Pragmatism

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XV*—PRAGMATISM

by Hilary Putnam

Pragmatism is a very large subject. My aim in this essay is not a survey, and certainly not an over-all evaluation of the movement's insights and errors. Instead, I want to examine those insights and errors with respect to just one issue—an issue which was of central importance to the pragmatists, but by no means only to the pragmatists: verificationism.

I

The pragmatist form of verificationism and how it differed from the positivist form. Although textbooks tend to treat pragmatism primarily as a theory of truth (and to identify it with the theory that the true is what is satisfying in the long-run to believe, a theory that not one of the classical pragmatist actually held[1]), it is important to remember that the principle that the classical pragmatists actually regarded as basic was Peirce's so-called 'pragmatic maxim' and that the theories of truth that Peirce and James advanced were regarded by them simply as applications of this maxim. Here is the maxim as stated by Peirce himself:

> Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearing, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.[2]

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1 The pragmatist who is supposed to have held this theory most explicitly is, of course, William James. For an account of the extremely complicated view that James actually had, see my 'James' Theory of Truth' forthcoming in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam.

2 §402 of 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear', in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, vol. 5 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960). Further references to this edition will have the by-now-standard form [volume number: paragraph number].

In the paragraph that precedes the statement of the pragmatic maxim [5:401], Peirce identifies these 'effects that might have practical bearing' with 'sensible effects'. And his application of the maxim in that paragraph (a criticism of the Catholic doctrine of the 'real presence' of Jesus' flesh and blood in the Eucharist) shows that he takes the pragmatic maxim to imply that there can be no *difference* in conceptions where there is no difference in the sensible effects that we suppose would obtain if one or the other of those conceptions were to be correct.

All this sounds very much like the logical positivists' 'verification principle', and, indeed, Carnap and Reichenbach assumed that that was more or less what the pragmatists had been trying to state. Yet there are a number of important differences between the ways in which the pragmatists understood their maxim and the ways in which the positivists understood the verification principle.

First of all, although it later moved away from its initial phenomenalism, logical positivism began with the idea that knowledge must be reduced to the knowledge (by the subject, conceived of as a single isolated individual) of sense data, which were initially conceived of as a 'given' incorrigible foundation. The movement was committed to the epistemological priority of the '*Eigenpsychisch*' and to 'methodological solipsism'.[3] (As Neurath remarked, it is hard to explain how 'methodological solipsism' differs from real solipsism.) Secondly, logical positivism began with the idea that to be meaningful an idea must be capable of *conclusive verification*. (In 1936–7 Carnap described how the positivists moved away from this position—and one sees from his account what a struggle that took!)[4]

Such ideas were anathema to the pragmatists from the beginning. As early (1868) as his 'Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man' [5:213–263], Peirce claimed that 'We have no Power of Introspection, but all knowledge of the internal world is derived by hypothetical reasoning from our knowledge of external

3 Rudolf Carnap, *Der Logische Aufbau der Welt* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1961); unaltered reprint of the 1928 text.

4 'Testability and Meaning', *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 3, 1936, 419–471 and Vol. 4, 1937, 1–40.

facts.'[5] Moreover, in every one of his writings, Peirce emphasises the importance of conceiving of the knowing subject as a *community*. But the difference from the positivists is even greater when we come to the issue of conclusive verification.

The positivists began with the idea that the unit of verification or falsification was the individual sentence. But from the very first, the pragmatists applied their pragmatic maxim to whole metaphysical systems and to ethical and religious beliefs as well as to scientific utterances and theories. Thus it is that William James could write, 'In every genuine metaphysical debate some practical issue, however conjectural and remote is involved.'[6] Thus it is that in his Cambridge Conference Lectures,[7] Peirce could propose a metaphysical system, many of whose assertions one could not hope to test in isolation, but with the intention that it should (and in fact it does) make predictions about the geometry of space and about other cosmological issues; the whole idea is that a naturalistic metaphysics can and should be confirmable in this way. In short, for the positivists, the whole idea was that the verification principle should *exclude* metaphysics (even if they were mistaken in thinking that their own ideas were simply scientific and not metaphysical), while for the pragmatists the idea was that it should *apply to* metaphysics, so that metaphysics might become a responsible and significant enterprise. There is all the difference in the world between these attitudes.

