A FEW PUZZLES ABOUT WILLIAM JAMES' THEORY OF TRUTH

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RESUMO *William James faz diversas declarações relevantes sobre o conceito de verdade: (i) verdade significa concordância com a realidade independente do conhecedor, (ii) verdade é feita pelos seres humanos, (iii) verdade pode ser confirmada, e (iv) a verdade é necessariamente boa. Essas afirmações originam alguns enigmas: (i) e (ii) parecem se contradizer mutuamente, e cada um dos itens (ii), (iii) e (iv) tem implicações contraintuitivas. Argumento que a interpretação de Richard Gale sobre a teoria de James sobre a verdade é inadequada para lidar com tais enigmas. Proponho uma interpretação alternativa e mostro como ela pode resolver esses enigmas.*

Palavras-chave *William James, verdade, verificação, realidade, relativismo, desejo-satisfação.*

ABSTRACT *William James makes several major claims about truth: (i) truth means agreement with reality independently of the knower, (ii) truth is made by human beings, (iii) truth can be verified, and (iv) truth is necessarily good. These claims give rise to a few puzzles: (i) and (ii) seem to contradict each other, and each of (ii), (iii), and (iv) has counter-intuitive implications. I argue that Richard Gale's interpretation of James' theory of truth is inadequate in dealing with these puzzles. I propose an alternative interpretation and show how it can solve these puzzles.*

Keywords *William James; truth; verification; reality; relativism; desire-satisfaction.*

0 Introduction

William James makes the following claims about truth: (i) Truth means agreement with reality independently of the knower;[1](ii) Truth is made by human beings;[2] (iii) Truth can be verified;[3] (iv) Truth is necessarily a good thing.[4]

These claims give rise to several puzzles. First, (i) and (ii) seem to contradict each other, for if truth means agreement with reality, and reality is independent of the knower (in James own words, reality is "found, not manufactured" by human beings), then truth is not made by human beings. Second, (ii) is counterintuitive. For example, intuitively, the proposition that the number of stars in the Big Dipper constellation is seven is true even before anyone actually observed the constellation. It is unclear how we humans *make* the proposition true. Third, (iii) seems wrong because some truths apparently cannot be verified. Take the metaphysical claim that God exists. Either it is true or its contradiction is true. But it seems impossible to verify either of them. Finally, (iv) seems implausible because there are truths that are too trivial to be of any value. Suppose it is true that J.K. Rowling uses 28697 question marks in her novel "Harry Potter". This truth seems to be of no value at all.

A good interpretation of James' theory of truth should be able to address these four puzzles together. At least, *ceteris paribus*, an interpretation is better if it can show that James can handle all these puzzles.

In this paper, I argue that Richard Gale's interpretation cannot deal with these puzzles adequately. James' theory of truth has been discussed by many philosophers, such as Bertrand Russell (1907/1992), G.E. Moore (1907), Susan Haack (1984), Roderick Chisholm (1992), Hilary Putnam (1997), Richard Gale (1999; 2005), David Lamberth (2009), and so on. While Russell and Moore's interpretations notoriously fail to do justice to (i), Haack, Chisholm, Putnam, and Lamberth's interpretations almost completely ignore (iv).[5] So none of

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1   James writes, "Truth, as any dictionary will tell you, is a property of certain of our ideas. It means their 'agreement' as falsity means their disagreement, with 'reality'. Pragmatists and intellectualists both accept this definition as a matter of course" (1987, p. 572). "All our truths are beliefs about 'Reality'; and in any particular belief the reality acts as something independent, as a thing found, not manufactured" (1987, p. 593).

2   James writes, "Truth is made, just as health, wealth and strength are made, in the course of experience" (1987, p. 581). "The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it" (1987: 823).

3   James writes, "True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we can not." (1987, p. 573).

4   James writes, "Truth is one species of good, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and coordinate with it. The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons" (1987, p. 520).

5   Lamberth argues that James did not think that truth admits of descriptive definition and that his pragmatic account of truth must be taken to be tentative, revisable, and refinable.

their interpretations can solve the four puzzles together. Gale's interpretation takes all of (i), (ii), (iii), and (iv) into account. It has drawn much attention from James scholars and is often regarded as an important contribution to the scholarship on James' theory of truth. For example, Christopher Hookway (2001: 101) writes, "Gale's views about James on truth are of particular interest, and should make an important contribution to the many current attempts to find a Jamesian theory of truth which is far more plausible than the familiar caricatures." However, Gale's interpretation still fails to adequately solve the four puzzles, or so I shall argue.

I shall proceed as it follows. First, I will briefly introduce Gale's interpretation. Then I will explain why it cannot adequately deal with the four puzzles abovementioned. Finally, I will propose an alternative interpretation and show how it can solve these puzzles.

1 Gale's interpretation

According to Gale (1999, p. 32), James holds that truth is necessarily good because "good" means desire-satisfaction, and a proposition is true when believing it maximizes desire-satisfaction.

