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"William James and the Promise of *Pragmatism*"

Often we are posed some variation of the question, "What does a philosophical text written many years ago have to offer *me*, someone living today?" For those whose livelihoods are bound up in reflecting on, teaching, and writing about such thought, few questions could resonate as more significant. The centennial anniversary of William James's *Pragmatism* seems a perfect opportunity to reflect upon this issue.[1] After all, "the present dilemma in philosophy" addressed in James's opening lecture is that between "tender-minded" rationalism and "tough-minded" empiricism, a debate that may very well still hold considerable weight in philosophy today, but will likely mean little to those who press the question to us.[2] In this essay, I address the matter of what James's *Pragmatism* has to offer someone today, a century after its publication. Toward this end, I underscore the theme of meliorism present in the text. James regards pragmatism as a method of inquiry and theory of truth capable of improving the human condition. As long as we are interested in such improvement, it seems that we ought to be interested in what James has to say to us. Of course, myriad philosophers put forth theories intended to improve the human condition; what, our interlocutor may ask, is so special about James and *Pragmatism*? My response to this question centers upon the notion of "promise" employed by James at several points throughout the text. I argue that James's view of our relationship to the world as like that which exists between promising parties is the basis for a worthy response to the question of what a century-old text might offer someone today.

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[1] Next year's centennial anniversary of Royce's *The Philosophy of Loyalty* seems similarly apropos.
[2] James, William. *Pragmatism.* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991 [1907]), 9. By "those who pose the question to us," I have in mind students, family, friends, and acquaintances – virtually anyone other than our colleagues in academia.

§1: Progress and Promise

Addressing the "present dilemma in philosophy" in the first of his *Pragmatism* lectures, James acknowledges that few individuals are truly rationalist "tenderfoot Bostonians" or empiricist "Rocky Mountain toughs," pure and simple. Most often, one takes on both temperaments, each to varying degrees. This leads James to encourage fulfilling one's "hankering for the good things on both sides of the line," offering the "oddly-named thing pragmatism."[3] Pragmatism has conciliatory power because it "unstiffens theories"[4] as a method of inquiry and is a "smoother-over of transitions"[5] as a theory of truth. Pragmatism limbers theories such as rationalism and empiricism by regarding them not as crystallized solutions to ancient philosophical riddles, but as active instruments implemented toward intelligent engagement with an ever-changing world. These vicissitudes include revolutions in both individual and social thought; pragmatism mediates the transition from old truth to new in its simultaneous recognition of the deep imprint of previous experience and the jarring effect of the novel.

David W. Marcell suggests that James's pragmatism had the effect of making "man's will to believe in a better future its philosophical ideal."[6] In other words, Marcell views James's pragmatism as melioristic, promoting the improvement of the world through human effort. Indeed, James himself describes the pragmatic method as "looking towards…fruits, [and] consequences"[7] and the pragmatic theory of truth as "bound up with" leading experience "towards other moments which it will be worth while to have

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[3] Ibid., 18.
[4] Ibid., 26.
[5] Ibid., 30.
[6] Marcell, David W. *Progress and Pragmatism.* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974), 190.
[7] James, 27.

been led to."[8] For James, pragmatism is an orientation and a guide; it eschews the quest for first principles and necessities supposed to be crystallized in the makeup of the world independent of us, in favor of a search for ideas with practical value for beings entrenched in the particulars of experience, here and now.

Marcell notes, however, that "James's melioristic…conception of progress involved a continuing element of risk," for "progress was uncertain, contingent."[9] Indeed, James cites the "restlessness"[10] of the conflict between theoretical temperaments and describes the world as "unfinished"[11] and our experience of and within it as "tangled, muddy, painful and perplex[ing]."[12] There is, for James, no guarantee that the contradictory forces encountered in everyday life will be overcome. To trace neat outlines around the world with polished principles of reason is to be unfaithful to experience. Indeed, the world often confronts us as foreign. It is not unusual to find ourselves struggling to make sense of and cope with the unforeseen or unknown.

This struggle is recognized by Patrick Dooley, who describes the world in words consonant with those of James, but who also offers the consolation that, "*promises* can hold in the face of a world of change, risk, uncertainty and unpredictability."[13] This remark comes in Dooley's "Promising and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy," in which he holds that James's "treatment of the effects of faith in *The Will to Believe* provides an insightful context for an adequate account of promising."[14] In fact, Dooley appears to furnish a

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[8] Ibid., 90.
[9] Marcell, 190.
[10] James, 86.
[11] Ibid., 46.
[12] Ibid., 13.
[13] Patrick Dooley, "Promises and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy," *Religious Humanism*, 14, (SPR 1980): 87-90 (90, emphasis mine).
[14] Ibid., 88.

