

The Practical and the Poetic: Heidegger and James on Truth

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1. Introduction

The now twenty-year old tradition know as “neo-pragmatism,” initiated by Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, has done more than merely rehash the texts of classical American philosophers. A large portion of neo-pragmatist scholarship has focused on judging classical pragmatists in the lights of their subsequent critics, both from analytic and Continental traditions. This essay follows in that spirit. In it I hold William James’s pragmatic understanding of truth up against Martin Heidegger’s pointed criticism. Though both philosophers share the belief that traditional correspondence theories of truth are inadequate, the conceptions of truth which they posit in their place are radically different. I argue that this disagreement is the result of a fundamental difference between James and Heidegger which reaches back to one of the root differences between David Hume and Immanuel Kant. The issue is whether experience furnishes the material by which it is to be made sense of, or if the intelligibility of experience presupposes certain foundational, necessary structures. James believes that the concept of truth can be fully understood by examining the experiences with give rise to it. Heidegger thinks that any understanding of truth must presupposes a necessary relationship between human and world. I argue that the transcendental argument Heidegger uses to criticize pragmatism can be dismantled by James’s practical analysis, and that Heidegger’s conception of truth fails to reach a deeper level than James’s.

Perhaps first it will be useful to give a generic sketch of the correspondence theory of truth that these philosophers reject. This

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sketch, in its brevity and lack of sophistication, will be unfair to everyone from Plato to John Searle, but it will suffice for present purposes. Correspondence theorists claim that the word “truth” extends to the group of propositions or ideas which accurately reflect the real world. The statement, “Stan just ate an entire pizza!” is true just in case Stan *really* ate an entire pizza. If he failed to consume the entire pizza, then the statement is false.

Problems with the correspondence theories of truth are easy to find. How can we check to see whether or not our ideas correspond to the “real world”? What if that which common-sense understands as the “real world” is actually an illusion? What can guarantee that it *is not* an illusion? How is it that a linguistic, human-created entity, that is, a “sentence,” can be a mirror image of a non-linguistic, non-human, external world? Surely it does not reflect the world the way a photograph does. We can judge the accuracy of a photograph by looking at what is in it: if the tree in the photograph looks sufficiently similar to the tree in the world, then it is a good copy. But where is the tree in the word “tree”? The isomorphism between sentences and world is not as obvious as the isomorphism between photographs and world. They seem to be so utterly different that any relationship between them would be a strained one.

Thus the rise of epistemological skepticism. Only if one thinks that the job of sentences is to serve as accurate reflections of reality can one possibly think that they might fail in their office. The skeptic wonders whether we ever *do* get a accurate reflection of the way the world *really* is, deep down beneath our subjective experience of it. The skeptic only offers a surface objection to the correspondence theory. He actually buys into the fundamental assumption *that truth is a matter of correspondence*. That is, the only difference between the traditional epistemologist and the epistemological skeptic is that the former believes that our statements can be said to correspond, and the latter believes that we have no way of knowing whether they do.

But perhaps we should stop and ask: What is so important about having a true idea? What is so important about having an accurate reflection of the world?

Neither James nor Heidegger think it is inherently good to have an accurate description of reality. In fact, Heidegger thinks that

ascribing truth to the merely correct descriptions of the world is a dangerous thing. He thinks that objects are always presented to us in an incomplete way. His objection is thoroughly different from the skeptic's. Heidegger is not arguing that our statements are out of touch with the way the world "really" is. He does not think objects are presented to us in a *distorted* way (as the skeptic proposes), but rather that we glimpse only a partial set of their possibilities at any one time; we see but one of an indefinite number of versions of what an object might be. The problem in the history of philosophy has been that philosophers have taken their narrow glimpse of a phenomenon and held fast to it with blind abandon, thus not seeing other aspects or versions of the phenomenon, and exposing themselves to an artificially restricted set of its "truths."

In the next section of the paper, I bring out this view by exploring Heidegger's central essay "On the Essence of Truth." I set forth Heidegger's critique of correspondence theory, and expand on his claim that it reduces truth to a matter of correctness, or the ability to report a certain way an object is presented to oneself. I explore Heidegger's claim that our engagement with the world covers up the indefinite number of ways that an object can reveal itself to us.

If Heidegger is correct, if objects are always, as they are revealed, also covered up, and if making a true statement consists only of reporting the tiny corner that is revealed, then the correspondence theory of truth seems to be rather emaciated. Heidegger thinks there is a more robust alternative than thinking of truth as mere correctness. He claims that we can discover this alternative by looking at what makes it possible for us to make a correct statement. His thesis is that *whatever gives the possibility of speaking correctly about an object is in fact the essence of truth.*

James agrees with Heidegger that correspondence theorists are wrong. However, he disagrees with Heidegger's method of proving this, and also with the architecture that emerges from Heidegger's critique. In the third section of the paper, I explore James's critique of correspondence and set forth his alternative pragmatic theory. He thinks that the correspondence theory of truth is part of a larger philosophical mindset that ignores the practical issues that confront humans. Humans, James thinks, are *practical* creatures. Language is an

instrument they use to satisfy their needs. “Truth” is the term that they use to describe the sentences in their language that help them do that. Truth is an inventive and practical thing, it consists in thinking up ways that effectively help us cope. James argues that our decision to call a statement true has less to do with it accurately reflecting the way the world really is, and more to do with its ability to guide our behavior toward it. Truth, for James, is a term we use to describe our favorite ideas, the ones that satisfy our practical needs.

