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**DAVID MARR**

**Pragmatism  
Before Poirier**

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**The Evergreen State College  
Olympia, Washington  
U. S. A.**

## Pragmatism Before Poirier

David Marr  
The Evergreen State College

If American pragmatism has anything to offer literary and cultural studies today, what might it be? Possible sources of answers to this ambiguous question surely include the exemplary work of the literary and cultural critic Richard Poirier. Poirier has been investigating the contributions of pragmatism to American literary and cultural studies for more than thirty years, beginning with *A World Elsewhere* (1966) and *The Performing Self* (1971) and, most recently and most explicitly, in *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (1987) and *Poetry and Pragmatism* (1992).<sup>1</sup> To Poirier pragmatism means Emersonian pragmatism, a (so far) self-renewing tradition of literary and philosophical achievement that runs from the master, Ralph Waldo Emerson, to Thoreau, Dickinson, William James, Robert Frost, Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens, to name only those philosophers and poets on whom Poirier dwells in his two recent books; there are others in addition. All in this line practice versions of what Poirier calls "linguistic skepticism": "a liberating and creative suspicion as to the dependability of words and syntax, especially as it relates to matters of belief, including belief in the drift of one's own feelings and impressions."<sup>2</sup> "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," Frost teaches us. From that vague "Something," nothing nameable, let alone anything cognizable, comes the poem "Mending Wall" (*P & P*, 148-51). Linguistic skepticism is Poirier's intentionally vague term for the stance of readers and writers toward words and the world which brings about poetic events like this one.

Up close, which is how Poirier reads them, the poets and philosophers in this line habitually exploit the liberatory power that they believe comes from linguistic instability, the defining characteristic of language as they use it and write about it and, importantly, as they *hear* it. For Poirier devotes much attention, especially in *Poetry and Pragmatism*, the densest but most astute of his books, to the illusion of immediacy created by the sounds of words, to the primacy of the voice in literature. For Emersonian pragmatists, a poem is sounds. Tone and connotation are far more vital, in life as in literature, than the theoretician's meaning or meaning of meaning, whether fixed or floating. Experience--the writer's, the readers's--comes before theory in literary study as in baseball; the physicist's demonstration that the curve ball does not curve is baloney to any hitter. And as Poirier says, whether there will be a fist fight usually depends on the tone of voice of the son of a bitch who calls you a son of a bitch (*P & P*, 141-42).

Following Emerson and Whitman, both of whom held readers to strenuous standards of engagement with poems, Poirier teaches and writes out of an expectation that the reader has a lot of work to do. He offers as a useful starting point the thoroughly non-academic question that is always already being asked anyway by the interested reader in the act of reading: "What is it like to read this book?" (*P & P*, 182)<sup>3</sup> This question exemplifies linguistic skepticism in small just because each consequence of taking it seriously obviously is indeterminate *a priori*. Poirier grounds his question in Emerson's claim, in the essay "The Poet," that language is "the archives of history."<sup>4</sup> To say that language is "the archives of history," and, more important, to write or read poems or philosophy as though one believed it to be so, is to hear in our uses of words resonances with the past. Linguistic skepticism in

the modest sense of "What is it like to read this book?" rather quickly discloses its historicist aspect, however, simply because answers to this query shade over, at least in many acts of reading, into "What was it like to be alive *then* and *there*?" To be attuned to the linguistic resonances which are our inheritance--as distinguished from monumentalizing that inheritance, thereby making it fraudulent--is to read past texts as lived experience. The archives of history then open up through an ironical reciprocal relationship between past and present, "so [that] the hours should be instructed by the ages, and the ages explained by the hours," in Emerson's words.<sup>5</sup>

