

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS TO THE WILLIAM JAMES SOCIETY

WHAT TO MAKE OF JAMES'S GENETIC THEORY OF TRUTH?

DAVID C. LAMBERTH

ABSTRACT

This Presidential Address to the 2008 Annual Meeting of the William James Society pursues an overlooked avenue to understanding what James might have intended by his claim in Pragmatism to offer a "genetic theory of what is meant by truth." The author argues that we can plausibly interpret this specific claim of James by appealing to Hermann Lotze's conception of "genetic definition," explicated in his 1874 Logik, which James read and annotated closely. The essay concludes by pursuing the implications of this thesis for understanding Pragmatism, 'truth' in James, and truth and pragmatism in relation to James's other philosophical commitments.

One of the longstanding challenges in interpreting William James's pragmatism is understanding what sort of account he thought he was providing when he turned to the question of truth. Notably, James entitled *Pragmatism's* central chapter on the subject "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth," not "The Pragmatic Theory of Truth," thus seeming to take a somewhat diminished view of what he offered. However, when introducing pragmatism in lecture two James refers to John Dewey's and F. C. S. Schiller's theories of truth, and notes that he himself will devote a lecture to explaining pragmatism's theory. The standard assumption from the first presentation of the lectures was that James was indeed offering a theory of truth in the way we normally mean that term. That is, it was assumed that James was offering a definition of the nature of truth in terms of properties, principles, and causes and providing a systematic account of their interactions or relations. But as many commentators from then until now have noted, James's account of truth is less what we ordinarily expect of a theory, and more something else.¹ The question is, what? In what follows I pursue an alternate and heretofore overlooked avenue to understanding what James might have intended with his account of truth, in hopes of shedding light on what sort of story James had to tell about this perennial topic in philosophy.

Specifically, I suggest that we can make at least some sense of James's claim to offer a "genetic theory" of truth by appealing to Hermann Lotze's conception of "genetic definition." Although the connection is abstruse, the perspective I take has implications for how one might interpret 'truth' in James, as well as for how one might interpret truth to stand in relation to pragmatism itself, and James's other philosophical commitments.

TURNING TO TRUTH

If one takes truth to relate to knowledge or knowing, one cannot help but notice that James works out variations on a theory of knowledge in a variety of places over the course of his career, ranging from *The Principles of Psychology* through his essays concerning radical empiricism on to his later writings, in addition to *Pragmatism*. I have argued elsewhere that much of James's understanding of knowledge is eventually premised on his radical empiricism, in contrast to those who take pragmatism to be a fundamental or standalone view for James.² Moreover, I have sought to present James's account of truth as dependent on, and largely subordinate to, this more comprehensive view. Notwithstanding this overall emphasis in my interpretation of James, my topic here is focused explicitly on his writings about pragmatism and truth, and the status of those claims. The view I adumbrate here is basically consistent with my broader strategy of interpreting truth in James, but it is also more specific about the particular rhetorical and theoretical location of James's actual discussions.

Looking at James's overt discussions of pragmatism, one finds shot throughout an appeal to pragmatism as a means of settling disputes or carrying on discussion on the one hand, and a related assertion of the pragmatic principle of meaning on the other hand.³ The first of these we might take to be a specification of the applicable context for the pragmatic method, and the second to be the principle undergirding the method itself. James's pragmatism is, however, often and more notoriously known for its pragmatic conception of truth, thus provoking questions about the scope of his pragmatism and its relation to traditional modern conceptions of philosophy which are, among other things, frequently dominated by epistemological concerns and ideas rather than by the practical sets of issues James otherwise seems to underscore in his pragmatic engagements.

Coincident with this, most readers and interpreters of James take his pragmatism to

involve two separable components or theories: the pragmatic principle relating to meaning and the pragmatic theory of truth.⁴ James himself suggested this reading, noting in the second chapter of *Pragmatism* that “Such then would be the scope of pragmatism—first a method; and second, a genetic theory of what is meant by truth. And these two things must be our future topics.”⁵

Though James was explicit about this two-fold aspect of pragmatism in 1907, in his early discussions of pragmatism between 1898 and 1904, James did not consider truth at all. In fact, in 1904 he noted in a letter to F.C.S. Schiller that:

‘pragmatism’ never meant for me more than a method of conducting discussions (a sovereign method, it is true) and the tremendous scope which you and Dewey have given to the conception has exceeded my more timid philosophizing. I welcome it, and admire it, but I can’t yet think out certain parts of it . . .⁶

