processuality through an operation that James tries to accomplish by integrating the *will to truth* and the *will to believe*. This reasoning leads James to the ground of Kantian practical reason and to the specific problems of this area of expertise. Problems that James attempts to address and leads to a solution in a post-metaphysical way. He tries to legitimize, for a finite and experimental subject, the reasons of convenience to believe in the future and in all the possibilities that can increase this way of life. James shows, with Kant and beyond Kant, not only the legitimacy to defend the rights of belief against those of knowledge, but the priority of the same belief on knowledge, because knowledge itself stems from the belief. In fact, a new truth is always presented as a hypothesis, which is an investment in trust, postulated on the basis of observations from experience, destined to last until the contrary is proved, that is, until the assumption of truth is not contradicted by experiment or test.

The vital and operational function of knowledge

The genesis of the general categories of the spirit must be brought back to the original ground of life: they are historically confirmed hypotheses. In this respect, at the beginning of all knowledge there is a belief to be confirmed; even knowledge itself is that sort of belief that finds its confirmation later in the experience. We can add that there is no theory that is not rooted in practice, and therefore claim a circularity between theory and practice, from which emerges the centerpiece of Jamesian pragmatism: namely, that what is true is confirmed by its consequences.

In James's thought only what is called revelation – with its force and intimacy of feeling – can provide a knowledge which stands in immediate relation to the inner state: this is what we may call certainty. The images of individual depths are both the locus of perplexity and the spring of certainty.

There is not a conjunction or a preposition, and hardly an adverbial phrase, syntactic form, or inflection of voice, in human speech that does not express some shading or other, of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thoughts... We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of cold. (James 1890/1950, 238)

As shown, by James, every word has its conceptual core of meaning that it designates, namely, the one that can be found in dictionaries. This core is surrounded by a halo or system of fringes of different species. There are, for example, fringes of relation, which connect a word – in its particular connection of sense within a particular arrangement in which the word is present – with the terms before and after it. There are other fringe groups that relate to the situation in which the term is used, to the situation of the speaker and listener in conversation, to the whole past of a meditation course in which the term presents itself in the thought of a thinker, and there are emotional fringes, caused by the evocative power of the word and not by its conceptual character.

In Chapter VIII of the *Principles of Psychology*, James focuses on the distinction of two forms of knowledge, what he calls the knowledge of acquaintance and the knowledge-about. This distinction recalls the Hegelian one between common knowledge (*Bekannt*) and knowledge (*Erkannt*) or between knowledge for familiarity and thematic knowledge, and states that it can be given a further definition between knowledge characterized by a halo and a knowledge devoid of such a halo.

If we then consider the *cognitive function* of different states of mind, we may feel assured that the difference between those that are mere ‘acquaintance’, and those that are ‘knowledge-about’ is reducible almost entirely to the absence or presence of psychic fringes or overtones. Knowledge about a thing is knowledge of its relations. Acquaintance with it, is limitation to the bare impression which it makes. Of most of its relations we are only aware in the penumbral nascent way of a *fringe* of unarticulated affinities about it. (James 1890/1950, 258–259)

It is useful to point out not only the importance of the concept of halo, but the correspondence that James establishes between it and the concepts of fringe, halo of relations and feelings of tendency that accompany and surround the substantive parts. The concepts of psychic overtone and suffusion may also be added to them.. James recognizes the utmost importance to the psychic overtone around each word in order to identify its meaning in the sentence:

There is about each word the psychic overtone of feeling that it brings us nearer to a forefelt conclusion. [...] a word in a sentence, is felt not only as a word but as having a meaning. The meaning of a word taken thus dynamically in a sentence may be quite different from its meaning when taken statistically or without context. The dynamic meaning is usually reduced to the bare fringe, or felt suitability or unfitness to the context and conclusion. (James 1890/1950, 265)

On the other hand the static meaning of the word consists of sensory images awakened, while its abstract meaning consists of other words aroused, forming the so-called *definition*:

Now I believe that in all cases where the words are *understood*, the total idea may be and usually is, present not only before and after the phrase has been spoken, but also whilst each separate word is uttered. It is the overtone, halo, or fringe of the word, *as spoken in the sentence*. It is never absent; no word in an understood sentence comes to consciousness as a mere noise. We feel its meaning as it passes, and although our object differs from one moment to another as to its verbal kernel or nucleus, yet it is *similar* throughout the entire segment of the stream. The same object is known everywhere, now from the point of view, if we may so call it, of this word, now from the point of view of that one. And in our feeling of each word there chimes an echo or foretaste of every other. The consciousness of the idea and that of the words are thus consubstantial. They are made of the same “mind stuff”, and form an unbroken stream. Annihilate a mind at any instant, cut its thought through whilst yet uncompleted, and examine the object present to the

cross-section thus suddenly made; you will find, not the bald word in process of utterance, but that word suffused with the whole idea. (James 1890/1950, 281)