Dependable instability continuously remodeling itself as creative achievement may appear to be only another pretty air-castle of theory, but in fact beneath this premise are foundations that go down deep, indeed all the way down to the living matter of human neurophysiology. The salvific instability of words and the fuzziness of concepts originate in the organic instability of the human nervous system. Linguistic skepticism comes out of Poirier's reading of William James, to whom Poirier is indebted for the form of his main conception just as he is indebted to Emerson for what used to be called inspiration. The specifically Jamesian idea of the vague, the breakthrough reported by James in *The Principles of Psychology*, serves Poirier as an explicit philosophical pretext for linguistic skepticism. The vague itself, however, along with The Pragmatic Test, gives James some interesting trouble, echoes of which may be heard in Poirier's work. But before Poirier reaches the end of *Poetry and Pragmatism* he has rewritten James's Pragmatic Test as a practical application of the vague to literary study. In what follows I track down the vague and examine the trouble under two headings: The Vague Before Poirier and The Vague in Poirier.

## The Vague Before Poirier

Linguistic skepticism represents Poirier's transformation of the vague, the defining characteristic of the stream of thought or consciousness in James's philosophy of mind (*P & P*, ch. 3). The Jamesian vague originates as a property of matter known as plasticity: "the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once."<sup>6</sup> The exceptional plasticity of nervous tissue is what makes possible the reflex arc or nerve path. Electrical currents flow from the sensory nerves into the hemispherical cortex and, once in, flow out--traveling along existing paths or cutting new ones. Systems of reflex paths constitute in the living brain the growing network of "*concatenated* discharges in the nerve-centres." James calls such concatenated discharges *habits* (*Principles*, I:108 [my italics--D. M.]) "Nothing is easier than to imagine," he adds, "how, when a current once has traversed a path, it should traverse it more readily a second time," just as once an ankle is sprained it is all the easier to sprain the same ankle again. Human habits, whether in small neural networks or in large stretches of the cerebral cortex, are functional in that they enable human beings to use their "nervous and muscular energy" efficiently. By the grace of habit we do not have to think through each step once we have learned to walk. "A glance at the musical hieroglyphics, and the pianist's fingers have rippled through a cataract of notes" (*Principles*, I:114). Automatic behavior frees us.

It is habits, taken in this materialist sense, that make it possible for the human nervous system to overcome its own inherent weakness. The human nervous system is defective. The basal ganglia and the cord are stable in the sense that what they do is lock-

step, predictable, determinable, dependable. But the cerebral hemispheres are unstable, i. e., their "performances" are "indeterminate" and "unforeseeable" by comparison. This natural defect in the nervous system is paradoxically its great strength, for it alone makes possible human beings' successful adaptation to the environment. "This very vagueness," James says, referring to the indeterminateness of the higher brain functions, "constitutes their advantage." The higher functions, in particular consciousness, introduce "a *tendency* [in the human being] to do more things than he has ready-made arrangements for in his nerve-centres" (my italics-D. M.); habits help smooth the way by directing and concentrating conscious attention, thereby preventing its being frittered away. Viewed under the aspect of habit, consciousness reveals itself to be "*a selecting agency . . . choosing one out of several of the materials so presented to its notice, emphasizing and accentuating that and suppressing as far as possible all the rest*" (*Principles*, I:139).

Selectivity and felt interest thus give the human organism an evolutionary advantage by generating dynamic equilibrium, but in itself the advantage amounts to no more than a "happy-go-lucky, hit-or-miss affair"; any particular nervous equilibrium could "as likely" lead to "the crazy as the sane thing at any given moment." So here arises the first big problem James must solve if his philosophy of mind is going to hold together: Can consciousness encourage "*those* of its performances" which are good for the human being and inhibit those which are not?<sup>7</sup> If the answer is yes, James reasons, then truly consciousness may be said to bear a teleological function. Standing in the way of a useful test of this hypothesis are bogus styles of "darwinizing," which speak in oxymorons such as "blind" or "purposeless struggle." Any talk of either "useful" or "hurtful" reactions on the

part of the organism, James observes, only betrays the presence of a "superadded commenting intelligence" interested in the outcome. Considered physiologically, survival is only "an hypothesis made by an onlooker about the future," not an inherent feature of "the organs themselves," of organisms or of nature generally (*Principles*, I:141). But James is interested not in the idea of survival but in the possibility that teleological function can be demonstrated empirically. So he proceeds with his own hunch, citing well established experimental data that show consciousness to be "only intense when nerve processes are hesitant," whereas "In rapid, automatic, habitual action it sinks to a minimum" (*Principles*, I:142). He concludes that only on the hypothesis that consciousness "have the teleological function we suppose" are these data explicable.<sup>8</sup>

