THE PRAGMATIC THEORY OF TRUTH

Harry Stottlemeier (HS): Two-headed giants...consequences, intentions, truth.... Gee, I really thought I had it.

William James (WJ): What's that, Harry?

HS: Well, I've been thinking about truth lately. I see how being truthful depends on intentions and consequences. I mean, I have a rule for how to act, but I still don't know what makes something true in general.

WJ: Before you give up your idea, Harry, think about what worked for you.

HS: Well, I figured that I'd be able to determine if I did the right thing just by looking at the consequences of my actions.

WJ: I agree. The idea of consequences is especially fruitful. Now let me ask you something. When you were working out your theory on reversing sentences, how did you know when you got it right?

HS: That's easy. I tried it out and it finally worked.

WJ: is it possible that we know if our ideas are true in the same way? We try them and they work? In other words, that the truth of our ideas is either confirmed or disconfirmed by our experience?

HS: Gee, I never thought of it like that.

WJ: In my theory of pragmatism, I tried to show that truth isn't some eternal first principle known by pure intuition or deduction. We decide if a belief is true just by looking at the practical consequences that have occurred in our experience. True ideas are ones that help people to solve problems and overcome obstacles. False ideas don't help us and may actually harm us.

HS: But doesn't truth exist before we're even born? Then we come along and discover it? Do people just "make up" truth as they go along?

WJ: One question at a time! But you may not be as far off as you think on that last point. Truth doesn't exist in some reality independent of the knower. What's "out there" are just facts. Facts are neither true nor false; they just are. Truth is a function of our ideas, our beliefs, and how these interact with our environment.

HS: But for our ideas to be true, don't they have to be exactly like reality? Like a scientific theory won't work unless it agrees with the way things actually happen.

WJ: Hold on to scientific theories for a minute, Harry. Let's take reality first. How would you describe reality?

HS: It's the concrete things I can see, touch, hear, and feel.

WJ: OK. But are there other things that you can't see or hear or feel or picture in your mind, but are nonetheless real?

HS: Oh, you mean things like friendship and justice and patriotism?

WJ: Exactly - abstract ideas that cause people to act in certain ways. And there's one more thing. That's our whole past experience and the truths based on it. I mean the body of knowledge that has been built up in the life of a person, a society, even a civilization.

HS: What makes things like abstract ideas and previous experience true?

WJ: I consider Truth with a capital "T" to be a "class name" for all sorts of "working values in experience."(1)

HS: Working values?

WJ: Right. We have all sorts of ideas, beliefs, and theories about things. But these things are just instruments to help us live better. If an idea works, then it's useful. If it's useful, it's true. We have a lot of information in our heads that we don't put to active use. But when the need arises, when we have a purpose or goal, we apply bits of that information, and if it helps us to deal with our purpose, then it becomes true. Truth happens to ideas.

Pragmatism sees truths as the way in which "one moment of our experience leads to others."(2) True ideas lead us in a certain direction, so that they can be eventually verified in our experience. Let's say I'm looking for a house in a certain neighborhood I've never visited. I walk down this street, then that. If I finally find the house, my idea will be verified as true - it got me into a satisfactory relationship with reality. Let's take your conversion theory again. How did you go about it?

HS: I started noticing this thing about sentences after something happened in science class. I found what seemed to be the answer and then I tried it with other sentences.

WJ: So you started with a concrete observation, made a generalization, tested your theory, and verified it. Did it happen all at once?

HS: No. Lisa came along and gave me some examples that turned my theory on its head.

WJ: Women have a way of doing that. Then what did you do?

HS: I was a little upset at first. Then I realized she had a point. So my theory got revised.

WJ: So you had this idea, let's say. And it led you to other ideas and experiences which agreed with it. Then you came up with some other data that wouldn't square with your

experience of reality and what you knew was true. A false idea wouldn't have allowed you to do that. It would not have been useful.

HS: "Useful", "satisfactory", it all sounds so...er...

WJ: Subjective? I know, it's a four-letter word. People have tried to oversimplify my theory by equating truth with the crudest experience. But as I see it, there are three criteria for the determination of truth. First, a truth has to cohere - stick with - the older body of truths and experience; second, it has to be workable - help us solve some kind of problem; and, third, it has to be capable of being verified or validated.

Remember your father's story about the three-headed giant? Actually, that comes close to my theory. We can't see all three heads at once, so we have to form some ideas about the giant by seeing only one or two heads. As I've said before, Truth lives largely on the credit system. We don't actually verify all of our ideas in perceptual experience. We test some here and some there, and the rest, well, if they work for us, we call them true. But in principle, all of our ideas are verifiable by someone somewhere. True ideas allow us to dip into concrete experience and test them along the way, like checking a radmap at intervals during a journey. Every true idea begins and ends in some perceptual experience.

HS: Is that how scientific theories work, too?

WJ: Exactly. There's a lot of talk about contextualism in science these days. In fact, I had a lot to do with that point of view. But I don't believe that scientific theories are mere conventions of thought. There *are* regularities of nature, what we call natural laws, and these can often be corroborated in experience. On the other hand, we have to keep in mind that theories may be true for certain purposes and not true for others. For example, Einstein's theory of relativity explains some phenomena but not others.

HS: Does that mean that what's true for me may not be true for someone 50 years from now?

WJ: Many of your truths could certainly be true in the next generation. That will depend on how well they continue to work in other situations and contexts. We said earlier that something is true if it helps us fit different parts of our experience into a meaningful, coherent whole. Truth is a way of grafting new experience onto old experience. It admits novelty while keeping as much of the past as possible. So truth has to cohere with other truths, beliefs, and actions; it has to correspond with the facts; and it has to be verified in objective events. The upshot is always the practical consequences.

HS: But how can truth change when reality stays the same?

WJ: Reality itself is mutable, Harry. Darwin proved that. Life itself, and especially the individual's responses to the environment, are subject to change. Novelty enters at every turn. It's very exciting. But we're not passively shaped by this change, because human freedom is very real. Besides, continuity of the past is very powerful. We accept new ideas because they enable us to make progress yet maintain stability. That's how pragmatism can help us in evaluating our truths.

Mary Melville Ryan

Footnotes

1. William James. "What Pragmatism Means," Pragmatism and Other Essays, Joseph L. Balu, ed. New York: Washington Square Press, 1963, p. 33.
2. William James. "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth," *Pragmatism and* Other Essays, Balu, p. 90.