In the final section, I set up the difference between James and Heidegger as being similar to a central difference between Hume and Kant. Hume has faith that experience furnishes the tools by which it is to be made sense of. Kant thinks that the very *possibility* of experience cannot be explained via experience, but necessarily relies upon the world being ordered by certain foundational, necessary structures.

This difference is evident in Hume’s discussion of causality. Hume looks at our experience of the world, and fails to find any experience of a “causal connection.” He says that all he sees are patterns, or the habitual antecedence of one thing by another. He never sees one thing cause another, just one thing precede another. But he affirms that for *practical* purposes, this “habitual antecedence” is all we need.

James believes that Hume has the right approach, which is to trace an idea back to the difference it makes in experience. To use a Jamesian term, Hume drags out the “cash value” of the word “causality,” where “cash value” means the effect that the belief in that idea has on our experience.

Kant has an entirely different method. He argues that the possibility of speaking intelligibly about experience presupposes certain necessary categories. For Kant, experience does not give us the tools by which we can make sense of it. Since, Kant says, experience *is* intelligible, and this intelligibility is not grounded in experience itself, then it must be rooted in some non-empirical, foundational framework. Kant’s method of analysis is to look for the conditions that grant the possibility of understanding a phenomenon.

Heidegger’s treatment of truth is similar to Kant’s. He believes we can only answer the question, “What is truth?,” by examining the conditions which make speaking about truth possible. His position

regarding the essence of truth unfolds into a direct attack on James's pragmatic account.

Like Kant, Heidegger does not think that the essence of truth can be found in our experience of truth. He thinks that to find that essence we need to examine what furnishes the *possibility* of talking about truth at all. He defines essence as *that which gives the possibility of a phenomenon*. When he examines truth, his analysis focuses on what makes it possible for us to say true things. Heidegger's transcendental argument, through which he argues that the essence of truth is rooted in the structures that grant the possibility of humans relating to the world, is directly at odds with James's practical analysis, which holds that all attempts at finding a non-empirical way of accounting for experience end in failure.

Heidegger argues that the pragmatist's overemphasis on practical concerns, the effect that an idea will have in experience, cuts off the opportunity for unpractical, mysterious, poetic engagement. By reducing truth to what is practical for one to believe, the pragmatist, says Heidegger, gets tunnel vision, and cannot see objects revealing themselves in truly novel or poetic ways.

James, on the other hand, shares Hume's faith that we need not appeal to anything beyond experience in order to explain experience. He abandons the quest for grounding the accuracy of our descriptions in something fixed, and instead articulates a pragmatic conception of truth, asserting that the truth of a statement depends on its practical consequences. He deflates truth to a psychological feeling which he calls the "sentiment of rationality," or the feeling that one needs no deeper justification for holding a belief. He thinks the "poetic engagement" that Heidegger talks about, that engagement in which the mysteriousness of the world is brought to light, is in fact just a special kind of practical engagement.

I conclude the paper by presenting a Jamesian argument that pragmatism's emphasis on the practical nature of truth does not come at the expense of poetic engagement. I argue that believing truth to be a concept which emerges from humans' practical engagement does not entail believing that humans should only be concerned with how to manipulate the world to their own ends. The turning away from practical concerns (building bridges, treating patients, learning

languages) in order to do something “useless,” like poetry, *is itself a real, psychological, practical, need in humans*. It is not a special, rarified way of engagement. James’s pragmatism denies that poetic engagement is beyond the realm of human needs. He holds that poetic engagement is a response to the needs and desires of an individual that arise when former ways of engagement no longer satisfy.

Usually, the way to argue that one view is superior to another is to show that it either (1) is more logically coherent or (2) is actually a better reflection of the way the world really is. Both James and Heidegger have logically consistent views, and it is hard to see how correspondence to reality could settle this debate, since both philosophers begin with the rejection of that idea. Thus, I propose a new standard for this paper: Heidegger succeeds if he can show that the pragmatic conception of truth, implicitly or explicitly, relies on the existence of certain necessary structures. James succeeds if he can show that Heidegger’s “necessary structures” are just a few more teleological instruments invented for practical purposes. To restate things, the argument rests on James’s ability to block Heidegger’s transcendental move, which can be done only by demonstrating that Heidegger never gets beyond the merely practical.

2. Heidegger: Pragmatism and the Turn to Errancy

The question with which Martin Heidegger begins “On the Essence of Truth” is this: How is it that we make true statements? Or to put it in Anglo-American terms, what are the necessary conditions for being able to say, “The cat is on the mat?”

The concept of truth which Heidegger takes to be common sense is a sort of folk verificationism. Heidegger states that under the common sense interpretation, “‘truth’ means what makes a thing true.”¹ And what is a true thing? True things fall into two categories: propositions and matters.

For one trained in Anglo-American philosophy, Heidegger’s talk of true “matters” appears as a kind of category mistake. In appealing to true matters, Heidegger is trying to capture the sense of the statement: That isn’t a hologram, that is *truly* him sitting there. This is the sense in which a *thing* can be false. A thing is false whenever it presents itself as something which it is not, as when fool’s gold

presents itself as the real thing. This kind of truth is akin to our notion of genuineness, a thing's being what it actually appears to be.

The truth of propositions consists in their conforming to the matter, or, simply put, to the "world." For instance, if the "matter" is that there is a book on the table, then the proposition, "There is a book on the table," is true by virtue of being in "accord" with it. Propositional truth necessarily leans upon material truth, the thing to which it must conform. For, if the matter does not present itself as it truly is, it is difficult to determine what a true statement about it will look like. Heidegger labels this "accordance" between proposition and matter "correctness" (118). A proposition is false or "incorrect" just in case it is not in accord with the material world. A matter is false if it does not present itself genuinely.

