

# Intellectualism and Regulative Assumptions: Subjectivism about Truth and Misak's James<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction:

The history of pragmatism has been, as Richard Bernstein famously put it, a history of conflicting narratives,<sup>2</sup> and in her otherwise admirable new book, *The American Pragmatists*, Cheryl Misak endorses one of the classic narratives of the field, namely the one in which C. S. Peirce founds Pragmatism with some deep insights about the nature of truth and objectivity, only to have William James misunderstand what he was doing, and pass off as Pragmatism an overly subjectivist and relativistic version of the doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

Like all such narratives, this one isn't without a grain of truth. James does, indeed, seem to make room for talk of a 'subjective' notion of truth that Peirce (and most other philosophers) reject, but in what follows I'll suggest that this comes his views on the status of one of the key 'regulative assumptions' that both philosophers took to govern our notion of objective truth rather than, as Misak suggests, his purported subjectivism about justification in "The Will to Believe."<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Misak's James: Subjectivism and the Will to Believe

By Misak's lights, the origin of James's "radical subjectivism"<sup>5</sup> go all the way back to his earliest writings on the Will to Believe, and she argues that:

James was already in the 1870s radically rethinking the concept of truth and that "The Will to Believe" can be best understood in light of that new view of truth. On this reading, what James was trying to do was not to refute evidentialism but, rather, to expand the concept of what can count as evidence for the

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<sup>2</sup> More precisely "a plurality of conflicting narratives". Bernstein 1999, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> Version of this narrative arguably go back to Peirce himself, are reinforced by R. B. Perry famous remark that "the modern movement known as pragmatism is largely the result of James' misunderstanding of Peirce"(Perry 1935, p.409) and can be found in contemporary defenders of the Peircian strand of Pragmatism like Mounce 1997 and Rescher 2000 (both of whom, like Misak, present Rorty as the successor of the 'Jamesian' strand).

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, rather than resulting from a misunderstanding of Peirce, James's 'subjectivism' arguably came from his understanding, and facing, the consequences of, Peirce's early views more forthrightly than Peirce was willing to.

<sup>5</sup> Misak 2013, p. 60.

truth of a belief.... one of the ways in which James wants to expand the concept of evidence is to include as evidence the satisfaction of the believer.<sup>6</sup>

If what we desire counts as *evidence* for a belief, then it would be natural to take it to be relevant to its *truth*, so James's purported subjectivism about what counts as evidence seems to commit him to, and quite possibly follows from, a subjectivism about truth itself.

This picture of James as 'expanding the concept of evidence' runs through Misak's discussion of "The Will to Believe", so that James's famous claim that:

Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, 'Do not decide, but leave the question open' is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth. (James 1896a, p. 20)

is glossed as James suggesting not that reasons don't determine our beliefs on their own, but rather that our reasons do determine our beliefs on their own in part because there are "non-epistemic reasons"<sup>7</sup> that help do so. That is, rather than claiming that our beliefs aren't determined solely on intellectual grounds, "James wants to broaden the scope of 'intellectual grounds' so that they include the passional."<sup>8</sup> Attributing to James a belief in this sort of "passional evidence"<sup>9</sup> allows one to treat James's views as being "compatible with evidentialism—with the view that one should believe in accord with one's evidence," even if "he has a view of evidence that is so expansive that it is anathema to the evidentialist."<sup>10</sup>

On this 'evidentialist' reading, James is presented as a defender of the legitimacy of arguments like:

1. The objective evidence doesn't decide whether God exists.
2. I'd be better off if I believed that God existed.<sup>11</sup>
3. Therefore, I should believe that God exists.
4. Therefore, God exists

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<sup>6</sup> Misak 2013, p. 63.

<sup>7</sup> Misak 2013, p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> Misak 2013, p. 65.

<sup>9</sup> Misak 2013, p. 66.

<sup>10</sup> Misak 2013, p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Or, believing in God "is satisfying to me", "has a commanding influence on my life", or I "cannot... emotionally or psychologically do without the belief" (Misak 2013, p. 66).

Of course, (2) doesn't seem to give any compelling reason to conclude (4) unless one thought that (2) was relevant to the truth of the belief in question, which intuitively it seems not to be. The only way to legitimize such a move from (2) to (4) would be, as Misak suggests James does, to adopt a type of subjectivism about truth where the truth simply is what one would be better off believing.

