Article

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THE PRAGMATIC THEORY—
TRUTH TRANSLATED INTO ACTION

SUMMARY: Regardless of the form it may take, the process of translation still tends to be viewed as a technical activity, a cumbersome yet necessary operation to be performed in pursuit of higher goals. Yet as a phenomenon, with its profoundness it seems to be calling for closer attention. Thus the following work aims to prove how relevant the notion of translation is for the philosophical debate—specifically, for the enquiry into the nature of truth as considered from the pragmatic perspective. Firstly then, theories of the two fathers of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce's and William James's, will be briefly recalled. Subsequently, the analysis will expose the role of translation process in each account. Recognition of the translative element will shed a new light on Peirce's and James's dispersed remarks concerning truth and offer an interesting ground on which they may be consolidated. Finally, the study yields a broader perspective on the idea of translation process as such, underscoring its philosophical potential.

KEYWORDS: Peirce, James, semiotics, translation, truth.

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Stating that the attitude to truth adopted by exponents of the pragmatic theory is tainted by a note of cynicism would not be perhaps an inconsiderable understatement. Much as it is grossly imprecise to subsume all the pragmatic accounts under one category, their authors indeed appear to be asking a question: "what do I get from holding a given belief as true?". By doing so, they go strongly against common intuitions which would prompt to regard truth as some form of an undisputable, unchangeable shape of reality, rather than a source of benefit to be discarded when proven inoperable. With their line of argument they also blow the coals under the fire of the most fundamental objection to the theory (called as such in Capps, 2019, Section 5.2)—an accusation of anti-realism.

At the same time it cannot be denied that in providing their explanation for the concept they bring together a few crucial factors which seem to be playing a significant role in how truth is actually treated by both the scientific circles and the average members of society. Three such factors should be pointed out: an ongoing investigation into the sense of the term, transformative character of its reference and consent of a wider community as vital in establishing its meaning.

In the light of such a dilemma, there appears to be a need for softening the unsentimental, somewhat hard-headed overtone of pragmatism, so that its advantages could be more readily appreciated. The three aspects mentioned above already prefigure the existence of a promising mutual ground between the pragmatic take on truth and translation process. As in the case of the previous theories, this relation will be here exposed and defended. Enveloping pragmatism in the translational framework will help it shed its calculative, relativist image, and simultaneously at least to some extent deflect the blade of "fundamental objection".

While some elements of pragmatic tradition are carried on by several contemporary thinkers, their versions of the theory draw on ideas which appeared later (such as deflationism), and therefore might obscure the analysis (see, for example, Rorty, 1991 for the notion of solidarity). That is why the study will focus on explanations proposed by two classical representatives of the theory: Charles Sanders Peirce and William James. First, because they are unquestionably considered as fathers of pragmatism, and second, since their contribution still differs in many respects. So what may be thereby shown is that irrespective of how each account is nuanced, they invariably retain a translative character.

C. S. Peirce—The Semiotic Nucleus Under the Crust of Science

Thanks to the foundation he laid for the field of semiotics, numerous attempts to combine translation with the thought of Peirce already have been made. His tendency to organise all phenomena on the basis of triads immediately brings to mind basic elements of translation process. One may for instance view the source text, the target text and its reader as participants in the Peircean "signifying relation" or the activity of translator as following the steps of abduction, deduction and induction (e.g., Hartama-Heinonen, 2008; Robinson, 2016). These studies

hint that there should be meaningful analogies also between translation and Peirce' remarks on truth.

These remarks should be briefly gathered against the background of his wider philosophical system. Its grounds were clearly idealist and, as Burch observes, characterised by strong affinities with the thought of Kant and Hegel (Burch, 2018, p. 4). In his view, the world was a realm of appearances, which he called *phaneron*, and which consisted entirely of signs. Human consciousness, in its cognitive activity was constantly interpreting these signs, creating their mental representations. Simultaneously, in the act of interpretation consciousness itself was turning into a sign—this triggered an endless chain of reading and representing (Peirce, 1994, Section 1.339).