The major point of this argument is that certainty can never be located anywhere other than in personal experience; it must also consist of more than merely rational assent to any string of propositions which may be spread before us. The moment of certainty has an energetic – emotional – charge. The nature of certainty will always consist of this charge, yet the effects of the experience of certainty will vary according to the value a person places upon the object of certainty. According to James's view this emotional charge can transform the human uncertainty into a contingent certainty centered on the individual responsibility to impress, through ideas and actions, a human directive on the course of events.

Everyone knows the difference between imagining a thing and believing in its existence, between supposing a proposition and acquiescing in its truth. In the case of acquiescence or belief, the object is not only apprehended by the mind, but is held to have reality. *Belief is thus the mental state or function of cognizing reality[...] Belief will mean every degree of assurance, including the highest possible certainty and conviction*. (James 1890/1950, 283).

James argues for a wholeness, for balance and a proper perspective. Intuitive experiences of certainty – inarticulate as they may be – must be accepted as vital data. In other words, the marginal or subliminal fields of consciousness, toward which our ordinary self continually shifts, should be recognized and included in any examination of human nature.

The function of the belief in the perception of reality

With regard to the mechanism of knowledge James attributes an essential function to the notion of *belief*: it is the constitutive element of human rationality, even if not the sufficient condition. For James – as it was for Charles Sanders Peirce – the doubt is the engine of search: to doubt means to translate a mental state of uncertainty to a state of mind of certainty and relaxation. Rationality is primarily emotional satisfaction of feeling, derived from compliance with the internal world to the outside world. The result of such a transition from uncertainty to certainty is belief. (Peirce, 1877,1878). But for James the belief is not only an inference from other beliefs; to decide is the result of a creation due to the incidence on inferences of different feelings. And the selection is an assessment of feelings, arising out of an emotional situation. Experi-

ence occurs within the limit of the experiencing self. To this extent any experience is subjective; yet James distinguishes the objective and subjective elements of that experience: “the objective part is the total sum of whatsoever, at any given time, we may be thinking of, the subjective part is the inner state in which the thinking occurs”. (James 1890/1950,498) According to James we might have two ways to obtain the certainty: an objective way, focused on the introduction of entirely verifiable beliefs, rational in the strict sense; and a subjective way, focused on individual influence of emotions on beliefs, unverifiably rational in a broad sense, exceptional “even when lacks a verifiable belief, the interest of man is to decide, since are true the beliefs that serve us, are not true the beliefs that do not serve us” (James 1890/1950,499).

At the heart of the idea of the selective nature of thought is the close link between consciousness and interest, which involves our whole psychic organization, from its most basic forms to the highest. This psychic organization assumes that experience is not the mere recording of an external world unfolding before us. Given the indefinite multiplicity of external elements present to our senses, but foreign to our experience, we must emphasize that experience is established only through those elements that arouse our curiosity. This suggests that without selective interest the experience would be one of real chaos. Involvement is what gives prominence to things; it gives them the light and shadows; it is their perspective: “it is different in every creature, but without it the consciousness of all creatures would be a gray chaotic indeterminacy” (James 1890/1950, 293).

Things are therefore nothing more than special groups of sensible qualities, which have the power to practically or aesthetically interest us and to which we give names. So the mind chooses among the sensations we receive from every single thing those which represent the thing most truly at the moment; it considers the rest as appearances. Similarly, this selective principle drives the mind to rationally connect objects to each other, and the so-called reasoning is just “another form of selective mind”. In a broad overview, therefore, “our mind is, at every step, the theater of simultaneous possibilities” and consciousness is the ability of selecting some and dropping others. We could take as the exergue of the discussion which James holds on belief – essentially processed in Chapter XXI of the *Principles of Psychology* – the following thesis: the mental states of knowledge are actually states of belief. The legitimacy of this thesis connects with the discussion on the psychology of states of belief and the adjoining at-

tempt to show that the concepts of knowledge and reality depend on a philosophy of belief.