On Gale's (1999, p. 117) view, James (implicitly) makes the following argument for the claim that a proposition is true when believing it maximizes desire-satisfaction:

1. We are always morally obligated to act so as to maximize desire satisfaction (all things considered, in the long run) over the other options available to us.[6]
2. Belief is a free action.
3. We are always morally obligated to believe in a manner that maximizes desire-satisfaction (all things considered, in the long run) over the other available belief options.
4. The true is what we ought to believe.
5. So, a proposition is true when believing it maximizes desire-satisfaction (all things considered, in the long run).

Call this "Maximum Satisfaction Argument." A problem for the Maximum Satisfaction Argument is that it provides us little guidance, that is, it cannot help

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6   In James' own words, we are morally obligated "to satisfy at all times as many demands as we can. That act must be the best act, accordingly, which makes for the best whole, in the sense of awakening the least sum of dissatisfactions" (1992, p. 610).

us determine what we ought to believe or whether a proposition is true since "due to radical limitations in our predictive powers, we rarely are in a position to determine which option among those that are open to us will in fact maximize desire-satisfaction in the long run" (Gale, 2005, p. 95. Cf. Gale, 1999, p. 119).

Gale argues that James addresses this problem by three guiding principles:

a. We are always *prima facie* morally obligated to believe in a manner that is epistemically warranted, except when epistemic justification is not possible.
b. Make sure that your web of beliefs is internally consistent.
c. Whenever a contradiction breaks out in your web of belief, revise the web in a way that makes the minimum changes in it.

James thinks that by following (a), (b), and (c), desire-satisfaction is maximized in the long run.

An explanation of (a), (b), and (c) is in order. Consider (a) first. On Gale's interpretation, James holds that a belief is epistemically justified or warranted if it is supported by empirical or perceptual evidence. Gale (1999, p. 120) offers the following example to illustrate James' idea that we are always *prima facie* morally obligated to believe in a manner that is epistemically warranted: "if you enter a room and seem to see and touch a chair but desire that there not be one in the room because you bet someone that there is none, you are obligated to believe that there is a chair in the room." On the other hand, James thinks we may sometimes believe a proposition upon insufficient evidence, for there are both epistemic and pragmatic modes of justification of belief, and though the former takes precedence over the latter, we may sometimes appeal to pragmatic reasons when epistemic ones are not unavailable (see Gale, 1999, p. 121). But Gale is not very clear about what he means by "when epistemic reasons are unavailable." His point seems to be that James thinks that if p is epistemically warranted or justified, we should always believe p; if p is not epistemically warranted but not-p is, we should believe not-p; if neither p nor not-p is epistemically warranted, but believing p rather than not-p would maximize desire-satisfaction, then we should believe p. This idea can be illustrated by James' will-to-believe doctrine. James argues that people should believe that God and free will exist as long as this belief will bring maximum desire-satisfaction.[7]

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7   According to Gale (2005, p. 97), James sometimes argues for the weaker conclusion that we are morally permitted to believe upon insufficient evidence when doing so will maximize desire–satisfaction rather than the stronger one that we are morally obligated to do so. If Gale is right, then James is inconsistent. However, I think the inconsistency is merely apparent, for James seems to hold the following view: One should believe in God and free will as long as believing in them will bring about maximum desire-satisfaction. Since following

Now let's move on to (b) and (c), which are about one's web of beliefs. Gale (1999, p. 125) points out that while James treats the web as exclusively a web of propositional opinions for the most part, there are some passages in which James portrays his web as including, in addition to beliefs, conative states such as desires and wants, emotional states consisting in feelings of satisfaction, and the like, thus making his web of belief a web of mentation or thought, which was James's generic term for any conscious state.

Apparently, James' view that a proposition is true when believing it maximizes desire-satisfaction is radically different from the correspondence theory of truth held by traditional realists. According to Gale, however, James hopes to placate traditional realists and thus also claims that truth means agreement with reality (Gale, 1999, p. 139).

Traditional realists hold the following views: (i) a proposition is true if it corresponds to reality; (ii) reality is independent of mind in the sense that a thing might actually exist even if no one experiences it or believes it exists; (iii) a proposition might be true even if no one is aware of it. James accepts (i) while denying (ii) and (iii) in light of Gale's interpretation. James denies (iii) because he endorses a form of nominalism according to which, the bearer of truth is a thought or idea in someone's mind. James seems to think there are no propositions that no one thinks of. Further, James rejects (ii) and holds that reality is just the totality of experiences. He calls this view "radical empiricism." Radical empiricism entails that nothing actually exists if no one experiences it. It reminds us of Berkeley's mantra *esseestpercipi* ("to be is to be perceived"). In fact, James explicitly praises Berkeley as a forerunner of pragmatism.

Radical empiricism, however, seems implausible. For example, it seems that the seven stars of the Big Dipper constellation had existed long before any human beings (directly or indirectly) experienced them and that they would continue existing even if all human beings suddenly get killed today.