James was encouraged by Schiller and the editors of *Mind* to enter the then lively fray on pragmatism and humanism, pragmatism having become all the rage due to the distribution of James’s 1898 Berkeley talk, “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results,” which was complemented in 1903 by the appearance of Dewey’s *Studies in Logical Theory* and Schiller’s *Humanism*. Several months later in 1904 James accommodated these demands with his article “Humanism and Truth,” published in *Mind* but now better known for its inclusion in *The Meaning of Truth* (1909).⁷ Tellingly, that article begins with James’s assertion that “I myself have only used the term [pragmatism] to indicate a method of carrying on abstract discussion.”⁸ James specifies further that all that his pragmatism implies in the case of truth is that truths should have practical consequences, which we can most fruitfully read as simply applying the gist of the pragmatic principle of meaning to the concept of truth.⁹ He then notes that a wider pragmatism has, however, recently been developed, involving Schiller’s much stronger claim that the truth of any statement *consists* in the consequences. This later claim, both more substantively epistemological and ontological, and certainly looking more like a theory than anything James had yet said, is apparently the “tremendous scope” James noted in his letter. In any case, in his essay James rather strategically endorses Schiller’s proposal to call the wider pragmatism ‘humanism’ in 1904, thus leaving his own narrower pragmatism intact as the ‘pragmatic method.’ He then generously offers something of a defense of some of humanism’s

claims, though he demurs from defending Schiller explicitly, due, he says, to not having the book in hand.

When James came to write *Pragmatism* two years hence, he tossed in the towel on this strategy of separating the nomenclature of pragmatism from humanism. In this text he discusses Schiller's humanism overtly and notes that, "for this doctrine, too, the name of pragmatism seems to be fairly in the ascendant, so I will treat it under the name of pragmatism in these lectures."¹⁰ Although from this text James may be read to be content with this shift, letters indicate that he was never fully comfortable with the name 'pragmatism' itself, and probably also not with a complete elision of pragmatism with Schiller's humanism regarding truth.¹¹ (Indeed, one might read the separation of chapter six "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth" from chapter seven "Pragmatism and Humanism" to be asserting some resistance to the adequacy of Schiller's formulations.) More importantly, despite James's overt comments about the two topics of meaning and truth in his book, it is simply not evident from the text of *Pragmatism* that James thinks that the humanistic/pragmatic theory of truth requires, in any meaningful respect, anything further than what is implied by his more rudimentary or fundamental notion of pragmatism as a theory of meaning, or pragmatism insisting that truth have practical consequences.¹² James does state that he has two topics for the lectures: "first, a method; and second, a genetic theory of what is meant by truth." He does not, however, claim explicitly that he has two separable pragmatic doctrines, despite how readers have taken him.¹³

One path to understanding what James is doing in extending his discussion of pragmatism from meaning to truth can be extrapolated from his unelaborated and obscure statement that he is offering a "genetic theory of what is meant by truth." Two features of this comment are immediately salient. First, much as he eventually does with the title of the sequel to *Pragmatism*, James appears to be underscoring that what he is interested in is the *meaning* of truth, or perhaps better, what "truth" means, through his inclusion of "meant" in the phrase "a genetic theory of what is *meant* by truth." This suggests that he may be subordinating "truth" to the pragmatic method of clarifying meaning, treating truth as a disputed conception, which it certainly was then generally, as well as in the case of discussions of pragmatism. James's strategy under this reading, then, would be to apply the pragmatic principle of meaning to the disputed conception truth, rather than the then more typical strategy of seeing truth as the ultimate telos or foundational conception that gives meaning to all subordinate and constitutive

conceptions, even that of “meaning” itself. This reading correlates well not only with how James entered the truth debate, seeking to moderate among the conversants rather than lead with his own view. It also comports well with his continued attempts to clarify what truth as “agreement,” insisted on by so many of his contemporaries, could be understood to mean.

A second feature may also be evident in this enigmatic claim to be offering “a genetic theory of what is meant by truth.” By modifying his project with the term “genetic,” James may be (intentionally or not) telegraphing a particular, and perhaps rather specific, kind of account. If he was doing this, it was apparently lost on many of his contemporaries, none of whom picked up on this point; almost certainly it has been lost on now-contemporary readers. But I want to follow this lead in this paper and inquire into what James might have meant by “genetic” to see if it can illumine further the puzzling discussions in *Pragmatism* and *The Meaning of Truth*.¹⁴ I should note that such a strategy is inherently tenuous—attempting to hang a full paper on the unexplicated inclusion of one modifier in the course of what was written as a public lecture. But in the spirit of pragmatism, I would suggest that the fruits of this endeavor be at least one criterion for the worthiness of venture.

Due to the prominence of the nomenclature of “the genetic fallacy” in twentieth century philosophy—in which one fallaciously judges the truth or value of something by interrogating its origin (or cause of acquisition in the case of beliefs)—one might assume that James in *Pragmatism*, much as Nietzsche in the *Genealogy of Morals*, intends to offer an account appealing to truth’s historical or grammatical origins. James himself, like Nietzsche, had prominently noted the independence of origin and value in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* when he discussed the faults of medical materialism’s criticisms of religion. Moreover, such an origin-oriented interpretation of “genetic” would seem loosely to fit into the general evolutionary mind-set that otherwise inflects James’s thought. On the contrary, though, it does go against the general grain of pragmatism’s interest in present and future function and value instead of the retrospective focus on origins.