However, this 'evidentialist' reading of James's writings on the Will to Believe does considerable violence to James's texts, including the passage quoted above where James claims that (rather than trying to "broaden the scope of 'intellectual grounds' so that they include the passionate") his focus is on those questions that "cannot by [their] nature be decided on intellectual grounds". After all, while James used the term "intellectualism" for a cluster of views to which he took himself to be opposed throughout his career, one sort of intellectualism that was consistently in James's sights was a picture of human psychology that overstated the role of evidence and conscious reasoning in our mental life. This is manifest in early works like *The Principles of Psychology*, where he argues that much of our mental life was determined by elements that came through the 'back door' of neurological variation rather than the 'front door' of experience and evidence. For instance, we find "1 + 1 = 2" compelling not because it has been confirmed by all our experience (or even all of our ancestors' experiences), but rather because a random variation led an ancestor to find it compelling, and that variation proved to be adaptive.<sup>12</sup>

Misak's presentation of James, however, puts James appeal to our passionate nature firmly within an intellectualist framework whereby our 'passionate' requirements are weighted by the intellect as just one more piece of evidence for or against a particular belief. However, James's point is precisely that not everything that affects the conclusions we draw (whether justly or unjustly) is a type of reason or evidence, and Misak's desire to interpret James's more realistic non-evidentialist psychology as just an attempt to combine evidentialism with an implausibly wide sense of what the evidence is seems, to put it

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<sup>12</sup> See, especially the chapter, "Necessary Truths and the Effects of Experience" in James 1890.

mildly, unmotivated (especially given the manifest implausibility of the views resultantly attributed to James).<sup>13</sup>

To see how such accounts distort the material James actually presents, consider James's famous 'mountain climber' case.

Suppose, for example, that I am climbing in the Alps, and have the ill-luck to work myself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Being without similar experience, I have no evidence of my ability to perform it successfully; *but hope and confidence in myself make me sure I shall not miss my aim*, and nerve my feet to execute what without those subjective emotions would perhaps have been impossible. But suppose that, on the contrary, the emotions of fear and mistrust preponderate; or suppose that, having just read the "Ethics of Belief," I feel it would be sinful to act upon an assumption unverified by previous experience -- why, then I shall hesitate so long that at last, exhausted and trembling, and launching myself in a moment of despair, I miss my foothold and roll into the abyss.<sup>14</sup>

What James describes here is a confident climber who has faith in his ability to make the jump, even when there is no compelling evidence that he can.<sup>15</sup> His confidence helps make it the case that he does make the jump, and James's view is that the climber's belief that he can make the jump is justified ("lawful"). It should be stressed that this confident belief formation is comparatively *unreflective*. The Climber's 'passional nature' takes over as he forms the belief without reflecting on it in too much detail, and such comparatively unreflective belief formation is justified in part because had he explicitly reflected on the question, his evidence would have not have settled the question of what he could, or couldn't, do. The above can be contrasted with the 'intellectualist' reading of the mountain climber case, where the conclusion that he can make the jump is the result of explicit reasoning something like the following:

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<sup>13</sup> Misak recognizes that hers may not be the most charitable reading of James (or at least that it is downplaying James "at his best" and emphasizing the "cruder and extravagant" aspect of his thought", but insists that it is her duty to do so since this was the version of James that was historically influential (Misak 2013, p.54). There is no doubt that the version of James as this sort of 'crude pragmatist' has been influential, but I should note that this deference to historically influential readings is noticeably absent in the discussion of Peirce and C.I. Lewis, since the equally, if not more, influential reading of Peirce as relying on the idea that we could reach some idealized 'end of inquiry' and C.I. Lewis as the proper target of Quine and Sellars are rejected in favor of arguably more plausible, but certainly historically less influential readings.

<sup>14</sup> James 1882, p. 80 (italics mine).