James's metaphor of "The Stream of Thought" properly stresses the continuity or seamlessness of human subjectivity. The personal character of subjectivity is often noted in commentaries on James: "It seems as if," he wrote, "the elementary psychic fact were not *thought* or *this thought* or *that thought*, but *my thought*, every thought being *owned*" (*Principles*, I:226). But because the personal character of consciousness is merely idiosyncratic by definition, it only weakly illuminates the vague. By contrast, the process character of consciousness brightly illuminates the vague precisely, in part, because it picks out nothing idiosyncratic. To say that thought has a process character is to say that thought is a continuum. Like other continua--e. g., motion and space--thought is not divisible into parts. It therefore would not follow that, if thought be a continuum, in thinking of a distinct image of a fixed object (e. g. the face of Ken Starr) my *thought* of it is fixed and definite. Thought and thoughts are not fixed but fluid. This premise represents James's radical



departure from all previous authority on the topic, which held various versions of the view that "the only possible materials of consciousness are images of a perfectly definite nature" (*Principles*, I:254). It is futile, James writes, to "seize . . . a spinning top to catch its motion," or to try "to turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks" (*Principles*, I:244).<sup>9</sup> All such efforts, when applied to continua, only yield the infinite regress of the Achilles paradox.

Only on the hypothesis that thought has a process character can James account for relations, which must be accounted for given that consciousness "does not appear to itself chopped up in bits" (*Principles*, I:239).

A silence may be broken by a thunder-clap, and we may be so stunned and confused for a moment by the shock as to give no instant account to ourselves of what has happened. But that very confusion is a mental state that passes us straight over from the silence to the sound. The transition from the thought of one object and the thought of another is no more a break in the *thought* than a joint in the bamboo is a break in the wood. It is a part of the *consciousness* as much as the joint is a part of the bamboo (*Principles*, I:240).

Moreover, though continuous, consciousness also is ever changing, and the changes it exhibits are rhythmic; subjectivity resembles "a bird's life . . .[,] made of an alteration of flights and perchings" (*Principles*, I:243). The rhythm of consciousness finds expression in the "rhythm of language . . . , where"

every thought is expressed in a sentence, and every sentence closed by a period. The resting-places are usually occupied by sensorial imaginations of some sort, whose

peculiarity is that they can be held before the mind for an indefinite time, and contemplated without changing; the places of flight are filled with thoughts of relations, static or dynamic, that for the most part obtain between the matters contemplated in the periods of comparative rest.

*Let us call the resting-places the "substantive parts," and the places of flight the "transitive parts," of the stream of thought.* It then appears that the main end of our thinking is at all times the attainment of some other substantive part than the one from which we have just been dislodged. And we may say that the main use of the transitive parts is to lead us from one substantive conclusion to another (*Principles*, I:243).

The difficulty, of course, consists in retrospectively giving the "transitive parts" their due, so demanding, by comparison, are the "substantive parts" on our attention. We tend to presume that the "transitive parts" function only as means of getting to the "substantive parts," the conclusion. James rejects this means-ends calculus as a violation of the process character of thought, for if we were to relegate the "transitive parts" to the status of mere means, there could be no defense against chopping consciousness into bits. The old-time Associationist psychology would then be back in business, and the Intellectualists in the field would likewise have new work to do gluing the bits together to fashion transcendental signifieds and signifiers. James the empiricist believes the evidence from within consciousness does not support a return to these old ways. Between the silence and the thunder there is a difference between two sensory experiences but not a "break in the mind" (*Principles*, I:244).

"Transitive parts" are essential relations; therefore "we ought to say a feeling of *and*, a

feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*" (*Principles*, I:245-46).