But how *exactly* is it possible that a proposition can "correspond" or be "in accord" with the material world? What does it mean for a proposition to *correspond* with the world? Heidegger states, the "essence of the correspondence is determined rather by the kind of relation that obtains between that statement and the thing" (120). But what exactly is this "relation" like? How might we get a better understanding of it? To understand how a proposition can correspond to an object we must first understand the relationship between the two.

Heidegger says that the proposition relates to the thing by *presenting* it. That is, the proposition brings attention to the object. For instance, the proposition, "The book is on the table," brings one's attention to a particular way in which the book and table are related to one other.

According to Heidegger, the relationship between proposition and object is manifested in a presentation. Making a presentation is one way of engaging with, or "comporting" toward, an object. By comporting oneself toward an object, one becomes familiar with it, and is then capable of making a presentation, in the form of a proposition.

Every comportment toward an object is specific and concrete. A person always comports toward the object, *as a certain such and such*; that is, as a table, a tree, a desk, and so forth. Everything turns on the "as such." The "as such" signifies that there are always other ways in

which an object can be engaged, which in turn lead to other ways of presenting it.

Upon the establishment of a relationship between the person and the object, a certain possibility, or “openness,” is created. From within this openness, a presentative statement about the object can be made. When this statement takes its directive from the object, that is, when it accurately documents a feature of the object, we call this conforming. The statement then falls under the conventional categories of “correct” or “true” (122).

So much for Heidegger’s understanding of the relationship between true propositions and the objects which they are about. Now it is time to say something concerning *how* propositions are able to accurately reflect objects.

Heidegger argues that if we are to address this question, we must first pay attention to the fact that every presentative statement inherits a standard by which its truth can be accessed. For instance, we typically say that the statement, “The book is on the table,” is true just in case it accurately describes the actual state of affairs. Thus, ‘accurate description’ is our standard by which we access the truth value of that statement. But from where did we get the standard to judge what will count as ‘accurate description?’ And from where did we get the standard by which to judge the standard regarding what will count as a standard? It seems that if the proposition always takes over a preexisting standard, that we are led to an infinite regress. Unless, of course, we can discover what it is that *first* gave the standard for making a true statement. It is for this reason that Heidegger asserts that the *essence* of truth does not reside in propositions themselves, but in whatever originally gave the propositions the standard by which to access their truth (122).

Heidegger maintains that the *original essence of truth*, the phenomenon that gave correctness as the standard by which we can access propositions, is freedom. He proclaims, “Freedom is the essence of truth itself” (123). Heidegger has a Kantian understanding of essence. He states, “essence is understood as the ground of the inner possibility of what is initially and generally admitted as known” (123). In claiming that the essence of truth is freedom, he is saying that freedom is what makes truth possible.

These are Heidegger's moves thus far: First, we started with the notion that the essence (understood now as possibility) of truth lies in correctness. Then it was shown that the possibility of correctness lies in a certain relationship between proposition and object. The relationship between the two is manifested by the propositions presenting the object. To present the object accurately is to be correct. The standard of accuracy is always already taken over from some preexisting standard. To prevent an infinite regress, Heidegger asserted that whatever *originally* furnished the standard of correctness is the essence of truth. Then he claimed that it was freedom that initially granted the possibility of correctness.

Nonetheless, to say that the essence of truth is freedom does not clear things up at all. The problem has only been pushed back one step further. For now the question is, what is the essence of freedom?

"Freedom," says Heidegger, "reveals itself as letting beings be...To let be is to engage oneself with beings" (125). How can one simultaneously "let beings be" and "engage oneself with beings"? Heidegger explains that in letting something be, one is not just "leaving it alone" or "ignoring it." "Letting be" means engaging it openly, in such a way that the thing presents itself as it is, and not as a predetermined, anthropomorphized entity. For instance, to let a tree be a tree means to be attuned to it as something outside of *humans*. To let a tree be a tree means to accept it as being a tree first, and mere "lumber," "shade," or "campground" later.

The freedom of the tree is revealed not in "doing what one pleases" to it, but in whether or not the tree can captivate one and be seen as more than a bundle of malleable qualities. If the object is free to present itself in this way, then the person engaging it can be free to do so *poetically*; her engagement is not reduced to mimicking the engagement of those that precede her. The being is "exposed," in the sense that it is no longer cloaked behind any particular description. It stands out from the background as an object worthy of attention, as more than a means to an end. Freedom is exposure to exposed, or unconcealed, beings.

Through freedom, letting-be, or the exposure to exposed beings, we see the openedness² of beings; suddenly they reveal themselves as beings that can be treated as something beyond our means-end oriented

categories. This openness is what Heidegger labels *aletheia*, or, “unconcealment.” The traditional translation of *aletheia* is “truth,” but its Greek etymology suggests “unconcealment.” Heidegger thinks that by returning to the “original” meaning of *aletheia* as unconcealment, we gain a more foundational understanding of the essence of truth. The essence of truth is in the unconcealment of the openedness of objects, the revealing of the object as something more than the ways we categorize it.

It is easy to think of freedom as something which we either have or have not. That is, we either have the ability to let beings present themselves to us openly or we do not. Heidegger believes that this sort of thinking is mistaken:

Man does not “possess” freedom as a property. At best, the converse holds: freedom, ek-sistent, disclosive Da-Sein, possesses man—so originally that only *it* secures for humanity that distinctive relatedness to being as a whole as such which first founds all history. Only ek-sistent man is historical. “Nature” has no history (127).

