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Preprint – Accepted Manuscript

This version of the article has been accepted for publication, after peer review (when applicable) but is not the Version of Record and does not reflect post-acceptance improvements, or any corrections. The Version of Record is available online at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11229-026-05565-2. Use of this Accepted Version is subject to the publisher's Accepted Manuscript terms of use https://www.springernature.com/gp/open-research/policies/accepted-manuscript-terms

Truth between Impediment and Success

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Abstract

According to success semantics, a belief is true just in case all actions based on it are guaranteed to be successful. A compelling objection has it that the truth of a belief can never guarantee success, since there may always be an unknown impediment or a chance accident. I argue that we must distinguish the *completion* (i.e. its full and proper performance) of an action from its *success* (i.e. it achieving its goal). The proper formulation of success semantics is then that a belief is true just in case all actions engendered by the belief are successful *if completed*. I conclude that this qualification can help to construct a tenable version of the pragmatist theory of truth.

"It is possible to commit no mistakes and still lose.
That is not a weakness; that is life."
—Jean-Luc Picard

1 The impediment problem

Taking cues from Frank Ramsey (1927/1990a), J. T. Whyte (1990, 1991) proposed the following *success semantics*.

> (R) A belief's truth condition is that condition which guarantees the fulfilment of any desire by the action which, combined with that desire, it would cause.

The suggestion is in line with other pragmatist accounts of truth whereby truth is what engenders practical success. This notably includes F. C. S. Schiller's definition that "truth is the useful, efficient, workable, to which our practical experience tends to" (Schiller, 1903, ch3) and William James's slogan that truth is "the expedient in the way of our thinking" (James, 1907, ch6). More broadly, Cheryl Misak (2021, 187) characterizes the pragmatist conception of truth as the claim that

> a true belief would be the best belief … a belief that could not be improved upon.

Pragmatists are then divided on what makes a belief "best" (or "good"). According to success semantics, the best belief is one that aids the fulfillment of one's desires. This contrasts with C. S. Peirce's (1868; 1878) definition of truth as not what engenders success but as what resists refutation. Misak (2013, 2016, 2021) has developed the Peircean strain to the claim that the best (i.e. true) belief is one that is *indefeasible* in that it withstands all possible challenges from reason or evidence. Success semantics, by contrast, expresses a more Jamesian than Peircean pragmatism.

This is not to say that success semantics is James's theory of truth. James may have had a broader picture of what success (or "best") means here, especially when we consider his *Will To Believe* (James, 1896). This broader picture might suggest to some that the best belief could also be one that is merely comforting or pleasant. Misak (2015) notes Ramsey's misgiving about these subjectivist tendencies in James and proposes instead a Peircean interpretation of Ramsey. As I continue to develop success semantics, further differences with James will emerge in Section 5.

It is indeed a common objection to pragmatist theories of truth, especially Jamesian ones, that they are subjective. Success semantics, however, avoids the challenge from subjectivity. Although success semantics entails that a belief is falsified when it fails to fulfill a merely individually held desire, this does not mean that its falsification depends on any individual's psychological reaction to such a failure, or even that any individual needed to be aware that they held some desire that caused some action that was unsuccessful. The belief is falsified regardless of the subjective mental state of the individual who acted on it; it is irrelevant, for instance, whether such an individual actually revises or rejects the falsified belief.

For example, some Flat Earthers conduct scientifically valid experiments that, were they successful, would indeed refute the curvature of the Earth. Invariably, of course, these experiments fail. But the individuals who conducted them do not regard their belief in a flat Earth to be falsified (they instead construct *post hoc*

alternative explanations of why the experiment failed). Nonetheless, the experiments falsify the belief according to (R), as the Flat Earther's desired outcome did not obtain. Thus, it is not up to the individual performing the action whether this performance verifies or falsifies the belief. Indeed, no one needs to perform any actions at all. A belief's truth condition, according to (R), does not even depend on anyone acting on the belief at all. If no one had ever conducted such experiments, they still would fail *were* they conducted by anyone holding a combination of beliefs and desires that caused them to conduct them. The definition of truth provided by (R) is entirely objective.[1]

Some beliefs may not, all by themselves, cause any kind of action. For instance, my belief that there is food in the pantry may not, by itself, combine with my desire to eat to cause any particular action. Only a longer conjunctive belief—that there is food in the pantry, that my kitchen is functional, that the food there is something I am able to prepare, etc.—will cause a particular action. Nonetheless, Whyte continues, we can 'factor out' the truth conditions of the individual belief *there is food in the pantry* as the join of the truth conditions of the longer conjunctions it features in. More precisely: given bivalent truth, A is equivalent to $(A \wedge B) \vee (A \wedge \neg B)$ and by iterating this expansion one can 'factor out' A from arbitrarily long conjunctions.

However, Robert Brandom (1994) demonstrates a ruinous objection against (R). No matter how long we make the conjunction, there might remain an unforeseen impediment that leads to the failure of any action based on believing the conjunction, even if all conjuncts are true. Say, a trickster might have glued shut the pantry, the stove may be disconnected, or all one's crockery may be broken. Thus one's belief about there being food in the pantry may be *true*, but the fulfillment of one's desire is not thereby *guaranteed*. One may try to anticipate the possible impediments and add their negations to the conjunction whose truth is supposed to guarantee our success, but there always remain further potential impediments. No condition, it seems, can ever *guarantee* success. This is the *impediment problem*.