James-inspired account of conditions for a successful promise.[15] Owing to its inheritance

from James, I shall further engage Dooley's notion of promising. Doing so should provide

an insightful context for an account of the meliorism marking James's thought, particularly

as instantiated in his use of "promise" in *Pragmatism*.

§2: Swimming in the Sea of Sense: The Promise of Meliorism Pragmatically Considered

When one makes a promise, Dooley contends, one does not mean that all things

being equal, one will do whatever it is that is being promised. "The fact that I have

promised," Dooley explains, "implies that all things are no longer equal."[16] The act of

promising carries with it a special force. The belief that whatever it is that one has

promised to do is worth promising to do, paired with the attitude one has toward the

agreement contained in the promise, constitute a significant role in the drama that

culminates in the subsequent experience.[17] To promise that one will do *x* is to already

begin to ensure the doing of *x* before it is done, in much the same way that "misgivings and

doubts augur failure."[18] Moreover, when promises are taken seriously by both the

promising agent and the person(s) to whom the promise is issued, a mutual sharing of

expectations and common responsibilities is acknowledged. The "obligations of

promises," Dooley urges, "make possible a humane and a humanizing environment," for

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[15] Dooley's project is akin to at least part of what John Searle was up to – sans Jamesian influence – in his seminal work in the philosophy of language, *Speech Acts*. See Searle, John R. *Speech Acts*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), especially pp. 57-62. While comparing and assessing Searle's and Dooley's accounts of promising would no doubt be interesting, such work would extend beyond the scope of the present essay.

[16] Ibid., 88.

[17] They are, to use James's term, part of the "tissue of experience" (James, 66). As Dooley suggests, promises may be viewed in much the same light as James regards belief in his claim that "belief creates its verification [and] becomes literally father to the fact." See James, "The Will to Believe," in his *The Will to Believe and other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), quoted in Dooley, 87-88.

[18] Dooley, 88. This beginning to ensure is at least quite typical of the promise that one will do *x*. It is possible, of course, that one is promising insincerely or that something will happen beyond the control of the promising party to prevent the promise from coming to fruition.

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the "fidelity, accountability, steadfastness, and trustworthiness" that they foster describe humankind at its best.[19]

This humanistic power seems absent for James when he compares humans to "fishes swimming in the sea of sense, bounded above by the superior element, but unable to breathe it pure or penetrate it."[20] But, James elaborates, "We get our oxygen from it… we touch it incessantly, now in this part, now in that, and every time we touch it, we turn back into the water with our course re-determined and re-energized."[21] The element providing us with oxygen, as it were, is that of "abstract ideas,…indispensable for life, but irrespirable by themselves,…and only active in their re-directing function."[22] James's claim is that theories, in and of themselves, are incapable of providing us with sustenance, yet they retain critical nutritive power insofar as they are "an effective determinant of life elsewhere."[23] In other words, much like one's belief in the value of that which one promises, one's belief in the value of a theory instills in one an animating energy to be extended in future action. The act itself, be it the fulfilling of one's promise or the renewing of one's swim, is the sum of the preceding nourishing conditions and the agent's active will to carry out the act.

The simile of the fish in the sea of sense is employed by James at the start of "The One and the Many," as part of a recapitulation of what has proceeded in the preceding lecture, "Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered." "Design, free-will, the absolute mind, spirit instead of matter, have for their sole meaning," James reviews, "a better *promise* as to this world's outcome. Be they false or be they true, the meaning of

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[19] Ibid., 90.
[20] James, *Pragmatism*, 57.
[21] Ibid., 57.
[22] Ibid., 57-58.
[23] Ibid., 58.

them is this meliorism."[24] Here, James explicitly links the notion of promise with that of

meliorism. The remainder of this section will be concerned with seeing how this

connection is made in James's previous discussion.

One metaphysical problem that James endeavors to pragmatically consider is that

of "materialism or theism?".[25] James inquires as to the practical differences that come with

holding that "the facts of experience up to date are purposeless configurations of blind

atoms moving according to eternal laws, or that on the other hand they are due to the

providence of God."[26] James asserts that retrospectively, no practical difference obtains;

"those facts are in, are bagged, are captured; and the good that's in them is gained, be the

atoms or be the God their cause."[27] But, James stipulates, prospectively, there is a

difference. When considering future facts of experience, we ask, "'what does the world

promise?'"[28] In other words, what sort of experience will be brought into effect if

materialism and theism make good on their solemn pronouncements?