In its inner nature, belief, or the sense of reality, is a sort of feeling more allied to the emotions than to anything else. [...] It resembles more than anything what in the psychology of volition we know as consent. Consent is recognized by all to be a manifestation of our active nature. It would naturally be described by such terms as willingness or the 'turning of our disposition'. What characterizes both consent and belief is the cessation of theoretic agitation, through the advent of an idea which is inwardly stable, and fills the mind solidly to the exclusion of contradictory ideas. (James 1890/1950, 284)

This inward stability of the mind's content is a characteristic of both disbelief and belief. But we shall presently see that we never disbelieve anything except for the reason that we believe something else which contradicts it. Disbelief is thus an incidental complication to belief, and need not be considered by itself. Believe the truth of an object does not just mean to have a representation and therefore a mental presence of the object, but it means to know by consent, which is a manifestation of our active nature and therefore closely connected with will. In this sense belief, according to a phenomenological analysis, presents itself as a sort of feeling more akin to emotion than to anything else.

The selectivity of the human mind is geared not only toward finding a balanced world of belief, but also toward removing all the elements that are incompatible with it – elements which do not disappear, but are simply displaced to other worlds or sub-universes able to tolerate their presence. These other worlds, momentarily removed from the field of attention as latent, continue to live as an undercurrent ready to come to the surface; in fact when they arouse some attention our credulity turns up again towards them. This implies that the relation of certainty or uncertainty with the worlds of presence and the worlds of latency does not have a purely logical character, because it is not a relation between judgments, which can never be contradictory, but a living relation.

To a mind not merely logical but characterized by desire, affection and selectivity, it is not contradictory to follow, on the one hand, the immediate visual appearance of the setting sun, while on the other, to judge false such appearance from the standpoint of modern scientific theory. We have to recognize, however, that, with respect to the multiplicity and diversity of worlds, the mind is always in a more or less chaotic state; the sun therefore continues to go down for us even after we acknowledged the Copernican hypothesis. Now we may from time to time select one of these perspectives or one of these worlds, but – placing us in a given

relation to the world – we cannot expect to eliminate a different, but equally legitimate, way to relate to the world. Once again the principle of a polyphonic truth must be asserted. In fact, the recognition of a polyphonic truth is just the other side of the pluralistic constitution of reality, recognizable on the other hand by the fact that each object appears to us with

a certain fringe of relations and even the same word real is, in short, a fringe. Therefore, from the circle of belief there is no escape; or, if we prefer, any exit from the circle of belief can only be seen as temporary, as just a transition to another belief, that is toward another substantive part. The true opposites of belief, psychologically considered, are doubt and inquiry, not disbelief since in both these states the content of our mind is in unrest, and the emotion engendered thereby is, like the emotion of belief itself, perfectly distinct, but perfectly indescribable in words (James 1890/1950, 284)

On the basis of this specific and uncompromising character of belief it is possible to measure its difference compared with mere conception or representation: while a representation or conception is always presented as something absolutely distinct and independent, belief presupposes always the thought. In this sense, belief is also akin to desire, as both presuppose something that is primarily represented in order to become the object of belief or desire. However, the passage from the mere conception/representation to the belief activates a whole new relationship between the mind and the represented object, a relationship that can be configured as a specific psychic attitude of the mind toward a proposition assumed as believed.

In every proposition, then, so far as it is believed, questioned, disbelieved, four elements are to be distinguished, the subject, the predicate, and their relation (of whatever sort it be) – these form the object of belief – and finally the psychic attitude in which our mind stands towards the proposition taken as a whole – and this is the belief itself. (James 1890/1950, 287)

Such an attitude, that is such a “state of consciousness sui generis”, coincides with a feeling of reality, with a feeling of the existence of something that is actually judged as existing, precisely because of this feeling. Essence and existence of an object thus become correlative terms of two different mental acts: one of a purely cognitive judgment, the other of a consent judgment that is of belief. In this broad concept of judgment (so wide as to include the term belief) we should recognize

the theoretical debt of James to Franz Brentano, who James quotes in the following passage from *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt* (1874):

Every object comes into consciousness in a twofold way, as simply thought of [Vorgestellt] and as admitted [Anerkannt] or denied. The relation is analogous to that which is assumed by most philosophers (by Kant no less than by Aristotle) to obtain between mere thought and desire. Nothing is ever desired without being thought of; but the desiring is nevertheless a second quite new and peculiar form of relation to the object, a second quite new way of receiving it into consciousness. No more is anything judged [i.e., believed or disbelieved] which is not thought of too. *But we must insist that, so soon as the object of a thought becomes the object of an assenting or rejecting judgment, our consciousness steps into an entirely new relation towards it. It is then twice present in consciousness, as thought of, and as held for real or denied; just as when desire awakens for it, it is both thought and simultaneously desired.* (James 1890/1950, 286)

By virtue of the essential role of belief within our world of life, it emerges also the general framework within which to rethink the issue of a new anthropology, finally escaped to the traditional rationalist hypothecation, in which the reasons of belief always orient the human conduct more decisively than the reasons indicated in a reflective way.