Brandom's objection is that given any belief, if its truth entails success, then failure entails its falsity by contraposition. But the latter is false. Failure can also be brought about by mere ignorance of an unforeseen impediment (which is not the same as a false belief). Whyte's response is that for a conjunction of beliefs to cause an action, the conjunction must include the belief that there are no impediments to the action (Whyte, 1997).[2] Thus, the conjunction must include

[1] The appeal to subjunctives here might also be in tension with some of James's claims (see Putnam, 1997); I return to this in Section 5.

[2] Whyte's argument for this is folk psychological, but I argue in Section 4 that folk psychology only delivers something much weaker. With my amendations to (R), however, the weaker claim will suffice.

a general 'no impediments' belief that covers all bases. Then, if the action fails due to an unforeseen impediment, it was this 'no impediments' conjunct that was not true. That is, Whyte's rejoinder is to rescue the contrapositive by stipulating that there is a false belief whenever one is ignorant of some impediment.

Brandom responds that if N is the 'no impediments' belief, B is the rest of the conjunction, and a is the caused action, then N is equivalent to the claim that if B, then a is successful if attempted. But then $N \wedge B$ entails *logically* that a will be successful. So the success of a is guaranteed by the truth of $N \wedge B$, but now "this has nothing do with the truth conditions" of B (Brandom, 1994, 177).[3] That is, the truth conditions of B cannot be 'factored out' from $N \wedge B$. Other responses to Brandom along similar lines have been attempted (Dokic and Engel, 2002; Nanay, 2013), but none are successful (see de Prado Salas, 2018 for an overview). Yet other discussions, notably Blackburn (2005), elide the problem altogether.

I argue that the impediment problem rests on an equivocation, namely of the *completion* of an action and its *success*. An action is completed if all its parts have been performed properly. An action is successful if it achieves its goal. In the presence of false beliefs, these can come apart, e.g. when one acts on the false belief that there is food in the pantry, completes the action of retrieving the contents of the pantry, but fails to achieve one's goal (of eating) when one finds no food among these contents. But this is not so when one only has true beliefs. I now go on to argue that although truth cannot guarantee that an action is successful *if attempted*, it can guarantee that it is successful *if completed*.

2 Not all practical failures are doxastic errors

Pragmatists of a Jamesian bent say that if we have a belief and we act on it to the fulfillment of our desires, the belief is verified. But it is too hasty to conclude that, therefore, if we have a belief and we act on it to the frustration of our desires, the belief is falsified. Examining our practice reveals that a belief is falsified only if our action leads to frustration *due to a particular kind of failure*.

Brandom's objection focuses on unforeseen impediments. The same objection can be developed on the basis of chance performance errors. To wit, however truthful and extensive one's beliefs are, it may still happen that they cause an action that fails due to nothing more than accident—as when one acts on one's

[3]Whyte (1997) claims that Brandom is mistaken to claim that N must be equivalent to 'if B, then a is successful'. Rather, it must be equivalent to 'if B is true, then a is successful'. But the response rests on a misunderstanding. Brandom takes B to denote *content* and Whyte takes B to denote *belief*, so that 'if B, then C' means for Brandom that if B is the case, then C, but for Whyte that if B is believed, then C. Once this is sorted out, Brandom's objection stands.

belief that *there is food in the pantry* and desire *to eat* by retrieving some food, only to then trip and spill it, leaving one's desire frustrated.

Chance errors show that not every practical failure comes down to a doxastic error. If we act on a belief and are left frustrated because we stumble and fall before we conclude the action, the belief is neither verified nor falsified. Likewise, if we are left frustrated because an unforeseen impediment halts the completion of our action, this also means nothing for the truth of the belief. In the empirical sciences, if one goes about testing a hypothesis using some instrument and the instrument breaks, this tells nothing about the hypothesis. Thus, the impediment problem can be understood as follows. There are failures, e.g. when an unforeseen impediment arises, that do not falsify a belief. Whyte's semantics is unsuccessful because it entails that some belief *must* bear blame for *any* practical failure. His attempt to stipulate a patsy belief, the 'no impediments' conjunct, is futile.

We find a response to the impediment problem if we can sort out under which conditions failure falsifies belief. Not all failures do so, but it is also plain that *some* failures do falsify. In more technical language, the relationship between true belief and successful action must be construed as holding only *ceteris paribus*. As long as *ceteris* are *paribus*, the failure of the action falsifies the belief. The challenge is thus to spell out what it means for *ceteris* not to be *paribus*. If we had a different theory of truth in the background, the task would be easy; we could then say that a belief is falsified by a failure if it is the falsity of the belief's contents that is responsible (causally or otherwise) for the failure. However, if we want to use success semantics to define truth, this would be circular. Thus, the defender of success semantics must draw this distinction without truth talk.

That said, there is a difference between an action being completed and it being successful. It is the difference between all parts of an action being performed without error and with the right intentions (*à la* Anscombe, 1957), and it achieving its goal. If there is an unforeseen impediment to an action, it cannot be completed. Even without an impediment, an action may be uncompleted due to a chance error. Thus if an action is uncompleted, one's failure to fulfill some desire need not come down to any doxastic error, be it a false belief or mere ignorance of the unforeseen. It might just be misfortune. Thus, an action that is uncompleted does not generally falsify the belief that precipitated it. (Although it *can* falsify beliefs, e.g. when one *does* have the belief that some impediment does not occur and then this very impediment occurs.)