To this objection, James has a sophisticated reply. Specifically, on Gale's (1999, p. 141) interpretation, James responds that a thing might virtually exist even if no one experiences it. For instance, the seven stars of the Big Dipper constellation virtually exist before anyone experiences them in the sense that *were there to be a thinker who entertained the idea that there are seven stars of the Big Dipper constellation and properly tested it, it would be discovered*

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the three guiding principles will maximize desire-satisfaction, and epistemic justification is not possible with regard to God and free will, whether the belief will bring about maximum desire-satisfaction mainly depends on one's other beliefs, tastes, and feelings. In this sense, one has the right to believe in God and free will. For a detailed discussion, see Section 3.3.

or verified that it is true. That is, the truth about the stars of the Big Dipper constellation is pre-determined. It does not depend on anyone's subjective experiences or opinions. This idea captures the realist's intuition that truth means agreement with reality that can exist independent of our mind.

James calls the truth about virtual reality "virtual truth". A virtual truth must be verifiable, not in the sense that it admits of the mere possibility of being verified but in the stronger sense that if it were properly tested it would be verified in the sense of being discovered to be true (see Gale, 1999, p. 140).

A virtual truth becomes an actual truth only when it is actually verified. Merely being believed by someone is not a sufficient condition for a virtual truth to become actual. Suppose we actually believe that *there are seven stars of the Big Dipper constellation*, but we are unable to verify this belief. Then our belief is merely virtually true, not actually true. In order to become actually true, it must be actually verified. What does James mean by "verification?" On Gale's view, James defines a successful act of verification as "a sequence of empirically vouchsafed steps that terminates in a direct perception of the event or one that goes proxy for it, as in the case of subatomic events or events in other minds" (Gale, 1999, p. 140). This definition is not very clear, and unfortunately, Gale does not explicate it. He seems to attribute to James the following view. If a set of propositions describes an observable event, then it is verified if we have direct perceptual experience of the event, that is, we directly observe it. For example, the proposition that there is a desk in a certain room is verified if we actually see a desk in the room. If a set of propositions is about an unobservable event such as subatomic events or events in other minds, then it is verified at time T if it makes successful predictions about the observable events (which can be viewed as the proxy of the unobservable event), and few unsuccessful predictions are made at T. (A prediction about an observable event is successful if we directly observe the event the prediction describes.) In short, a set of propositions is verified at T if it is *epistemically* warranted or justified (i.e., supported by perceptual evidence) at T. James thinks that only upon the successful completion of verification does the virtual truth become actual.[8]

According to Gale (1999, p. 183), it is this requirement of actual rather than potential verifications that underlies James' claim that "Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events" (James, 1987, p. 574). Since an idea obtains the property of truth when it becomes actually verified,[9] it is

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8   Gale is aware that James uses "verification" in a broad sense, but he seems to think that James should not. I will discuss this issue in detail in Section 3.

9   One might object that an actually verified belief might still be false. James' distinction between "half truth" and "absolute truth" provides a response to this objection. Absolute truth means what no further appropriate

something that we bring about through our activities as verifiers. In this sense, (actual) truth is made.[10]

Allow me to summarize Gale's interpretation of James' theory of truth. James claims that [actual] truth is necessarily good because he defines "good" as desire-satisfaction and "truth" as something believing which maximizes desire-satisfaction. When claiming that truth means agreement with reality independent of the knower, James talks about virtual truth: virtual truth means agreement with virtual reality, which is mind-independent in the sense that if there were to be a thinker who properly tested a proposition that agrees with virtual reality, it would be discovered or verified that it is true. (In contrast, actual reality is just the totality of experiences.) "Truth is made" means that we make a proposition actually true by verifying it. If a proposition cannot be verified, then it can neither actually true nor virtually true. So all truths can be verified.

2 Problems for Gale's Interpretation

Gale's interpretation seems to solve the first two puzzles nicely. Recall the first puzzle: the claim that *(i) truth means agreement with reality independent of the knower* and the claim that *(ii) truth is made by human beings* seem to contradict each other, for if truth means agreement with reality and reality is "found, not manufactured" by us, then truth is not made by us. Gale's interpretation can nicely solve this puzzle: (i) and (ii) do not really contradict each other since (i) is about virtual truth while (ii) talks about actual truth. Only actual truths are made by human beings. Further, the distinction between virtual truth and actual truth can deal with the second puzzle that (ii) is counter-intuitive. Intuitively, the proposition "the number of stars in the Big Dipper constellation is seven" is true even before anyone actually observed the constellation. This intuition can be explained in terms of virtual truth: the proposition is virtually true even before anyone actually observed the constellation. Virtual truth is not made by us.

tests or inquiries will ever overturn and all those who conduct appropriate tests against or inquiries into the issue will ultimately agree on. Gales (1999, pp. 140-141)claims that James' notion of absolute truth is "defined" by his idea of virtual reality, since if there is no virtual reality independent of any mind, then it is unlikely that appropriate tests against or inquiries would lead to agreement or convergence. Though Gale does not discuss James' idea of half truth, it seems that he would say James holds that all actual truths are, in a sense, half truths, because absolute truth is an ideal limit of inquiry that we can never reach.

