

William James

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Abstract

At the center of William James's pragmatism was a provocative account of mental representation. For James, ideas do not represent in virtue of either resembling or having been caused by their objects. Instead, James developed a voluntaristic, forward-looking approach that explained representation in terms of causal consequences. In this chapter, I offer a brief examination of James's approach to mental representation, explaining what makes his view "voluntaristic," what makes it "forward-looking," and how it sets the tenor for his general approach to philosophy.

Imagine a photograph, taken straight on from above, of a human left hand resting palm down on a table. We might think of the photograph as representing the hand in virtue of *resembling* it. In the image, the index finger appears shorter than the middle finger, and it appears to the left of the thumb. The hand appears to be on top of the table. All the various relations in the image between the fingers, between the hand and the table—left-right, long-short, over-under—match the corresponding relations between the real objects, from the perspective of the camera that originally shot the image. Perhaps the colors match as well.

Now consider the idea of the same hand in the photographer's mind. Her idea of the hand consists (let us suppose) of a visual image of the hand as pictured from the same perspective as the camera. We might think that the idea also represents the hand in virtue of resembling it, much in the way the photograph might be thought to represent the real hand in virtue of resembling it.

Alternatively, we might think the idea was *generated* through a neuro-psychological process that is somehow akin to the way light reflected off the hand causes an irradiation pattern in the film or CCD, and that the idea represents the hand in virtue of having the right kind of causal history. More recently, so-called causal theorists like Dretske and Fodor (Dretske 1981, Fodor 1987) have made just this kind of suggestion, that a mental state like the one in my example represents the hand not in virtue of resembling the hand, but in virtue of having been appropriately caused by it. *Resembling* and being causally *generated* by an object are not mutually exclusive, of course, and older copy theorists like Hume long incorporated causal-generation into their view as well (Garrett 2006, 307).

At the center of William James's pragmatism was a conception of mental representation that staunchly denied both copy- and object-generation style theories of the sorts sketched above. For James, ideas do not represent in virtue of either resembling or having been caused by their objects. Instead, James developed a voluntaristic, forward-looking approach that explained representation in terms of causal consequences. In this chapter, I will offer a brief examination of James's approach to mental representation, explaining what makes his view "voluntaristic," what makes it "forward-looking," and how it sets the tenor for his general approach to philosophy.

By "mental representation" I shall mean the familiar phenomenon of a mental state's *picking out or being about* some other object, whether that object is physical or mental. And I take it a *theory* of mental representation (or "meaning," as I shall also say) should identify the feature or property of mental states in virtue of which those states count as representations (whenever they do so count).¹ James's theory, very roughly, says that an idea represents an object in virtue of affording an ability to navigate to the object and, so to speak, to transact one's business with the object. The view is voluntaristic in that mental representation requires *having* some "business" to transact with an object in the first place, and just what business one might

¹ My use of "representation" loosely follows (Cummins 1989, 12), who uses the term "mental content" in a similar way. I prefer "representation" because James came (late in his career) to be wary of the distinction between consciousness and content (Klein 2020), and because James uses the term "representation" himself (e.g. at James 1909/1978, 21).

have with an object is a matter that is hatched—sometimes, but not always—by the agent herself. We shall therefore see that his psychological work on willing helps bring the philosophical view about meaning into focus.

James first achieved intellectual celebrity for his work in the nascent field of empirical psychology, especially for a series of pioneering essays that culminated in his classic 1890 *Principles of Psychology*. He styled psychology as a marriage between physiology (a field in which he had had extensive training) and philosophy.² During the subsequent decade, he turned his attention to what he called “popular philosophy,” evidently making a play on the more familiar idea of “popular science” practiced by people like Ernst Mach and especially Herbert Spencer and his legion of followers.³ A central interest explored throughout James’s philosophical output was the question of whether science and religion are compatible, and when he began discussing pragmatism publicly (first in an 1898 lecture at UC Berkeley called “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results”), he expressly sought to apply pragmatism to this problem.⁴

By James’s own description, a “pivotal” part of his pragmatism was his account of “truth” (James 1909/1978, 3), and the account of truth itself is but a short step from his account of representation. He says his “first statement” (James 1909/1978, 4) of the account of truth had been given in an 1884 essay, “The Function of Cognition,” and that essay in fact devotes considerable attention to representation as well.

It is natural to assume that *resemblance* is somehow involved with representation, especially if we think of ideas as mental images, as per the example in my opening paragraphs. But “The Function of Cognition” raises objections that suggest that resemblance at least cannot be *sufficient* for representation. Much like (but also much before) more recent causal accounts of

² See the letter to Charles Eliot, December 2, 1875 (CWJ 4.527), where James specifically positioned himself professionally as someone who could develop psychology at Harvard by uniting these “two ‘disciplines’”—physiology and philosophy—“in one man.” I discuss James’s physiological background in chapter one of (Klein Forthcoming).