The link thought-action and the will to believe

Once he fixed the intentional structure of belief, James explains how its psychological origin is acknowledged in an impulse to believe taken as an original structure of human behavior, at least of a behavior seen in its immediate and spontaneous outpouring.

To illustrate such an experience, James suggests to analyze an hallucinatory hypothesis, asking, for example, what constitutes to a naive mind (i.e. an immediately ante-predicative consciousness) –the image of a burning candle on a dark background. James strengthens this example with the image of a winged horse, taken from Spinoza. The two images primarily refer to a certain awareness of imagining, which has, as with every awareness, an intentional structure; it is consciousness directed towards the imagined object. It is important to note that in these two imaginary experiences, intentional acts relate to their objects outside of any querying framework of their truth or falsity. The imaginary candle and the winged horse are objects of the imagination, but experienced as present realities and therefore as real. James explains how for a naive mind, a mind without any other experience than

that of an imaginary life, a mind for which there is not yet an outside world where it could be found an objective reduplication of the imaginary candle: “that candle is its all, its absolute: the entire faculty of attention is absorbed by it. It is, it is that, it is there: no other possible candle, or other quality of this candle, nor other possible place, or possible objects in the place, no alternative in short suggests itself as even conceivable” (James 1890/1950, 288).

To such a mind, to doubt the existence of what looks like a living presence could only occur if this presence would lose its character of absoluteness, if it was contradicted by other phenomena able to call into question its real existence. It occurs to James that “any object which remains uncontradicted is ipso facto believed and posited as absolute reality” (James 1890/1950, 289). Clearly the idea that “the first impulse is to affirm immediately the reality of all that is conceived” – exercises a great attraction for James, and we might add that he moved away from the thesis that the impulse would manifest automatically, unless elements of doubt or contradiction would intervene. However, we cannot say that for James the criterion for distinguishing between perception of reality and purely imaginary experience is logical-formal, which is founded on the principle of non-contradiction of beliefs. It is important for James to recognize a balance of power between antagonistic beliefs and, above all, to be open to the recognition of a stratified and pluralistic perception of reality – namely to the fact that there is no *the* world, but a plurality of worlds; that there is not *the* reality, but there are different orders of reality.

Taking on the role of the spectator or that of the psychologist, or simply placing ourselves in the perspective of *common sense*, the imaginary candle and the winged horse would not be true reality, which is a connotation that features a world structured according to the scheme of the inside and outside. The imaginary candle and the winged horse would, in fact, be a reality only *inside* the mind, not *outside* it. A dreamed candle has true enough life, but does not have the existence (existence itself, that is *extra mentem meam*) that have candles during a vigil. A dreamed horse has wings, but neither horse nor wings are to be identified with any horse or with any wings we care to remember. As soon as we establish such a comparison, and foray into the *world otherwise known*, there comes the contradiction: the imagined candle and the winged horse appear for what they are, that is, a pure product of imagination or hallucination. The ultimate law of our intellectual constitution shows us that thought is carried out through comparisons and connections with different and earlier ways of thinking. But when we think of it incompatibly with our other ways of thinking, then we must choose which to stand by, for we cannot continue to think in two contradictory ways at once:

The whole distinction of real and unreal, the whole psychology of belief, disbelief, and doubt, is thus grounded on two mental facts – first, that we are liable to think differently of the same; and second, that when we have done so, we can choose which way of thinking to adhere to and which to disregard. (James 1890/1950, 290)

To refer to the example chosen by James, it is clear that the imaginary candle burning on a dark background is believed and appears as existing for the mere fact of being conceived. Indeed, as James notes, since the mind is waiting for some item to capture, the candle is believed. But when the candle appears simultaneously with other objects, it must enter into competition with them, and then it is doubtful which one among the various candidates for attention will gain the belief. As a rule, we believe whatever we can and if we could we would willingly believe anything. Consequently, for James “any relation to our mind at all, in the absence of a stronger relation, suffices to make an object real” (James 1890/1950, 299).

The interpretation of a pragmatic truth

Therefore, the presupposition of reality of the object is the previously given relationship between us and the object, until it is produced a stronger relationship leading us to pay attention to a new object that we feel it more real than the previous one. The reality of the object proceeds in this way from the fact that it is a candidate for the attention of thought, which isolates it from a homogeneous continuity and selects it according to its own interests. We must add a fundamental assumption, to the impulse to recognize as real everything that is offered to our immediate consciousness: the previous investment of *our interest* for the object. In other words, the mere fact of appearing as an object is not enough to constitute reality. This kind of reality may be metaphysical reality, may be reality for God, but what we need is practical reality, the reality for ourselves. In order to have such a reality it is not enough for the object to appear: it should appear both interesting and important. The worlds whose objects are neither interesting nor important we treat simply negatively, *we brand them as unreal*.