10 There is a "common" sense in which truth is made, that is, our belief in p sometimes can help make p true. For example, a patient who believes that she will recover can sometimes help her recover and thus make her belief true. Gales notices that James accepts this commonsensical view. But I shall not discuss it here because it is not a feature that distinguishes James' pragmatism from other theories. A traditional realist may happily accept the commonsensical view.

However, the fact that Gale's interpretation is able to solve the first two puzzles does not mean that it is the whole story James tells about (i) and (ii). In fact, James means more by (i) and (ii) than Gale's interpretation, as I shall show in the next section.

In addition, Gale's interpretation has difficulties in dealing with the other two puzzles. The third puzzle is that James' claim that all truths can be verified contradicts the commonsensical view that some unverifiable propositions such as that God exists might be true. Gale's interpretation cannot solve this puzzle. Rather, it makes James contradict himself. On the one hand, James holds that a proposition is true when believing it maximizes desire-satisfaction and that believing that God exists may maximize desire-satisfaction. So he must accept that (G1) it may be true that God exists. On the other hand, James holds that all truths can be verified, that the proposition that God exists cannot be epistemically justified, and that a proposition can be verified if it can be epistemically justified. So he must accept that (G2) the proposition that God exists cannot be true. Now (G1) and (G2) clearly contradict each other.[11]

Finally, Gale's interpretation seems unable to solve the last puzzle, i.e., James' claim that truth is necessarily good contradicts our common sense that some truths are too trivial to be good. According to Gale, James claims that truth is necessarily good because he defines "good" as desire-satisfaction and "truth" as something believing which maximizes desire-satisfaction. But not all kinds of desire-satisfactions are good. Suppose S has a pure and strong curiosity about how many question marks used by J.K. Rowling in her book *Harry Potter*. That is, S has a burning desire to know the answer for its own sake. Suppose she carefully counts question marks used *Harry Potter* and gets the correct answer. So her desire is satisfied. But intuitively, such desire-satisfaction is not good or worthwhile. Rather, we would think S is an intellectual pervert, as Linda Zagzebski (2008, p. 135) says.

3 An Alternative Interpretation

In the previous section, I have argued that Gale's interpretation is inadequate in dealing with the four puzzles about James' theory of truth. In what follows, I will try to show how Gale's interpretation can be improved.

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11 To be fair, Gale notices a change in James' view of verification in order to deal with problem, but he does not think it works. I will discuss this issue in detail in the next section.

3.1 Puzzle 1 & 2

I suggested above that although Gale's interpretation can nicely solve the first two puzzles, it fails to tell the whole story. In fact, there are at least two things we may add to Gale's interpretation.

First, when James says that reality is independent of the knower, he does not merely talk about virtual reality. There is a sense in which *actual* reality – the totality of experiences – is also independent of us. James (1987, p. 865) writes, "That reality is 'independent' means that there is something in every experience that escapes our arbitrary control". What we experience is not completely up to us. Take the flux of our sensations, which, on James' (1987, p. 593) view, is "the first part of reality". James (1987, p. 594) thinks that these sensations are "undoubtedly beyond our control". Suppose you turn around and are surprised to see a dog following you. Why do you see a dog rather than a cat? It is not because you want to see a dog or you conjure a dog for yourself to see. Otherwise, you would not be surprised. The fact you are surprised shows that there is something in your experience beyond your arbitrary control. So from that reality is a totality of experience, it does not follow that reality is completely manufactured by us. Indeed, actual truths are made by us in the sense that we make a proposition actually true by verifying it. But that does not mean we can verify any proposition as we wish. It is often the case that we want to verify a proposition but our experience disappointedly falsifies it. In fact, James (1987, p. 866) points out, "the only real guarantee we have against licentious thinking is the circumpressure of experience itself, which gets us sick of concrete errors, whether there be a trans-empirical reality or not."[12] Hence, actual truths are not only made by us but also agree with reality (i.e., the totality of experience) that is independent of us.

Second, when James says that truth is made by us, he does not merely talk about actual truth. There is a sense in which all truths are made by human beings. James writes,

> We conceive a given reality in this way or in that, to suit our purpose, and the reality passively submits to the conception ... You can say of a line that it runs east, or you can say that it runs west, and the line per se accepts both descriptions ... We carve out groups of stars in the heavens, and call them constellations, and the stars patiently suffer us to do so ... In all these cases we humanly make an addition to some sensible reality, and that reality tolerates the addition. All the additions 'agree' with the reality; they fit it, while they build it out (1987, pp. 596-597).