Plausible though an appeal to this concept of genetic may seem, this usage of the phrase “genetic fallacy” is anachronistic. The explicit phrase was only introduced into philosophical terminology in the 1930s by Morris Cohen and Ernest Nagel in their *Introduction to Logic and the Scientific Method*.¹⁵ Moreover, James’s own emphasis on the independence of truth and value from origin, evidenced in his conception of spiritual judgment in *Varieties*, for example,

renders this interpretation implausible.

While it is admittedly not possible to determine exactly what James had in mind in mentioning once a “genetic theory of what is meant by truth,” there is a more plausible candidate for the James’s use of “genetic,” and that is R. Hermann Lotze’s articulation of “genetic definition” contained in his 1874 *Logik*. James not only owned this book in German and English, but we also know that he read it closely and referred to it frequently in both his writing and teaching. James’s German copy of the text, held by Harvard’s Houghton Library, is actively annotated in the margins of the whole work, and specifically attends to the discussion of genetic definition. As Otto Kraushaar observed in four essays from 1936-40 on James and Lotze, James not only read Lotze and was influenced by him, but he reserved the highest praise for Lotze throughout his career, calling him “the most exquisite of contemporary minds,” among other accolades.¹⁶ Indeed, in *Pragmatism* itself James refers specifically to “the great Lotze,” though on a different subject from genetic theories.¹⁷ Peirce and Josiah Royce frequently lamented that James was not an avid student of logic; it may well be that Lotze’s *Logik* was the only text on the subject which James thoroughly digested.

LOTZE’S LOGIK AND GENETIC DEFINITION

Lotze’s 1874 *Logik* was the first volume of his mature system of philosophy, complemented by his *Metaphysik* in 1879. The *Logik* is divided into three books: Pure Logic (or “on thought” or thinking), Applied Logic (on inquiry or investigation), and Methodology (or “of knowledge”). Lotze notes that he patterned the book on pure logic after his 1843 *Logik*. He also thought the third book—which deals with questions as they have historically emerged, much as Hegel’s introductions to his own *Logics* did—was inadequate in its execution. Thus the most substantive contribution of the 1874 *Logik* was to be found in the middle book on applied logic, or inquiry, even though Lotze himself notes that this portion of the text is idiosyncratic.

Lotze’s understanding of applied logic is not what one might expect from today’s use of the term, which frequently involves the application of logic to other fields. Rather, by applied logic Lotze understands something more like the study of right reasoning approached from the concrete, phenomenological perspective, in contrast to pure logic, which approaches thought and forms of reasoning formally and in idealized form. He thus notes that applied logic takes as its

subject matter the task of investigation, which is occasioned by the need to remedy problems of reasoning posed by the actual world and the difficulties of thinking within it, in contrast to the formal aspects of logic apparent only in pure systematic thought.¹⁸ Lotze's view is that real world objects in real world settings do not normally appear for us, or stimulate concepts or ideas in us, in the ideal way that formal logic would have them considered. Hence the lead problem for applied logic is the practical set of issues of delineating, defining, and specifying the objects we seek to discuss or understand. Investigation or inquiry is the means to that, and hence the primary application of logic in experience. Interestingly, Lotze's view here follows the formal structure of Hegel's dialectic and logic, where concept—which is formal and ideal—precedes determinateness in philosophical presentation; historically or phenomenologically speaking, however, determinateness is always where we actually begin. Lotze's skepticism about the ability of actual ideas to emanate necessarily into knowledge, however, is contrary to Hegel's optimistic understanding of the modern human situation.

Given this overall perspective, Lotze opens his analysis of investigation—applied logic—with the challenges of specifying or defining objects and the ideas and relations in thought they eventuate in. He has an interesting take on this subject, locating the issue of definition in the context of the possibility and necessity of communication. He thus sees investigation essentially as a communal affair, aligning his own analysis with the inherently communal endeavor typical of modern science. (This orientation to both language and science makes it thus no wonder that Lotze has more recently been seen as a bridge to analytic philosophy.¹⁹) In contrast to material objects, which he notes can often simply be passed from one person to another hand to hand, “we can,” Lotze notes, “communicate [inner states, sensations and ideas, feelings and impulses] only by subjecting our neighbor to conditions under which he will be compelled to experience them or beget them anew in himself.”²⁰ In light of the necessity of specifying what one is attempting to communicate, some form of definition or specification is thus essential.