On such an unstable, idealist foundation Peirce develops a surprisingly firm, scientific approach—also towards the concept of truth. According to his pragmaticism, the conception of a given object could be reduced to "conceivably practical effects" which this conception might have. These practical effects were the conception's meaning (Peirce, 1905, p. 165). Out of such building blocks of meaning one could later construct beliefs. In order to confirm them and expand knowledge, one had to explore practical effects of one's experiments within the realm of experiential data (Peirce, 1905, p. 165), following the steps of what Peirce called the Scientific Method—a process of enquiry which consisted in formulating hypotheses, making generalisations on their basis and subsequent testing their validity. Beliefs confirmed in this way could be ultimately called true. Hence his idea of truth is often summarised as "the end of enquiry".

Peirce specifies his definition in *How To Make Our Ideas Clear* (1878), combining semantics and ontology (Legg, 2014). He states that "the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real" (Peirce, 1878, p. 15). In *The Collected Papers* he further adds that it is "a character which attaches to an abstract proposition"; its

> concordance with the ideal limit towards which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific belief, which concordance the abstract statement may possess by virtue of the confession of its inaccuracy and one-sidedness, and this confession is an essential ingredient of truth. (Peirce, 1994, Section 5.565)

This concordance ultimately consisted in the strength in which the statement forced itself upon one's mind together with practical enquiry (Section 5.566).

The Scientific Method as a Translational Workshop

Fragmentariness of Peircean reflections makes any attempt to arrange them into a decisively coherent whole a questionable venture. His mysterious remarks have provoked a number of critical voices. Among the most famous objections there are those formulated by Russell, who argued that one does not observe a tendency in the human history for beliefs to gradually converge into a unified

theory (Russell, 1939, p. 146). Field was among those who noticed that Peirce's vision excludes a possibility of arriving at a plurality of opinions, while such an outcome would seem quite likely, being essentially proper to human nature and not requiring any further agreement (Field, 1982, p. 554). Quine noticed that it is possible to approximate numbers, but not theories, since in their case one cannot be "nearer" a given limit than the other (Quine, 1960, p. 23). And echoing the "fundamental objection" mentioned above, Horwich expresses the obvious fear of relativism. Dependence upon the agreement of community and evolving, personal beliefs of its members make "truth" changeable, disprovable and hence forever unreliable—while for the majority the idea should be conveying a sense of ultimate, autonomous stability (Horwich, 1990, p. 12).

In the face of such in interpretative riddle, the notion of translation is offering itself as one possible solution. Recognising its role is not an attempt to posit that there is an ultimate reading of his entire theory, but merely suggest that when viewed from at least one such angle, his vision presents a consistent picture. In that picture, objections recalled above seem to fade and it becomes easier to explain how the idealism of *phaneron* might underlay a world of reliable science.

External reality, the source of appearances, was providing people with their sense perceptions. It could be therefore considered as a source text. Each person was then becoming a translator who approached the original through the prism of their own understanding. Because the original consisted entirely of signs, its reception was naturally subjectivised in the act of interpretation. Beliefs formed in such a personalised way, if they were to be called "true", had to be acknowledged as an intermittent stage, a work in progress towards obtaining an ideal representation of reality. With their cognition expanding thanks to employment of the Scientific Method, the individual would continually find their beliefs discordant with those held by others or with their own still newly acquired perceptions. Hence they would recognise a need to adjust them. So taking any such original claim as a basis, they would transform it into a target text—a new representation of reality—which might again undergo further transformations in an analogous way.

This activity has a translative character. The source text is formulated in the language of perceptions acquired from the external reality, modified by the individual's reading. The target text is to be formed in a different language—a medium which would be intersubjective and which could be shared with other community members. Construction of the target text was a process determined by a series of choices involved in applying individual creativity on the one hand, and responding to external requirements or expectations on the other. The subject first needs to decide how to articulate information about their experience of reality, and then what changes they would accept to introduce, in order to make the target text operable within a larger community. The "practical effects" of a given belief, the consideration of which according to the Peircean "pragmaticism" accompanied the conception of every object, function as norms and conditions regulating the translator's creative process; every person who intends to coordi-

nate their vision of the world with others is not free to hold it as originally conceived. Possible unwanted consequences of their belief, inconsistencies with opinions of others and obstacles in functioning within the world act as still new restrictions which the translator uses as criteria of adjustment. The finally created target text has to be a balance between what is preserved from the original and what is modified by the translator, to make the original content understood and accepted.