<sup>15</sup> Though (crucially) no compelling evidence that he can't either. Santayana seems to miss this point rather aggressively when he writes:

Why does belief that you can jump a ditch help you to jump it? Because it is a symptom of the fact that you could jump it, that your legs were fit and that the ditch was two yards wide and not twenty. A rapid and just appreciation of these facts has given you your confidence, or at least has made it reasonable . . . otherwise you would have been a fool and got a ducking for it. (Santayana, 1920, p. 61)

1. The objective evidence doesn't settle the question of whether I can make the jump.
2. I'd be better off if I made the jump.
3. If I believe that I can make the jump, I'll be more likely to make it.<sup>16</sup>
4. Therefore, I should believe that I can make the jump.
5. Therefore, I can make the jump.

The intellectualist reconstruction doesn't capture how the Mountain Climber is actually described,<sup>17</sup> but equally importantly, it requires the believer to form beliefs in ways that don't seem psychologically plausible (hence all the related discussions about the possibility of 'voluntarism' about belief for those who defend such a reading). Merely being aware of something like (3) won't be enough for most of us to get to believing (5).

If the intellectualist version of the 'Will to Believe' is both obviously flawed as a philosophical position and not clearly found in James's texts, why attribute it to James? In spite of its manifest problems,<sup>18</sup> one possible reason to support the intellectualist reading of the Will to Believe argument would be if it were the only, or even the best, way to explain James's apparent sympathy with a more 'subjective' notion of truth.<sup>19</sup> However, the type of subjectivism in this 'subjective' strand is not as robust as it is sometimes made out to be,

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<sup>16</sup> This belief is special to cases like the mountain climber, but it should be noted that James never describes his climber as explicitly considering anything like (3). For attempts to read James in this way, see, for instance:

[T]hink of an Alpine climber who, because of an avalanche and a blinding blizzard, is stranded on a desolate, mountain path facing a chasm. The climber cannot return the way he came because of the avalanche, yet if he stays where he is, he will freeze as the temperature plummets. The climber's only real hope is to jump the chasm, the width of which is obscured by the blizzard. *The climber knows himself well enough to realize that, unless he believes that he can make the jump, he attempt will only be half-hearted, diminishing his chance of survival.* In circumstances like these, one is clearly justified in relying upon pragmatic reasons, since survival is practically possible only given belief. (Pojman 1993, p. 543, italics mine)

James's own example (with my filing out an interpretation) is of a man trapped at the edge of a crevasse, overlooking a yawning gorge. *He calculates that a successful leap is improbable, but it will increase in probability in proportion to his convincing himself that he must get himself to believe what an impartial look at the evidence will not allow.* So he volitions the belief. (Jordan 1996 pp. 412-13, italics mine)

<sup>17</sup> Of course, the Mountain Climber appears in "The Sentiment of Rationality" rather than, "The Will to Believe" but one could make much the same point about James's discussion of the people on the train (James 1896a, p.29), the gregarious man (James 1896a, p. 28) and the confident lover (James 1896a, p. 28). In none of these are the subjects themselves described as explicitly reflecting on the effects of their confidence on their chances of success.

<sup>18</sup> Which I discuss in more detail in Jackman 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Which goes along with his admittedly more objective conception of 'Absolute' truth.

and it will be argued below that better explanations of this strand of James's thought are available.

### **3. An alternative explanation of James's 'Subjectivism' about Truth: Regulative Assumptions**

So how does one explain James's suggestion that there is a 'subjective' (or "temporary") sense of truth? It will be argued here that James's sympathy with a more subjective take on truth comes from another source of difference between the James and Peirce, namely their attitude towards what Misak refers to as "regulative assumptions". Misak describes Peirce's take on such assumptions as follows:

Peirce is very interested in what he calls "regulative assumptions." His account of truth turns on the idea that a regulative assumption of inquiry is that there would be an answer to the question at hand. As he thinks his way through the implications of that idea, he speaks to the nature of regulative assumptions more generally. We have seen that some of his examples resonate with James's alpine climber. For instance, Peirce talks of a general who "has to capture a position or see his country ruined." He "must go on the hypothesis that there is some way that he can and shall capture it" (CP 7. 219; 1901).

But for Peirce, the essential point to make about regulative assumptions is not one about their truth or about whether we should believe or assert them. His is a point about the successful continuation of a practical matter—making friends, preventing your country from being ruined, jumping the chasm, continuing to inquire. If we want to succeed in any of these endeavors, we need to make assumptions—assumptions that allow the practice to go on in the way that is desired.

