

Moral Presence and Absence in William James' Rhetoric of Truth

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In "Pragmatism and Radical Empiricism" ("PRE"), William James famously claims, "truth happens to an idea," and so "it becomes true, is made true by events" (312). For James, the question of whether or not an idea is true depends on verification, a process that in turn verifies itself as true. The question of validity, however, poses some interesting concerns regarding "truth" as it relates to individuals and "truth" within individuals. Because James constantly refuses to begin with definitions regarding truth—or *any* term, for that matter—and because he is forced to couch his process in language, he performs a rhetorical strategy in order to *invoke* the presence of truth. Quite often, James selects a rather structural process to determine exactly *what* and *how* we can determine the truth of something. In this essay, I will explore not only the *function* of James' rhetorical—and largely relativistic, I argue—method of truth, but also, and I think more importantly, the *purpose* of this rhetorical structure. I claim that in order to understand the rhetoric of James' theory of truth, we must first understand how James employs notions of presence and absence in these writings, and the way in which James employs these terms is fundamental to individual truth.

Truth maintains a prominent place in James' moral philosophy, because, as Ellen Kappy Suckiel notes, "truth in the first instance, for James, is truth for the individual" (105). But how can we connect truth with morality when the moral

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The Humanities Review
Volume 5 Issue 2
Spring 2008 167-186
St. John's University

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structure of James' thought seems so vague? Hilary and Ruth Anna Putnam, in defense of their contributions to the *Cambridge Companion to William James*, claim that James was not essentially a moral philosopher, although a strong underpinning of moral philosophy serves as the foundation for his philosophy (366). The Putnams go on to argue that while James did not *intentionally* frame his philosophy in ethics, certain consequentialist motives provided direction for him.¹ I think we can grant that at least this latter idea is true for James—certainly, some outcomes seem better than others *because* of consequences. And, I would agree, James' moral philosophy, were we to ascribe one to him, does find its roots in his conception of truth.

The verification of truth seems, in James' pragmatic view, somewhat fundamental if we are to look for some rhetorical structure. The Putnams provide evidence that shows how "in papers and books written at all stages in his philosophical career, James repeatedly insisted that a true belief must be such that we are 'fated' to converge on it, such that it becomes 'the whole drift of thought,' such that it becomes 'the ultimate consciousness'" ("The Real William James" 370). Further, for James, truth does not correspond to realities; it is more of an agreement—couched in pragmatic terms, *not* between abstract realities and beliefs—through which verification continually serves to verify. James does not hold that there is some ultimate truth. Instead, truth is adjusted and verified as experience grows. It is precisely this idea, that is, the claim that truth is defined in terms of verification, that I would like to pursue in this essay. If James *did* believe that verification continually forms truths for individuals, and even humanity—and I think he did—then his rhetoric of truth can be considered extremely personal. And, as James states in "The Will To Believe," there is a *passional* nature that must distinguish individual temperaments.

It is quite clear that James' reluctance to define conceptual terms such as "truth" goes with his empiricist model for discerning conceptual ideas and his wish to avoid any *a priori* stain before all the facts are in. James, like Emerson before him, is all for the individual, more relativistic than foundationalist, and there is a problem with calling this system a formal structure. Charlene Haddock Seigfried points out the dilemma in this formulaic process, and it's worth quoting in full:

Exact definitions of phenomena are arrived at only after much effort and are part of a continuing process of transforming a looser web of experiential evidence into precise formulas. To impose exact formulas before examining the evidence is to prefer systematic simplification arrived at dogmatically to the more modest scientific procedure of announcing results only after operational definitions have been experimentally validated ... but [James] has not proved that no preliminary plan of ordering is necessary. (339)

Although James steers clear of dogmatic yardsticks, he does not prove that his brand of what Haddock Seigfried calls "selective interest" is any better—or any different at all, for that matter—than a fundamental idealist position. Going further with this latter point, A.J. Ayer argues that we are not determined to think systematically, even when it is detrimental, so James does not really provide a strong foundation.² Two things are important here. First is the notion that James has no novel way of deducing his definitions, which I will relate more to his moral prose a bit later. Second, that James has to work with any type of definitions at all is fundamental in the former.