Another translative feature in the Peircean theory is the fact that the opinion agreed upon by the community does not mark the end of the process. Just as the translated text is not taken to be the ultimate rendering of the original and better solutions may always be suggested, together with the ongoing scientific enquiry every belief held as true remains subjectable to revisions. Moreover, similarly to discrepancies that occur between different target texts, changes which are introduced to scientific beliefs tend to be small and gradual, with a major breakthrough being rather a rarity. What is more, Peirce significantly stresses that a true belief is necessarily accompanied by "confession of its inaccuracy and one-sidedness". This brings it even closer to the target text, the latter being inevitably imperfect and offering only one of many possible interpretations of the original.

In this way, verification process can be regarded as constant translation of one's beliefs, in order to make them better suit the results of scientific enquiry. When the finally established opinion is viewed as a target text, elements of Peircean definition fall into place. Truth as "concordance with an ideal limit" becomes translation equivalence with the original—external reality—which the target text of its human representation forever strives to yet never actually achieves.

By supplementing the theory in such a way, several points may be gained. The unreliability objection seems to be losing its force. The changeable nature of truth should not be considered as its relativism, but rather as its inherent adaptability, with various translations remaining appropriate in the respective circumstances for which they were produced. In response to Russell and Field, translational workshop of the Scientific Method could acknowledge plurality of opinions or theories as its outcome. This would not expose the Method as unreliable. Even less so—if the source text was to be a dynamically evolving *phaneron* which not merely breeds multiple interpretations, but literally consists of interpretation itself, then applying different tools for its analysis and obtaining diverse results appears inevitable. The translational framework allows one to justify the Method employed on such mutable ground and legitimise variety of "truths" it yields. And finally, the theory might perhaps defend itself against the accusation of antirealism. When *phaneron* is understood by analogy to a source text, even though it begets endless process of signification, there should still remain faith in a certain primitive, mind-independent root which gives rise to interpretative chains—"the original"—whose reading Peirce believed to be an ideal goal of science.

William James's Propitious Venture Through the Stream of Experience

It is Jamesian comments on truth which came to be considered as exemplary slogans of pragmatism. Fame notwithstanding, their provocative and rebellious overtone can hardly pass unnoticed, and criticism they may ignite becomes all the more fierce upon exposing their notorious, mutual inconsistency. As in the case of Peirce, James theory seems to be rather a nebula of ideas, if not a signpost leading to plainly opposite directions (contradictions are pointed by, e.g., Gale, 1999; Hu, 2016; Kirkham, 2001). Again therefore, as it was done in the previous section, his statements will be gathered and set against a relevant background of his philosophy, not so much to forcefully synthesise them into a unified model, but perhaps to prove that using the concept of translation it is possible to draw within the nebula a line which reveals the shape of a logical constellation. And as it will turn out, the choice of metaphor is not coincidental.

Similarly to the Peircean account, James's theory of truth rests on a particular, astoundingly fluxional ontology. Its most crucial assumptions were drafted in *The Principles of Psychology* (James, 1890) and *Essays on Radical Empiricism* (James, 1912). For the purpose of the following study, what should be recalled is that James discarded any division into mental and material substance, claiming that the universe was built of a unity which he called "pure experience". It constituted the content of each individual consciousness, which was realising itself in the famous "stream of thought", neither physical nor spiritual—the idea for which he was perhaps most distinctly remembered. One's mental activity was to be an incessant, interchangeable succession of moments when cognition rested in a certain state of contemplation and when it proceeded to another by following a thread of multiple relations: the "substantive" and "transitive parts" respectively (James, 1890, p. 120). These relations were to be experienced by the individual as directly as the contemplative moments and were themselves an inherent element of the experience (James, 1912, pp. 95–96). At the same time, James underscores the difficulty in grasping the real mechanics behind the "transitive parts", stating that there is no name which could exhaustively describe the complexity of a process wherein the stream matched one state with another, only "by an inward colouring of its own" (James, 1890, p. 121).