James calls all such states of the mind "Feelings of Tendency," or "the vague" for short. The Jamesian vague is not only "an inarticulate feeling" (*Principles*, I:252); it is a feeling of inarticulateness. James welcomes such feelings into the home of introspective psychology, from which they have been barred *a priori* up to now. He welcomes "namelessness" (*Principles*, I:251), along with "*psychic overtone[s], suffusion, . . . fringe*" (*Principles*, I:258). "[L]arge tracts of human speech" lack Cartesian clarity and distinctness and "are nothing but *signs of direction* in thought, of which direction we nevertheless have an acutely discriminative sense, though no definite sensorial image plays any part in it whatsoever" (*Principles*, I:252-53). Though only "halting-places" in thought are "*intrinsically* important," "[t]hroughout the rest of the stream, the feelings of relation are everything, and the terms related almost naught" (*Principles*, I:269).<sup>10</sup>

The vague analyzed by James in *The Principles of Psychology*, his first masterpiece, reappears in his second, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, published twelve years later in 1902. In *The Varieties* James reports on the recent discovery by psychologists, himself included, of the "the field of consciousness," the new view that he rightly says was rapidly supplanting the old vision of the mind as a repository of sensations and ideas faithfully dedicated only to cognition. In *Pragmatism*, published five years later in 1907, the vague reappears again, this time as a source of trouble for James. I will conclude my remarks about the vague before Poirier by briefly reconsidering the description of The Pragmatic

Method, which James offers, as everyone knows, as the Pragmatic Movement's cure-all for the chronic ills of philosophy.

Every reader of *Pragmatism* will recall the story James tells of the "ferocious metaphysical dispute" over the respective movements of the man and the squirrel. There was a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree-trunk; while over against the tree's opposite side a human being was imagined to stand. This human witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving rapidly round the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps the tree between himself and the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught. The resultant metaphysical problem now is this: *Does the man go round the squirrel or not?*<sup>12</sup>

James offers the pragmatic resolution of this dispute: Everything turns on what the respective parties "*practically mean* by 'going round'." Clarify terms, and if the clarification shows the disputants that their dispute had been about nothing, then Poof! So far, so good.

What interests me is how James manages to muck up his exposition of the principle that the example of the man and the squirrel--and other examples, non-trivial ones, such as the One and Many--is meant to illustrate. What interests me is the form and content of the codification known as The Pragmatic Method. The mucking up is not, to be sure, earthshaking, only annoying. Here is James on The Pragmatic Method:

The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. Is the world one or many?--fated or free?--material or spiritual?--here are notions either of which may or may not hold good of the

world; and disputes over such notions are unending. The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle (*Pragmatism*, 28).

All James has to do to make this exposition of The Pragmatic Method hold up is to erase the clause that says "the alternatives mean practically the same thing." But he leaves it in, and repeats the sense of it later. The consequence is mildly unfortunate.

James wants us to believe that the absence of any practical difference to anyone between notion A's being true and rival notion B's being true shows that notion A and notion B are the same notion. What *is* that notion? If I say the world is One and you say it is Many, and if analysis discloses no practical difference to anyone between taking my view as true and taking your view as true, then my view and your view are really the same view, according to James. What *is* this same view, this sameness of meaning such that the dispute in which you and I had been engaged before it was analyzed by applying The Pragmatic Method to it--the pre-analytic dispute, as it were--is now "idle"? I want to see it in writing.

When a dispute gets resolved after the manner of the one about the squirrel and the man, or, more generally, in accord with James's own exposition of The Pragmatic Method minus the offending clause at the end, it is revealed to have been chimerical. The disputants *believed* they were at loggerheads, but they find they were wrong. The upshot is that the *dispute is revealed to have been empty, not that a new, commonly held meaning emerges*. It is pointless to baptize the original rival notions as "the same notion." There simply is no

such notion. Again, what is the same thing that rival notions mean? What *could* it be?