Definitions are all James has to work with, so the argument must be a rhetorical move if it is to work at all. In "PRE," James claims that the semeiotic placeholders "God," "freedom," and "design" are interchangeable (and we can think of other semiotic markers in a like way *ad infinitum*). So, for James, each of these terms means, conceptually speaking, "a *presence* of promise in the world" (McDermott 313, emphasis mine). But really they all mean, in a Levi-Straussian structural way, or more narrowly, in a Peircean way, "good" or "bad," or, more closely, "present" or "absent." They are referents for a presence of promise. In this sense, the meaning of "truth," or "Truth" as a foundation, suggests that objects cannot be strictly derived from anything outside of an individual; it must, as the Putnams seem to argue, be defined on individual verification by the terms each individual chooses. Consequently, truth must be derived from the *sense* made out of the sign vehicle. Moreover, an individual presence and absence occurs within an individual, *not* between the individual and the exterior world. For James, the choices do not have to necessarily correspond to any type of extension.³

I would like to return to the idea that James really has no novel way of deducing his definitions, because this idea of "choice" adds a new wrinkle to James' rhetoric of truth. It might help to look at a discussion regarding James' moral theory for clarification. In Wesley Cooper's argument, moral deeds and actions are measured pragmatically at the empirical level, meaning that certain actions have proven themselves well up to that point. Similarly, metaphysically moral deeds, in Cooper's sense of the term, prove historically suitable for continued use at a later date. Like Robert O'Connell,⁴ Cooper argues James' morality displays a deontological streak, since James' brand of consequentialism "projects what history has taught us into the future, as a presumptive element of a more inclusive moral order, and, at the limit, as an objective moral truth" (412). However, if the verifiable—and subsequently *only*—method of obtaining truth is from within, as James claims, *not* from any exterior source, not even, as Cooper claims, from history, then James falls more on the side of relativism and less on the side of deontology (McDermott, "PRE" 315-16). So we need to ascribe more to James in the way of structure, intentions, and individual choice in order to steer him through the

Scylla and Charybdis of too formal or too loose of a system.

What I have claimed is tenuous up to this point, so I shall devote the latter part of this essay defending it. First of all, I have claimed that James must work within a linguistic world of definitions to conclusively arrive at his own. Additionally, James must have some kind of process—a method set apart from general idealism—or he falls prey to criticism that claims he has no structure of ordering his system in a way that moves the individual toward truth.⁵ Finally, I argue that there exist individual placeholders—not unlike structural semeiotic tags—set by James for others, and from which ideas of presence and absence occur. And, through these placeholders, the individual can propel with what James calls *passional* nature to the presence from the absence of truth.

For clarification regarding morality in James, I return to the Putnams' claim of James' moral philosophy. The Putnams assert that James' ethical theory does not even stand on its own enough for philosophical evaluation, claiming, "the result of James's metaethical reflections is not a normative theory, but neither is it moral skepticism" ("The Real William James" 367-68). That James wrote no explicit moral tracts—apart from "Moral Philosopher"—speaks for itself, according to the Putnams. Instead of a thread or current running from James' philosophy, moral ideas serve as an impulse for his philosophy *in toto*. Strictly speaking, James' philosophy depicts a worldview of what choices would make a difference in this world, and this worldview accounts for the pluralism within which it sought to ameliorate. Apart from this, Ruth Anna Putnam further argues that James was even further removed from hard moral philosophy in that some of his lectures were not for professional philosophers at all, but were aimed at middle-aged men and women suffering from a sense of ennui.⁶

Be that as it may, I would like to rescue James from the abyss of Emersonian aphorism-hood by looking more closely at exactly *why* James might have invoked any sort of rhetoric of truth; the purpose for which must be a salient part of the method. Richard Gale argues that on one hand, James does have a higher, perhaps more personalized purpose for what I am calling his rhetoric of truth. James' moral theory serves as the foundation for his Promethean side, in Gale's view. Gale asserts that James is a consequentialist, but in contradistinction to Cooper, he argues that James' ultimate moral claim insists upon maximizing desire satisfaction. Accordingly, then, Gale constructs the following argument detailing James' normative moral equation:

- 1) We are always morally obligated to act so as to maximize desire-satisfaction over desire-dissatisfaction.
- 2) Belief is an action.

From propositions 1 and 2 it follows that

- 3) We are always morally obligated to believe in a manner that maximizes desire-satisfaction over desire-dissatisfaction.

