
Kidnapping an Ugly Child: Is William James a Pragmaticist?

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ABSTRACT

Since the term 'pragmatism' was first coined, there have been debates about who is or is not a 'real' pragmatist, and what that might mean. The division most often drawn in contemporary pragmatist scholarship is between William James and Charles Peirce. Peirce is said to present a version of pragmatism which is scientific, logical and objective about truth, whereas James presents a version which is nominalistic, subjectivistic and leads to relativism. The first person to set out this division was in fact Peirce himself, when he distinguished his own 'pragmaticism' from the broad pragmatism of James and others. Peirce sets out six criteria which defines 'pragmaticism': the pragmatic maxim; a number of 'preliminary propositions'; prope-positivism; metaphysical inquiry; critical common-sensism; and scholastic realism. This paper sets out to argue that in fact James meets each of these criteria, and should be seen as a 'pragmaticist' by Peirce's own lights.

§1. INTRODUCTION

Since the creation of pragmatism, a great deal of ink has been spilt attempting to determine who is or is not a ‘real’ pragmatist, and what exactly that might mean. In recent scholarship, the division most commonly drawn is between the respective pragmatisms of Charles S. Peirce and William James. Peirce is seen as providing an account of pragmatism which is logically grounded, scientific in approach, and which offers an objective account of truth. As such, his pragmatism coheres with prevalent attitudes and projects in Anglo-American philosophy. James’s pragmatism, on the other hand, is presented as the kind which was rightly rejected by the founding analytic philosophers. It is woolly, nominalistic, and deeply subjectivist. Whether intentionally or not, the argument goes, *this* version of pragmatism opens a door which leads to relativism and ‘vulgar Rortyism’.¹

It is not only contemporary scholars who make this division, however. The first person to separate Jamesian and Peircean pragmatisms was in fact Peirce himself. In his 1905 *Monist* article, entitled ‘What Pragmatism Is’, Peirce distinguishes between ‘pragmatism’, a broad church which includes himself, James, Dewey, Schiller, as well as many historical figures, and ‘pragmaticism’, which was a more narrow and defined version of pragmatism to which he subscribed. Though surprisingly coy in the published article about who precisely he was trying to distance himself *from* (he was, after all, still to some extent reliant on James’s fame and good will), elsewhere it is clear that his target was James and those who followed him. Peirce held that James applied the doctrine of pragmatism too liberally, and that his ‘remodelling’ of pragmatism had prominent parts which he held to be ‘opposed to sound logic’ (1908, CP6.482; see 1903, CP5.358n.1).² It was this which drove him to ‘kiss goodbye’ to his ‘child’ pragmatism, and give birth to ‘pragmaticism’, a name which he held to be ‘ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers’ (1905, CP5.414).

Despite this ugliness, it is precisely the aim of this paper to kidnap this term ‘pragmaticism’, and argue that it should be applied to James as well as to Peirce. The next section will move through the various criteria by which Peirce separates his own ‘pragmaticism’ from pragmatism more broadly, focusing on his two

¹ Haack (1997). For examples of the division between these two types of pragmatism in recent scholarship, see in particular Misak (2013), and also Talisse (2010; 2013); Talisse and Aikin (2005); Haack (1977; 1997) and Mounce (1997) for a book length account of the split. Rorty makes the same split in the opposite direction, endorsing Jamesian pragmatism and arguing that Peirce did little more than give pragmatism its name (1982: 161). Klein (2013) and Levine (2013) are two contemporary figures arguing against this asserted divide from a Jamesian position.

² For abbreviations see bibliography.

Monist articles, both published in 1905, ‘What Pragmatism Is’ and ‘Issues of Pragmaticism’ (§2). The subsequent sections will show that James meets these various criteria, looking in particular at James's position on metaphysical inquiry (§3), his stance on critical common-sensism (§4), and his realism about generals (§5). Though James himself was not interested in attending to the differences between various versions of pragmatism, by calling him a pragmaticist I hope to bridge the apparent divide between the two thinkers, and bring them into a more productive dialogue.