Now, for an action to be successful (i.e. fulfilling its goal), it must also be completed. But an action can also be completed without being successful. If, say, I believe there is fresh milk in the fridge and I desire a milk tea, this may cause me to retrieve the milk and pour it in my tea. Even if I complete the relevant action—I retrieve and pour properly—my desire is left unfulfilled if the milk begins to

curdle in the hot liquid. In this case, the culprit for my action being unsuccessful is indeed a false belief, namely the belief that the milk is fresh.

The pragmatist arguments demonstrate a close connection between true belief and practical success. Reckoning with Brandom, however, shows that the connection is imperfect, as not all practical failures come down to a doxastic error. No belief can *guarantee* practical success since actions may remain uncompleted, hence unsuccessful, for any number of reasons beyond false beliefs. The world is a messy place and remains so even if all our beliefs are true. The pragmatist arguments, I contend, are rescued by bracketing the messiness, i.e. by restricting their scope to actions that are completed.

To be sure, this does not yet vindicate success semantics. The claim to be made out is as follows: a completed action is unsuccessful *only if* some false belief was involved in precipitating the action. This then entails (by contraposition) that true beliefs guarantee that the actions they engender are successful if completed. So success is necessary for truth. The pragmatist arguments, properly construed as assuming completion and rehearsed accordingly in Section 5, then entail that success is also sufficient for truth.

3 Success semantics in its proper place

For a first pass, consider the following variant of Whyte's (R).

(R2) A belief's truth condition is that condition which guarantees the fulfilment of any desire by **the completion** of any action which, combined with that desire, it would cause.

This is compatible with the situation that a belief is true while an action caused by the belief and some desire is unsuccessful for reasons unrelated to the belief itself, e.g. due to impediments or errors. Thus, Brandom's objection does not apply. However, similar objections are near in the vicinity.

Consider again the situation where one desires to eat and believes that one has food in the pantry. Sure, these combine to cause one to act to retrieve the food. But between the *completed* retrieval of the pantry's contents and the fulfillment of one's desire lies a lacuna of further actions where things can go wrong. One can stumble and drop the food. One can fail to properly prepare it. One can move the food to one's mouth only to spit it out because it is rotten. Thus it seems that just as much as unforeseen impediments and chance errors can prevent the completion of an action with no doxastic error in play, so can any number of unforeseen impediments and chance errors prevent that a completed action leads to success. So how does (R2) improve on (R)?

Something is odd about this objection. On the one hand, yes, these potential failures show that things can go wrong between an action's completion and its success. But on the other hand, these failures each mean that some action has gone uncompleted: the moving of the food from the pantry, the preparation, and the actual consumption are all actions that are uncompleted in case of the relevant failure.

To home in on the point, consider the actions that precede or constitute the retrieval of the food. Supposedly, retrieving the food from the pantry includes the action *going to the pantry* which further includes the action of *opening the kitchen door*, and so on. Any single such action is properly said to be caused by the belief that there is food in the pantry combining with the desire to eat. But the truth of the belief guarantees for none of these preceding or preparatory actions that if they are completed, the desire is fulfilled. It would be uncharitable to interpret success semantics as entailing that if one believes truly that there is food in the pantry, one is then guaranteed that one's desire to eat is fulfilled when one opens the kitchen door. This is just plainly not what is *meant* by (R) or (R2)—notwithstanding that this is what is *said* in (R) and (R2), since the action of *opening the kitchen door* is one of the actions caused by the belief that there is food in the pantry (located in the kitchen) and the desire to eat.

But then what *is* meant? Clearly, not just any action caused by a combination of desire and belief must be so that the truth of the belief guarantees that the completed action fulfills the desire. Combinations of belief and desire cause actions that merely go *towards* fulfilling the desire. It would be extraordinary to demand that such actions, by themselves, can ever guarantee fulfilling the desire that brought them about.

Say that an action a is *maximal* to a desire D and a belief B if: a is caused by D and B and there is no other action b that is also caused by D and B of which a is a proper part.[4] The action *retrieving the food* is not maximal to the desire to eat and the belief that there is food in the pantry, as this desire and this belief also cause the action *retrieving, preparing, and consuming the food* of which *retrieving the food* is a proper part. Thus, (R2) should be clarified as follows.

(R3) A belief's truth condition is that condition which guarantees the fulfilment of any desire by **the completion** of any action **maximal** to the belief and the desire.

[4]In linguistics, it is defined that an expression E is telic (i.e. towards a goal) if any event described by E has no proper parts that are also described by E (Krifka, 1989; Altshuler, 2014). Given this definition, a being maximal is the same as a being described by the telic expression 'acted on B to fulfill D' which I suspect is what was *meant* by success semantics all along. This proper understanding was merely obscured by Whyte's talk of a desire and belief combining to cause an action, as this can be correctly said about *parts* of the maximal action as well.

The claim to be made out, recall, is that when an action is maximal to a belief and a desire, then its completion is not also its success (i.e. fulfillment of the desire) *only if* the belief is false. That is, for maximal actions, no impediment or accident can interfere between completion and success when the belief is true. I defend this claim in the next section.