Peirce seems to be suggesting that there is a propositional attitude, alternative to belief, which is appropriate in certain circumstances. It is of course an open question whether adopting this kind of attitude towards the proposition "this chasm is jump-able" or "we can capture this position" would be sufficient to instill the confidence required to successfully jump the chasm or capture the position. The attitude that Peirce thinks is warranted towards such beliefs is that we should hope that they are true. And in so hoping, we should act on them. He is very clear that this is a different matter from believing or asserting.<sup>20</sup>

Peirce is here notably presented as taking the more modest position on regulative assumptions, and is favorably contrasted to James purported belief that "the need to assume something entails its truth"<sup>21</sup> or at least that "if I have to believe  $p$  in order to fulfill some aim, then I am justified in believing  $p$ ."<sup>22</sup>

It will be argued here, however, that James's own position will ultimately turn out to be the more modest one. This is at least in part because belief is a better candidate for many of these cases than hope, but mainly because, even for the cases when something like more

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<sup>20</sup> Misak, 2013, p.64.

<sup>21</sup> Misak 2013, p. 75.

<sup>22</sup> Misak 2013, p. 75.

modest hope might be more appropriate, James is willing to step back from these regulative assumptions in the way that Peirce is not.

First, on the question of whether, belief or hope is the best attitude to take towards these regulative assumptions, it seems clear that, as it is standardly understood, hope is too weak an attitude to deal with the sort of cases, like the Alpine Climber, that James has in mind in papers like “The Will to Believe” and “The Sentiment of Rationality”. The diffident jumper may still *hope* that he can make it, the socially cautious man may still *hope* that people will like him, etc., but such hopes will not do the work that actual belief can. I hope that I will win each time I buy a lottery ticket, but that hope doesn’t lead me to act as if I’ll win, indeed, I remain very confident, virtually certain, that I won’t. The type of hope involved here then needs to be some souped-up type of hope that allows that when you hope that your assumption is true, you will be willing to act on that assumption with full confidence. However, it’s hard to see how this strong version of hope is any different from belief, especially when you assume, with Peirce and James, that “The essence of belief is the establishment of a habit.”<sup>23</sup> One can pretend that one doesn’t ‘really’ believe these regulative assumptions and merely hopes that they are true, but this seems to be no different from the sort of ‘paper doubt’ that Peirce criticizes Cartesian philosophers for indulging in.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, even if Peirce did think that the “regulative assumptions” needed for *science* (such as the principle of bivalence, or the existence of an external world causing our perceptions) shouldn’t be *believed*, there is some reason to think that he wouldn’t have counted cases like the Alpine Climber as in this class, and thus could have treated belief as the appropriate attitude in such cases. As he puts it in his 1898 Cambridge Conferences lectures:

I hold that what is properly and usually called *belief*, that is, the adoption of a proposition as a [possession for all time]... has no place in science at all. We *believe* the propositions we are ready to act upon. *Full belief* is willingness to act upon the proposition in vital crises, *opinion* is willingness to act upon it in relatively insignificant affairs. But pure science has nothing to do with *action*. The propositions it accepts, it merely writes in the list of premises it proposes to use. Nothing is *vital* for science; nothing can

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<sup>23</sup> Peirce 1878.

<sup>24</sup> Peirce 1877. Indeed, it isn’t clear why ‘Cartesian’ philosophers couldn’t help themselves to this new attitude and insist that we should never *believe* anything that we weren’t certain of, but could build up our inquiries about the world on these beefed up hopes.

be. Its accepted propositions therefore, are but opinions, at most, and the whole list is provisional....There is thus no proposition at all in science which answers to the conception of belief. But in vital matters, it is quite otherwise. We must act in such matters, and the principle upon which we are willing to act is belief.<sup>25</sup>

It may be then, that Peirce's worries about James's "Will to Believe" doctrine had only to do with its application in scientific contexts. This would leave the two surprisingly close in this area, since James himself often suggests that the doctrine doesn't apply in such contexts either.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, while both Peirce and James took it to be a "regulative assumption of inquiry is that there would be an answer to the question at hand,"<sup>27</sup> James seems more willing to 'bracket' such assumptions when any particular question isn't actually at hand. Even if one needed to assume that a question has a definitive answer when one was investigating in to it, one can still step back from such investigations and ask oneself how likely such definitive answers are likely to be.<sup>28</sup> On stepping back, one might conclude that some of these questions might not be plausible candidates for reaching the stable consensus on single answer that Peirce and James associate with objective, or 'Absolute' truth.