To say freedom holds man is to say that, at best, beings stand out to man in such a way that they *captivate* him. That is, they capture his attention. Man’s ways of engaging beings also stand out to him as questionable. His ways of engaging, these glossings, are themselves not allowed to be glossed over. When these glossings are glossed, when they do not stand out to man as questionable, man forgets that they are in fact glossings, and takes them as being essential to the beings themselves. He does not think to question them, for they do not appear to us as questionable objects. Only when something ek-sists, or stands-out, can it capture our attention and cause us to engage it in a deeper way than when it is handled easily with a glossed term. In order to stand out, a being’s concealment must be unconcealed.

In a summarizing passage, Heidegger states:

“Truth” is not a feature of correct propositions which are asserted of an “object” by a human “subject” and

then “are valid” somewhere, in what sphere we know not; rather, truth is disclosure of beings through which an openness essentially unfolds. All human comportment and bearing are exposed in its open region (127).

When objects are concealed, the human element gets passed off as inhering in the object. In disclosure, the human element is exposed, “all human comportment and bearing” are brought out into the open region. If the human element is not exposed, then it gets passed off that the object is “directing” certain statements at us. That is, if we do not expose “lumber” as a manifestation of human comportment (and not as a quality inhering in the tree itself), then the tree will only to appear to us as “lumber.” Or to put it in a slightly different way, in exposure, “lumber” is shown to lay on top of the phenomenon, not underneath it. This exposure of the human element is the root of freedom; it gives the possibility of comporting oneself toward the object in an open way. Only once we fully “captivated” by the tree, can we see that there are more ways to comport oneself toward the tree than as mere lumber. Freedom is manifested in this newfound possibility of different comportment.

It is clear now why Heidegger considers his discussion on the essence of truth to be more important than a mere “theory of knowledge.” Since truth is chained to freedom, and freedom is chained to the way we move about the world, the degree to which we understand the essence of truth may have a direct impact upon the way we move about the world.

So far we have been speaking of truth as unconcealment. This is only half correct. Beings are *always* concealed. Unconcealing merely shows this. It does not “lift the veil” of appearance and display the thing-in-itself. It only exposes the thing’s covered-upness. That is, my metaphor of a description “laying on top of” rather than “being underneath” is misleading, for it implies that there might be a pure phenomenon in the middle. We have no clue as to what this descriptionless phenomenon would be like. *Thus, all human engagement with things is done in the domain of concealment.* Unconcealment, or truth, is what happens when we refuse to treat concealed beings as if they

are in fact unconcealed and laid bare in front of us.

Contrariwise, it is proper to refer to *untruth as the concealing of the concealed*. That is, the denying that any concealment has taken place. If the covering up of beings is itself covered up, then the very notion that our descriptions are “coverings” is forgotten. In untruth, everything seems robustly familiar to man. The descriptions of beings, the proper ways of comporting oneself toward them, all seem to be a matter of commonsense. We cease to question our engagement with beings. Our minds then turn toward “practical” or “pragmatic” matters. Because everything appears to us as laid bare, we then turn our minds toward the manipulation of beings for our interests. When the contingent nature of all our descriptions ceases to reveal itself, when there is no acknowledgement that this contingency has in fact been forgotten, man takes up planning and proposing. Heidegger, with no small amount of irony, calls this a kind of “omniscience:”

Precisely in the leveling and planing [sic] of this omniscience, this mere knowing, the openedness of beings gets flattened out into apparent nothingness of what is no longer even a matter of indifference, but rather is simply forgotten (129).

Untruth, the concealing of the concealment of beings, is the root of the pragmatic turn, the turn away from matters that are not germane to our current projects.

So man becomes pragmatic. He takes as his standard of truth things as they familiarly appear. Yet, Heidegger asks, upon what does he ground this standard? What justifies it? It is precisely this question which Heidegger thinks the pragmatist ignores. Man pragmatically clings only to those things that are readily familiar, and considers questions of essences, especially regarding the essence of truth, wasteful. The clinging to what is readily available Heidegger calls *insistence*. In holding fast, or insisting, on the readily available, man loses that which is *not* readily available. He grasps the most transparent definition, the one most in accord with his projects. As soon as an adequate demarcation is found, man skips along to the next being. His world becomes mere cataloging and planning. Heidegger states

that man insistently turns *toward* what is readily available and turns *away from* what is mysterious (133). This turning to and fro Heidegger describes as *erring*. Erring is the “oppressing” of the mysterious openness of beings, the subjugating of beings’ mystery to practical concerns.

Heidegger holds that man is always in erring. That is, man always has to insist upon some aspect of a being. Insofar as he continues to eat and breathe, man will always live pragmatically. He will always have to ignore the mystery and grasp the concrete. He will have to think *for practical purposes*. Heidegger does not deny this, but is only trying to awaken us to the fact that *we are indeed passing the mystery over*. The pragmatists, according to Heidegger, deny that such a mystery exists, and therefore conceal what is concealed.

Heidegger asserts that in recognizing errancy, in admitting that beings are in fact concealed, mystery can get a wedge in, and errancy can be suspended. We can then get a glimpse at the mysteriousness of beings, and uncover the human comportment that conceals them.

The kind of thinking that goes on when we confront the mystery is called philosophy. It is the questioning of ready-to-hand comportments and descriptions. It is directly opposed to “sophistry,” or the rhetoric of common-sense. Heidegger says that philosophy “does not renounce the concealment as a whole,” but merely exposes it *as* concealing for thoughtful reflection (135). It drags it up from the forgottenness of our everyday, practical engagement.