12 For a detailed discussion, see Sarah E. Glenn (2003, pp. 215-216).

Truth is a property of some of our ideas. In order to have any idea to describe the world, we must have some categories or concepts to classify things. For instance, in order to have the idea that the number of the stars in the Big Dipper constellation is seven, we need categories and concepts such as "number", "star", "constellation" and so on. James thinks that these categories and concepts are invented by us. Without our invention of them, there would be no ideas to be (virtually or actually) true.[13]

3.2 Puzzle 3

I argued above that Gale's interpretation not only fails to solve Puzzle 3, but also makes James hold a contradiction: "God exists" may be true and truth can be verified, but "God exists" cannot be verified. However, this contradiction can be resolved if we notice that James uses "verification" in a broad sense. James may admit that it is impossible to epistemically justify the proposition that God exists. But he does not think it is impossible to verify the proposition, because he rejects the idea that that *E verifies P if E epistemically justifies P*. James writes,

> But what do the words verification and validation themselves pragmatically mean? They again signify certain practical consequences of the verified and validated idea ... They lead us, namely, through the acts and other ideas which they instigate, into or up to, or towards, other parts of experience with which we feel all the while–such feeling being among our potentialities–that the original ideas remain in agreement. The connections and transitions come to us from point to point as being progressive, harmonious, satisfactory. This function of agreeable leading is what we mean by an idea's verification (1987, p. 574).

Here James claims that an idea is verified if it fulfills the function of agreeable leading. Elsewhere he talks about "the maximum of stability" (1987, p. 1138) or "a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity" (1987, p. 513), which are synonymous with "agreeable leading". James seems to think that an idea fulfills the function of agreeable leading if it can be made coherent with our web of mental states (including beliefs, emotions, desires, tastes, perceptual experiences, and so on) with the minimum change of the web.

Now believing in God seems to be able to fulfill the function of agreeable leading. So in light of James' criterion of verification, the belief that God exists can be verified. Accordingly, the belief that God exists is true.

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13 For a detailed discussion, see Susan Haack (1984, p. 274).

However, not everyone would agree. For instance, those who believes in Allah would find that believing that the Christian God exists would lead to substantive changes of his old web of mental states. Thus the idea that the Christian God exists, for them, cannot fulfill the function of agreeable leading, that is, it cannot be verified. According to James' criterion of verification, it is false for them, though it may be true for the Christian believers.

Gale actually notices this problem. He is perfectly aware that James sometimes endorses a broader definition of verification. He (2005, p. 100) writes, "Initially, James seems to restrict the confirmatory experiences to sense experiences alone. ... But, at other places, he seems to require personal satisfaction as well as confirmatory sense experiences for full verification." Gale thinks that it is a bad move for James to allow personal satisfaction for full verification, for one problem is that "it renders confirmation, and thereby truth, subjective because of the variability among persons in regard to what satisfies them" (Gale, 2005, p. 101). And Gales argues that James cannot escape this Protagorean relativistic nightmare by appeal to a general agreement among people as to what gives satisfaction, due to their sharing a common human nature, because "this fails to square not only with patent facts about the widespread diversity among people in regard to what outcomes give them satisfaction, but also with James's 'sentiment of rationality' doctrine, according to which people differ with respect to which philosophy they find attractive because of their psychological differences" (Gale, 2005, p. 102).

Gale also contends that James' criterion of verification suffers from two further problems. First, it is inconsistent with James's idea that we are always *prima facie* morally obligated to believe in a manner that is epistemically warranted, except when epistemic reasons are not available. Second, James' criterion of verification gives rise to the incommensurability problem. In the cases where our perceptual experiences support p while our non-perceptual experiences (conative and emotional states) support not-p, it is impossible to decide which kind of experience has a stronger "confirmatory or evidential force" (Gale, 2005, p. 102).

Nevertheless, I think James can handle all these problems. First, James frankly admits that his theory of truth leads to a form of relativism. He writes,

> We say this theory solves it on the whole more satisfactorily than that theory; but that means more satisfactorily to ourselves, and individuals will emphasize their points of satisfaction differently. To a certain degree, therefore, everything here is plastic (1987, p. 513).

> Truth consists in a character enclosed within the 'situation.' Whenever a situation has the maximum of stability, and seems most satisfactory to its own subject-factor, it is true for him (1987, p. 1138).

In responding to Bertrand Russell's criticism, James (1987, p. 963) offers the following example:

> I may hold it true that Shakespeare wrote the plays that bear his name, and may express my opinion to a critic. If the critic be both a pragmatist and a baconian, he will in his capacity of pragmatist see plainly that the workings of my opinion, I being what I am, make it perfectly true for me, while in his capacity of baconian he still believes that Shakespeare never wrote the plays in question.

Moreover, James sees this form of relativism as a virtue of pragmatism. In a reply to a critic, James (1987, p. 916) writes, "The critic's trouble over this seems to come from his taking the word 'true' irrelatively, whereas the pragmatist always means 'true for him who experiences the workings.'"