Peirce may insist that "it is unphilosophical to suppose that, with regard to any given question (which has any clear meaning), investigation would not bring forth a solution of it,

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<sup>25</sup> Peirce 1898, p. 112. See also Peirce 1898, p. 178 where he suggests that while truth itself may not be ambiguous, he does think "that *holding for true* is of two kinds; the one that is the practical holding for true which alone is entitled to name of Belief, while the other is that acceptance of a proposition which in the intention of pure science remains always provisional." Misak is, of course, aware of such passages, but seems to see them more as a reflection of Peirce's irritation with James in 1897 and 1898 than they are a reflection of Peirce's own considered views (see Misak 2004).

<sup>26</sup> As James puts it, "Let us agree, however, that wherever there is no forced option, the dispassionately judicial intellect with no pet hypothesis, saving us, as it does, from dupery at any rate, ought to be our ideal" (James 1896a, p. 26). Not that there is no difference between the two on the issue of how scientists should form their beliefs, as Peirce precedes the passage quoted above with the claim, "If I allow the supremacy of sentiment in human affairs, I do so at dictation of reason itself; and equally at the dictation of sentiment, in theoretical matters I refuse to allow sentiment any weight whatever" (Peirce 1898, p. 112). James, on the other hand, clearly thought that there was no escaping "sentiment" in the theoretical realm either, and even if the scientist worked with provisional hypotheses rather than beliefs, sentiment would affect which provisional hypotheses they chose as well.

<sup>27</sup> Misak 2013, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> The general who "has to capture a position or see his country ruined" may need to "go on the hypothesis that there is some way that he can and shall capture it", but those following the campaign from abroad needn't make such assumption.



if it were carried far enough”,<sup>29</sup> but it is far from clear that a *generalized* confidence need be a regulative ideal for our inquiries. On the contrary, one might think that it’s healthy for inquiry to have a sense that some (indeed, many) questions are a waste of time to inquire into not just because the answers are of little interest, but because inquiry wouldn’t point towards any clear answer. One might remain a fallibilist about what claims fell in this class of ‘buried secrets’, but still maintain that it is never empty, and so still respect Peirce’s insistence that we shouldn’t dogmatically assume any question is unknowable.<sup>30</sup>

One should note that being open minded about their not being an answer to particular questions does not necessarily amount to a violation of Peirce’s “first ... rule of reason”, namely, that one “not block the way of inquiry”.<sup>31</sup> As long as one remains a fallibilist about *which* questions would never receive an answer, there is no reason why having opinions about which questions will yield definitive answers must block (rather than help direct) inquiry. Misak argues that bivalence needs to be a regulative assumption of inquiry,<sup>32</sup> but even if we needed to assume that any question *we were actively inquiring into* had a determinate truth value, it wouldn’t follow that we were thereby committed to the universal principle that “for any  $p$ ,  $p$  is either true or false”.

However, there are moments when James steps back and seems to suspect that *most*, perhaps virtually all, beliefs won’t reach the stable resistance to further inquiry that Peircian truth requires. James has his reasons for thinking that our beliefs may not converge as much, or as often, as Peirce hopes. The most important of these is his general view that our concepts don’t capture reality’s ‘continuous’ character,<sup>33</sup> and so any claim

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<sup>29</sup> Peirce 1878, p. 140. And one should note, that if a question doesn’t yield an answer, it isn’t obvious that it’s meaning is perfectly ‘clear’ in the first place.

<sup>30</sup> See his discussion of Comte’s unfortunate claim that it would be impossible to discover the chemical composition of the stars in Peirce 1898, p. 179.

<sup>31</sup> Peirce 1898, p. 178.

<sup>32</sup> “Thus the principle of bivalence—for any  $p$ ,  $p$  is either true or false—rather than being a law of logic, is a regulative assumption of inquiry. It is something that we have to assume if we are to inquire into a matter” (Misak 2013, p. 50)

<sup>33</sup> As Misak herself notes (Misak 2013, p. 57). Another reason may stem from the fact that, even if we were able to square something like a materialist conceptual system with all of our perceptual experience, such systems would clash with our ‘spontaneous powers’ in a way that would never leave them free from doubt.

wrapped up in them can't be 'Absolutely true'.