First, a clarification is in order. The appeal to maximal actions in (R3) means that some of the standard examples given for (R) are, strictly speaking, ill-stated. One example was that if one desires *to eat* and believes *there is food in the pantry (etc.)*, these combine to cause the action *retrieving the food* which, if unsuccessful, falsifies the belief. But this action is not maximal to this belief and this desire. One's desire *to eat* and belief *there is food in the pantry* will cause a sequence of preparatory actions—say, getting up from the couch, entering the kitchen, retrieving the food, preparing it—that culminate in eating the food, satisfying the desire if everything went well. The whole sequence is the maximal action.[5] If there is no food in the pantry, this maximal action cannot be completed. So, it appears that according to (R3) one's failure to retrieve the food when there is no food in the pantry, oddly, does not falsify the belief that there is food in the pantry. Since the maximal action is uncompleted, no belief is falsified.

This is correct as it goes, but merely demands more precision. Maximal actions have parts, and each of these parts works towards fulfilling some derivative desire. The part *retrieving the food* fulfills the desire *to have the food* which is a preparatory condition for the next step in the maximal action, *preparing the food*. Since (R3) states that *any* maximal action caused by *any* desire is suitable to falsify a belief, the belief that *there is food in the pantry* is falsified if the action *retrieving the contents of the pantry*—that is maximal to the belief and the desire *to have the food*—is complete but unsuccessful.[6]

[5] In casual descriptions of such situations, one may denote the maximal action just as *eating* (as in, *I was hungry, so I ate*). But it pays here to be overly explicit about the parts of the maximal action.

[6] It might now appear troublesome if actions are pursued for their own ends. For example, the action of *retrieving the food* is maximal to the desire *to have retrieved the food* and the belief *there is food in the pantry*, so it is trivial that the action *retrieving the food* is successful if completed, since success and completion are the same for this action and desire. But it does not matter for (R3) if *some* actions trivially succeed if complete, as this does not mean that any belief is trivially true—for a belief to be true, *all* maximal actions engendered by *any* desire must succeed if complete. In any case, it seems plausible that actions are never pursued for their own ends, so perhaps such cases never occur.

4 The argument for R3

One may attempt to find counterexamples to (R3) by attending to matters outside the control of the one who acts. Say that David desires to be a famous philosopher and believes that his philosophical ideas, if only they'd become known to the broader public, would make him so. He thus undertakes the action of *writing a treatise, publishing it, promoting it (etc.)* with the goal *to become famous*. Now suppose David completes the action but, alas, his treatise "fell dead-born from the press". One possible reason is that David's beliefs about the quality of his ideas were false. But it might be that these beliefs were perfectly true and he failed for other reasons. David might see his practical project to conclusion—write his treatise, see to its proper publication, promote it duly, meet challengers in public debate, and whatever else may be required—and still not fulfill his desire because he was ahead of his time, i.e. his audience was not ready to appreciate his ideas. But this is not a counterexample to (R3) because David *did* have a false belief, namely that he would earn fame if his ideas were publicized.

It might be responded that David held the true belief that his ideas are of grand philosophical significance and this belief alone combined with his desire to be famous led to his practical action. David, the response goes, need not have believed that *the public is ready for these ideas*, he may have simply been ignorant of the fact that *the public is not ready*. But this is not right. David's writing action must have been influenced by his assumptions about his audience, so he could choose topics, expressions, terminology and examples that he expected to be appealing to his intended audience. He could not have pursued a writing project without such beliefs. Thus David could not have been merely ignorant about his audience, he must have had some beliefs—that factored into his actions—about how to appeal to them.

For a similar putative objection, consider Florence who desires to disinfect some utensil and believes that in front of her is a pot of boiling water. This desire and belief combine to cause her to submerge the utensil in the water for an appropriate time. However, unbeknownst to Florence, she is in a high-altitude environment where water boils at a temperature too low to disinfect, so her desire is unfulfilled despite the completion of her action. Supposedly, her belief that the water is boiling was true and, hence, her failure was due to mere ignorance (of the altitude she is at or of the effects of this altitude). But again, this is a case of a false belief. The desire *to disinfect* x does not combine solely with *this water is boiling* to cause Florence's action of submerging x in the water. This requires, at least, some additional belief that *boiling water disinfects*. It is this latter belief that is, in this situation, false.

The same, I contend, goes for any other purported counterexample to (R3). Whenever the completion of a maximal action a caused by B and D fails to fulfill

D, something about the action itself was ill-conceived, i.e. some conjunct of B was false. This follows from a routine bit of folk psychology.[7]

If some act a is caused by some beliefs B and some desire D, folk psychology has it that B entails something to the tune of *If I complete a, I will fulfill D* where a is maximal to B and D. It might be more familiar to say that folk psychology entails *If I do a, I will fulfill D*, but this gloss contains an ambiguity. One might read 'do' as meaning something like 'pursue' or 'attempt', or instead as 'complete'. The latter reading is the correct one. This becomes clear when one substitutes a concrete action for a. When one goes about opening the pantry to sate one's hunger, one (at least according to folk psychology) believes something like *If I open the pantry, I will obtain food.* This is not the same belief as *If I attempt to open the pantry, I will obtain food.* In the situation where the pantry door is glued shut, it is false that *If I attempt to open the pantry, I will obtain food* but it could still be true that *If I open the pantry, I will obtain food.* Thus, the antecedents of the relevant folk psychological conditionals do not denote attempts or mere pursuits. To avoid ambiguity, I use 'complete' in my gloss.