When James put an end to the titanic struggle over the squirrel and the man he did so simply by showing the disputants that they had been all het up over nothing--specifically the nothing that the two sides had put into words. No "same thing that they meant" ever showed up. No distinction without a difference is the watchword of pragmatism. No sameness with a distinction might be a corollary.

When James turns next to the example of Ostwald, the Leipzig chemist whom he admires for his pragmatism, he shows Ostwald taking better care of the language needed to formulate The Pragmatic Method than he, James, does. Ostwald says that when no difference in the world can be traced to this versus that alternative account of the same phenomenon, then the very idea of *alternative* in such an instance is senseless (*Pragmatism*, 29). Billed as rivals, such alternatives disclose no rivalry. But James has to put it this way: "That is, the rival views mean practically the same thing, and meaning, other than practical, there is for us none" (*Pragmatism*, 29) No, they do not mean the same thing. If they do, what is it? James never answers this question.

### The Vague in Poirier

Poirier ignores James's painstaking derivation of the vague from its lowly origins in neurophysiology, taking from James only the final formulation of the vague and refashioning it as a version of the unfinished loose aesthetic he calls linguistic skepticism. The "reinstatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life"--James's avowed purpose

in *The Principles*--becomes, in Poirier's hands, the reinstatement of tone, connotation, voice in literary study, along with an implied challenge to what Charles Newman calls the "new Germany of theory," contemporary American academia. This aesthetic, Poirier holds, is grounded in the natural deconstructive tendencies in language. Between everyday language and literary language Poirier finds differences in degree, not in kind--in that way defining a difference in kind and not in degree on this question between himself and such big-time deconstructors as Paul de Man. "Figuration, rhythm, rhyme and meter," all sources of vagueness in poetry, also generate useful vagueness in everyday language (*P & P*, 140). Poirier believes literary study would probably be better off if it rid itself of "the illusion that language is meant to clean up the messes of life," and rid itself, too, of the correlative illusion that the failure of language to clean things up justifies a massive theoretical therapy. Instead, "we ought to be grateful to language . . . for making life messier than ever, more blurred than we pretend we want it to be, but also therefore more malleable" (*P & P*, 30). *The Gettysburg Address* cleaned up nothing; the gestures of its language defer to the certainty of grief and loss.<sup>13</sup>

Writers and readers in the line of Emersonian pragmatism "are at once grateful to the inheritance of language and suspicious of it, congenitally uncertain as to the meaning of words and correspondingly attentive to nuance. Theirs is a criticism persuaded always of the instability of any formation of language" (*P & P*, 178). This style of criticism gathers philosophical authority from James's discovery that the substantive parts of the stream of thought are continuously being eroded in the transitive flow, as the rhythms of language and speech body forth the rhythms of consciousness. Certainty is an illusion continuously being

wrecked by linguistic instability. This power to destroy is discriminable through study of its consequences, viz. the tropic history of Emersonian pragmatism. But a study of James's *Principles* reminds us of the close proximity of this history of literary and philosophical achievement to the frailty, the profound defect, within the central nervous system. If no defect, then no vague and no history--Emersonian pragmatist or any other. Along with the vague, Poirier would like to see literature itself reinstated in literary study: he would like to get back some of the land ceded to the Glendowers of theory (*P & P*, 192). He would like a renewal of *literature*. Amen to that. Surely he would also welcome, if for different reasons, a reversal of what Newman calls the "temporary abandonment of traditional American aesthetic pragmatism," a central feature of the so-called post-modern aura. A break in that hyped-up weather might also allow us to see that meaning in art and life never was endlessly deferred but rather always was historically referred or contextualized. We might then be able to stop "wonder[ing] how our common sense was beaten out of us."<sup>14</sup>