However, the version of relativism does not lead to complete subjectivism according to which, the idea that (say) water and sand have different properties might be true for John but false for Mary. In his reply to Russell, James writes,

> How is the world made different for me by my conceiving an opinion of mine under the concept 'true'? First, an object must be findable there (or sure signs of such an object must be found) which shall agree with the opinion. Second, such an opinion must not be contradicted by anything else of which I am aware (1987, p. 963).

Here James seems to think that perceptual experiences and logical consistency take precedence over conative and emotional states (such as feelings and tastes) in verifying an idea. If one of your ideas constantly contradicts your perceptual experiences (the object in your idea is not findable in the world), then the idea will disappoint (or even frustrate) you and not give you maximum satisfaction in the long run all things considered; it is falsified even if you initially think it beautiful or graceful or pleasant.

As we have seen in Section 1, Gale in fact gets it right by claiming that James endorses the following two guiding principles: (a) we are always *prima facie* morally obligated to believe in a manner that is epistemically warranted, except when epistemic reasons are not available; (b) make sure that your web of beliefs is internally consistent. (It is strange that Gale thinks (a) contradicts James' criterion of verification, and he offers no explanation.) Only when these requirements are satisfied may we appeal to conative and emotional states. In the case of Shakespeare, James seems to bear the following in mind: the idea that the plays were wrote by Bacon and the idea that the plays were wrote by

Shakespeare are equally (poorly) supported by perceptual experience, so it's OK for one to let her feelings, tastes, etc. to decide which idea is true as long as she can make her web of mental states consistent. The case of God is similar.

If perceptual experiences and logical consistency take priority over conative and emotional states in verifying an idea, then the accusation that James' theory leads to complete subjectivism is implausible. Since there is a general agreement with regard to perceptual experiences and logical consistency (perhaps due to a common human nature), at least some verified idea about the world cannot be totally subjective. For instance, if a person who sees many real cats still believes that a cat has wings, we would not say, "the belief is true for him though not true for us;" rather, we would simply say, "the belief is false and the person is insane." This case is different from the case of God or Shakespeare where perceptual evidence is not available.

James not only makes a distinction between objective truth and subjective truth, but also holds that some truths are neither purely objective nor completely subjective. He writes,

> Yet sometimes alternative theoretic formulas are equally compatible with all the truths we know, and then we choose between them for subjective reasons. We choose the kind of theory to which we are already partial; we follow 'elegance' or 'economy.' Clerk-Maxwell somewhere says it would be 'poor scientific taste' to choose the more complicated of two equally well-evidenced conceptions; and you will all agree with him. Truth in science is what gives us the maximum possible sum of satisfactions, taste included, but consistency both with previous truth and with novel fact is always the most imperious claimant (1987, p. 581).

Scientific truths are objective in the sense that they must respect perceptual evidence and logical consistency. They are subjective in the sense that though two competing theories T1 and T2 equally respect perceptual evidence and logical consistency, T1 (rather than T2) is true for S1 in that it better satisfies S1's feelings and tastes than T1 while T2 (rather than T1) is true for S2 in that it better satisfies S2's feelings and tastes than T2.

In short, James' theory of verification and truth does not suffer the three problems pointed out by Gale. Gale fails to notice James' distinction between objective truth and subjective truth.

Some might further object that there are some truths that are unverifiable in principle. For example, suppose it is impossible to find any perceptual evidence for the proposition that Churchill sneezed 52 times in 1945. Suppose no one can get satisfied in believing the proposition. It does not follow that the proposition cannot be true. Intuitively, whether the proposition that Churchill sneezed 52 times in 1945 is true depends on the historical fact, not on whether we can

verify it. If Churchill *actually* sneezed 52 times in 1945, then the proposition is true even if it cannot be verified. Surely, it makes some sense to say that we don't *know* a proposition if we cannot verify it. But knowledge is different from truth. Knowledge might require verification but truth does not. James seems to confuse the two.

To this objection, James would reply that we don't have to respect the intuition or common sense that the proposition that Churchill sneezed 52 times in 1945 might be true even if it cannot be verified. For if a proposition cannot be verified, it cannot fulfill the function of agreeable leading and thus cannot enhance desire-satisfaction, that is, it cannot have any practical consequences. And if a proposition does not have any practical consequences, it does not matter whether it is true or not. James writes,

> If it can make no practical difference which of two statements be true, then they are really one statement in two verbal forms; if it can make no practical difference whether a given statement be true or false, then the statement has no real meaning. In neither case is there anything fit to quarrel about: we may save our breath, and pass to more important things (1987, p. 857).

This is known as the "pragmatic method." It seems to provide a criterion of significance rather than a criterion of (linguistic) meaning. Unlike the gibberish "jkl*de%bc#x", the sentence "Churchill sneezed 52 times in 1945" clearly has meaning even if it has no practical consequences. But it is not implausible to claim that whether the proposition is true is insignificant if it has no practical consequences. And surely we don't have to respect the intuition or common sense that the proposition is true if it does not matter whether it is true.