In Lotze's view, definitions divide into two categories, descriptive and genetic. Description involves attempting to fill in the outlines of the idea under consideration by invoking the specific concepts or subordinate ideas involved, then attempting further to specify sufficient details so that the person being communicated to can form the accurate conception in their mind. Lotze observes that this sort of definition may be offered principally in the case of “actual things

which we know from the outside and whose definition therefore is in fact nothing but a methodical description.”²¹ Lotze expounds at length on what the ideal for methodical description is, specifying that all concepts involved in the description should be specific and non-circular, and that elegance and brevity ideally must be observed. The example Lotze offers, after much discussion of the process of refinement, is the definition that “a circle is a line which contains all the points in one plane which are equidistant from any point.”²² Lotze also notes that the usual method of descriptive definition involves specifying the proximate genus of the object under definition and the characteristic mark that distinguishes it, much as in Linnaean classification. Thus the example of the circle is defined by reference to its genus, line, with the unique mark of the type of line being equidistance from one point on the same plane.

Where descriptive definitions are direct in constituting the concept under description, invoking directly known constituents in a definitive way, Lotze’s genetic definition, by contrast, tries “by indirect means to make us form a mental picture of [a conception] *M*, when it is impossible or inconvenient to say directly what *M* is.” That is, in the case of descriptive definition, the object is both known directly and produced through the complete invocation of appropriate known concepts. Genetic definitions do not construct the discrete idea from its constituents so much as invoke it for another thinker by other means. In offering such a definition, one fixes the conception “not by the mere addition of other ideas, but by freely using and manipulating them at will” such that the intended idea can be produced. Lotze understands this genetic definition “not [to be] a statement of the process by which the content of the conception *M* is actually found, but only an indication of the way in which the *mental picture* of this content *M* may or must be formed.”²³ In contrast to the descriptive definition of a circle, which specifies its constitutive logical features, Lotze gives an example of a genetic definition of a circle as follows: “Let a straight line revolve in one plane about one of its extremities, and combine the successive positions of the other extremity.”²⁴

The distinction here is subtle, but significant. While genetic definitions may be offered for conceptions that are also subject to descriptive definitions, as in the case of the circle, there are numerous conceptions that simply cannot (or cannot yet) be defined descriptively, according the parsimonious descriptive method of specifying proximate genus and specific significant difference. That is, conceptions that we do not know directly (for example, perceptually) as actual things, but only indirectly for whatever reasons, do not submit well to descriptive

definition, because we do not know all the specifics relevant to their description. In these cases, genetic description is the only option for investigation or inquiry to proceed. In a genetic description of these things known only indirectly, the conception must be fixed not simply by associating all other relevant conceptions to it, elegantly but efficiently, but rather by putting some relevant conceptions into active and dynamic use to generate the mental picture of the conception being described in the person to whom one is communicating.

Though he is critical of aspects of idealism, Lotze's *Logik* admits of strong idealistic commitments, not the least being his understanding that the true objects of knowledge are all mental. But for Lotze, the mental picture generated by a genetic definition itself does not necessarily suffice fully for the thing actually to be known, as it retains its indirectness by virtue of the sort of conception it is.²⁵ (The exception to this is when the object to be known is a purely mental object, such as a mathematical one, which can then be dissected for descriptive definition once presented genetically.) Genetic definition does, nonetheless, contribute a "higher degree of definiteness than [the conception] has yet [had]," thus contributing at least to making the object (idea) under investigation clearer to the mind.²⁶ Invoking the Cartesian desiderata of clarity and distinctness, Lotze goes on to note that to attain further distinctness would require knowing the general law that regulates the idea, as well as its distinguishing mark or marks. He thus indicates that genetic definition moves us part of the way towards knowledge, but not wholly to it, since it leaves us unclear on the real gist of the particular under definition.

Lotze makes one more point in this discussion relevant to James's account of truth. When reflecting on clarity and distinctness in common communication and speech, he observes that the untrained intellect frequently converts adjectives and verbs, such as "sick" and "to live," into substantives before proceeding to define them as objects, thus producing "a strange mythology that speaks as if these terms stood for things with a being of their own." Lotze, by contrast, recommends proceeding with more care as the physical sciences do by giving such terms "their proper place in the grammatical structure of the definition," letting them refer plainly to their possible subjects. Hence the definition "a living organism is *sick* when its functions depart from a certain course" attends primarily to the subjects to which the adjective "sick" can apply, thus avoiding making sickness into a general substantive when there is no such concrete substantive with which to become acquainted.²⁷ This practice has the benefit of avoiding a confusion of actual things met with in the real world with substantives created

through mere grammatical construction, thus maintaining clarity in our communications and investigations, and promising the possibility of inquiry proving more productive over time.