Now, if a is attempted and completed but D remains unfulfilled, *If I complete a, I will fulfill D* is false. And since this conditional is entailed by B, this means that B is false. But if a is attempted and remains uncompleted due to impediment or error, the conditional *If I complete a, I will fulfill D* is vacuous, so says nothing about B. Thus, when beliefs B and desire D cause some action a, then a's failure falsifies B only if (i) a is the action from the belief *If I complete a, I will fulfill D* (rather than any other action that, in virtue of being part of a, is also technically *caused* by B and D); and (ii) a is completed rather than merely attempted. But this is just what it says in (R3).

Strictly speaking, the folk psychological part of the argument is not quite correct. For example, Florence may also move to boil her utensil to disinfect it when she merely guesses or hopes that boiling results in disinfection. That is, folk psychology does not strictly speaking tell us that when someone acts on some desire and beliefs, then these beliefs must entail that *If I complete a, I will fulfill D*. Some actions are also caused by beliefs that merely amount to something like *If I complete a, then I might fulfill D*.[8] According to standard analyses of

[7] See, among others, Sellars, 1956; Dennett, 1987; Fodor, 1987. The status of folk psychology *as a theory* is contested, but irrelevant here. Everybody, even Paul Churchland (1989), seems to agree that folk psychology, whatever it is, is at least approximately correct about how people's mental states relate to their actions. This suffices for my argument, as nothing more than this relation is at stake. (Eliminativism, however, would seem to be incompatible with my argument—but success semantics, being about *beliefs*, is on the whole incompatible with eliminativism.)

[8] Perhaps one must also attend to prescriptive or moral beliefs here. David, for example, might believe that his way of expressing his ideas *ought* to earn him fame and it is this belief that leads him to his writing project. But this belief is not falsified if, due to a philistine audience, he does not find fame. But this still means that David had some false belief about how *ought* would

conditionals, this is equivalent to the belief that *It might be: if I complete a, I will fulfill D* (e.g Edgington 1995). That is, one often acts when one only has a *partial* belief—a guess or a probabilistic belief—that some action will fulfill one's desire when completed.

Whyte (1990, 156) provides the correct response: "A belief's truth condition is that which suffices for the success of the actions it would cause *if it were a full belief*" (his emphasis). The fact that we *do* act on partial beliefs does not affect the claim that the truth conditions of cognitive contents are fixed by what actions are caused by *full* beliefs. The truth conditions of partial beliefs can then be defined derivatively from those of full beliefs. Thus, when we ask which *full* beliefs cause some action when combined with some desire, these beliefs must include or entail the full belief that the completion of the action fulfills the desire. Any belief that would be expressed with epistemic or probabilistic vocabulary is counted here as partial.[9] We may, therefore, also put (R3) as the following, equivalent, formulation.

(R3*) A belief B's truth condition is that condition which guarantees the fulfilment of any desire D by the completion of any action a so that B entails *If I complete a, I will fulfill D*.

The defense of this formulation is near trivial. If one's beliefs entail *If I complete a, I will fulfill D* and one completes a, then it is immediate that some belief must be false when D is not fulfilled.[10]

lead to *is*, e.g. that he falsely believed that his audience was receptive to what ought earn fame. (Alternatively, one may go Humean and say that *ought*-beliefs are not truth-apt and only factor into folk psychology on the desire side.)

[9]See Incurvati and Schlöder (2023, ch4, ch9) for a pragmatist-friendly treatment of such vocabulary that allows one to separate the full beliefs; one can define a full belief as one that, when expressed, does not commit one to any partial beliefs (except in the trivial sense that when one has a full belief that p one also believes that p is possible and probable). This in particular rules out beliefs like *might/probably p* and *if p, then might/probably q*. Incurvati and Schlöder (2023, ch6) also provide a strategy to explain how the contents of other attitudes than full belief (partial beliefs, but also e.g. hope) can be explained once the contents of beliefs are explained (also see Beddor, 2020; Baker, 2022). Thus, it seems that Whyte's strategy of focusing on full beliefs is workable.

[10]A referee notes that beliefs involving objective chance or counterfactuals may present a particular challenge here, since such beliefs do not seem to make determinate differences. For instance, if one believes of some coin that it is fair, then it landing on either side is equally expected. So it is difficult to say which actions are suitable to verify or falsify such a belief. One could also side-step the issue by saying that the apparently full belief that a coin is fair is reducible to a partial belief that it will land heads and a partial belief that it will land tails (cf. Incurvati and Schlöder, 2023 who explain belief with probabilistic content as derivative of partial belief). The matter turns on contentious questions about objective chance, so I leave it open here. It is similarly difficult to say what practical difference a belief like *had my alarm gone off,*

One might now suspect that *If I complete a, I will fulfill D* is a mere rehash of Whyte's 'no impediments' belief N. But while N is a general belief about there being no impediments whatsoever, I stipulate here that the conjuncts of B contain (or entail) beliefs about particular actions having particular outcomes if completed. By contrast, Whyte (1997) seems to motivate his stipulation of N by claiming that folk psychology shows that to pursue some action a to fulfill some desire D, one must believe *If I attempt a, I will fulfill D*. But this is much stronger than what folk psychology provides. That is, while Whyte claimed that in order to act, one must believe that one's action *will* succeed, I merely claim that one must believe that *completing* one's action will succeed (with the above *provisio* about partial beliefs). The small amendation makes all the difference, as it ensures that beliefs are not falsified by just any chance failure.