From the teleological and selective nature of our mind (i.e. from the fact of considering ourselves as practical people), clearly derives that the acts of thinking and of believing are formed on the principle of selectivity of the experience. An object in order to be taken as *real to us*, it has to look important and interesting. For individuals constitutively determined by practical reason, what is meant by reality has meaning only in a live and active relationship with the sphere of emotion.

Whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real: whenever an object so appeals to that we turn to it, accept it, fill our mind with it, or practically take account of it, so far it is real for us and we believe it. Whenever, on the contrary, we ignore it, fail to consider it or act upon it, despise it, reject it, forget it, so far it is unreal for us and disbelieved. (James 1890/1950, 295)

Taking into account this active involvement of our subjectivity in determining the reality of an object, it is now necessary to identify the specific increase it receives from the attribution of the predicate of existence. Following the indication given by Kant that “the real contains no more than the possible” (real one hundred thalers, for example, do not contain a penny more than one hundred possible thalers), we must always put ourselves outside of what is real in order to make it exist. James may as well have recognized that reality or real life is completely different from all other attributes given to a subject. If we add an attribute to a subject, it results in an increased to its intrinsic content, and the picture that we have of it in the mind may be richer, but such a framework is unchanged if *reality* is added. Such an addition does not change the picture inside, but can only fix and imprint it within us.

James held that the intuitive form of knowledge was direct apprehension, unmediated by anything, and truth for intuitive knowledge was a matter of direct consciousness in the flow of experience. James argued for a humanistic and practical conception of truth, rooted in human experience and indexed to available evidence, and to the perspective of human individuals or groups. *True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False are those that we cannot.* That is the practical difference having true ideas has for us; the truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, it is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process, the process namely of verifying itself, its verification. So, , for James, truth is not separable from the contexts of conscious experience, from the interaction with processes in the surrounding world, the relationships among things and ideas, and the representative theories that we hold about how the world works. Truth in a pragmatic sense seems to oscillate between verification and verifiability, between a real putting in place and a virtual implementation of the verification. Of course the evidence of truth is primarily related to our own life, even if we grant trust, as social beings, to many ideas that we have not directly verified. So truth lives in large part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs 'circulate', as long as no one tests them. This implies that, somewhere, a direct factual verification, has to take place, since without it the structure of truth may collapse: beliefs verified by someone actually are the pillars

of the entire superstructure of language. We exchange the verification of truth and beliefs. As James, paraphrasing the Gospel, says: Blessed are those who have not seen and believe. It would indeed be crippling for our action and impossible for our daily practice, which often forces us to sudden decisions, linger in a continuous verification and full of ideas that guide our conduct. Once we have verified directly our ideas about a specimen of some kind, we consider ourselves free to apply it to all other specimens, without further verifications. (James, 1907/1995)

Thus, James's view does not fit neatly into either a correspondence or a coherence of truth. It is not correspondence, because the terminal points of the truth-making relation are not propositional sentences and things, but experiences in the stream of consciousness, and processes of perception, representation or validation that verify the experiences. The problem of the correspondence becomes a matter of usefully guiding our thoughts where there are important objects. True ideas lead us directly to useful verbal and conceptual places, as towards sensitive useful destinations. They guide us to consistency and stability, necessary to make human relationships easier. They take us away from weirdness, eccentricity, isolation, and from sterile and impotent way of thinking. Once again is the "common sense" that establishes itself as a discriminating factor of each agreement, and once again is through the practical use that the agreement appears to be as an operation not purely formal, but substantively complete: therefore the pragmatist considers the word 'agreement' from the practical point of view. (James, 1907/1995; Stara 2004)

James makes a clear attempt to come out from the cognitive maps of intellectualism, based on a strict distinction between subject and object and on the separation between cognitive and emotional sphere. This is not to discredit the theoretic-representative function of the mind, but to bring it to a more original ground, the ground of an active and emotional self, and to recognize that the theoretic-representative state is the result of a reduction of reality with respect to the plenum of the world-of-life, i.e. the perceptual pre-categorical sphere. Truth grows, as a process of continuous adequacy to reality in motion, it is necessarily involved in a continuous process of change. Truth emerges from the facts, and then it re-immerses in them and adds itself to them, and then again these facts create or reveal new truths, and so on ad infinitum. The "facts" in themselves are not true: they simply are. Truth is in function of the belief as the realization of the consequences related to the belief.

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