JAMES'S GENETIC THEORY IN LIGHT OF LOTZE

Lotze's general notion of applied logic as the logic of investigation is well-suited to understanding James's enterprise in *Pragmatism*. James's general contention that pragmatism is a method of dispute-settling implies that pragmatism itself is about the logic of inquiry, or applied logic. (This comports well with the perspectives of Peirce and Dewey, although both elaborated general theories of inquiry more than James.) Further, Lotze's notion that investigation (applied logic) fundamentally concerns communication also fits well with James's general model of discussion in *Pragmatism* as well as his objectives in the lectures. James figures the task of the text of *Pragmatism* as a whole to be that of communicating what pragmatism is, and what it implies, to his audience; 'pragmatism' in this case is has fundamentally to do with the logic of inquiry. Internal to this task of communication is giving examples that at minimum render the idea of pragmatism at least clearer, if not also distinct, for the reader.

In the case of the pragmatic principle of meaning, James gives a number of examples that demonstrate, or at least allow the reader to abstract, the principle he has in mind. (This is analogous to a communication strategy more basic than definition, also described by Lotze at the beginning of his applied logic.) One might well argue that in the case of the pragmatic principle, James at least comes close to offering what on Lotze's terms is a "descriptive definition." He does this when, modifying Peirce's account, he defines pragmatism's theory of meaning by noting that our concept of the effects of a practical kind that an "object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare . . . is then for us the whole of our conception of the object."²⁸ For this to be a descriptive definition, we would have to be sure we were specific about the notion of an 'object,' and that of 'effects' and 'sensations,' but it is at least arguable that James has gone far enough with Peirce's and his own specifications (despite what Peirce thought of those).

But James's statements concerning pragmatism's conception of truth are, I submit, a different matter altogether. Instead of providing a concrete and delimited definition in terms of

known or even discrete concepts, James instead seems more frequently to sidle up to truth and provide mere glimpses of it. He does so in a variety of ways, invoking a range of disparate and strained, if not also ambiguous, conceptions, rather than defining truth's constituent parts and indicating how they interact in a law-like manner. My suggestion, then, is that instead of reading James to be fundamentally muddle-headed and confused in his account of his so-called 'genetic theory of truth' in *Pragmatism* (as many already have), we would do better to read James as attempting to offer the lesser, genetic definition of truth on Lotzean terms. This interpretive strategy has the obvious benefit of salvaging James from his own lack of clarity, since it offers an avenue for understanding why the imprecision might be there. Even more, however, it allows us to pursue in more concrete detail some of the features that may follow from the kind of account James is giving, and even the kind of thing he is accounting for.

WHAT KIND OF THING IS TRUTH?

Before turning to the specifics of James's view on truth, I begin with the issue of what can be a suitable candidate for a Lotzean genetic definition. As noted above, Lotze thinks genetic definition is appropriate when it is either impossible or inconvenient to say directly what the object of inquiry is. It would be damning for James's *Pragmatism* if he had declined to define truth descriptively through the course of the whole book simply because it was inconvenient. To be fair critics, we should at least entertain this possibility. The facts of his coming late to the truth discussion suggest that James might simply never have come to think it out clearly. On the contrary, it does also seem plausible that James elects the genetic approach to truth in contrast to his descriptive approach to the pragmatic principle simply because he finds it impossible to meet the more demanding criteria of descriptive definition in the case of truth.

There are several reasons why this is so for James. From James's point of view, there is a fundamental ambiguity in experience and philosophy as to what sort of thing truth is. Throughout the text of *Pragmatism* James insists that truth is not so much a thing as a function, writing, for example, that "that new idea is truest which performs most felicitously its function of satisfying our double urgency [to assimilate the novel in his experience to his beliefs in stock]."²⁹ (We should note here the comparative use of "true" as an adjective in relation to this function.) In a different and rather rhetorical passage, James agrees with the dictionary definition that truth

is the property of agreement of our ideas with reality, but he immediately puts into question what ‘agreement’ and ‘reality’ both mean in this case. This makes it clear that the Lotze’s demands for descriptive definition are begged rather than met in such a case, at least until the pragmatic principle is applied.³⁰

A page later James explicitly states that “the truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea, it *becomes* true, is *made* true by events.” This suggests that truth is more function than property, more process than product, more verb than noun, and that truth in the substantive form is not so much met with or found in experience as produced via some work we perform upon it. There are, to be sure, numerous truths to be met in experience. But as James details in “Pragmatism and Common Sense,” the trueness of these truths is more a function of their stability and unavoidability, their having become consolidated in speech and experience, than any real claim to what we mean philosophically by truthfulness.³¹ Common sense is, after all, something we cannot and should not avoid, but also something we cannot fully trust, as numerous examples of science show.

James does speak of truth as a completed thing, ‘truth absolute,’ in *both Pragmatism* and in *The Meaning of Truth*.³² But when he discusses this, it is almost always as a future possibility at best. “This regulative notion of an absolute truth to be established later, possibly some day to be established absolutely . . . will have to be made,” he writes. Elsewhere, with some apparent irony in comparison to Peirce (whom he seems to have in view), he writes:

The absolutely true, meaning what no farther experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge. It runs on all fours with the perfectly wise man, and with the absolutely complete experience; and, if these ideals are ever realized, they will all be realized together. Meanwhile, we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day and be ready tomorrow to call it falsehood.³³

Clearly, truth absolute as a substantive is not yet achieved, and hence not ready to be subjected to the kind of scrutiny and investigation possible for things which we know directly.