If Heidegger’s position has been presented with sufficient clarity, then it should be obvious that his harsh remarks about pragmatism stem from his fear that the pragmatic criterion for truth supports the suppression of thoughtful investigation into our engagement with the world. It does this by focusing on “practical” issues, at the expense of those non-practical ones, the ones that ask us to withdraw and question the grounds for our comportment. In the next section I outline James’s pragmatic criterion of truth. In doing so, I hope to make the conflict even sharper, and explain why Heidegger got pragmatism wrong.

3. James: The Practical Urge for the Poetic

This section explores James’s focus on the practical nature of

human activity as it applies to his understanding of truth. I explore James's argument that the concept of truth emerges from our normal, practically-minded engagement with the world. I then give an interpretation of James that is meant to be immune to Heidegger's charge that pragmatism's focus on the practical nature of truth comes at the expense of "useless" poetic engagement. I try to show that the poetic does not "ground" the practical, but emerges *from* it.

Heidegger attempts to prove that all other conceptions of truth piggy-back upon his own "necessary" understanding of truth. James is not concerned with providing a foundational explanation for the possibility of truth, and so has no need for Heidegger's Kantian method of transcendental argumentation. His method of countering the transcendental argument is not to make a *deeper* transcendental argument, but to insist that neither Kant nor Heidegger (to speak anachronistically) ever gets to a "deeper" level in the first place, that all they do is offer different descriptions and metaphors for thinking about truth. He would argue that the work done by Heidegger's notion of unconcealment, namely, the calling into question of common sense, and the creation of a clearing for poetic engagement (rather than mundane, practical engagement), is successfully accomplished by the pragmatic notion of truth.

Like Heidegger, James begins his discussion of truth in "Pragmatism and Radical Empiricism" by pointing to the "common-sense" notion of truth:

Truth...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.³

The intellectualists maintain that the term "agreement with reality" is roughly synonymous with "correspondence to reality." That is, for the intellectualist, the truth of a statement can be tested by seeing if it matches what the real world looks like. Let us call this kind of person a "positivist."

James is willing to concede that the truth or falsity of a statement hangs on its agreement with the world. However, unlike

the positivists, James denies that “agreement with reality” can be successfully explained in terms of correspondence. The problems of skepticism sketched in the introduction (not the least of which is the concern as to whether our statements ever accurately reflect the world) abound for the positivist. Let us suppose that the skeptic is correct, and that our statements never correspond to the way the world really is. Or, let us go so far as to say that the world as we experience it is an *illusion*. James maintains that there would still be some statements that we would rightfully describe as true, and others rightfully as false. The fact that there was no ontological force propping up our experience would not change our assignment of truth-values. That is, the truth-value of our sentences does not hang on their being accurate reflections of the world, but on their ability to satisfy our needs. The true ones would be those that helped us navigate, manipulate, and survive amongst those illusions. We will still apply it to those statements that we can “assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify.”⁴ Since no difference manifests in any particular experience, real or conceived, we can quit trying to find out whether or not our propositions truly correspond to the “real” world. James holds that we have no workable notion of truth apart from the ideas we describe as true, and that we never describe any statement as true that does not have some practical effect in our lives.

James’s pragmatic conception of truth dovetails with his understanding of human beings. He assumes that humans are more concerned with a statement’s ability to help us know what events the future holds, and how we might be able to manipulate them to our own benefit, than with the statement’s one-to-one correspondence with the real nature of things.

But why is it that we routinely affirm certain ways of thinking, such as science, as getting closer to the truth than other ways of thinking, such as astrology? James thinks that it is not because scientific jargon reflects the world as it “really is” in a way that astrological jargon does not. He instead believes that our faith in the scientific method, just like faith in supernatural powers, is an example of the unquestioning attitude he calls “the sentiment of rationality.” According to him, the sentiment of rationality is a “feeling of the sufficiency of the present moment, of its absoluteness, — [the] absence

of all need to explain it, account for it, or justify it.”⁵ “Rationality” does not stand for the eternal, necessary structure of experience, but rather a psychological phenomenon in humans, a kind of satisfaction that one has by holding a certain belief. The devout Christian feels no need to question the existence of God, just as the scientist feels no responsibility to justify her methodology. The negation of these core beliefs creates such a violent sensation that all semblance of order and calm, all sense of rationality, is destroyed. The believer holds fast to his or her belief, for it is the one that feels most rational, most hospitable.

To reduce rationality to a mere sentiment might be a dangerous move. The objectivity that Plato and Descartes envisioned goes by the wayside. James states, almost comically, “rationality [means] impeded mental function.”⁶ That is, there is no “deep” justification as to why our questioning should stop at a certain point. Yet, this impeded mental function is essential to our existence. If we unceasingly question whether or not scientific engagement is a valid way of engaging the world, then we will never get around to harvesting any of the benefits it brings. Such impractical exercises as doubting whether we are warranted to call this red, spherical, object hanging from the branch of a tree an “apple,” disturbs our sense of rational order. The statement, “this is an apple,” nestles itself more comfortably within our belief framework than its negation.

James fully realizes the danger, or “charm,” of being able to speak correctly about the relations between phenomena. He observes that the simplicity of correct statements, the ability to effortlessly explain the rise and fall of the tides, the length of a year, and the eclipse of the moon, with a few pithy formulae, is remarkably alluring. This suspension of doubt, the ceasing of questions concerning the legitimacy of our engagement with the world, is the result of our *practical* need to not doubt certain things.