Poirier uses the idea of the vague itself as an alibi for James's own occasional vagueness and seeks to dignify James's "blurring and vagueness" as evidence that Jamesian pragmatism amounts to a poetic theory that offers "a prescription and a promise only for the writing of poetry and prose." I do not agree. It is true but not especially interesting in itself that in the writings of James are to be found "dizzying metaphors." More interesting, in my view, is the trouble James gets into using *literal* language, especially at those times when he makes a grab for formula at the expense of his consistently fresh and instructive concrete examples. These are rarely blurred or vague in James, thankfully. James is best remembered, in my view, for his mostly faithful adherence to his first intuition as an



empiricist, namely, his belief that experience comes before reasoning both in the order of value and in the order of his own rhetoric. Nothing is gained by saying that at those times when he lapsed, he turned into a literary theorist. Similarly, though Poirier rebuts the ignorant charge that pragmatism amounts to a philosophy of crude practicality and the cash nexus, he strains needlessly when he says that Jamesian pragmatism has little to do with practicality. It has a good deal to do with practicality. Pragmatism is nothing if not a philosophy of experience, which is exactly what James always meant by practicality. Experience is the recurring theme throughout James's scientific and philosophical writings and, I should add, the strongest link to both Emerson and Dewey.

I will close with Poirier at what I take to be his best: viz., in his troping of James's Pragmatic Method. When Poirier concludes his book *Poetry and Pragmatism* with a chapter on his work as a teacher called "Reading Pragmatically: *The Example of Hum 6*," what he is doing, I believe, is in effect rewriting James's Pragmatic Method as a heuristics for reading well. Reading what is there in front of us will get us as close as we can get via literature to how it is in the world. Forget subversiveness. Look and listen. Poirier offers no formula, certainly no how-to, no theory worthy of the name in his account of what it was like to teach Hum 6 at Harvard in the 50s, what it was like to have a part in training students to think by training them to pay attention to the actions of words. "Philosophy lives in words," James wrote in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, "but truth and fact well up into our lives in ways that exceed verbal formulation"<sup>15</sup> Like his teaching, Poirier's literary and cultural criticism brilliantly develops and prolongs the dis-ease identified here by James. What James seems to miss Poirier retrieves: viz., that the welling up of truth and fact in our lives would

remain a voiceless welling up in literature no less than in our lives outside it if skepticism about language and logic were not habitually checked against experience. The willing suspension of disbelief, after all, is not like fate but is instead a decision that the reader makes and sustains. James, with his Pragmatic Method, tried to make uses of words answer to experience, thereby banishing phony disputes, but the rhetoric of his formula pinches. Poirier is looser from the start and consequently better at making experience, including above all the reader's experience, answer to language when he goes over the head of James and back to Emerson, not to lean on authority but in search of a heuristics of reading. What he comes up with, of course, are his own words, not Emerson's: Reading, Poirier says, should be "a test of your adequacies and mine" (*P & P*, 8).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* (London: Oxford UP, 1966); *The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford UP, 1971); *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987); *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1992).

<sup>2</sup>*Poetry and Pragmatism*, p. 5. Subsequent references to this book appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>3</sup>Poirier's question is thoroughly non-academic, despite its career among students and professors, simply because it arises from ordinary and untutored experiences of readers reading, not from what Charles Newman aptly characterizes as "the longest, ongoing pedagogic literary conversation amongst the largest number of people, in the history of mankind." Referring to the American academic literary scene from the 1960s to the mid-1980s, Newman writes: "No constraints of space, time, deadline or standards can be said to have obtruded upon this process, and we can hardly claim that it has produced an increase of

'fearless and disinterested discussion' [presumably an allusion to Virginia Woolf]. This is one failure that cannot be laid at the door of commercialism or mass culture. What we have witnessed, epitomized by this never ending ecumenical conversation for credit, is the double irony of an institutionalized respect for literature which disguises a diminished interest, except as transactional therapy and careerist certification. The social context and unspoken contracts of literary discourse have been modified to an extent that Woolf could not imagine; these terms are now moot" (Charles Newman, *The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern UP, 1985), pp. 114-15). In the thirteen years since Newman wrote these words the institutionalized respect for literature appears to have diminished, whereas the prestige of many kinds of theory in the human sciences has become so inflated as to make Newman's critique seem quaint. As theory rises, professorial interest in literature declines.