If we take James’s comments about truth as a function seriously, and we pursue my hypothesis of working out of Lotze’s understanding of definition and inquiry, then several conclusions appear to follow. Truth, as the sort of function James intends, appears to be the kind

of “object” that admits primarily, if not exclusively, of being defined genetically rather than descriptively. In fact, it is not even clear that this conception of truth admits of being an object at all. Lotze’s understanding of genetic definition does seem capable of being used to elucidate functions in addition to objects, since it involves animating or putting into motion via their relations other elements in order to demonstrate or bring into mind the target of the definition. Insofar as truth is a function among a range of other sorts of legitimate objects of knowledge, like ideas, statements, and the experiences they intend, genetic definition would seem applicable, and perhaps even most specifically appropriate to it. James’s attempt to offer a genetic theory of truth thus seems to coincide well with his claim that truth is fundamentally a function among other parts of experience—most explicitly, between ideas or sentences, and the facts to which they refer.

Even if truth is a function, as James insists, one might rejoin that it should in principle be capable of being defined descriptively. If one takes a mathematical function as a paradigm, it is clear that it is possible in the case of some functions, at least, to be definitive and to speak in a law-like fashion, both about the terms in question and the relations that hold among them. James himself is explicit in *The Meaning of Truth* that strictly speaking, truth pertains to ideas, to things we say, and not realities themselves in the objective sense. Thus one might be able definitively to describe this function in clear terms.³⁴ This seems, at points, to be James’s strategy, particularly when he proffers definitive sounding statements like “the true . . . is only the expedient in our way of thinking,” most of which provoked significant ire from his critics.³⁵ But the situation is complicated by that fact that for James, satisfactoriness is an essential component of the truth function, and satisfactoriness itself correlates both with our interests and our conceptions of the good. These interests and conceptions are fundamentally malleable and idiosyncratic, in the sense of having plural and subjective components internal to them. Thus the function of truth cannot simply be defined in the lawful way that a mathematical function can be delineated though, say a formula in differential calculus. Even if we were to make the good into a variable, the problem of satisfactoriness, which carries the weight of interest in James’s account, would vary independently and unquantifiably as a subordinate function within the truth function. As James notes when anticipating his discussion of humanism, “the trail of the human serpent is thus over everything.”³⁶ Were James an absolutist or a universalist rather than a pluralist about human desire, interest and the good itself, we might have an avenue towards a

more explicit formulation. But as he demonstrates as early as “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” he is decidedly not.³⁷ Hence the overlapping and potentially inconsistent formulations of the function of truth are not in fact necessarily contrary to the view he is seeking to generate in his audience members’ minds. This, I take it, is what James has in mind when he insists in *The Meaning of Truth* that he is a relativist, to the chagrin of many.³⁸

Having Lotze’s account in view affords one more observation on the question of what sort of thing truth is. It is difficult to find James to be clear at various points in the text because of his alternation between using ‘truth’ as a substantive and speaking of ‘truths’ being made, of their being true. Indeed, in the parts of *The Meaning of Truth* written after *Pragmatism* was published, James resorts more explicitly to talking about trueness and truthfulness in the place of truth. Lotze’s observation, which I noted above, that the untrained intellect frequently converts adjectives and verbs into substantives before proceeding to define them (erroneously) as independent realities seems *à propos* of James’s predicament. James has, as he notes in his account of the development of cognition in “Pragmatism and Common Sense,” inherited the linguistic habits of truth talk. What he seeks to effect, with pragmatism’s genetic theory of truth, is none other than to reorient this usage of truth as a substantive into what he takes to be its proper functional, and hence dependent, domain. James’s actual success at this is, in my estimation, fairly limited. He would have been more successful explicitly to prohibit the use of the substantive noun ‘truth’ as a stand-in for successful ‘knowledge-about,’ which really does almost all the work in his broader system, instead using only the adjectival or verbal formulations.³⁹ This would have permitted him to have a clear concept of truth, understood as the pragmatist’s regulative and future-possible notion, while nonetheless still affording clarity about achieved degrees of trueness in actual experiences of verification and knowing. We would be no closer to a descriptive definition of trueness, but we would at least have more consistent clarity in what James was seeking to delineate.