But it is the same practical origin of the sentiment of rationality that keeps it from ever holding full sway. James states:

Every way of classifying a thing is but a way of handling it for some particular purpose. Conceptions, ‘kinds,’ are teleological instruments....The interest of theoretic

rationality, the relief of identification, is but one of a thousand human purposes.⁷

The need for rationality or identification may always exist in humans, but it is only *one* need. Though we may always require teleological instruments, we may not always need *this* particular set of them.

James believes that the simple, unambiguous, explanations of science are good insofar as we need simplicity and clarity to get about the world, but our experience as a whole is a “mightily complex affair,” and those simple, unambiguous explanations will always be a pale skeleton of it.⁸ He acknowledges and celebrates the thoroughgoing mysteriousness of the world, and the inability of any single set of descriptions to capture all its wonder.

James realizes that the teleological instruments of science are designed precisely to cover up that mystery. But this does not worry him the way it does Heidegger, for they are but one of a thousand ways of thinking. James believes that when a certain set of descriptions become dominant, when objects are so covered that they only reveal themselves to humans in a glossed and prepackaged way, certain people will always be nagged by an “ontological wonder sickness,” a reminder from the world that all our ways of comporting toward it are contingent, and none hold more firmly to the world’s will than any other.⁹ Those struck by the wonder sickness do not thereby throw out the entire system of descriptions. Such wholesale, bottom up re-visioning is not possible, or at least not practical. We can never fully step outside our current ways of talking about things. All poetic engagement, all shaking off of the crust of convention, is done *in the world*. The mystery in the world can never be totally banished, but neither can the world ever be banished from mystery. For James, the pragmatic notion of truth exposes the practical, contingent nature of all our forms of engagement. He holds that our actual involvement with the world, rather than the spectatorial documentation of it, is the surest way of uncovering the intractable human element in the most “objective” explanations. He thinks that pragmatism, by exposing the practical origin or our “objective” descriptions, shakes loose some of their influence over our relationship with the world.

Yet, Heidegger would ask: what would motivate a pragmatist

to stop being pragmatic? That is, what would cause her to turn away from practical engagement in order to do something not means-end oriented? How would an object suddenly reveal itself to her as “questionable”?

In response, James could simply say: *look at experience!* Experience itself causes the pragmatist to question her engagement. Human experience is shot through with boredom, confusion, wondering at the meaning of it all. These are all kinds of mental irritants. James describes these collectively as “novelty,” an irritation that makes noticeable what is in front of us.¹⁰ It is an irreducibly *practical* phenomena, one arising from our experience in the world. It arises when the world no longer seems to meet one’s descriptions congenially, when it baffles our expectations, or fails to satisfy our desires. It manifests in boredom, confusion, or wondering at *the meaning of it all*. Novel instances require new ways of talking, classifying, and acting.

The danger with which James is concerned, the same one that worried Heidegger, is that novel experiences will be banished from the world, that everyone will speak the same language and think about things in the same way. James believes that philosophers and poets are examples of people who prevent such a thing from happening:

They [philosophers and poets] are pathfinders....both alike have the same function. They are [to make]...so many spots, or blazes,—blazes made by the axe of the human intellect on the trees of the otherwise trackless forest of human experience. They give you somewhere to go from. They give you a direction and a place to reach. They do not give you the integral forest with all its sunlit glories and its moonlit witcheries and wonders....We can now use the forest, wend across it with companions, and enjoy its quality....Though they create nothing, yet for this marking and fixing function of theirs we bless their names and keep them on our lips, even whilst the thin and spotty and half-casual character of their operations is evident to our eyes....No one like the pathfinder himself feels the immensity of

the forest, or knows the accidentality of his own trails.¹¹

The pathfinders are the ones who, walking upon the trail, are so struck by what is *not* on the trail, the “immensity of the forest,” that they blaze a new one. They realize both the “accidentality” of their own path, and the fact that they are on it because some person before them left markers for them to follow, that these persons could very well have traveled another course, and also the accidentality of the path they are about to blaze. Lucky for us who are not pathfinders, they leave markings, names, teleological instruments, for us to follow should we wish to repeat their experiment. And though we may be aware of the entire section of forest through which their trail does not run, we still, out of a desire to inhabit that section of the forest through which their trail *does* run, joyfully follow it. That is, though we are aware that only a tiny portion of the forest is illuminated by this trail, it just so happens that it is a portion in which we are interested.

Thus we see the essential *practical* nature of these paths, of these ways of engaging the forest. By accepting the truths of one path and denying those of another, we expect our experience to be different. If no difference manifests in concrete experience, then the two paths are, for our purposes, the same. James states that our most trodden paths, the ones we most confidently rely upon to carry us to our correct destination, are the remote discoveries of ancient ancestors.¹² We inherit from them the path, our ways of talking about it, and our ways of comparing it to others. The recognition of the accidental character of common-sense truth, that it is overwhelmingly “experience-funded” by our ancestors’ practical engagement, serves to soften up the rigidity of our matter-of-fact attitude toward our ways of engagement.

Every so often, a poet discovers a path that satisfies her needs and desires more effectively than the old (or even supplants those needs and desires with new ones). If she succeeds in persuading others that her path is better, then the old path, after some time, due to lack of use, becomes overgrown, so that others can hardly *imagine* that people once faithfully trudged in that direction. To use James’s example, the limits of Ptolemaic astronomy were made fully visible by Newton and his successors. There was a group of people that wanted a certain

thing, namely, ability to predict the movements of the cosmos, and Newton suggested a more promising route. After seeing the success of those that followed Newton, and the frustration of those who followed Ptolemy, it soon became a matter of 'common sense' that Newtonian observations were the 'true' path.