³ For a discussion of the impact of Spencerian popular science on various pragmatists, see (Pearce 2020, ch. 3). On Mach’s dedication of one volume of his own popular scientific writings to James, see (Stadler 2017).

⁴ For more on James’s pragmatist approach to religion, see (Bush 2020, Klein 2019).

content (such as Kripke 1972, Stampe 1977), James called attention to the symmetric nature of resemblance, which appears to be at odds with the asymmetric nature of representation. James offered the example of two toothaches that may “resemble each other, but do not on that account represent, stand for, or know each other” (James 1909/1978, 21). Contrast this with the photograph in my example. If the photograph resembles the hand, the hand must in turn resemble the photograph; but since the hand doesn’t *represent* the photograph, resemblance cannot be sufficient for representation. One can run the same argument for the relationship between the hand and the visual idea of the hand.

So we have one reason for doubting at least the sufficiency of resemblance for establishing representation. What about object-generation? Why not think that ideas represent objects in virtue of having been caused by them?

More recently, causal generation has been regarded as a factor that can help address the symmetry problem with copy theories discussed above. In a classic paper, Stampe offers the example of a photograph of one of a pair of identical twins (Stampe 1977). The photograph resembles each twin equally, we may suppose, and yet only represents one twin. Why? Stampe’s answer helped inspire a generation of causal theorists: the image was created (caused) by light that bounced off one twin rather than the other, and the twin that is appropriately causally connected with the image is the twin represented by the image (and *mutatis mutandis* for an idea of a twin).

James recognized this very problem.

Suppose, instead of one *q* [the object of some particular thought], a number of real *q*'s in the field. If the gun shoots and hits, we can easily see which one of them it hits. But how can we distinguish which one the feeling knows?” (James 1909/1978, 21)

Instead of appealing to the thought’s causal *history* to answer this question, James proposed that an idea is in fact quite like a gun. Just as the gun shows what reality it’s pointing at “by breaking it,” the idea refers to some reality in virtue of conferring a “power of interfering” with it (James 1909/1978, 21 – 22). Like the bullet, what matters is where the idea *leads*.

Isn't it simpler or more intuitive to think of representation in terms of where an idea *comes* from? One factor that might explain why James wasn't more tempted by appeals to causal history is his general approach to scientific reasoning, which was broadly inspired by Comtean positivism (Klein 2015, Pearce 2015). Comte was an early advocate of *hypothetical* reasoning (Laudan 1981, ch.9). On this approach, our scientific theories need not arise inductively from data we have collected in the past—they can stem from *hypotheses*, or educated guesses about nature, and a good guess can come from a creative flash as much as from a natural extension of what we have already observed. In other words, the epistemic value of a hypothesis is not derived from what *generated* it, but rather from whether or not it is borne out by future experience. Here is one way James put the point. As empiricists,

[o]ur great difference from the scholastic lies in the way we face. The strength of his system lies in the principles, the origin, the *terminus a quo* of his thought; for us the strength is in the outcome, the upshot, the *terminus ad quem*. Not where it comes from but what it leads to is to decide. It matters not to an empiricist from what quarter an hypothesis may come to him: he may have acquired it by fair means or by foul; passion may have whispered or accident suggested it; but if the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it, that is what he means by its being true. (James 1897/1979, 24)

Strikingly, for James empiricists do *not* find either the meaning or justification of every idea in past experience. He views empiricism as an attitude central the sciences (James 1897/1979, 21), one that says that we can attain truths by reasoning hypothetically, by postulating new ideas and then checking how well they conform to *future* experience. Like scientific hypotheses, our everyday ideas do not gain legitimacy from their source, according to Jamesian empiricism—they get their legitimacy from where and how well they lead.⁵

⁵ An account from cognitive science that draws on James's forward-looking empiricism about representation is (Buckner Forthcoming). My own reading of James in this paper is stimulated by Buckner's account, with which I am broadly sympathetic.

To be sure, in the above passage James is making an epistemological rather than a semantic point. But statements of his similarly forward-looking semantic commitments are plentiful. For example:

the same thought may be clad in different words; but if the different words suggest no different conduct, they are mere outer accretions, and have no part in the thought's meaning. If, however, they determine conduct differently, they are essential elements of the significance. "Please open the door," and "*Veillez ouvrir la porte*," in French, mean just the same thing; but "D—n you, open the door," although in English, *means* something very different. Thus to develop a thought's meaning we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance. (James 1898/1975, 259)

This is one of James's early statements of the so-called pragmatic maxim.⁶ As he understands it, the maxim says that two thoughts are different if and only if they are "fitted" to produce different "conduct." James attributes his awareness of this principle to an article by his friend Charles Sanders Peirce (Peirce 1878). But he had also independently developed a sophisticated psychological account of just *how* thoughts produce conduct—quasi-mechanically—in his *Principles of Psychology* (James 1890/1981). I will examine the "how" of it, below. First we should ask this question: in virtue of *what* do two sequences of bodily motion constitute different "conduct"?