James believes that materialism and theism offer strikingly different answers to this

question. Materialism has it that the stuff of the world is transient and that eventually, all

will decay with nothing remaining to represent that which was. "This utter final wreck and

tragedy," states James, "is of the essence of scientific materialism as at present

understood."[29] Theism, on the other hand, has it that "tragedy is only provisional and

partial, and shipwreck and dissolution not the absolutely final things."[30] According to

James, this is because although the perishing of objects of the world is acknowledged by

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[24] Ibid., 57 (emphasis mine).
[25] Ibid., 46.
[26] Ibid., 46.
[27] Ibid., 46.
[28] Ibid., 46 (emphasis James's).
[29] Ibid., 48. James alludes to the materialism of Balfour, quoting him to this effect (47).
[30] Ibid., 48.

theism, theism makes an assurance that materialism never could, namely, that of an eternal

preservation of moral order. Because he regards the "need of an eternal moral order" as

"one of the deepest needs of our breast,"[31] James characterizes theism as offering "a world

of *promise*, while materialism's sun sets in a sea of disappointment."[32] That is to say that

in its affirmation of an eternal moral order, theism promises a world of promise, or hope,

while in its denial of an eternal moral order, materialism promises the opposite. Settling

this question pragmatically consists in deciding which promise one wishes to accept.[33]

Another metaphysical problem taken up by James is the debate between

determinism and free-will. James characterizes free-will as "a *melioristic* doctrine," for it

"holds up improvement as at least possible; whereas determinism assures us that our whole

notion of possibility is born of human ignorance."[34] For James, the difference between

these doctrines just is that determinism denies the existence of possibility, citing one

narrative of the universe as that which necessarily obtains,[35] while free-will entails that this

narrative is one of a myriad that could potentially be told, and is continually being authored

by our volitions and actions. Because this narrative appears thus far to be far from "a

lubberland of happiness," free-will is "a general cosmological theory of *promise*" that "has

no meaning unless it be a doctrine of *relief*."[36] Like that of theism, the promise of free-will

is promise; the possibility that free-will affirms is "the possibility that things may be

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[31] Ibid., 48.

[32] Ibid., 49 (emphasis James's).

[33] James takes up this question in a variety of other places, the most famous of which is "The Will to Believe" (1896), with which his audience was likely familiar. Of course, John Dewey would accuse James of accepting a false disjunction here, for Dewey finds promise in human inquiry, with or without an eternal moral order. This claim is made most explicitly in Dewey's *A Common Faith* (1934).

[34] Ibid., 54 (emphasis James's).

[35] James seems to tend to conflate determinism with fatalism, but a full demonstration and critique of this would take me beyond the scope of my aims in this paper.

[36] Ibid., 54 (emphasis James's).

better."[37] This possibility of a better world through the effects of human effort is what

motivates James to accept the promise of free will.[38]

§3: Minimum Jolt and Maximum Continuity: Pragmatism's Conception of Theory and
Truth as Remedies for the Wayward

James would attribute the choice to accept or reject the promise of a theory to

philosophical temperament. James describes this phenomenon as one's way of "seeing and

feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos."[39] James's view is that the universe

impinges upon us in multitudinous ways, and the fashion in which we interpret and respond

to these vicissitudes brings into relief our characteristic temperaments. "Tender-minded"

rationalists tend toward principles, intellectualism, idealism, optimism, religiousness, free

will, monism and dogmatism, while "tough-minded" empiricists tend toward facts,

sensationalism, materialism, pessimism, irreligiousness, fatalism, pluralism and

skepticism.[40] Tender and tough alike, "all our theories," James asserts, amount to

"remedies and places of escape."[41] While a theory may purport to give an *explanation* of

the concrete universe,"[42] James believes that at bottom, theories are devised toward the aim

of transcending or retreating from the "crassness of reality's surface."[43] Thus, a world that

may appear chaotic is rendered more reasonable to the tender-minded rationalist when

conceived of, for instance, as a place of free will, while this same world is made more

rational to the tough-minded empiricist when cast as a place void of such freedom. This is

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[37] Ibid., 54 (emphasis James's).
[38] James gives a much more intricate treatment to this question in "The Dilemma of Determinism" (1884),
with which his audience was likely familiar.
[39] Ibid., 5.
[40] Ibid., 9.
[41] Ibid., 19.
[42] Ibid., 13.
[43] Ibid., 19.

pragmatism's unstiffening in action. Theories are "limbered up" and "set…to work," serving as *"instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest."*[44] That is, although the confusions that these views attempt to mitigate seem to carry on indefatigably, both tender and tough achieve some sense of satisfaction or relief in their respective conceptions of the universe.