The point of this rather wispy metaphor is to show that James fully believes that reexamining truth pragmatically, treating it as a nest of such concepts as leading, suggesting, agreeing, and working, is sufficient for opening up different ways of engaging with the world. He does not think that by saying, "truth is a practical affair," he is committed to saying, "we can only think about practical issues." James only holds that truth is a concept born out of practical engagement, and insofar as we are concerned with a statement's truth, we are concerned with the difference it should make in our experience if we accept it as true. His discussion of truth is actually a discussion about truths, that is, the multiple ways of engaging the world which are more or less effective at what we want them to do. So long as we don't have a better path, we call the one we are on, and all the signs and demarcations on it, true. And whereas we ask the question, "Why should I care about making a path toward *this* goal, the goal of explanatory and predictive power?" the answer is going to be merely, but proudly, practical, and therefore circular. And if a poet should claim to cast aside practical interests, and insist upon blazing a new trail, or more, walking without any trail at all, more power to her! But do not let her think that she can move through the forest without leaving *some* trace for us to follow, that she can engage the forest, have it change her, without also changing *it* in some way noticeable to the rest of us. This is to say that her poetic engagement, after being repeated by those that follow upon her, becomes a form of practical engagement. Her poetic engagement springs from a practical urge to blaze a new trail, and then later terminates in the practical needs of those that follow her.

The person who exposes the contingent, practical nature of our current engagement with the world does not thereby reach a *deeper* sort of engagement for herself. For this exposure arises from, and returns to, the level of practice. James maintains that novel ways of engaging the world always emerge from mundane ways. They never

completely shed the banality of the well-trodden path from which they deviate. To think otherwise is, for James, the byproduct of a “desire for a purer form of truth than the muckiness from which it is actually found.”¹³ It is to take the idea of truth, which is abstracted from the concretes of practical engagement, and use it to trivialize that from which it is abstracted.¹⁴ It is to forget that today’s practical engagement is yesterday’s poetic engagement, and that today’s poetic engagement will either be ignored, or converted into tomorrow’s practical engagement.

If I have succeeded in presenting a coherent account of James’s position, then the differences between him and Heidegger should be clear. Heidegger’s transcendental notion of truth as unconcealment, and James’ deflationary, pragmatic notion of truth are at direct odds. Heidegger thinks he has uncovered a more ‘primordial’ account than James. James believes the very *desire* for a more primordial account of truth is rooted in the practical, psychological need for novelty. Heidegger thinks that to reduce poetic engagement to a form of practical engagement is to forget the essence of the former and mistake it for the essence of the latter. James holds that if one wants to get at poetic engagement, then one ought search in the places from which it actually emerges, “the muckiness” of practical engagement. In the final section I explore the competing methodologies responsible for this impasse, and argue that James’s commitment to exposing the practical nature of the poetic thwarts Heidegger’s transcendental ambitions.

4. Practical Analyses and Transcendental Argument

In this concluding section I argue that the James-Heidegger debate results from a disagreement concerning which kind of questions philosophical investigation should start with. James follows the lead of the British empiricists in answering these questions. Heidegger follows Kant. That is, James attempts to answer questions by examining the experiences that give rise to them. Heidegger seeks to answer questions by examining the conditions that grant the very possibility of their being asked.

First it should be made clear how closely allied Heidegger and Kant are in terms of methodology. Kant states:

I entitle *transcendental* all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode of our knowledge of objects in so far as this mode of knowledge is made possible *a priori*. A system of such concepts might be called transcendental philosophy.¹⁵

Heidegger defines essence as “the ground of the inner possibility” of an object’s being known.¹⁶ Kant would clearly describe this as a species of transcendental philosophy. That is, Heidegger, in searching for the essence of truth, concludes that it cannot be found in the actual statements that are described as true, but in whatever makes it possible to describe them as true in the first place. Heidegger, like Kant, is in search of the *a priori*, necessary, conditions that must hold in order to make a true statement. Both Kant and Heidegger believe that the kinds of questions with which philosophy should start concern what makes it possible to experience a certain phenomenon. They maintain that the best way to understand a phenomenon is to examine the conditions that makes the experience of it possible.

Kant and Heidegger attempt to ground everyday, practical truth in the necessary structures that bequeath to them their possibility of existence. James believes that this method always ends in failure. Concerning the Kantian method of philosophical analysis, James states, in a scathing charge:

I believe that Kant bequeaths to us not one single conception which is both indispensable to philosophy and which philosophy either did not possess before him, or was not destined inevitably to acquire after him through the growth of men’s reflection upon the hypothesis by which science interrupts nature. The true line of philosophic progress lies, in short, it seems to me, not so much through Kant as round him to the point where we now stand. Philosophy can very well outflank him, and build herself up into adequate fulness [sic] by prolonging more directly the older English lines.¹⁷

James thinks the empiricists’ question, “What difference will it make

if this idea be true or false?,” is a better start than the Kantian-Heideggerian question, “What makes it possible to speak of the truth or falsity of this statement in the first place?”.