The answer is that like a bullet, conduct has a *target*, and so James individuates conduct on the basis of the goal to which it is directed. We can see this in another classic illustration of his forward-looking account of representation:

Suppose me to be sitting here in my library at Cambridge, at ten minutes' walk from 'Memorial Hall,' and to be thinking truly of the latter object. My mind may have before it only the name, or it may have a clear image, or it may have a very dim image

⁶ For a helpful discussion of James's distinctive take on this maxim, see (Jackman 2022).

of the hall, but such an intrinsic difference in the image makes no difference in its cognitive function. Certain *extrinsic* phenomena, special experiences of conjunction, are what impart to the image, be it what it may, its knowing office.

For instance, if you ask me what hall I mean by my image, and I can tell you nothing; or if I fail to point or lead you towards the Harvard Delta; or if, being led by you, I am uncertain whether the Hall I see be what I had in mind or not; you would rightly deny that I had ‘meant’ that particular hall at all, even tho my mental image might to some degree have resembled it. The resemblance would count in that case as coincidental merely, for all sorts of things of a kind resemble one another in this world without being held for that reason to take cognizance of one another.

On the other hand, if I can lead you to the hall, and tell you of its history and present uses; if in its presence I feel my idea, however imperfect it may have been, to have led hither and to be now *terminated*; if the associates of the image and of the felt hall run parallel, so that each term of the one context corresponds serially, as I walk, with an answering term of the other; why then my soul was prophetic, and my idea must be, and by common consent would be, called cognizant of reality.

That percept was what I *meant*, for into it my idea has passed by conjunctive experiences of sameness and fulfilled intention. Nowhere is there jar, but every later moment continues and corroborates an earlier one. (MT 1904, 62 – 63, italics original, underline added)

Notice that James presents the Memorial Hall example as illustrating an instance of “knowing,” or of being “cognizant of a reality.” And he seems to use these two phrases as roughly synonymous with “thinking truly,” so that the example in effect concerns both what the thought of Memorial Hall “meant” (that’s the “thinking” part) and whether or not *what* was meant was accurate (that’s the “truly” part). It is not entirely clear how to disambiguate the semantic and epistemic considerations at play here, but James apparently sees meaning (and truth) as grounded in a thought’s capacity to help the agent *navigate to* and *talk about* an object in ways that

“fulfill” an “intention,” and to do so in ways that the agent’s peers would accept. The intention specifies, in effect, a goal. When I am thinking of memorial hall, I am thinking of it as a target of some purposive action sequence, for James. For example, I might be thinking of it as the target of a physical action sequence, perhaps as a place I would like to go sit and work on campus. Or it might be the target of an intellectual sequence, perhaps as a focus of discussion on the history of department locations at Harvard. We can distill James’s view this way. A thought successfully represents, he thinks, just in case the thought would aid in fulfilling the intended action sequence through the actual, contingent environment (physical or intellectual) in a manner that would satisfy not only me but my rational peers.

Notice from this passage that James is an externalist about mental representation in that what a thought means is not purely contained in the thought itself, but depends on the environment in which the thought is embedded. So, on offer is a special kind of causal theory, where ideas represent in virtue of aiding in achieving a goal in the actual, contingent environment.

One standard problem traditional causal theories of representation (i.e., object-generation theories) have faced is how *misrepresentation* is possible.⁷ My idea of water may be triggered both by real water and by mirages, but we don’t want to say that my idea of water means either water *or* mirages. So the backwards causal theorist needs a way to disambiguate representation-conferring from accidental causes.

Though James’s causal account is forward-looking, he might be thought to face a similar problem, one that Wittgenstein once raised against Bertrand Russell (in a related context). Suppose we understand an object that a mental representation picks out as whatever would terminate my navigation- or intervention-action. A punch in the stomach (Wittgenstein notes)

⁷ Fodor calls this the “disjunction problem” (Fodor 1987, 101 – 02). For a discussion, see (Cummins 1989, 40, 57). Buckner also discusses ways in which a James-style, forward-looking account can skirt the disjunction problem in (Buckner Forthcoming).

might terminate my navigation just as much as actually finding Memorial Hall.⁸ How can a forward-looking account avoid this problem?

James has theoretical resources, found in his psychological work on will, for addressing this problem. A brief overview of these resources should give readers a sense of how James might account for misrepresentation, and also how distinctively voluntaristic James's general approach to mental representation is.