CONCLUDING PERSPECTIVES ON PRAGMATISM

It is typical for anyone interested in James’s pragmatic theory of truth to focus on lecture six of *Pragmatism*, as that chapter appears both to be devoted to adumbrating a theory, and to deliver on James’s promise in the second lecture to give a genetic account of what is meant by

truth. But from the perspective of this discussion of genetic definition in light of Lotze, I suggest that a different, more contextual, approach to the text is warranted for one with this interest. James notes in lecture two that he actually intends to dedicate three lectures of eight to the topic of truth: "Pragmatism and Common Sense," on how truths become "petrified by antiquity"; "The Pragmatic Conception of Truth," in which he "expatiates on the idea that our thoughts become true in proportion as they successfully exert their go-between function"; and "Pragmatism and Humanism," where he intends to show "how hard it is to discriminate subjective from objective factors in Truth's development."⁴⁰ If we take seriously the indirect aspect of genetic definition which Lotze draws our attention to, we should also follow James's insinuation that these three discussions together constitute his attempt at defining truth, even though they do not all necessarily appear to be involved in the task of definition.

The first of these chapters is probably the least attended to. But it is important not least because it underscores James's historicist understanding of ideas, concepts and language, and warrants a series of cautions about taking any language to refer ideally, which is particularly distinctive of pragmatism. It also both animates the reader's desire to become more revolutionary and precise in our manner of thinking, as science would have us do, and warns about the slim likelihood of being able fully to achieve that ideal. James is, I should note, significantly more circumspect than both Lotze and Peirce about our ability to overcome this set of restrictions to our cognitive abilities in any significant respect, even though he too pushes for the value of scientific endeavors and orientations.

With this cautionary set of observations in place, James then proceeds in the sixth lecture to specify, as clearly as he can, his genetic account of the truth function in action. As I have already noted, he does so still indirectly, deploying other concepts and examples as means of illustrating when and how truthfulness distinguishes itself, sketching how the function appears to play out both in our language and our experience. None of the statements that appear to be descriptive definitions actually should be so taken, I submit. But we should read the chapter as a whole as designed to elicit in us a set of concepts or rough ideas of the kinds of interactions James seeks to distinguish. Most fundamental to that is the idea of making the meaning of truth practical, in the sense of attending to the effects that constitute truth functions in successful cases of knowing. Notably, one of these functions is agreement of truth with reality, but, as James so crucially insists, that is not all to understanding truth, but barely a beginning.

Following this indirect definition, or series of indirect definitions, of the basic functions of truth, James then proceeds to elucidate pragmatism's conception of truth by emphasizing the subjective aspects that necessarily inhere in it and its constituents. The chapter on "Pragmatism and Humanism" is in part James's attempt to make allegiances where he can with Schiller in particular, as a means of more broadly promoting the pragmatic movement; but it is also central in extending James's notion that truth has fundamentally to do with human social enterprises. It thus extends his historicist analysis from the fifth chapter, and further specifies the concepts in play in the sixth chapter's conception of truth itself. To read any one of these chapters on its own, I submit, sells short the overall genetic definition James is attempting to give of truth, since it obviates some of the components of his indirect attempt at specification. Clarity in his conception is thus sacrificed when we do not take James's whole account to be of a piece, despite its internal tensions and even apparent contradictions.

Looking at James in light of Lotze allows one final and important note concerning pragmatism's (and here I speak not only of the book) conception of truth. If my reading of James's understanding in light of Lotze is correct, in the sense that James did not think that truth admits of descriptive definition, then it is also the case that his pragmatic account of truth must be taken to be tentative, revisable, and refinable. If we were as optimistic as Lotze, we would take this to mean that James's account could be clarified, and even eventually moved towards becoming distinct, thus becoming subject to descriptive definition. This is, in a way, how Peirce inclined in his own counterfactual definitions of truth; it is also apt concerning Dewey's accounts of warranted assertibility that erased elements that mandated residual indirectness. But one of the features I find most distinctive about James's pragmatism is his tempering of his own optimism with a historicist and humanistic recognition of the fallibility of all our knowing enterprises, even those that seek to know how we know. This does not lead James to give up on the idea that what we mean by "truth" is meaningful, that seeking truth itself is critical to our interests and lives. But it does relativize the importance of truth as *the* ideal—and ideal topic—of philosophy, in favor of the actual effects, the actual goods, that truths and the quests for them have on actual human lives in the individual and aggregate senses. This, I submit, is one of the most salutary features of his pragmatism, and deserves repeated attention.

Harvard Divinity School
david_lamberth@harvard.edu

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NOTES

¹Graham Bird is a case in point here. See Graham Bird, *William James, The Arguments of the Philosophers* (London ; New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

²See David C. Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³See, for example, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," William James, *Pragmatism*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt, *The Works of William James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), "Humanism and Truth," William James, *The Meaning of Truth*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt, *The Works of William James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), James, *Pragmatism*, 27ff., William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt, *The Works of William James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

⁴See, for example, Sidney Morgenbesser, "Response to Hilary Putnam's 'Pragmatism and Realism,'" in *The Revival of Pragmatism*, ed. Morris Dickstein (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), Bird, *William James*, and Richard M. Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). H.S. Thayer makes this presumption in his "Introduction" to the *Works* edition of *Pragmatism*, though he is also clearly at pains not to take James's theory of truth to be a separate, fully fleshed out theory. See his "Introduction" in James, *Pragmatism*, xxix.