In particular, the problem that James saw with the competing scientific theories<sup>34</sup> is seen by him as arising with our conceptual schemes writ large. In particular, James is not merely endorsing the 'weak pluralism' that points out that there may be more than one way to successfully organize perceptual experience,<sup>35</sup> but floating the more radical conclusion that, when held to the demanding criteria of absolute truth, *no* conceptualization will be adequate. As he puts it:

There are thus at least three well-characterized levels, stages or types of thought about the world we live in, and the notions of one stage have one kind of merit, those of another stage another kind. It is impossible, however, to say that any stage as yet in sight is absolutely more *true* than any other. ... There is no *ringing* conclusion possible when we compare these types of thinking, with a view to telling which is the more absolutely true. Their naturalness, their intellectual economy, their fruitfulness for practice, all start up as distinct tests of their veracity, and as a result we get confused. Common sense is *better* for one sphere of life, science for another, philosophic criticism for a third; but whether either be *truer* absolutely, Heaven only knows.<sup>36</sup>

Inquiry into a question will never produce a stable answer, since there is not a stable framework for inquiry, and when we adopt, say, a scientific framework, many claims that were previously endorsed will be denied because their ontological presuppositions will be rejected. James seems at times pessimistic about this situation ever changing. (Note that the quotation above ends with the question of *whether* any of the competing schemes be true absolutely, not of *which* one is.) Concepts emerged to serve our *practical* ends (with our most fundamental concepts evolved to serve the most basic of these ends), and a

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<sup>34</sup> "Up to about 1850 almost everyone believed that sciences expressed truths that were exact copies of a definite code of non-human realities. But the enormously rapid multiplication of theories in these latter days has well-nigh upset the notion of any one of them being a more literally objective kind of thing than another. There are so many geometries, so many logics, so many physical and chemical hypotheses, so many classifications, *each one of them good for so much and yet not good for everything*, that the notion that even the truest formula may be a human device and not a literal transcript has dawned upon us." (James 1909, p. 40, italics mine.)

<sup>35</sup> This is the sort of pluralism emphasized, for instance, by Steven Levine in his recent response to Misak's book. (Levine, 2013, see especially pp. 126-127). Though James certainly endorse this sort of weak pluralism as a best case scenario, and if Absolute Truth were reachable, he would expect that there would be multiple schemes able to capture it.

<sup>36</sup> James 1907, pp. 92-3.

conceptual system that emerged this way may not be well suited to provide the kind of consistent *theoretical* account of reality that Absolute Truth requires.<sup>37</sup>

It is, of course, an empirical question whether the sort of convergence that Absolute Truth requires is possible, and in this sense, the 'nature of truth' can't be determined by mere armchair reflection. James may have had reasons for doubting that Absolute Truth could be achieved, but his fallibilism is stronger than his pessimism in this area, and he also felt that we had a 'right to believe' in Absolute Truth, and this tension between doubt and hope (a tension that runs through so much of James's work) structures his complex writings on truth.

So what should we say if the 'pessimistic' conclusion that James imagines actually turned out to be the case, and that the regulative ideal that our use of "true" aspired to was unsatisfiable? Peirce clearly felt that the Absolute conception is so central to our notion of truth that if there were no Absolute Truth then we should say that there is no truth at all.<sup>38</sup> James, on the other hand, seems to consider the possibility that the failure of anything to be Absolutely True should lead us instead to conclude that the 'Absolute' interpretation might not be the best account of what we mean by "true".

"True", James sometimes suggests, is 'ambiguous.'<sup>39</sup> However, he never spells out just what this ambiguity would amount to. I'd like to suggest here that, on his view, "true" could be 'ambiguous' in the way terms like "free" or "saint" could be. Both terms have, arguably, a 'strong' reading (roughly, freedom as the incompatibilist understands it, and a holy person

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<sup>37</sup> Indeed, this assumption that our concepts always at some level misrepresent the realities they normally help us cope with is not limited to the concepts of common sense. James seems to suspect that it will be a problem with *any* conceptual system, since *conceptualization itself* misrepresents the 'continuous' nature of reality. Concepts require sharp boundaries, and while the imposition of models of the world where things are sharply defined has tremendous practical value, it inevitably misrepresents the richness of reality, and thus are unable to get to a point of Absolute Truth. The pinch will always be felt if any concept is extended enough, and thus no stable rest to inquiry will ever be reached.