Moreover, James seems to think that there is no practical difference between [actual] truth and knowledge in inquiry,[14] for he (1987, p. 973) writes, "if truth and knowledge are terms correlative and interdependent, as I maintain they are, then wherever knowledge is conceivable truth is conceivable, wherever knowledge is possible truth is possible, wherever knowledge is actual truth is actual". If there is no practical difference between actual truth and knowledge, then we can disregard the impractical difference between them and regard them as the same thing. In light of this reading, Bybee (1984) gets James wrong in arguing that James' theory of truth should be better understood as a theory of knowledge. Gale (1999, p. 140) correctly points out that "James' requirement

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14 James seems to think that there is a real difference between virtual truth and knowledge (or actual truth), for he (1987, p. 972)writes, "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."

that a true idea be actually verified amounts to equating truth with knowledge." But he does not explain why James equates truth with knowledge.

3.3 Puzzle 4

James pragmatic criterion of verification and significance implies that if an idea makes S satisfied to a certain degree, it is verified and significant to that degree. This brings us to Puzzle 4, which is about valueless desire-satisfaction. If S has a burning desire to know for its own sake the answer to the question how many question marks were used in "Harry Potter" and S carefully counts question marks used in the book and gets the correct answer, then James' theory seems to imply that S's true belief about the number of the question marks is good. But that's counter-intuitive.

In fact, James (1987, p. 1200) himself is aware of this problem: "if to be satisfactory is what is meant by being true, whose satisfactions, and which of his satisfactions, are to count? Discriminations notoriously have to be made." And he (1918, p. 369) also remarks, "As the art of reading is the art of skipping, the art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook." However, he does not offer any explicit answer to the question which satisfactions are to count and which to overlook.

It seems that the best answer for James is appealing to the Peircean notion of genuine doubt or question. Peirce seems to think that a doubt or question is genuine if it is result of the awareness of two conflicting beliefs. If you are not aware of any inconsistency in your belief system but still come up with the question "Is it possible that I am deceived by an evil demon?" then the question is sham. In contrast, suppose you predict, on the basis of the theory you accept, that the next lunar eclipse will happen on a certain night, but it turns out that you observe no lunar eclipse on that night. Now you experience an inconsistency between your observation and your theory. It gives rise to a genuine question: Is there anything wrong with the theory?

James may borrow Peirce's idea in solving Puzzle 4. True belief is just the correct or satisfactory answer to a genuine question. A question is genuine at T if it is the result of our dissatisfaction of our web of beliefs at T. If we do not find our web of beliefs unsatisfactory at time T, but have a pure and strong curiosity about a question that has little relevance to our web of beliefs, then the question is sham at T. Now the question about how many question marks used by J.K. Rowling in her book "Harry Potter" is, at least in normal circumstances, not a result of our dissatisfaction of our current web of beliefs. So it is a sham question. The desire to know the correct answer to a sham question is not worth being satisfied. If it is actually satisfied, the satisfaction is worth-

less. A true belief is one that maximizes only worthwhile desire-satisfactions. Beliefs that can *merely* give us unworthy desire-satisfactions cannot be true. That's why truth is necessarily good.[15]

Is there any textual evidence suggesting that James endorses the above criterion of genuine question? I think there is. For example, James writes,

> You doubtless wish examples of this process of truth's growth, and the only trouble is their superabundance. The simplest case of new truth is of course the mere numerical addition of new kinds of facts, or of new single facts of old kinds, to our experience – an addition that involves no alteration in the old beliefs. Day follows day, and its contents are simply added. The new contents themselves are not true, they simply come and are. Truth is what we say about them (1987, p. 513).

If James endorses the above criterion of genuine question, these remarks will make perfect sense. Our experiences including sense experiences grow everyday. But that does not mean truth grows accordingly, for truth is an attribute of some of our ideas (not of the contents of our experiences) and we are free to decide whether to form ideas about the contents of our experiences. We may happily disregard the useless experiences, i.e., the experiences that neither pose any challenge to our existing web of beliefs nor help us solve the genuine questions that make our existing web of beliefs unsatisfactory. We don't have to form beliefs about the contents of useless experiences, or in James' words, we don't have to "say" they are true. Indeed, it is not worth forming any beliefs about them. For example, I see a stranger waving his hand on the street. This sense experience has the content that a stranger is waving his hand on the street. I can decide whether to believe the content (to *say* it is true) or not. If there is no genuine question to which believing the content is the correct answer, I should not believe it (i.e., not *say* it is true); if there is a genuine question, I should believe it (i.e., *say* it is true). If we form beliefs irrelevant to genuine questions, and count those beliefs that are confirmed by experiences as true, then we get the *trouble* of the superabundance of trivial truths (e.g. I sneezed two times in the morning; my father mispronounced a word yesterday; the first sentence my kid wrote today consists of five words; etc.).[16]

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15 I'd like to note that the criterion of genuine question does not imply that the question about how many question marks used by J.K. Rowling in her book Harry Potter is not genuine in all cases. Suppose you are threatened by a manic that if you don't know the answer to that question, you will be killed. Now your old web of belief's unsatisfactory. It cannot help you deal with the threat. So the question becomes genuine at this moment. If you count the numbers of the question marks and come to believe the correct answer, your belief is true and good.