James's most significant remarks were included in the preface to *The Meaning of Truth* (1909) and can be roughly subsumed under two categories; those of descriptive and those of evaluative nature. As far as description goes, in tribute to the reverend correspondence tradition he states that truth is a property of certain ideas which "means their agreement with reality". In the light of James's ontology however, reality is not independent of the mind. The stream of "pure experience" which linked consciousness with the world seemed to be exerting its influence bidirectionally, in that the individual was constantly structuring perceptual

data according to the prompts given by their conceptual scheme.[1] Consequently, the belief might agree with reality in different ways, and the property of truth was not "stagnant". Instead, it "happened to an idea" and was made jointly by events and human beings ("like health, wealth or strength"). What also clearly follows is that truth would be relative (as it "varies with the standpoint who holds it"). Lastly, the human contribution to truth-making consisted not only in structuring the reality with which the belief was to correspond. The idea needed to be practically tested: "its verity is in fact an event, a process, the process namely of its verifying itself, its verification" (James, 1909).

What may in turn open the list of evaluative claims is James's strong insistence that whatever was labelled "true" was "one species of good". True beliefs were leading people to other parts of their experience through transitions which should feel "progressive, harmonious, satisfactory". "This function of agreeable leading" was precisely what James meant by an idea's verification (James, 1909, Section VI). Moreover, the degree of truth which a given belief might possess would be measured by its "cash value", which meant how successfully it would allow one to "ride" into further aspects of reality, and how useful an instrument of action it would prove to be in the course of this venture. Hence his account is often described as "instrumentalism" (cf. Stanford, 2015, p. 319). Kirkham distinguishes four senses in which an idea could be useful on James's view. It allowed one to properly manipulate physical objects around them, it facilitated communication with other people, it enabled to make accurate predictions and provided explanations for various phenomena (Kirkham, 2001, p. 94). As a summary of these functions one might consider James's famous statement: "'The true' is only the expedient in the way of our thinking" (James, 1909).

Russell demeaned such emphasis on utility as reducing the concept of truth to that which has good effects, and objected that it would be impossible to determine an overall practicality of a given belief—all its effects being infeasible to embrace or evaluate in the absence of any universal benchmark. Putnam however defends James, arguing that Russell's interpretation does not do justice to the theory. He argues that it is misguided to trivialise James's idea of truth as whatever makes one satisfied. Rather, for different types of claims there would be various kinds of expediency; in science for instance, satisfaction with a belief would be measured by how well it preserved the past discoveries, the degree of its simplicity and coherence with other claims (Putnam, 1995, pp. 8–10). Indeed, James says that for a satisfactory opinion to be formed, "first and object must be findable in the world […] and second, the opinion must not contradict everything else of which one is aware" (James, as cited in Hu, 2016, p. 3). Hence in conclusion to James's evaluative characteristic it must be observed that the philosopher seemed to have intended one's judgement of truth as a balance between personal

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[1] "We carve out groups of stars in the heavens, and call them constellations, and the stars patiently suffer us to do so […]. We make an addition to some sensible reality, and that reality tolerates the addition" (James, 1909, Section VII).

contentment and empirical basis together with logical consistency, where the latter two take in fact precedence.

Translation Ensuring Agreeable Continuity

It appears in place to ask how truth of an opinion could consist in agreement with reality and at the same time be made by human beings. How to accept the fact that to any true belief there would be a necessary admixture of subjective satisfaction, as well as that its truth has an expiry date? And how truth could always be considered good, if there seem to be claims towards which one might remain indifferent? These are but a few concerns which the theory may raise, and several prominent commentators have naturally grappled with reconciling James's mutually exclusive postulates. Yet they usually address only selected aspects of the theory, and even if they analyse its entirety, then to the recognised dilemmas they propose different solutions (for instance, Haack, 1984 deals with the problem of correspondence; Russell, 1939 addresses the notion of usefulness; Chisholm, 1992 defines the purpose of James's overall project; Gale, 1999 interprets each problem separately). By contrast, here a single notion will be suggested as a way to accommodate the majority of conflicting claims.