To appreciate the difference, recall that the problem with N was that it blocked the 'factoring out' of the truth conditions of B from the conjunct of $B \wedge N$. There is no similar problem here, since *If I complete a, I will fulfill D* is not an *additional* conjunct at all. Whyte (1990, 1997) claims that even when the beliefs B suffice to determine a course of action for the fulfillment of D, they only *cause* one to actually attempt this course of action if one *also* believes that there are no impediments to it. By contrast, my argument involves no such stipulation of an additional belief. The question of 'factoring out' does not pose itself, since nothing is added that would need to be factored out.

I fear I might have belabored a fairly simple claim to the point of obscurity, so let me take a step back. The claim is that when, to fulfill some desire, one pursues some course of action that (i) is based only on true beliefs and (ii) has run its full course with no unexpected impediments or chance errors, then (iii) one gets what one expected from it where (iv) what one expected was the fulfillment of the desire. This is so because for one to pursue some course of action *towards some end*, one must have some beliefs that entail that the action is suitable to achieve its end (again with the *provisio* about partial beliefs). If the action goes well and one's beliefs are true, it will achieve its end. Otherwise, some of these beliefs are false.

I'd have been on time makes. The matter again depends on further, contentious questions about counterfactuals and so I leave it open as well. I venture that an analysis of counterfactuals as as claims about regularities and interventions may be helpful (cf. Woodward, 2003), but it might also be that some counterfactuals just do not make differences and, hence, are not truth-apt.

Counterfactuals are a pressing issue here, since success semantics is itself expressed using counterfactuals (also see Section 5). However, although counterfactuals are challenging *in general*, the *particular* counterfactuals occurring in the success semantics itself are of the form *were a completed, then D would be fulfilled.* The practical difference made by such counterfactuals is (at least) that they combine with the desire to fulfill D (which is distinct from D itself) to cause a. The completion of a is then suitable to verify or falsify the counterfactual. So success semantics explains at least the counterfactuals required for its own expression.

This suffices to show that success is necessary for truth, if 'success' is understood as in (R3). But success semantics further claims that success is also sufficient for truth. That is, that the truth conditions of a belief are *exhausted* by what the belief entails for the pursuit of practical projects. One may object that a belief's truth conditions could involve further matters that go beyond such pursuits. This is an objection to pragmatism itself.

5 Pragmatism

Success semantics is supposed to give due to its pragmatist antecedents. But to say that a belief is only verified or falsified if actions based on it are completed may seem like an un-pragmatist thing to say. For this means that even if a belief does not pass the actual practical test, the belief may still be true since it *would* pass the test *were* the test completed. According to (R3), a belief has truth conditions that guarantee this subjunctive, regardless of whether any action is completed or even attempted.[11] So a belief may be true without anyone successfully acting on it. It may then be tempting to separate truth from action entirely. A representationalist can just say that one's belief was true in that it represented what is really there, so one's actions related to the belief have nothing at all to do with its truth. But this overshoots the goal. Pragmatists can accommodate the subjunctive.

As said, saying that a belief is verified by successful action is not the same as saying that a belief is falsified by just any practical failure. What (R3) acknowledges is that acting on a belief can lead to failure for different reasons, not all doxastic. Yes, the truth of a belief is a practical matter, but the impediment problem demonstrates that the pragmatist *must* acknowledge that acting on a belief can fail us for reasons that have nothing to do with the belief *per se*. Brandom's examples show that something unforeseen can always get in the way. I have added that practice is imperfect.

Examining our practice reveals that when we speak of a belief's practical test, we speak of the *completion* of a testing action, rather than the mere attempt at such an action. This is equally clear in the sciences: an experiment that is disturbed rather than completed neither verifies nor falsifies the hypothesis that motivated it. The subjunctive gloss—that the action would succeed *were* it completed—is nothing more than a linguistic vehicle to express that this is the practical test. Indeed, a pragmatist who followed me until here might agree that

[11] For example, Putnam (1997) claims that James's pragmatist theory of truth (unlike Peirce's) must not be expressed in subjunctives, since for something to be true, it has to actually be made true in an actual verification process. The impediment problem puts pressure on either this interpretation or this aspect of James's thinking.

subjunctives are just the right language to express the distinction between failure given completion and failure *tout court*. More precisely, they might agree that when we pursue the Peircean project of *making clear* our idea of the practical test, we end up with the subjunctive claim.

A further worry might be that some beliefs are a good deal more abstract or remote than *there is food in the pantry*. One might believe that democracy is in danger;[12] that there are sentient aliens on a faraway planet; or that Socrates was bald when he died. It may be difficult to see what practical test could verify or falsify such beliefs, as it is hard to see with what particular desires such beliefs could combine to cause particular actions. This is another objection to pragmatism itself, which holds that only beliefs that make practical differences (to somebody, somewhere, somewhen) are candidates for truth. All others are alethic chaff. If it can be demonstrated that some such belief is not test-apt, the move is to reject it being truth-apt.