16 I'd like to note that there is a different puzzle about James' claim that truth is necessarily good: it seems that not all truths have good consequences (desire-satisfaction). Consider a case where a mother learns the death of her child, that is, she is epistemically justified in believing that her child is dead. This belief

4 Summary

In summary, James makes four major claims about truth: (i) truth means agreement with reality independent of the knower, (ii) truth is made by human beings, (iii) truth can be verified, and (iv) truth is necessarily good. These claims give rise to four puzzles: first, (i) and (ii) seem to contradict each other; second, (ii) contradicts our intuition that the proposition "the number of stars in the Big Dipper constellation is seven" is true even before anyone actually observed the constellation; third, (iii) seems wrong because some truths apparently cannot be verified; finally, (iv) seems implausible because there are truths that are too trivial to be of any value.

On Gale's interpretation, James makes a distinction between virtual truth/ reality and actual truth/reality. When claiming that truth means agreement with reality independent of the knower, James talks about virtual truth: virtual truth means agreement with virtual reality, which is mind-independent in the sense that if there were to be a thinker who properly tested a proposition that agrees with virtual reality, it would be discovered or verified that it is true. "Truth is made" means that we *make* a proposition actually true by verifying it. If a proposition cannot be verified, then it can neither actually true nor virtually true. So all truths can be verified. Finally, James claims that [actual] truth is necessarily good because he defines "good" as desire-satisfaction and "truth" as something believing which maximizes desire-satisfaction.

leads to such unbearable grief that the mother got crushed and died shortly after the death of her child. Had she had the false belief that her child is not dead, she would live happily for a long time. So believing the truth cannot maximize desire-satisfaction; some truths are not good. To this objection, James might respond as follows. While the mother believes that (p1) her child is dead, this belief alone cannot cause unbearable grief in her. She got crushed probably because she also believes that (p2) her life is worth living if and only if her child is flourishing. Since her child is dead, she believes that (p3) her life is meaningless. In this case, it is believing (1), (2), and (3) (and perhaps some other factors) that crushes the mother. James would grant that had the mother had believed the false proposition that (p4) her child is flourishing, she would have more desire-satisfaction in the long term as long as she still believes (p2) and thereby believes that (p5) her life is worth living. But consider the following possibility: after learning (p1), the mother, upon reflection, stops believing (p2) and acquires the new belief that (p6) her life would be still worth living if she could make people remember her child (e.g., by setting up a scholarship in her child's name). Further, suppose that the mother believes that (p7) she is able to make people remember her child. In this case, the mother would still believe (p5) and thereby would not be crushed though she believes (p1). Now the question is: would believing (p1), (p5), (p6) and (p7) have better consequences than believing (p2), (p4) and (p5)? It seems so, at least it is far from obvious that the opposite is true. One might object that the new case involves a substantive change of the mother's web of belief, which is against another guiding principle James provides: revise the web of belief in a way that makes the minimum changes in it. But James would reply that this guiding principle is subordinate to the guiding principle that epistemic justification should always take priority over non-epistemic justification. To be sure, this reply would invite further objections, but I think it is a respectable response that can be elaborated and defended.

Although Gale's interpretation can nicely solve the first two puzzles, it fails to tell the whole story. Moreover, his interpretation has difficulties in dealing with the other two puzzles.

I therefore propose the following interpretation. When James says that reality is independent of the knower, he does not merely talk about virtual reality. *Actual* reality – the totality of experiences – is also independent of us because at least part of it (e.g. the flux of sensations) is often beyond our control. In addition, when James says that truth is made by us, he does not merely talk about the activity of verification of actual truth. There is another sense in which all truths are made by human beings, i.e., the categories or concepts of which a truth (virtual or actual) consist of are also made by us. Regarding the claim that truth can be verified, James endorses a broad sense of verification, according to which the proposition "God exists", though cannot be epistemically justified (confirmed by perceptual evidence), can be verified. Contrary to Gale's view, the broad sense of verification does not commit James to complete subjectivism, since James requires that perceptual evidence takes priority over personal feelings and tastes in verifying an idea. Furthermore, Gale fails to notice that James makes a distinction between objective truth and subjective truth. Finally, James may deny that all desire-satisfactions are good. The desire to know the answer to a question is worth being satisfied if the question is genuine. Truth is just a correct or satisfactory answer to a genuine question. The belief that can merely give us unworthy desire-satisfactions cannot be true. That's why truth is necessarily good.

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