II

Why we should not accept verificationism. My sympathy with the pragmatists in this dispute does not mean that I accept verificationism, even in the very liberal sense in which pragmatism is committed to a kind of verificationism.[8] An example is the

5 This is Peirce's own summary [5:265] of the upshot of [5:243–249].

6 William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 52.

7 Charles Sanders Peirce, *Reasoning and the Logic of Things*, ed. K. Ketner with an introduction by myself (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

8 This represents a change in views which I held for a number of years; a fuller account of those views, and of my reasons for giving up *some* of them—in particular, verificationism —can be found in my 'Replies and Comments' in *Philosophical Topics* 20 (The Philosophy of Hilary Putnam), Feb. 1992, as well as in my 'THE DEWEY LECTURES 1994: Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses; an Inquiry into the Powers of the Human Mind',

following: consider the statement that a physical system of a certain kind (one whose existence is improbable, but not actually excluded by physical laws as far as we know)—say a system of 100 stars arranged at the vertices of a regular 100-gon, in a region of space otherwise free of stars—does not *happen* to exist anywhere in space-time. It could, of course, be the case that there is some presently unknown law which we do not know which prohibits such a formation; but this seems unlikely. Let us assume that this is not the case, and that there is a small finite probability of such a system existing in many different parts of the space-time universe. Especially if the whole space-time universe is finite, it could nevertheless be the case that such a system just doesn't *happen* to occur. It follows *from our present scientific world-picture itself* that there is no way we could know that this is the case if it is. After all, we cannot have any causal interaction of any kind with space-time regions outside our light cone (i.e., with regions such that a signal from those regions would have to travel faster than light to reach us). There is no point in space-time from which it is possible for beings who have to rely on physical signals for their information to survey all of space-time. We can *know* that there are some things which are possible (possible according to our scientific world-picture itself), but which are such that if they are the case, then we cannot know that they are the case. If the statement:

> (I) There do not happen to be any stars arranged as the vertices of a regular 100-gon (in a region of space otherwise free of stars).

is true, there is no way in which we could know that it is true. Yet to conclude from the fact that, in the context of our present scientific world-picture, (I) has no 'consequences that might conceivably have practical bearing' that are not consequences of:

> (II) No one will ever encounter any causal signals from a group of stars arranged as the vertices of a regular 100-gon (in a region of space otherwise free of stars).

—and that therefore (I) and (II) have the same meaning (or, better, that the conjunction of (I) with our present scientific world-picture

has the same meaning as the conjunction of (II) with our present scientific world-picture) would obviously be a mistake.

Peirce would almost certainly have responded that, if there are no stars arranged in this way, then this is something that we could and would find out eventually *if inquiry were indefinitely prolonged*. But this assumes (1) that future time is infinite—something we are no longer willing to postulate; and (2) that no information is ever irretrievably destroyed—something which also contradicts our present physical theories[9] (though not, of course, the physical theories of Peirce's time). Peirce's own pragmatic maxim rested on a scientific world-picture important parts of which we no longer accept. (In view of Peirce's desire that his metaphysics should itself be testable, the fact that he was making empirical assumptions should not have bothered Peirce—given his strong and repeatedly expressed commitment to fallibilism, he might have been delighted to find himself refuted in this way.)

This brings me to my real topic: why I believe that, notwithstanding the fact that we cannot say that conformity to any verification principle, including the pragmatists' 'pragmatic maxim', is even a necessary condition for meaningfulness (or even a necessary condition for sameness of meaning, for that matter), there is, nonetheless, an insight in pragmatism. This is a controversial issue, as well as a difficult one, and it will take the remainder of my time, not, indeed, to do it justice (that would take a much longer essay than this one), but to sketch the reasons for saying what I just said—that there is some insight in verificationism.