<sup>4</sup>*Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), p. 457.

<sup>5</sup>"History," in *Essays and Lectures*, p. 237.

<sup>6</sup>William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (n. p.: Dover, 1950; authorized, unabridged edition), I:105. Subsequent references to this work appear in parentheses in the text. James uses the terms "consciousness," "thought," and "subjective life" interchangeably. See *The Principles*, I:224 and 239.

<sup>7</sup>In other words, "*Can consciousness increase its efficiency by loading its dice?*" (*Principles*, I:140). A century later, Ian Hacking sees the philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce, James's friend, as predicated on the existence of "absolute chance in the universe." Peirce thought history showed that "blind Chance stabilizes into approximate Law." See Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 1990), p. 215. Like Peirce, James believed that chance phenomena (specifically the phenomena of human subjectivity), though indeed absolute, nevertheless exhibit telos when examined functionally.

<sup>8</sup>Moreover, data having to do with "the causal efficacy of pleasures and pains" support the same conclusion, viz., that "*pleasures are generally associated with beneficial, pains with detrimental, experiences*" (*Principles*, I:143). Lest we fail to appreciate the significance of this seemingly obvious remark, we should remember that in making it James was refuting the standard "darwinian" account advanced by Herbert Spencer that natural selection, rather than a "pre-established harmony" between organism and environment, is responsible for killing off any creature "to whom the fundamentally noxious experience"--say, of "suffocation, privation of food, drink and sleep . . . [,] wounds, burns, the effects of poison," and so forth--seemed enjoyable. James rejects this account. He believes pleasures and pains are efficacious, not merely the coincidental outcomes of the action of natural selection.

The human nervous system, too complicated to regulate itself, is fortunately the physiological site of consciousness: that function of supplying exactly the missing regulation. James's general conclusion clarifies the apparent contradiction here:

*A priori* analysis of both brain-action and conscious action shows us that if the latter were efficacious it could, by its selective emphasis, make amends for the indeterminateness of the former; whilst the study *a posteriori* of the distribution of consciousness [as illustrated in the foregoing discussion of pleasures and pains] shows it to be exactly such as we might expect in an organ [sic] added for the sake of steering a nervous system grown too complex to regulate itself (*Principles*, I:144).

Two brief remarks. One, James does not purport to show in *The Principles of Psychology* that the brain and the mind are one. He seems content to await future discoveries in neurophysiology, which today shares a common research program with cognitive studies. Second, James is consistent throughout *The Principles* in treating consciousness as a hypothesis to be applied abductively. He sometimes calls it an "organ," often a "function," but always makes plain that some nonentity there is which purposely regulates a nervous system "grown too complex to regulate itself."

"The "re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life" represents the *sine qua non* of James's analysis of consciousness, which in turn stands as the ruling principle of continuity enumerated among the many other principles of psychology. "The traditional psychology," James notes, "talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartpotsful, barrelsful, and other moulded forms of water. Even were the pails and the pots actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would continue to flow. It is just this free water of consciousness that psychologists resolutely overlook. Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water

that flows around it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead" (*Principles*, I:255).

<sup>10</sup>James's long introductory illustration of the vague is designed to show us clearly what the vague is, to suggest the poverty of psychological nomenclature and indirectly to dignify imprecision in language and speech.

Suppose [he begins] we try to recall a forgotten name. The state of our consciousness is peculiar. There is a gap therein; but no mere gap. It is a gap that is intensely active. A sort of wraith of the name is in it, beckoning us in a given direction, making us at moments tingle with the sense of our closeness, and then letting us sink back without the longed-for term. If wrong names are proposed to us, this singularly definite gap acts immediately so as to negate them. They do not fit into its mould. And the gap of one word does not feel like the gap of another, all empty of content as both might seem necessarily to be when described as gaps. When I vainly try to recall the name of Spalding, my consciousness is far removed from what it is when I vainly try to recall the name of Bowles.