It seems reasonable to say that the three aforementioned examples do make differences and hence are truth-apt. But perhaps they make differences only when combined with many further, more concrete beliefs. That democracy is in danger might cause an action only when combined with concrete beliefs about one's own political agency; that there are faraway aliens only when combined with beliefs about what preparations this requires of us; and that Socrates was bald only when combined with some beliefs about why this matters in some, say, philosophically or historically informed endeavour. The truth-conditions of the *individual* belief that, say, democracy is in danger must then be 'factored out' from these many further concrete beliefs. It would be idle to speculate about these further beliefs, but it would also beg the question against pragmatism to presume that there could be no such beliefs while insisting that the abstract claims are nonetheless truth-apt.

It is worth noting that Peirceans face similar problems. Misak's interpretation of Peirce's theory of truth is that the true beliefs are the indefeasible ones (she likewise appeals to a subjunctive phrasing of indefeasibility; see Misak, 2013, 36). There is an impediment problem also for Peirceans, as they need to say what kind of new information would defeat a belief. If *any* new information can overturn a belief, then nothing might be indefeasible, as anything might be overturned by chance errors such as spontaneous hallucinations or accidental mismeasurements. But if only *true* information can overturn a belief, the account is plainly circular. So Peirceans must say more about what the practical test amounts to—what counts as defeat and what is merely accidental—but without invoking truth. Similarly, Peirceans must say what it would take to defeat beliefs like *democracy*

[12] I should note that saying what such a belief might *represent* seems no easier than saying what actions such a belief engenders.

is in danger. It seems likely that defeaters for such beliefs can only be spelled out against a background of further beliefs, so there is again the problem of how to 'factor out' when the belief in question (rather than the background assumptions) is defeated. The distinguishing feature of success semantics (and, arguably, of James's theory) is that it specifies the practical test to be attempts to fulfill subjectively held desires.

The impediment problem put pressure on the claim that success is *necessary* for truth, since one can have only true beliefs and yet fail due to bad luck. On the flip side, the problem also puts pressure on the claim that success is *sufficient* for truth.[13] One may have false beliefs and yet succeed due to good luck. Consider a situation in which my (false) beliefs entail that I must set the stove to "5" to prepare my food but I make a performance error and set it to "4". It happens that my food would have burned on "5" but cooks perfectly on "4". My desire ends up fulfilled due to my error.

It does not follow from (R3) that such a happy accident would verify my belief. Good luck and bad luck are on a par—both lucky and unlucky errors mean that there was an error in the performance of the relevant action. Thus, the action was not completed and so the belief in question is neither verified nor falsified. In cases of good luck, however, I might end up with the subjective (but mistaken) impression that my belief was verified. But such subjective reactions are neither here nor there. Recall the Flat Earth example from Section 1. One might *think* that a belief was not falsified when it was actually falsified by one's actions. Likewise, one might think that a belief was verified, but if the relevant action was not completed, this is a mistake.

Nevertheless, there is an important asymmetry between verification and falsification. Success semantics ties the truth of a belief to the *guarantee* of success. One success need not prove the guarantee, but one failure refutes it. That is, verification is always tentative, whereas falsification is typically definitive. On this, (R3) seems to agree with the Peircean account: a belief is only true if it would pass every test it could be subjected to. But for Peirceans, this means *every possible* test, in the long run and over the whole course of it. Jamesians, by contrast, may want to make distinctions. Me finding food in my pantry *proves* my belief that there is food in my pantry. That this belief might not withstand all future objections does not seem to have practical relevance. Say that future dieticians convincingly demonstrate that what we eat today is actually mildly poisonous to humans and, thus, not food. Peirceans seem compelled to say that this would mean that my belief is false. But my belief is nevertheless the "best" one for me, insofar as it is the right one to navigate my circumstances to satisfy my desires. Challenges from the abstract future do not change this. The situation

[13] I thank a referee for pressing me on this.

mirrors James's infamous distinction between truth in the concrete and truth in the abstract.

> [A]t each and every concrete moment, truth for each man is what that man 'troweth' with the maximum of satisfaction to himself; and similarly abstract truth, truth verified by the long run, and abstract satisfactoriness, long-run satisfactoriness, coincide. If, in short, we compare concrete with concrete and abstract with abstract, the true and the satisfactory do mean the same thing. (James, 1904, 471)

This is the source of many subjectivist worries against Jamesian accounts. Note however that success semantics draws a bright line between truth (guaranteeing success) and one's merely subjective assessment of truth (one's idiosyncratic response to the outcomes of one's actions). This distinction can be made in the concrete and in the abstract. I should note that this is a upshot of my response to the impediment problem; James himself does not clearly introduce such a distinction and might, in fact, not want to make it at all.

In the abstract, it is at stake for (R3) whether completing actions based on the belief in question will let anyone fulfill any desire whatsoever, in any possible circumstance. In the concrete, it is at stake for (R3) whether the belief in question lets one successfully navigate one's concrete circumstances given one's concrete desires. In either case, one might fail to complete some action, but satisfy the desire due to good luck. One may *assess* this as verifying the belief. But one is still mistaken to regard the relevant belief as true (in the concrete or in the abstract) if circumstances are so that one would have failed *had* the action been performed correctly.[14]

Concrete truth is shaky ground and one may not want to follow James this far. Fortunately, the distinction between concrete and abstract truth is not forced onto success semantics. One could also insist that "guarantee" in (R3) is fixed to mean that the success of all possible actions to satisfy all possible desires is ensured. The remaining difference between (R3) and the Peircean account is then on the nature of the practical test. Either way, it is then a standard objection against Jamesian accounts of truth that this test may confuse the *psychology* of truth with truth *itself* (cf. Moore, 1908, Russell, 1910). John Capps (2023) usefully puts the problem as follows.[15]

[14]Different people may then also have different concrete truths. This does not contravene my distinction between truth and the subjective assessment of truth, as it only means that there are contextual variations regarding what is concretely true. The contextual parameter is what success means in different circumstances or to different people.