III

Why there is, nonetheless, an insight in verificationism. Because the issue is a subtle one, I shall proceed by the method of successive approximations. Here is a first approximation to an answer: the reason that there is some insight in verificationism is that there is a conceptual connection between grasping an empirical concept and being able to recognize a perceptually *justified* application of that concept.

9 Hawking has shown that there is irrecoverable loss of information in Black Holes.

Please note that even this 'first approximation' to what I want to say does *not* imply a number of familiar if problematic philosophical claims. It does not imply, for example, that empirical concepts are *reducible* to perceptual ones. Indeed, I have elsewhere argued[10] that we should not think of talk of 'objects too small to see with the naked eye' as employing a different *meaning* of the word 'small' than that involved in talk of one observable thing's being smaller than another; and the former kind of talk is clearly not bound up with the kind of direct perceptual verification that is envisaged here (nor can it be exhaustively analyzed in terms of indirect verification either, but that is another story). It does not imply that perceptual claims themselves are statable in some language that doesn't presuppose the existence of 'external' objects —indeed, I have already pointed out that from the beginning Peirce insisted that the language in which perceptual claims are stated *does* presuppose the existence of external objects. It does not presuppose that perceptual claims have 'non-conceptual content'. All of the 'Kantian' points on which Strawson has insisted (rightly, in my view) are fully compatible with this claim.

Still, one of the reasons that this is only a first approximation to a correct story should already be obvious from example (I) above. 'Group of stars arranged as the vertices of a regular 100-gon' is an empirical concept, and (it seems) we grasp this concept *without* knowing what would justify its application. But that is not quite right. What we do not know how to justify (what seems to be impossible to justify, as a matter of physical necessity) is *a negative existential generalization* involving the concept. But if we were in a position to *refer* to something we saw in a telescope by the description 'group of stars arranged as the vertices of a regular 100-gon', we *would* know how to justify *that* referring use. So even in the case of an empirical concept that appears in an unverifiable quantified statement, we do know how to verify a (hypothetical) direct application.

But is this necessarily the case? Can't we, after all, form an empirical concept whose application we might never know how to verify? For example, the following:

10 H. Putnam, 'THE DEWEY LECTURES 1994', 505 *passim*.

(D) 'Group of stars *outside our light cone* arranged as the vertices of a regular 100-gon.'

One approach to this question might be to follow Strawson in distinguishing two ways of thinking about reference. One way (associated with the names of Frege, Russell, and Quine) is to identify reference with the use of definite descriptions. The other way, long urged by Strawson himself, is to insist that there is an epistemologically basic notion of reference (reference to *this* tree, *that* cat, etc.) which is not captured by definite descriptions, and, indeed, cannot be captured by the notions of a language which is constructed as the 'ideal languages' of the logicist tradition are constructed, languages lacking both tenses and indexical words. The peculiarity of such descriptions as (D), Strawson might say, is that they precisely cannot be used to *refer*.

While I am sympathetic to this line, and I feel sure that it could be used to arrive at conclusions similar to the ones at which I shall arrive, I am going to take a different tack.

The obvious point to notice about such a description as (D) is that is built up with the aid of quantifiers and other logical constants out of terms which themselves do have easily verifiable applications, e.g., 'regular 100-gon' and 'star'. What the existence of descriptions like (D) shows is that quantifiers and other logical constants extend our conceptual powers beyond the range of the verifiable;[11] but this does not mean that we could grasp a language without grasping *any* terms whose understanding is intimately connected with verification.