On the view sketched above, an idea is about Memorial Hall just in case it supports an intentional *action* of a certain kind—namely, the intentional navigation to or intervention with the relevant object. At their most fundamental level, actions involve two components, for James. First, the agent hatches a goal for herself. In the paradigmatic case, hatching a goal means framing what he calls an “anticipatory image”—an idea of what it will have felt like to make some bodily movement (James 1890/1981, 1111 – 12).⁹ For example, an archer might hatch the goal of shooting an arrow at a target by thinking of what it will have felt like to have performed the relevant motions. This feeling-anticipation is essentially a goal representation (and different sense modalities can be involved in such representations). I submit that in the more philosophical passages quoted above where James is discussing an “intention” I seek to “fulfill,” as when I intend to navigate to Memorial Hall, the “intentions” are just goal representations in the sense articulated in his earlier psychological work.

The second component of intentional action—in the paradigmatic case of physical actions—is a sequence of muscular contractions that are naturally (as an evolutionary-physiological matter; see Klein Forthcoming) caused by the conscious awareness of the goal representation. For example, when I think of raising my hand, I am thinking of what it will feel like to perform this action; and James argues that this thought will naturally tend to trigger the

⁸ Though he always rejected the pragmatist theory of truth, by the 1921 *Analysis of Mind*, Russell would adopt something like James's philosophy of “pure experience” (which Russell called “neutral monism”). Wittgenstein had objected to Russell's neutral-monist account of the content of a desire: “if I wanted to eat an apple and someone punches me in the stomach so that I lose my appetite, then the punch was the thing I originally wanted.” Russell himself had made a similar objection to James's account of representation, years earlier; for a discussion, and for the Wittgenstein quotation, see (Griffin 2015, 11).

⁹ The term more frequently used in psychology today is “response image.”

arm-raising motion, provided no rival thoughts occur (such as the thought that I am at an auction and do not want to place a bid). This, in a small nutshell, is James's ideo-motor theory of action.¹⁰

Now suppose I have an idea of the coffee cup on my desk. My idea is about the coffee cup in virtue of affording me aid in performing a relevant goal-directed action (perhaps grabbing the cup and taking a swig). I need not actually perform the action for my idea to represent the cup—what matters is that the cup *affords* help in performing the action *were* I to perform it (James 1909/1978, 63). Thus, not just any old (actual or possible) interaction with an object will establish reference—*my interaction must be in accord with my goal representation*.

In the paradigmatic case—representation of external objects¹¹—the world about which I am thinking is in effect populated by loci of practical activities. The cup I am thinking about is the thing from which I can sip my coffee, and the table is the place I can rest the receptacle.¹² I call this approach “voluntaristic” because goal representations are often endogenously generated. *I* decide what business I have to transact with the coffee cup, and thus the very content of mental representations depends in part on my own subjective interests.

The Jamesean solution to the problem of misrepresentation can quickly be illustrated by contrasting the case of my veridical idea of the cup on my desk with my hallucinatory idea of water in the desert. In the latter case, my idea *misrepresents* because, when I try to transact my business with the mirage, my aim (slaking my thirst) is thwarted. This explains the phrase I underlined in the Memorial Hall passage, above—the notion that reference involves an actual or possible “fulfilled intention.”

¹⁰ James's ideo-motor theory of action has a fascinating history, and it has come in for a revival in contemporary cognitive science; see (Stock and Stock 2004, Yun Kyoung Shin 2010). James introduces the term “ideo-motor action” at (PP 1890, 1130).

¹¹ Since James often treats the representation of external, physical objects as paradigmatic, readers may wonder whether and how such an account can be extended to more abstract ideas such as those at play in mathematics or logic. For an ingenious solution to this problem on James's behalf, see (Jackman 2020).

¹² The resemblance to Gibson's later ecological psychology is unlikely to be an accident—for James's influence on Gibson (primarily via James's student E. B. Holt), see (Heft 2001, 2002).

Finally, one should emphasize that there is a social dimension to reference, as James conceives it. While I may be the most important agent who gets to decide what business I might *legitimately* have with a represented object, I am not the *only* agent who has a say, on James's view. Refer again to the Memorial Hall passage—one requirement of having a thought that successfully refers, in his example, is that I can converse coherently *with others* about this or that aspect of the Hall (“if *you* ask me what hall I mean...”). Thus if I am so severely dehydrated that I hallucinate a feeling of satisfaction when imbibing the imaginary water in the desert, James can deny that I have had an idea of water on grounds that onlooking “critics”¹³ would not agree.¹⁴

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¹³ James gave an ineliminable, theoretical role to an idealized “critic” even in his earliest articulation of this forward-looking account of mental representation; see (James 1909/1978, 16).

¹⁴ For helpful critical feedback on an early draft of this paper, I thank Henry Jackman.

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