A good initial premise which may prompt one to view James's idea of truth as grounded in translation is his emphasis on processuality of the concept ("[the opinion's] verity is in fact a process"). As in the case of Peirce, a true belief is for James merely a starting point, an incentive for action and a material which will be subjected to further transformations. This event is defined as the belief's verification, which James in turn attempts to explain better by introducing a notion of "agreeable leading". So this notion turns out to be lying at the heart of his model of truth. The idea remains sketched rather vaguely and seems difficult to grasp in terms other than metaphorical. Arguably, it can be specified as consisting in a form of translation.

Any opinion which is a potential candidate for truth should be then considered a source text. As such, it constitutes an inextricable combination of data which the person receives externally and their own immediate interpretation of it. This would remain in perfect accord with the basic postulate of James's ontology, by which there is no subject-object distinction, and only the flow of experience. Let us take as an example a belief that "In Westminster Abbey there is a tomb of king Henry III". The individual forms such a belief on the basis of information gathered from history teachers, books, or the media. They hold it as a certain mental construct, which is a resultant of images they may have seen or words they have heard and their own visualisations of the place which they consequently created. The belief as the original text represents what was in James's theory called the "substantive part". When the person acknowledges the belief as true, they move further in the experiential stream.

In his analysis, this movement was regarded as the elusive "transitive part", which may be explained as initiating a process of translation. The individual

engages in practical actions: they may personally visit Westminster, notice a crowd gathering around it, prepare money for the ticket and in the end see the tomb with their own eyes. Each of these events would provide an example of how the belief became a useful instrument (explaining the phenomenon of the crowd, enabling to make a correct prediction of a ticket requirement and finally corresponding visually with the image they saw). Turning the opinion into a useful tool consisted therefore in changing it into events. This change is carried out in a translative manner.

Firstly, in this process the person makes a series of semi-determinate decisions regarding how the belief should be transformed (which place to visit, how it explains the crowd outside or whether the picture they had in mind matches the view they ultimately faced). They choose from a repository of available experiences, checking how they reflect the content of belief by enabling to perform successful actions; the decisions are largely free, yet they have to conform to the external conditions, as long as they are to yield a successful venture. Secondly, in the case of translation, when a new language is applied, on the surface the target medium is different, however essentially remains the same in the sense of still being an information carrying system. Similarly in James's vision, mental content becomes translated into events, yet both phenomena happen within uniform "pure experience", constituting a fusion of the objective and the subjective.

Moreover, just as the target text is an effect of the translator's creative work with the original, it is up to a person how they interpret the belief and to what practical uses it inspires them—consequently, the target text of events initiated by the individual will be different for each person. Still more significantly, in both cases, whatever these practical effects turn out to be, the process is aimed at establishing a certain type of equivalence. For the translator it should be primarily the equivalence of meaning, with simultaneous preservation of the text's structure whenever it is possible. By analogy, the individual strives to achieve correspondence between what the belief means and how it works in practice, where the relation of sense is of primary importance, while the structural similarity desirable, yet secondary (as the example above shows, what influences the person's actions making them successful is the sense of opinion they hold, while the question to what extent the image which accompanies the belief copies reality remains less relevant).

In this way, James's idea of verification process as "agreeable leading" would mean translation of judgements into their satisfying effects—establishing a relation of equivalence which links two "substantive parts" of the experiential stream. A "transitive" movement is performed translatively, in that it is driven and shaped by factors coming from both inside and outside of the individual. Translators are incentivised by the desire to externalise their "reading" of the original text and at the same time confined to the resources available in the target language as well as norms imposed by the community for which they translate. In the same way the subject's action is motivated by their personal beliefs, yet must conform to the conditions imposed by the environment. Just as the translator's

aim is to make the original understandable for a certain community, the transla-
tion process behind truth is aimed at making mental content of individuals oper-
able within the world and manifest for other people, so that they have but some
degree of insight into one another's minds—a passage opened by a bridge of
equivalence, which always rests merely on a frail benefit of the doubt granted to
the translator.