⁵James, *Pragmatism*, 37.

⁶William James, *The Correspondence of William James*, ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis, Elizabeth M. Berkeley, and Henry James (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 369.

⁷First printed as William James, "Humanism and Truth," *Mind* n.s. 13 (1904).

⁸James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 37.

⁹*Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁰See James, *Pragmatism*, 37.

¹¹For the former point, see, for example, James's letter to Schiller, 4 April 1907, and James to

Dickinson Miller, 5 August 1907, James, *The Correspondence of William James*, 345, 411. Supporting this latter point, note James's strategy of not discussing Schiller's own position directly in his 1904 "Humanism and Truth."

¹²This is something of a tricky issue, since, as H. S. Thayer notes, to provide a pragmatic account of the meaning of truth is, in a certain way, to give a theory of truth. But as Thayer also notes, James's theory doesn't offer the same kind of explanation that philosophical theories often offer.

¹³See James, *Pragmatism*, 37. Sidney Morgenbesser, commenting on Hilary Putnam's work, makes the point that accepting the pragmatic principle of meaning does not necessarily imply accepting a pragmatic theory of truth, but it is less clear that James understands this point.

¹⁴Graham Bird is the only commentator I have found who notes the significance of James's use of the term "genetic" and also the focus on the "meaning" of truth. Bird also notices that James seems to have an unconventional notion of definition related to his offering of a theory, and goes on to loosely outline something consistent with what I argue here. Bird does not seem aware of the Lotze antecedent for James's usage, and thus has to attempt an indirect reconstruction of what he could have intended (Bird, *William James*, 43, 56, 62). I will be treating this issue more fully in upcoming publications on James and truth, but owe the reader at least this much evidence here to render plausible my rather novel interpretation of the status of his position on truth.

¹⁵See Morris Raphael Cohen and Ernest Nagel, *An Introduction to Logic and the Scientific Method* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1934), 388-90.

¹⁶For James's praise of Lotze, see James to George Holmes Howison in James, *The Correspondence of William James*, 181. For references to Lotze, consult the various indices of the Harvard edition of James's works. Lotze's influence on James, and James's great appreciation of and affinity to Lotze, is well-treated in a series of four articles by Otto F. Kraushaar published from 1936-1940. See Otto F. Kraushaar, "Lotze's Influence on the Psychology of William James," *Psychological Review* XLIII (1936); Otto F. Kraushaar, "What James's Philosophical Orientation Owed to Lotze," *The Philosophical Review* XLVII, no. 5 (1938); Otto F. Kraushaar, "Lotze as a Factor in the Development of James's Radical Empiricism and Pluralism," *The Philosophical Review* XLVIII, no. 5 (1939); and Otto F. Kraushaar, "Lotze's Influence on the Pragmatism and Practical Philosophy of William James," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 1, no. 4 (1940). The last of these is particularly helpful, though it does not consider the specific conception I discuss here.

¹⁷James, *Pragmatism*, 123.

¹⁸Hermann Lotze and Bernard Bosanquet, *Logic: In Three Books, of Thought, of Investigation, and of Knowledge*, Clarendon Press Series. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884), 11.

¹⁹See the entry by David Sullivan, “Hermann Lotze,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2008/entries/hermann-lotze/>.

²⁰Lotze and Bosanquet, *Logic: In Three Books, of Thought, of Investigation, and of Knowledge*, 202.

²¹Ibid., 221.

²²Ibid., 218.

²³Ibid., 222.

²⁴Ibid., 222.

²⁵Lotze, I should add, is noted by James in both *Pragmatism* and “Humanism and Truth” as a source for his view of thoughts as additions to the universe, which is so characteristic of James’s thought. See James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 50, and James, *Pragmatism*, 123.

²⁶Lotze and Bosanquet, *Logic: In Three Books, of Thought, of Investigation, and of Knowledge*, 222.

²⁷Ibid., 220.

²⁸James, *Pragmatism*, 29.

²⁹Ibid., 36.

³⁰Ibid., 96.

³¹See Ibid., 92.

³²I have discussed at some length my view of James on absolute truth in an exchange with Hilary Putnam. See Jeremy R. Carrette, *William James and “The Varieties of Religious Experience”: A Centenary Celebration* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004), specifically Putnam’s Afterword and my response to Putnam.

³³James, *Pragmatism*, 106-7.

³⁴James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 87.

³⁵James, *Pragmatism*, 106.

³⁶Ibid., 37.

³⁷See William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt, *The Works of William James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

³⁸James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 142.

³⁹See Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*, chapter 1, for more on this.

⁴⁰James, *Pragmatism*, 37-8.