This notion of relief is well captured in James's description of inquiry as the seeking of "escape" from the "disturbance" of "an inward trouble" encountered when one is confronted by a new experience that "puts a strain" on one's stock of old opinions.[45] The inquirer attempts to execute this escape by modifying the previously held mass of opinions, though "he saves as much of it as he can," for as James insists, "in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives."[46] That is, when a novel experience jars our faith in long-held beliefs, we construct the account for it that is most coherent with, and thus casts the least doubt upon, the set of previously held beliefs. James describes this process as the marrying of "old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity."[47] This is pragmatism's smoothing-over in action. New truth is a "go-between,"[48] filling in the gaps that separate the old and the new, the stable and precarious.

Consistent with its commitment to continuity, another motivation of the pragmatist pursuit of truth is the search for clues as to what type of reality we might expect in the future. Because "we live in a world of realities that can be infinitely useful or infinitely harmful," this quest is, for James, "a primary human duty."[49] As an illustration of this point, James imagines himself lost in the woods and starved, but fortunate enough to

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[44] Ibid., 26 (emphasis James's).
[45] Ibid., 29.
[46] Ibid., 29.
[47] Ibid., 30.
[48] Ibid., 29.
[49] Ibid., 89.

happen upon what looks like a cow-path. "It is of the utmost importance that I should think of a human habitation at the end of it," James urges, "for if I do so and follow it, I save myself."[50] The true thought (that there is a house at the end of the cow-path) carries with it an expectation about the future (if James follows the path, he is likely to find nourishment and be able to reorient himself). For James, then, "the practical value of true ideas is thus primarily derived from the practical importance of their objects to us."[51] Although the true idea of the house that exists at the end of the cow-path might in most cases not prove particularly useful, when it does, "it passes from cold-storage to do work in the world."[52] Transitioning from latency to the forefront of our minds, our belief in the idea "grows active."[53]

This notion of truth as "eventual verification" is described by James as "manifestly incompatible with waywardness on our part."[54] For James, a true thought is that which acts as a useful guide to the otherwise disoriented or lost. "True ideas," James insists, "lead to consistency, stability, and flowing human intercourse."[55] This account of truth is clearly melioristic, for it suggests that as much as we are concerned with truth, we are concerned with fruitful action.

§4: Turning-Places and Growing-Places: Pragmatism, Humanism, and Religious Meliorism

"Distinctions between the lawful and the unlawful in conduct, or between the correct and incorrect in speech, have grown up incidentally among the interactions of men's experiences in detail," James writes, "and in no other way do distinctions between

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[50] Ibid., 90.
[51] Ibid., 90.
[52] Ibid., 90.
[53] Ibid., 90.
[54] Ibid., 91.
[55] Ibid., 95.

the true and the false in belief ever grow up."[56] Such is James's case for the analogousness

of truth to law and language; each of these is, so to speak, made by us as we go. In the case

of truth, "human motives sharpen all our questions, human satisfactions lurk in all our

answers, all our formulas have a human twist."[57] James considers this humanism of a piece

with his melioristic pragmatism. "We receive in short the block of marble," James states,

"but we carve the statue ourselves."[58]

This presupposes, of course, that our attempts to carve make an impression. One of

the last questions taken up by James in *Pragmatism* is the possibility of the salvation of the

world. Eschewing pessimism and optimism, James embraces meliorism, which regards

salvation as neither impossible nor inevitable, but as "a possibility, which becomes more

and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become."[59]

But what are these conditions? Live possibilities must be upheld as ideals, striven for, and

finally, realized. Complementary to this is the presence of "such a mixture of things as will

in the fullness of time give us a chance, a gap that we can spring into, and finally, *our*

act."[60] We *create* our salvation with our acts, for they are "the actual turning-places and

growing-places which they seem to be, of the world."[61] While higher powers may exist and

be "at work to save the world," they may do so, says James, "on ideal lines similar to our

own."[62] Thus, insofar as the religious may be conceived of as melioristic in this way,

James's pragmatist meliorism may also be described as religious.

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[56] Ibid., 106.
[57] Ibid., 106.
[58] Ibid., 108.
[59] Ibid., 125.
[60] Ibid., 126 (James's emphasis).
[61] Ibid., 126.
[62] Ibid., 132.

Reading the letter of a member of his audience, James witnesses an embodiment of the melioristic pragmatism for which he has been arguing. The correspondent claims to "believe that in our search for truth we leap from one floating cake of ice to another, on an infinite sea, and that by each of our acts we make new truths possible."[63] Moreover, "each man is responsible for making the universe better, and that if he does not do this it will be in so far left undone."[64] Indeed, this individual recognizes with great acuity one of the most important insights of James's *Pragmatism*, an insight that endures a full century after its first appearance in print; "the world stands…malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands."[65] That it will remain so is its promise to us. That we will create of it a thing of beauty we must promise to it.

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[63] Ibid., 122.
[64] Ibid., 122.
[65] Ibid., 112-113.