This syllogism is what Gale calls James' "Master Syllogism," and it serves as the foundation for Gale's interpretation of James' Promethean self. Because Gale seeks to show that James' moral individual should maximize desire-satisfaction, in Gale's view, James' philosophy might be considered desire-utilitarianism. Simply put, it is everyone's highest obligation to maximize all of their own desire satisfactions; yet, Gale's view substitutes desire-satisfaction for happiness, thus arguing for a variant of utilitarianism in James' moral model. But it is specifically Gale's idea of an *individual* master syllogism that appeals to an *individual* rhetoric that I find appealing. Interestingly enough, Gale notes in a later chapter that for premise 2 to work, it must be qualified to read, "2) Belief is a free action," arguing that to have a moral obligation, we must be free to believe or act (38-56).

Indeed, there is a balance between freedom and unity. James does not promote a limiting morality; instead, it appears that he, as Gale argues, promotes a *freedom-oriented* morality. With this comes either a definition of self—a *redefinition*—or a new definition, a presence of an older self or an absence of the same. As Gale has already noted, we must be free to act; therefore, we must be free to engage in either a presence or absence of any one moral choice or direction. As an example, let us say we have before us the moral choice of either X or Y. James would certainly choose the one, as Gale's equation notes, that provides maximum desire satisfaction. Let us say that Y does this. In this equation, Y maintains presence while X is removed, because it is the absence of Y.

But James adds a second semeiotic card to the pile. In addition to the "presence of promise in the world," which signaled the absence of any one of a number of antipodal structural placeholders, such as cynicism, dubiousness, doubt—all a lack of promise—there lies a rhetoric of moving toward this presence of truth. For James, we can *only* move toward truth when both our will and our actions work in concert, and he applies this equation in a number of ways.⁷ In "The Sentiment of Rationality," James claims, "cognition ... is incomplete until discharged in an act" (McDermott 330). Similarly, in "What Makes a Life Significant," James claims,

the solid meaning of life is always the same eternal thing—the marriage, namely, of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance ... and there will always be the chance for that marriage to take place. (659)

For James, “cognition,” “ideals,” and “vision” all correspond to a presence of the possibility of truth; yet, they must be married with “act,” “fidelity,” and “courage,” or simply action. This action, then, would likely cause a move from absence to presence.

James highlights this idea of presence and absence best perhaps in “The Continuity of Experience,” where he invokes the presence and absence in experience with semiotic tags. James notes that, in the midst of our continuity of experience, there comes an “alteration”: “‘Yes’ we say at this full brightness, ‘this is what I just meant.’ ‘No,’ we feel at the dawning, ‘this is not yet the full meaning, there is more to come.’” In experience, we slide from the presence of absence and back, gaining first, then losing. As James states, “in every crescendo of sensation, in every effort to recall, in every progress towards the satisfaction of desire, this succession of an emptiness and fullness that have reference to each other *and are one flesh* is the essence of phenomena” (emphasis mine). As Gale claims, James’ idea of striving toward satisfaction of desires is clear: this shapes the individual’s moral drive. “Truth,” in this sense, arises from a foundational moral impulse to move to the presence of satisfaction from the absence of dissatisfaction. After all, James acknowledges, “in every hindrance of desire the sense of an ideal presence which is absent in fact, in a word, which the only function of the present is to *mean*, is even more notoriously there” (294). So even if it is not “there,” in the conscious sense of the term, presence is there with absence.

However, James still remains stuck in a linguistic trap, for as he relates this idea of presence to pure thought, he still acknowledges the phenomenon. Names, like bits of consciousness, are placeholders for something, a thing that is on the way to the peak of the continuum. Just as sensational experiences are their own others, in a Hegelian sense, names must be part of the larger continuum. James claims that experiences cut through a man’s life, portioning it out, and the names (of these events) *conceptually* break them down, but “no cuts existed in the continuum in which they originally came” (295). And James does appear sensitive to the fact that no names are “good” in the sense that they precede thoughts; so it gets continually tougher to use names as linguistic guides that help us, not hinder us.⁸ Thought does not *exactly* replicate the world, and we can never capture even this lack of precision in language, but we can use language to assist in the ascension toward the possibility of truth, the possibility of individual truth, which is that we are always morally obligated to believe in a manner that maximizes desire-satisfaction over desire-dissatisfaction.