James pauses here to allow "some [hypothetical] ingenious persons" to ask,

"How *can* the two consciousnesses be different when the terms which might make them different are not there? All that is there, so long as the effort to recall is vain, is the bare effort itself. How should that differ in the two cases? You are making it seem to differ by prematurely filling it out with the different names, although these, by the hypothesis, have not yet come. Stick to the two efforts as they are, without

naming them after facts not yet existent, and you'll be quite unable to designate any point in which they differ."

To this seemingly sturdy objection, James replies,

Designate, truly enough. We can only designate the difference by borrowing the names of objects not yet in the mind. Which is to say that our psychological vocabulary is wholly inadequate to name the differences that exist, even such strong differences as these. There are innumerable consciousnesses of emptiness, no one of which taken in itself has a name, but all different from each other. The ordinary way is to assume that they are all emptinesses of consciousness, and so the same state. But the feeling of absence is *toto coelo* other than the absence of a feeling. It is an intense feeling. The rhythm of a lost word may be there without a sound to clothe it; or the evanescent sense of something which is the initial vowel or consonant may mock us fitfully, without growing more distinct. Every one must know the tantalizing effect of the blank rhythm of some forgotten verse, restlessly dancing in one's mind, striving to be filled out with words (*Principles*, I:251-52).

James's concrete illustrations of the vague are compelling, in my view, but the logic on which he depends in his exposition of it escapes me. Consider again his example of trying to recall a forgotten name. James says that in the experience of trying to remember the name, a gap appears in our consciousness which is tailor-made for the forgotten name, Spalding. Mention of some other name--Bowles--leaves the Spalding gap empty as ever. But James says we now have two gaps, one unfilled by Spalding and the other filled by Bowles. James claims these are different consciousnesses. His hypothetical critic objects. James



surprisingly agrees, or says he agrees, with the critic's point that we can only designate the difference between the two feelings by illegitimately importing into the mind names not originally allowed by the hypothesis. But James is wrong to agree here; either he does not understand the objection or he does not understand his own hypothesis. The critic is right: James should not be allowed to borrow names. James then surprisingly agrees to this point as well and says that the fault lies with our impoverished psychological vocabulary, specifically the absence of terms with which to designate existing differences in consciousness. This reasoning, however, simply begs the question. James assumes the existence of differences in consciousness which he is required to prove. Next, James tries to salvage his argument by saying that the feeling of absence is entirely different from the absence of feeling. This is no doubt true but irrelevant. James concludes with another of his altogether compelling illustrations of the vague. I conclude that James's illustrations make this part of his case for the vague much better than his reasoning does.

<sup>11</sup>William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature*, ed. Martin E. Marty (New York: Penguin Books, 1982 [1902]), pp. 231-33.

<sup>12</sup>*Pragmatism: A New Name For Some Old Ways of Thinking and The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to "Pragmatism"*, ed. A. J. Ayer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1975 [1907]), p. 27. Subsequent references to this volume appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>13</sup>Here I paraphrase and adapt, with an allusion to the criticism of R. P. Blackmur, a remark of J. Robert Oppenheimer's on style:

"The problem of doing justice to the implicit, the imponderable, and the unknown is of course not unique to politics. It is always with us in science, and it is with us in the most trivial of personal affairs, and it is one of the great problems of writing and of all forms of art. The means by which it is solved is sometimes called style. It is style which complements affirmation with limitation and with humility; it is style which makes it possible to act effectively, but not absolutely; it is style which, in the domain of foreign policy, enables us to find a harmony between the pursuit of ends essential to us and the regard for the views, the sensibilities, the aspirations of those to whom the problem may appear in another light; it is style which is the deference that action pays to uncertainty; it is above all style through which power defers to reason." This passage is from a 1948 speech titled "The Open Mind," excerpted in *The Limits of Language*, ed. Walker Gibson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), pp. 50-51, the source I have used. See also R. P. Blackmur, *Language as Gesture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952).

<sup>14</sup>Newman, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup>*Varieties*, p. 456.