There is yet another highly significant property of the "transitive part" in-
volved in truth which it shares with translation, namely simultaneous reliance
and dependence of the person on the conceptual scheme. Creative material which
the translator uses is the way they have come to understand and organise the
indivisible totality of meaning offered by the target language. They remain under
its unavoidable influence, since this semantic whole inspires and utterly deter-
mines their work. As noted above, James himself acknowledges that a similar
phenomenon can be recognised in the individual's interaction with reality—
hence also in the way they give rise to practical effects of their beliefs. The ex-
ternal world, though somehow removed from the person further in the experien-
tial stream, is nevertheless to a certain extent also a product of the subject. They
continually structure perceptual data according to the patterns prompted by their
language. So they construct the target text of practical consequences not only by
initiating different events, but also in every arranging act of perception, turning
a scattered randomness of stars into a meaningful order of constellations.

Now it also seems easier to account for James's postulate regarding the un-
failing "goodness" of truth. When viewed as consisting in translation, truth could
be considered good in a way demonstrated above—it consists in a continuous
strife to lift the veil of secrecy from the individuals' mind, even if there be facts
towards which they remain indifferent. Moreover, "goodness" can be understood
in terms of translation quality; no matter how personally irrelevant the content of
the source text may seem, the way in which it was turned into the target one is
always subjected to the translator's evaluation, and may be deemed "good" upon
conclusion of the process. Accordingly, such a sense of evaluative attitude would
also accompany each instance of "truth making".

Finally, translation process inherent in truth enables to explain and waive the
burden of relativism to which the pragmatic theory seemed condemned. It came
to be accepted that the choices made by the translator as to which rule to honour
and when to enrich the target text with uniquely creative elements would vary for
each transformation they carry out. Consequently, their works differ—and yet it
does not preclude having a common concept as a name for all the instances of
their activity. And so the same would apply to the pragmatic truth, if the idea is
acknowledged as grounded in translation process. Furthermore, neither of the
phenomena involves a completely unpredictable and hence utterly relativised
action. If the translator wishes his work to be officially recognised as the target
text, it is adherence to the norms and social expectations that has to take priority.
A similar assumption can be found in James's theory, in the form of empirical

anchor the role of which, as pointed above, was to prevent the belief from falling into total subjectivism.

Another aspect of pragmatic relativism was temporariness of truth (since it merely "happens to an idea"). Again, this feature also seems easier to accept if one keeps the suggested framework in mind. Translations are made to serve specific communities at a specific point in time. It is natural that together with societies' development and transformation not only of their language, but also their general living conditions, target texts would gradually cease to be relatable and there would continue to arise a need for their actualisation. The new ones do not invalidate the old, but rather further contribute to exploring a full scope of the original meaning. The previous ones remain accurate in the circumstances for which they were produced. Transience of truth could be understood in the same way. Beliefs do not have to be considered unreliable merely in view of the prospect of losing the property of truth, and truth itself need not be deemed worthless. On the contrary, each such opinion, before it is updated, has a role of delivering one of numerous components which together fulfil the truth's ever growing capacity.

Ultimately, this is how on the firmament of James insight it is possible to delineates the constellation of truth theory which forms itself in the shape of source and target texts, linked with translation process in its still new manifestations.

Summary

The two thinkers laid different corner stones to the theory; Peirce elaborated the concept of enquiry in establishing truth, while James focused on practicality of holding true beliefs. Yet they both constructed their visions on comparably fluid, dispersive ontology (*phaneron* in the case of Peirce, and "pure experience" for James), which coupled with a rather hard-headed approach to truth exposed their analyses to similar objections (most grave of which would be conflict with intuition, relativism and anti-realism). Recognising translation at heart of their systems made it possible to reconcile incompatible postulates and took the edge off the pragmatic blade. It was demonstrated that true beliefs apprehended subjectively by the individual could be viewed as a source text, which was subsequently translated into a target text of actions—chains of interpretations, physically performed events, etc. The notion of satisfaction which disassociated true beliefs from reality was revisited as the one which accompanies translational equivalence, where a relative sense of aesthetic approval arises on the grounds of a properly performed, specific procedure, and which additionally remains regulated by the norms of a target community. Truth's finite lifespan was in turn re-understood as an enduring role that each act of translation plays in unearthing still new significance layers of the original for a continually changing audience of different times and places.

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