Given this idea, I lean more on the side of Gale rather than the Putnams. James maintains *some* structure in which morality guides the individual, and he couches within this rhetoric of truth. For purposes of rebuttal, I refer back to Haddock Seigfried’s quote once more, which claims that,

to impose exact formulas before examining the evidence is to prefer systematic simplification arrived at dogmatically to the more modest scientific procedure of announcing results only after operational definitions have been experimentally validated.

This is, I argue, precisely what James does *not* do in language. He cannot impose any *exact* terms before experience plays out for the very reason he cannot claim any universal moral structure. Therefore, James’ rhetoric—like his moral philosophy—is limited to the individual, and the individual must make his or her own way through his or her own rhetoric. In James’ writings, then, we see the rhetorical play of placeholders of absence and presence, all serving to propel the reader, or listener, to the passionate nature and an individual free choice of will that, when married to the presence of truth, will act on it.

However, essays such as “What Makes a Life Significant,” one of the essays Ruth Anna Putnam claims James wrote for the *hoi polloi*, not necessarily anyone who might be more than a dilettante, and “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” do tend to push James into some aphorism-filled corner along with Emerson because of their certain “quotable” nature. But both essays carry a similar rhetorical structure, and James’ major claim revolves around semiotic placeholders of presence and absence. It is worth noting that James acknowledged “What Makes a Life Significant” as “the perception on which [his] whole individualistic philosophy is based.”⁹ Here, James deifies the absence, calling it the “ancestral blindness,” and in doing so, moves toward a rhetorical strategy of light versus darkness. Because he terms this “ancestral,” James calls upon the *past* notion of absence to avoid future conditions of like darkness or absence of light. Subsequently, after James relates the individual experience—“And now I perceived by a flash of insight, that I had been steeping myself in pure ancestral blindness”—he can relate it again to the whole (McDermott 649). James hints that in fact our passionate nature is something not to understand, but it is instead something to let guide us, like an automatic pilot. He states, “The more we live by our intellect, the less we understand the meaning of life” (651). Truly, the “meaning of life” here for James indicates a truth of some sort—not solely individual truth, but humanity’s truth. And James finally concludes that “the altered equilibriums and redistributions only diversify our opportunities and open chances to us for new ideals,” for “the chance for a life based on an old ideal will vanish” (660). Here, James relates the stipulation for some kind of universal yet intangible vision, trying to capture it in the rapture of rhetoric, yet falling short.

This is precisely why I consider these two essays good examples of how James’ rhetoric of truth works. Because he *cannot* capture this universal—although he tries in a Keatsian way, with a vague allusion to the nightingale’s song—he cannot

actually posit anything he has not experienced. So the "ancestral blindness" remains a present absence, according to James, in humanity. But the goal is to arrive at our true end, which he claims later in *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* is a "union or harmonious relation with that higher universe" (759). To do this, however, James alludes in both "On Blindness" and "What Makes a Life" that we must somehow do it *together*. And here is where the final Hegelian synthesis comes in. Like the second thinker in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," we must somehow converge on this truth together, for, as in the second thinker's scenario, the situation becomes complex. And typically, we fall back into the "ancestral blindness."

For some, all of this might imply that James moves toward a bifurcation of the one and the many. It seems that for James, the "many," as a rhetorical term, does differ from the "one," but "what the intellect knows clearly [in all cases] is only the word itself and its steering function." Indeed, as James states, "the only literally true thing is reality," but that, according to James, is the flow of senses and emotions (651). He is very aware of and uses this linguistic "steering function" to push the envelope further. In order to reach what we can call reality, we must employ a pragmatic view that values in each thought level a purpose, where each thought level combines to form a rhetorical structure that might *lead* to this reality. For James, this is all done in his succession of rhetorical play.

But does this imply that James makes the move to unify truth into a universal God? I think not, but further dwelling on that is outside the scope of this paper; it is enough to say at this point that James thought any claims about God need to be grounded in human experience. However, there is one point regarding this issue that remains relevant to my thesis. In *Self, God, Immortality*, Eugene Fontinell argues that "James is in the broad Kantian tradition that denies the possibility of proving or disproving God, while leaving the door open for belief or faith in God ... [James' arguments] serve to confirm the beliefs of believers but are useless to atheists" (135). This is precisely where James' fundamental notions of morality and truth manifest themselves as temporally present. For James—as for the aforementioned believers—it is moral to believe, because belief constitutes a *presence* (of something), and it negates, by its very nature, the *absence* of that something.