A more serious objection to my 'first approximation' is that there are many empirical concepts that we grasp, and whose application we are able to verify, at least under favourable circumstances, but whose application we are not often able to *perceptually* justify. I have in mind two sorts of cases: analytically defined terms, such as 'bachelor', and terms with respect to which most of us defer to experts. In the case of 'bachelor' the situation is much the same as with respect to the descriptions just discussed—in fact, the definition of 'bachelor' (man who is eligible to be married but who

11 H. Putnam, 'THE DEWEY LECTURES 1994', Lecture III, 'The Face of Cognition'.

has not ever been married) involves a negative existential quantifier just as do the descriptions we discussed (and under some circumstances one can perceptually *falsify* the claim that someone is a bachelor—by witnessing the person being married, although one cannot within a reasonable period of time perceptually verify that someone is a bachelor). So a second and better approximation would have to restrict the thesis to terms which are not analytically defined.

Terms with respect to which we defer to experts include both technical terms in science and such terms as 'elm' or 'beech' (in the United States, at least, most people cannot tell an elm from a beech, but anyone who knows that 'elm' and 'beech' are the names of common sorts of deciduous trees counts as understanding them). A third approximation would have to restrict the thesis to terms which are not under expert control in this way. Still, the great majority of the terms we employ are neither analytically defined nor such that we need to call on an expert to advise us in their application in everyday use.

But is it really true, even with these exclusions, that the understanding of even the most ordinary terms—say 'chair' or 'cat'—*is* intimately connected with verification—indeed, with perceptual justification? Here too, subtle issues are involved.

At first blush (and, in the end, the first blush answer is largely right, or so I shall argue), the answer seems clear enough. Under normal circumstances, to understand the word 'chair', for example, involves knowing what chairs look like. But what of blind people? Yes, blind people know how to recognize chairs by touch, and both blind and sighted people know what it feels like to sit in a chair. Could one grasp the concept of a chair, grasp our actual ordinary concept of a chair and not some made-up substitute, and not know what chairs look like *or* what they feel like *or* what it feels like to sit in one? The answer seems to be 'no'.

Moreover, it is not just that normal possessors of the concept know what chairs look like or feel like, etc.; they also know *how to tell that they are in the presence of a chair* by means of these 'sensible effects' (as Peirce called them). In short, they have the practical ability to verify—to verify *perceptually*—that they are in the presence of something that falls under the concept in question. (The reference to being 'in the presence' of something is closely

connected with the Strawsonian notion of reference, by the way, which is why I believe that there is a Strawsonian route to my conclusions.)

In the end I believe that this is a correct line of argument, but there is an important objection to it that I have to consider, one that will require a careful examination of what we mean—or better, what we ought to mean in philosophy—by speaking of a 'conceptual connection' between abilities. But first, a word about my own reasons for being especially interested in this topic.

As some of you know, for a number of years I defended the principle that a statement is true if and only if its acceptance would be justified were epistemic conditions good enough. While I no longer accept this principle—our consideration of (I) has shown us how it can have exceptions—I think it is important to determine the extent to which it holds as well as to point out instances in which it fails. And what I contend is that, in the case of the great majority of our everyday assertions, assertions about the familiar objects and persons and animals with which we interact, truth and idealized rational acceptability do coincide. The reason that they so often coincide is not, however, that truth means idealized rational acceptability, but that, first, it is built into our picture of the world itself that these statements can be verified under good enough conditions (when they are true); and, second, the existence of statements of this kind is a conceptual prerequisite of our being able to understand a language at all. (Why this is a partial vindication of pragmatism is a subject to which I shall return.)

IV

The revolt against conceptual analysis. Although British philosophy appears not to be so profoundly affected as American philosophy continues to be, I can hardly afford to ignore the fact that a great many analytic philosophers now reject the entire idea of a difference between conceptual and empirical truth. This is, of course, explained by the influence of W.V. Quine's celebrated 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism'. If there is no such thing as a 'conceptual connection', then, *a fortiori,* I am mistaken in claiming that there is a conceptual connection between grasping certain concepts and being able to verify (in certain sorts of situations) that they apply.