James allies himself with the English philosophers whose methodology Kant rejects. He credits them with the roots of the pragmatic method:

Mr. Peirce has only expressed in the form of an explicit maxim what their sense for reality led them all instinctively to do. The great English way of investigating a conception is to ask yourself right off, “What is it known as? In what facts does it result? What is the cash-value, in terms of particular experience? [A]nd what special difference would come into the world according as it were true or false?” Thus does Locke treat the concept of personal identity....So Berkeley with his “matter.”...Hume does the same thing with causation.¹⁸

The English philosophers try to understand concepts by way of the experiences out of which they arise. They begin the messy work of examining the concrete experiences of phenomena, rather than conjuring foundational, transcendent structures which purport to illuminate the real-life experiences of them. James thinks that this method can be successfully used to examine the concept of truth. He believes that when we examine the experiences that give rise to it, we see that it arises from experiences of having an idea that proves useful in satisfying some practical need.

I stated in the opening section that for James to withstand Heidegger’s criticism, he must show that Heidegger’s method of transcendental argument never gets “under” or “behind” the empirical or practical investigation. Or, to cast this in terms of the James-Heidegger debate, James needs to show that the question concerning the possibility of practical discourse *is itself* a part of that discourse, and cannot be used to give practical discourse a firmer foundation than that which it provides itself.

James states, “[I]n every metaphysical debate some practical

issue, however remote, is really involved.”¹⁹ For example, the metaphysical question as to whether or not God exists originates from a whole nest of practical questions: Is there a guarantee to the moral order? Is our purpose in life given to us from an outside power? To whom must we justify our actions? Similarly, James argues that our disagreement over the nature of truth is also rooted in practical concerns.

What practical concern is addressed by Heidegger’s conception of truth? What motivates Heidegger to ground both positivistic and pragmatic conceptions of truth in his own apparatus? Heidegger believes that the pragmatic conception of truth suggests that one look at an object just long enough to be able to say something “correct” about it, that is, to be able to manipulate it in accordance with one’s preexistent goals. The mysteriousness of objects, their ability to captivate and cause one to behave toward them in novel ways, is suppressed. The world then is reduced to a pile of instruments, a mere tool box for one to skim over. What Heidegger refers to as “freedom,” or the ability of an object to reveal itself to be taken up in novel ways, is extinguished by the sort of thinking that focuses only on its “instrumental” or “practical” value. Heidegger believes that the pragmatist makes it impossible to bring the human element of the world into the open, to expose it. Instead, the pragmatist passes it off as if the object *itself* was demanding these technical descriptions.

Thus, Heidegger proposes a way of thinking of truth that exposes what he thinks the pragmatic theory covers. He tries to show that speaking pragmatically about an object presupposes a necessary relationship between the object and the speaker.

So much for Heidegger’s transcendental critique of James. James’s rebuttal is to subject Heidegger’s criticism to practical analysis, that is, to expose the practical origins of Heidegger’s “necessary” structures. Upon doing so, it seems Heidegger is rejecting pragmatism for *pragmatic* reasons — namely, that it excludes the possibility of engaging the world poetically. James’s practical analysis sets forth a simple yet powerful roadblock against Heidegger’s transcendental move. If successful, it shows that Heidegger’s necessary structures are just another set of teleological instruments invoked to shape our experience in a way that is congenial to poetic engagement.

Heidegger believes that he has already made himself immune to this sort of practical analysis. He states that *of course* all engagement is done in the domain of concealment, which is as good as saying that all engagement is permeated with practical needs and desires. Necessarily, his own engagement with the concept “truth” must also take place within this realm of concealment. That is, according to his own argument, he cannot expose the essence of truth itself; the best he can do is to show that that essence, though concealed, presupposes a necessary relationship between humans and objects, one that must be shaped in accordance with his examination. Heidegger thinks that the pragmatic criterion of truth starts with the denial that this relationship exists, and thus begins in a state of erring.

Instead of trying to outflank Heidegger and show that this move is *also* motivated by practical needs and desires, James can strike directly at the heart of Heidegger’s position. He can argue that the very concept of “necessity” appealed to in the formulation of the Kantian-Heideggerian question arises as an answer to specific practical needs for rationality and novelty. The question, “What are the *necessary* conditions for a phenomenon’s existence?”, arises from the need to make sense of the world. It cannot be used to ground that need. Talk of necessity cannot ground talk of practice because it itself is a kind of practical talk.

James blocks Heidegger’s transcendental move by not allowing him to formulate the question that is the engine of his entire criticism. Through practical analysis, he dismantles the transcendental argument and shows that the transcendental question is but an odd kind of practical question. He exposes the concepts which Heidegger appeals to in his transcendental argument as just another set of teleological instruments invoked, for pragmatic reasons, to shape our experience in a way that seems congenial to poetic engagement. James shows that we can go around the transcendental question instead of through it. The poetic engagement that James and Heidegger seek to preserve emerges as an *answer* to practical needs, not as proof that those needs presuppose a necessary foundation. While Heidegger argues in vain that practical engagement presupposes deeper structures, James demonstrates that the very concept of a deeper structure emerges from our practical needs for rationality and poetic engagement.

Notes

¹ Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," in *Basic Works*, ed. David Farrell Krell (Harper Collins, 1993), 116-117. Hereafter demarcated by page number alone.

² "Openedness" is no typographical error. It denotes the already-opened character of objects; they have already been opened up to us in a certain light.

³ "Pragmatism and Radical Empiricism," *The Writings of William James* (hereafter *WWJ*), ed. John J. McDermott, (University of Chicago Press, 1977), 311.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *The Sentiment of Rationality*, *WWJ*, 318.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 321.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 326.

¹¹ "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," *WWJ*, 347.

¹² "Pragmatism and Common Sense," *WWJ*, 420.

¹³ "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth," *WWJ*, 441.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 440.

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 59.

¹⁶ "On the Essence of Truth," 123.

¹⁷ "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," *WWJ*, 361-62.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 360.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 352.