I shall make one more relevant comment before I conclude. It is my contention that James uses what I have been calling these placeholders for the very purpose of getting rid of them. Essentially, the more rhetorical placeholders—that is to say, the more divisions there are of *any* sort—the less we really know the truth. As James states in "Reflex Action and Theism," "we break it: we break it into histories, and we break it into arts, and we break it into sciences; and then we begin to feel at home ... it is an order with which we have nothing to do but to get away from it as fast as possible" (*Will to Believe* 119). This "order," as James calls it, is something that constrains the very freedom of the presence of truth.

James' rhetoric of truth, conversely, attempts to unify it, or put it back together, or at least provide a rhetorical arena within which the belief that this can occur is possible. And the linguistic trap in which James is stuck is the order within which he himself has been confined, an order that, as it exists in language, holds some possibility of escape. In this way, James' rhetorical structure of truth is simply a method to make itself absent—it is a presence through which we must transcend in order to arrive at the other end of the truth, or the steering function that guides us to that point.

Now, is this to say that no one can read James for this reason? Certainly not. It does suggest, however, that James be read as more than a precursor to New Thought thinkers or in the succession of Emerson, where the claims are more "light your own light, but not off of mine" than they are dogmatic, although that reading is not necessarily incorrect. This is to suggest that James be read as one who displays the very limits—or, in fact, necessary confines—within which humanity immerses itself. And for this reason, I think James' rhetoric of truth is *extremely* valuable, deep, and timeless. With this idea of truth comes the moral obligation to seek it out, and it is an obligation that carries forward with every generation—James links the human quest for truth with morality. The Putnams argue that James believes we are fated to converge on truth. I think James' rhetorical strategy lends to this idea, but from a moral standpoint, individual truth can become "the whole drift of thought," such that it becomes "the ultimate consciousness," within individuals and *among* individuals. ■■

Notes

1. The Putnams argue against Gerald Myers, who claims James never tried to be a moral philosopher in his essays, p. 400.
2. Ayer implies that there is an inconsistency in James' idea because it would seem to follow that only those realities we can comprehend would fit into our "network" of definitions, p. 197.
3. However, an absolute extension, while not required, might act as a marker for a certain ascription to truth.
4. "Will to Believe" and James' "Deontological Streak." O'Connell argues this deontological streak saves "WTB" from charges of wishful thinking.
5. Or he is placed too far on the side of relativism, which is where Suckiel locates him, pp. 105-6.
6. Here, Putnam specifically names "Pragmatism," "What Makes a Life Significant," and "so on."
7. Although he does claim "action must obey vision's lead." McDermott, p. 699.
8. James claims if "languages must thus influence us, the agglutinative languages, and

even Greek and Latin with their declensions, would be better guides." McDermott, p. 31.
9. Perry, p. 265, qtd. from the Atlantic #144, 1929.

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The Road to Freedom

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Freedom is a value characteristic of contemporary life, and it so dominates the thinking of the modern age that we tend to forget its roots in the medieval tradition. One figure completely neglected in the complex and often murky history of freedom is Petrarch. He played a central role, as this chapter will show, in a new conceptualization of freedom, and, in so doing, he absorbed the speculations of the tradition—the views of St. Augustine, Boethius, Aquinas, and Dante, whose thinking, in turn, moved within the perimeter of the classical philosophical theories of Aristotle, Cicero, Lucretius, etc., and who essentially developed the notion of freedom as an issue central to ethics. Their questions on problems such as moral choice, randomness, predestination, and necessity both shape and hinge on the way they understood freedom and vice versa.

But in the fourteenth century, freedom was not circumscribed only within a moral, individual compass. Ever since the twelfth and thirteenth centuries at the University of Bologna (which Petrarch would eventually attend), in the tradition of the decretists, such as Huguccio of Ferrara, Irnerius, and Gratian, the moral principles of canon law and natural law, as inherent to human nature, were understood as the power to choose between good and evil. The unwritten law of the heart, which brought together the two major strains of thought—Roman law and Scripture—was explained by the Scholastics (Aquinas) as the power of reason, and nature itself

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The Humanities Review
Volume 6, Issue 2
Spring 2008 pp 187-201
St. John's University

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