To certain philosophers, what I have been writing will appear as 'hopelessly pre-Quinian'.

One can see how profound the influence of this thought of Quine's is in the writings of Jerry Fodor—himself an influential thinker, especially among philosophers who feel themselves part of the 'cognitive science' movement. In a recent book which he coauthored with Ernest Lepore, Fodor insists that there are no 'conceptual connections' at all between *any* concepts; the very idea of conceptual connection is a senseless one.[12] In conversation, Fodor has indicated that he likewise (not surprisingly, I suppose) sees no significant epistemological difference at all between a mathematical truth, say '5+7=12', and an empirical truth, say 'Water expands when it freezes'. Both are simply statements of fact, and both are equally revisable.[13]

I have been recently reading the work of Josiah Royce, a thinker who is too much neglected, and one evening I suddenly had the experience of re-seeing Quine's celebrated paper; seeing it as Royce might have seen it. [My readers will recall that Quine argued that if there were such a thing as two terms A and B being 'synonymous', then there would be analytic truths of the form, 'x is an A, if and only if x is a B'. (Premise One) He argued that in that case, we would have *unrevisable knowledge* of the truth of these conditionals. Evidently using an unstated premise of the form: analytic truths, if such there be, are the sort of truth of which we have unrevisable knowledge—call this Premise Two.) But, Quine argued (and with so much I agree) no truth-claim is *immune* to revision; hence, he concluded, synonymy (having the same meaning) is an unacceptable notion.] Royce considered himself *both* a pragmatist and an idealist, and partly because analytic philosophy defined itself in opposition to idealism in its very first moments in 1903, and partly because Royce's most interesting work appears in books whose titles seem to have nothing to do with meaning and reference,[14] analytic philosophers (apart from his

12 Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore, *Meaning Holism: A Shopper's Guide* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992).

13 For a criticism of this view, see 'Rethinking Mathematical Necessity', in my *Words and Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), which also develops the view of 'conceptual' truth urged here in more detail.

14 Josiah Royce, *The World and the Individual* (New York: Macmillan, 1901), and *Problems*

student C.I. Lewis), seem never to have read him. But to Royce Quine's argument would have seemed a crazy one. For Royce —who was influenced by Peirce—the statement that two terms have the same meaning is a statement that involves *interpretation*, and for both Royce and Peirce, *interpretation is an endlessly revisable process*. The leap from 'there are conceptual truths' to 'there are unrevisable truths' (this is, of course, where the unstated Premise Two is needed!) is utterly unjustified.

This is not to deny that Quine's essay contains an important insight. Many analytic philosophers did think that conceptual truths were somehow unrevisably known to us, and against a notion of conceptual truth that carries *that* consequence, Quine's essay is a salutary and powerful corrective. But against what I might call the pragmatist notion of conceptual truth it has no force at all.

Indeed, even Premise One fails when A and B are words in different languages.[15] Moreover, one must resist the tendency —which Premise One perhaps exemplifies—to take every claim that something or other is a conceptual truth as a claim that some sentence or other is *analytic*. Certainly it is unhappy to think of an arithmetical truth such as '5+7≠13' as analytic (either in the Kantian sense, or, less metaphysically, in the sense of being a 'verbal' truth like 'all bachelors are unmarried'); but nonetheless there is a significant sense in which we can say that it is a conceptual truth that 5+7≠13, namely that *we simply do not understand what they would be asserting, if some people were to claim that five plus seven is sometimes thirteen, or that they had just found out that five plus seven is sometimes thirteen.*

Of course, it can sometimes happen that words to which we are not presently able to attach a sense turn out to have significance. At one time we could attach no sense to the words 'two straight lines can be perpendicular to a third straight line and still meet at a point' (if intended as a serious claim, and not, say, as a part of a proof by *reductio ad absurdum*). It took the invention of a whole new theory—more precisely, of a new *kind* of theory—to give those words a sense, that is, to provide them with a use in which we can

of Christianity (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

15 When A and B are in different language, 'x is an A if and only if x is a B' is in general not a well formed sentence of any language.