<sup>38</sup> "I do not say that it is infallibly true that there is any belief to which a person would come if he were to carry his inquiries far enough. I only say that that alone is what I call Truth. I cannot infallibly know that there *is* any truth." (Peirce 1908, p. 398.)

<sup>39</sup> In *Pragmatism* he asks, "May there not after all be a possible ambiguity in truth?" (James, 1907, p. 94), and he mentions this "ambiguity" almost as an aside in his "Does Consciousness Exist" ("Note the ambiguity of this term ["truth"], which is taken sometimes objectively and sometimes subjectively" (James 1904, p. 13), but spells it out in perhaps his clearest fashion in his 1908 seminar at Harvard where he claims "It is unfortunate that truth should be used, now for the temporary beliefs of men and now for a purely abstract thing that nobody may, perhaps, ever be in possession of." (James 1908, p. 433.)

in whom Christ dwells) and a 'weak' reading (roughly, freedom as the compatibilist understands it, and someone who is officially canonized by the Catholic church). There are two uses of each of these terms in the sense that some people may have something like the weaker sense in mind when they use the term, while others have the stronger sense. However, most may not clearly have one of the two in mind rather than the other, and so these terms aren't, strictly speaking, *ambiguous*. If the presuppositions behind the strong readings were, in fact, satisfied, most would agree that something that satisfied the weak criterion but not the strong would not *really* be free or a saint. That said, if the metaphysical presuppositions behind the strong senses of these terms aren't satisfied, one could still hold on to such presuppositions and claim that there are no saints or free actions. However, there is also the option of holding on to the term and claiming that the weaker sense, the sense that did correspond to the conditions under which the terms were actually applied, is what the terms should be understood as having meant all along.

Which way we should go for any particular term will depend, ultimately, on one's subjective interests and whether you think that the term has a purpose even if the strong reading falls through, so one might think it best to tie "saint" to the strong reading and say that there are no saints, while tying "free" to the weak reading, so that they can affirm that we are free and continue with the moral practices that presuppose that we are. Much the same can be said for truth. It is, ultimately subjective factors that would (in the pessimistic scenario where Absolute Truth is unattainable) determine whether we give up on the existence of truth all together. Some might feel that convergence is so central to our idea of truth that if there is no convergence, then there is no truth. Others might feel that truth-talk is central enough for us that if the ideal of Absolute Truth proved to be unrealizable, then we would simply need to understand "truth" in a way that doesn't make absolutist presupposition (as the compatibilist understands "freedom" in a similarly less loaded way). I think that James's willingness to understand truth as "Temporary Truth" (rather than only as "Absolute Truth") puts him firmly in this latter camp. If you think that Absolute Truth is a realizable ideal, then it will be natural to think that Temporary Truth is a pretty shabby candidate for what most of us mean by "true". However, if, like James, you think that this ideal may fail to be realized, even in principle, then the shabby candidate can begin to look like what we have been talking about with the term all along.

Some might think that this pessimism about Absolute Truth is inconsistent with one of the main ideas associated with Pragmatism, namely that we can't make sense of any idea of truth beyond what our best inquiries can do. However, I think that just the opposite is the case. The 'ambiguity' that James posits draws precisely on a tension within our idea of 'what our best inquires can do'. 'Absolute' truth draws on that notion in that global consistency, comprehensiveness and stability are all goals that can seem 'internal' to our practice of inquiry and so Absolute Truth can claim to a concept of truth that draws its content from the ideals governing our actual practice of inquiry. That said, there is no guarantee that inquiry will, or even could, live up to these ideals, and what James calls 'temporary truth' can claim to be a legitimate concept of truth because it is tied to what our best inquiries can *actually* do.

I think that *this* is the ultimate source of James's subjectivism. He takes "true" to be ambiguous between the objective/absolute/Perician sense and the more 'subjective' sense of his "temporary truths" because he remains, properly, a fallibilist about the regulative assumptions that are presupposed in much of our truth talk.

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