[15]In a similar vein, Ramsey (1990b) claims that the pragmatist theory of truth (at the time of writing typically understood to be James's) does not answer the question *What is truth?* convinc-

> James tends to overlook … the distinction between (a) giving an account of true ideas and (b) giving an account of the concept of truth. This means that, while James' theory might give a psychologically realistic account of why we care about the truth (true ideas help us get things done) his theory fails to shed much light on what the concept of truth exactly is or on what makes an idea true.

The objection is that one may take the success of completed, maximal actions to define a practical *mark* or *criterion* of truth and, possibly, an explanation of the *value* of truth, but insist that the *constitution* of truth—the nature of truth *itself*—is not determined by what truth *guarantees*. The objection has legs here. Following Whyte, I have been saying that the success of the practical test—what is expressed by the subjunctive phrase—is guaranteed by a belief's *truth conditions*. But this may suggest that the success of some action is merely what is *guaranteed by* some truth condition that is not *itself* practical. This is again the worry that although success is necessary for truth, it may not be sufficient.

The pragmatist response is that it is a mistake to make a distinction between what something *does* (such as guaranteeing success) and what it *is*. To say that truth's being outstrips truth's doing is spurious, unless and until some other practical consequences of this allegedly otherwise constituted truth can be demonstrated. Without such a demonstration, inquiry into truth's being beyond its doing would be about as idle as to worry about whether everything just doubled in size.[16] But since any putative practical consequence is *ipso facto* a doing, there is no point to separating *doing* from *being* at all. Thus, if (R3) exhausts the practical consequences of truth, then it also defines truth. To be clear, this discussion does not show that (R3) exhausts the practical consequences of truth. It only shows what is at stake. To wit, to show that the practical test adumbrated in (R3) is not sufficient for truth, some *other* practical consequence of truth must be demonstrated.

It may however appear that talk of truth conditions in (R3) teeters on the edge of spuriousness. But it stays on the right side of the edge. Insofar as no other practical consequences of the truth of a belief can be demonstrated, we can say that the truth-condition of a belief *is that* the maximal actions it causes would succeed were they completed. There need not be anything beyond the subjunctive itself that guarantees the subjunctive. Or, to put this differently, there is nothing more to the truth-condition that guarantees the subjunctive than the

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ingly, so it might yield an answer to *What makes a belief have the content that it does?* (also see Misak, 2015).

[16]Peirce (1878) claims that disputes about such distinctions are not about facts, but merely about "arrangements of facts". James (1907), that "there can be no difference … that doesn't make a difference."

subjunctive itself. That is, we can make the subjunctive in (R3) explicit to arrive at the final formulation (R4).

(R4) A belief's truth condition is that: for any action a that is maximal to the belief and some desire, were the action completed, the desire would be fulfilled.

This suffices to vindicate Whyte's original, Ramseian ambitions about fixing the truth-conditions of a belief (as part of a project of fixing the *contents* of beliefs). But if we follow the pragmatist thread just a little further, we can turn (R4) into an account of *truth* itself. As argued above, the pragmatist contention is that there is no daylight between being and doing, so the account of truth will be (T).

(T) The truth of a belief is that: were any action a that is maximal to the belief and some desire completed, the desire would be fulfilled.

This expresses the pragmatist view that when we speak of truth—of truth *itself*—we speak of the practical difference that truth makes. This practical difference is nothing else than that actions brought forth by the belief are successful (if completed). The truth of a belief *is that* it leads to such successful actions.

Thereby, (T) gives due to some of James's (1907, ch6) claims that truth is a "process" and that true beliefs "lead us … through the acts and other ideas which they instigate, into or up to, or towards, other parts of experience with which we feel all the while … the original ideas remain in agreement." The "leading" of (T) is that when an action proceeds from true beliefs, it leads to an outcome that does not contradict these beliefs (i.e. agrees with them). To stress, I make no claim to this being the correct exegesis of James, although I consider it an appealing development of his views. In particular, one must concede that this "leading" need not be actual; if Putnam (1997) is right that James rejects non-actual leadings, we must reject James's rejection.

If we were to drop the subjunctive from (T), it would not *merely* follow that a belief that is not acted upon is not true. Pragmatists might respond that beliefs that manifest no practical effects are not proper beliefs at all. But dropping the subjunctive would *moreover* entail that if I do act on a belief and a chance error occurs, my belief is not true. The option to reject that I had a belief is not available in such cases, as the belief itself *did* manifest a practical effect. This would mean that if I stumble and fall on my way to the pantry, then it is not true that there is food in my pantry. But it seems unacceptable to tie the truth of my belief to whether or not I stumble. The impediment problem shows that dropping the subjunctive is unacceptable.

Finally, the move to (T) changes nothing about the objectivity of truth. One might have thought that this objectivity is a practical consequence of otherwise

constituted truth conditions, but they remain spurious. It is still not up to the individual performing the action whether this performance verifies or falsifies the belief. Hence, I submit, (T) is a tenable version of the pragmatist theory of truth, faithful to the pragmatist project itself.

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