see the sense. Once they *had* been provided with such a use, we could also come to see that use, that 'new sense', as an inevitable extension of the way they had always been used—a new *sense*, in this sense, is not the same thing as a new *meaning*. But it is a matter of methodological importance, not just of sociological fact, that some statements cannot be falsified unless someone invents a *kind* of theory, or better, a kind of use of language,[16] that we cannot presently foresee (and that we do not know whether any use of language that involves saying that seven plus five sometimes equal thirteen would be one which we could regard as an inevitable continuation of our present uses of the words 'seven', 'five', 'thirteen', 'plus', 'equals' and 'sometimes').

Similarly, when I say that there is a conceptual connection between understanding the concept 'chair' and being able to perceptually verify that one is in the presence of a chair, I am not talking of analytic truths of the 'all bachelors are unmarried' variety —these bake no philosophical bread and cut no philosophical ice— but of the limits of sense as we presently experience those limits in our lives and in our thought. That those limits may, in a phrase of James,[17] sometimes prove 'casual'—that we may, in the future, see how they could have been transgressed—does not make them philosophically insignificant or nonexistent.

V

But does the connection exist? My point might also be expressed by saying that conceptual truths depend not only on the interpretation of words but also on the interpretation of ways of life.[18] But even if one grants this, one might still doubt whether the particular conceptual connections that I have claimed to find are really there. Let us see if we can really perform the thought experiment of imagining a being who grasps a concept of the sort

16 This is a better way to put it, because scientific revolutions do not just produce new theories; they renegotiate the limits of what counts as a 'theory' at all.

17 James writes, 'We call those things [Ptolmaic astronomy, euclidean space, aristotelian logic, scholastic metaphysics] only relatively true, or true within those borders of experience. "Absolutely" they are false; for we know that those limits were casual, and might have been transcended by past theorists just as they are by present thinkers.' *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 107.

18 Peirce famously said that man is a sign [6:344].

that I have been talking about, say, the concept of a chair, while having no idea of how to perceptually verify that something is a chair, indeed, no idea of what chairs look like, feel like, etc.

If the being has sense organs like ours and imaginative capacities like ours, then, even if we introduce the notion by means of a description, if the being really and truly 'grasps' the concept it will acquire the ability to tell that something is a chair when it does finally see one, or sit in one, even if has not exercised that ability before. Indeed, if it cannot, then we will doubt that it has truly grasped the concept. But let us imagine a being that does *not* have such sense organs (and whose 'mental images' are not visual or tactile, etc., as ours are). The astronomer Dyson once imagined intelligent beings whose bodies were *gaseeous nebuli*. Such beings would presumably have concepts of space and time, and be able to learn the laws of physics; could we teach them to grasp our notion of a chair by supplying a definition in terms of these highly abstract scientific concepts?

(1) If the answer is 'Yes, we can already attach a clear sense to the notion of doing that', then a very large revision will be required in my claim that the understanding of even the most ordinary term —say 'chair' or 'cat'—*is* intimately connected with justification. The claim will still be true, if what I have so far argued is at all right, in the sense that understanding the term 'chair' or 'cat' will require —both in the case of the Nebulous People and in our own case—the mastery of *some* empirical concepts whose use is linked to perceptual verification, but it will be possible to make large alterations in the system without removing the understanding of the concept 'chair', or whatever. It will, we are supposing, be possible to understand it by an explicit description in terms of the fundamental notions of physics, where those notions themselves can be given empirical content in an indefinite variety of different ways. Understanding 'this is a chair', 'this is a cat', etc., will presuppose the ability to verify some perceptually controlled proposition or other, but exactly which perceptually controlled proposition will be a matter about which very little can be said. My first approximation to a formulation of the insight in verificationism will have been far too 'molecular'. (Although there will have been an insight in verificationism, none the less, namely that the grasp of concepts requires that there

somewhere be an ability to verify something.) But I shall argue that we need not retreat to such an extreme holism.

