



William James in 1907

photograph by Alice Boughton; courtesy Houghton Library, Harvard University

Pragmatism

A New Name for Some Old Ways
of Thinking

The Meaning of Truth

A Sequel to *Pragmatism*

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XV

A Dialogue

After correcting the proofs of all that precedes I imagine a residual state of mind on the part of my reader which may still keep him unconvinced, and which it may be my duty to try at least to dispel. I can perhaps be briefer if I put what I have to say in dialogue form. Let then the anti-pragmatist begin:

ANTI-PRAGMATIST:—You say that the truth of an idea is constituted by its workings. Now suppose a certain state of facts, facts for example of antediluvian planetary history, concerning which the question may be asked: 'Shall the truth about them ever be known?' And suppose (leaving the hypothesis of an omniscient absolute out of the account) that we assume that the truth is never to be known. I ask you now, brother pragmatist, whether according to you there can be said to be any truth at all about such a state of facts. Is there a truth, or is there not a truth, in cases where at any rate it never comes to be known?

PRAGMATIST:—Why do you ask me such a question?

ANTI-PRAG:—Because I think it puts you in a bad dilemma.

PRAG:—How so?

ANTI-PRAG:—Why, because if on the one hand you elect to say that there is a truth, you thereby surrender your whole pragmatist theory. According to that theory, truth requires ideas and workings

A Dialogue

to constitute it; but in the present instance there is supposed to be no knower, and consequently neither ideas nor workings can exist. What then remains for you to make your truth of?

PRAG:—Do you wish, like so many of my enemies, to force me to make the truth out of the reality itself? I cannot: the truth is something known, thought or said about the reality, and consequently numerically additional to it. But probably your intent is something different; so before I say which horn of your dilemma I choose, I ask you to let me hear what the other horn may be.

ANTI-PRAG:—The other horn is this, that if you elect to say that there is *no* truth under the conditions assumed, because there are no ideas or workings, then you fly in the face of common sense. Doesn't common sense believe that every state of facts must in the nature of things be truly stateable in some kind of a proposition, even tho in point of fact the proposition should never be propounded by a living soul?

PRAG:—Unquestionably common sense believes this, and so do I. There have been innumerable events in the history of our planet of which nobody ever has been or ever will be able to give an account, yet of which it can already be said abstractly that only one sort of possible account can ever be true. The truth about any such event is thus already generically predetermined by the event's nature; and one may accordingly say with a perfectly good conscience that it virtually pre-exists. Common sense is thus right in its instinctive contention.

ANTI-PRAG:—Is this then the horn of the dilemma which you stand for? Do you say that there is a truth even in cases where it shall never be known?

PRAG:—Indeed I do, provided you let me hold consistently to my own conception of truth, and do not ask me to abandon it for something which I find impossible to comprehend.—You also believe, do you not, that there is a truth, even in cases where it never shall be known?

ANTI-PRAG:—I do indeed believe so.

PRAG:—Pray then inform me in what, according to you, this truth regarding the unknown consists.

ANTI-PRAG:—Consists?—pray what do you mean by 'consists'?

It consists in nothing but itself, or more properly speaking it has neither consistence nor existence, it obtains, it *holds*.

PRAG:—Well, what relation does it bear to the reality of which it holds?

ANTI-PRAG:—How do you mean, 'what relation'? It holds of it, of course; it knows it, it represents it.

PRAG:—Who knows it? what represents it?

ANTI-PRAG:—The truth does; the truth knows it; or rather not exactly that, but anyone knows it who *possesses* the truth. Any true idea of the reality *represents* the truth concerning it.

PRAG:—But I thought that we had agreed that no knower of it, nor any idea representing it was to be supposed.

ANTI-PRAG:—Sure enough!

PRAG:—Then I beg you again to tell me in what this truth consists all by itself, this *tertium quid* intermediate between the facts *per se*, on the one hand, and all knowledge of them, actual or potential, on the other. What is the shape of it in this third estate? Of what stuff, mental, physical, or 'epistemological,' is it built? What metaphysical region of reality does it inhabit?

ANTI-PRAG:—What absurd questions! Isn't it enough to say that it is *true* that the facts are so-and-so, and false that they are otherwise?

PRAG:—'*It*' is true that the facts are so-and-so—I won't yield to the temptation of asking you *what* is true; but I do ask you whether your phrase that 'it is true that' the facts are so-and-so really means anything really additional to the bare *being* so-and-so of the facts themselves.

ANTI-PRAG:—It seems to mean more than the bare being of the facts. It is a sort of mental equivalent for them, their epistemological function, their value in noetic terms.

PRAG:—A sort of spiritual double or ghost of them, apparently! If so, may I ask you *where* this truth is found.

ANTI-PRAG:—Where? where? There is no 'where'—it simply obtains, absolutely obtains.

PRAG:—Not in anyone's mind?

ANTI-PRAG:—No, for we agreed that no actual knower of the truth should be assumed.

PRAG:—No actual knower, I agree. But are you sure that no notion of a potential or ideal knower has anything to do with forming this strangely elusive idea of the truth of the facts in your mind?

ANTI-PRAG:—Of course if there be a truth concerning the facts, that truth is what the ideal knower would know. To that extent you can't keep the notion of it and the notion of him separate. But it is not him first and then it; it is it first and then him, in my opinion.

PRAG:—But you still leave me terribly puzzled as to the status of this so-called truth, hanging as it does between earth and heaven, between reality and knowledge, grounded in the reality, yet numerically additional to it, and at the same time antecedent to any knower's opinion and entirely independent thereof. Is it as independent of the knower as you suppose? It looks to me terribly dubious, as if it might be only another name for a potential as distinguished from an actual knowledge of the reality. Isn't your truth, after all, simply what any successful knower *would* have to know *in case he existed*? and in a universe where no knowers were even conceivable would any truth about the facts there as something numerically distinguishable from the facts themselves find a place to exist in? To me such truth would not only be non-existent, it would be unimaginable, inconceivable.

ANTI-PRAG:—But I thought you said a while ago that there is a truth of past events, even tho no one shall ever know it.

PRAG:—Yes, but you must remember that I also stipulated for permission to define the word in my own fashion. The truth of an event, past, present, or future, is for me only another name for the fact that *if* the event ever *does* get known, the nature of the knowledge is already to some degree predetermined. The truth which precedes actual knowledge of a fact means only what any possible knower of the fact will eventually find himself necessitated to believe about it. He must believe something that will bring him into satisfactory relations with it, that will prove a decent mental substitute for it. What this something may be is of course partly fixed already by the nature of the fact and by the sphere of its associations.

This seems to me all that you can clearly mean when you say that