(2) My reasons for thinking that we cannot, in fact, presently make clear sense of the idea of acquiring the notion of a chair (or whatever it may be) in the manner just suggested are connected with a remark by the psychologist Eleanor Rosch, and a remark of Wittgenstein's. Rosch at one time defended a theory according to which we perceptually recognize chairs by seeing that they have certain 'distinctive features'—features which are themselves supposed to be recognizable without knowing what a chair is. I was once present at a meeting at which she explained that one of her reasons for giving up this theory was encountering the *beanbag chair*. 'My subjects didn't recognize a beanbag chair as a chair by seeing that it had a back,' she said, 'they recognized that it had a back because they recognized it as a chair.'

Rosch's remark leads naturally into Wittgenstein's remark. Wittgenstein discussed the word 'game', writing: 'One might say that the concept "game" is a concept with blurred edges. "But is a blurred concept a concept at all?"—Is an indistinct photograph a photograph of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need?'[19] To replace a concept with blurred edges by a rigidly limited concept is not to analyse the original concept, but to replace it with a different concept.[20] If we imagine defining 'chair' in terms of geometrical and physical primitives we are imagining replacing the concept 'chair' by a very different concept.

Or could we proceed in the following way? we describe one or two examples of chairs, and then say that 'chair' applies to anything which is 'sufficiently similar'. But then we need to suppose that the Nebulous People have a term that we can translate as 'sufficiently similar', and that the objects they count as 'similar' are just the objects *we* count as similar, not withstanding the different natural

19 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd edition, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), §71.

20 *Op. cit.*, §68: 'I *can* give the concept "number" rigid limits... that is, use the word, "number" for a rigidly limited concept, but I can also use it so that the extension of the concept is not closed by a frontier.'

histories, the fact that they know our objects only through mathematico-physical descriptions, etc..... !

Moral: we can make no clear sense of the idea of grasping these familiar concepts apart from possessing the appropriate perceptual verification abilities. If this seems too loose a status to justify speaking of the statement that grasping such concepts requires *some* ability to perceptually verify the presence of the object as a 'conceptual truth', then call it a 'hinge proposition' if you like.[21] I suggest that what has been called 'conceptual analysis' is best (re-)conceived of as the description of the hinges on which the very understanding of our language turns.

VI

But what does this all have to do with pragmatism? I want to close with a word about the respects in which this is a partial vindication of pragmatism. What I have defended is the idea that our grasp of empirical concepts depends on our perceptual verification abilities. I have emphasized that on the pragmatist picture perceptual verification is not identified with knowledge of private objects, and also does not involve any sort of incorrigibility. To round out even this very preliminary examination of the pragmatic maxim, I need to mention one further fact. From the earliest discussions in the 'Metaphysical Club' in which Peirce, James, Chauncey Wright and others participated, the idea of 'belief' as simply a free-standing mental ability was resolutely opposed. The pragmatists one and all saw beliefs as complex and multi-tracked *habits of action.* What is insight and what is error in *that* formulation would require another essay at least as long as this one! But certainly at least this much deserves to be listed on the 'insight' side of the ledger: a belief, even the belief that I am seeing a chair, is not a self-identifying mental state. What identifies it as the belief that it is, *at least in part*, its connection with action—including, of course, further intellectual action. The insistence, not just on the interdependence of our grasp of truth-claims and our grasp of verification, but also on the

21 The comparison of propositions on which the language game turns to 'hinges' comes, of course, from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), §342.

interdependence of our conceptual abilities and our practical abilities is at the heart of pragmatism. Given the profound originality of their vision, it is hardly to be wondered if the pragmatists sometimes depicted the relationships between these various abilities as simpler than it actually is. But they were profoundly right in supposing that it is an important task of philosophy to explore and describe their interdependence.

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