§2. PRAGMATISM AND PRAGMATICISM

At the beginning of the first *Monist* article, Peirce gives us the terminological rule by which he separates ‘pragmatism’ from ‘pragmaticism’:

the name of a doctrine would naturally end in -ism, while -icism might mark a more strictly defined acception of that doctrine (1905, CP5.413).

Pragmaticism, then, is meant to be a more *defined* version of pragmatism. In a letter to the Italian pragmatist Mario Calderoni, Peirce presents the position he adopted in this article in the following way:

I proposed that the word ‘pragmatism’ should hereafter be used somewhat loosely to signify affiliation with Schiller, James, Dewey, Royce, and the rest of us, while the particular doctrine which I invented the word to denote, which is your first kind of pragmatism, should be called ‘pragmaticism.’ The extra syllable will indicate the narrower meaning (1905, CP8.205).

Peirce considers his ‘original’ conception of what he now calls pragmaticism to have a number of advantages over the pragmatisms which followed it, and sees it as immune to a number of the problems which less precise pragmatisms entail (1905, CP5.415).³ Pragmaticism, then, is the original, best, and most strictly defined version of pragmatism.

Seeing as pragmaticism is a more refined example of pragmatism, we need to be clear on what Peirce means by ‘pragmatism’. Pragmatism, according to Peirce, emerges out of the application of a certain kind of scientific methodology to philosophy. When someone with an ‘experimentalist’ perspective is asked to assess the meaning of any assertion, they tend to do so in terms of the kinds of experiences we should expect if certain actions are performed (1905, CP5.411). It was this experimentalist perspective which lead Peirce to express the pragmatic maxim, which in 1905 he defines in the following way:

³ Peirce thinks that the ‘capital merit’ of his pragmaticism over other pragmatisms is that it ‘more readily connects itself with a critical proof of its truth’ (1905, CP5.415). See Hookway (2012: 197-234) for an examination of Peirce's attempts to ‘prove’ pragmaticism.

if one can define accurately all the conceivable experimental phenomena which the affirmation or denial of a concept could imply, one will have therein a complete definition of the concept, and *there is absolutely nothing more in it* (1905, CP5.412).⁴

A ‘pragmatist’ in Peirce’s terms is simply someone who holds some version of the pragmatic maxim. He is happy to attribute this definition to himself, James, Dewey, Schiller, Royce, and others (1905, CP5.414; 1905, CP8.205).

Before giving an account of ‘pragmaticism’ and its differences from pragmatism, Peirce is keen to assert that there are several ‘preliminary propositions’ which we must adopt if our pragmaticism is going to be anything more than ‘a nullity’. He thinks that some of the other pragmatists (he mentions Schiller) include some of these propositions within their pragmatism, but Peirce aims here to present them precisely (1905, CP5.416). These propositions include a commitment to anti-foundationalism, anti-scepticism, and a theory of beliefs as habits of action. Let’s take these in turn.

Peirce consistently and explicitly rejects any philosophical methodologies which attempt to find some certain foundation for philosophical reflection, either through the ‘first impressions of sense’, or by ‘doubting everything’ until we find something indubitable. The first strategy forgets that all our perceptions ‘are the results of cognitive elaboration’. The second misunderstands what ‘doubt’ really is (1905, CP5.416).

True doubt, Peirce tells us elsewhere, is an unpleasant state of mind which is characterised by a feeling of unease and by an inability to continue with some actual conduct. It is defined by the interruption of some actual belief, and initiates an inquiry to regain a stable belief (1877, W4:247-8; 1905, CP5.510). Peirce often contrasts true doubt with what he calls ‘paper-doubt’ (1906, CP6.498). These are doubts merely entertained in philosophical reflection, ‘as if doubting were “as easy as lying”’. But doubting is not easy. We cannot *really* doubt anything which we actually live by, and that which we do not actually doubt, we must ‘regard as infallible, absolute truth’ (1905, CP5.416). Combined with his anti-foundationalism, then, Peirce presents a kind of anti-scepticism.

Rather than looking for some indubitable foundation from which to start our philosophical inquiry, Peirce holds that:

there is but one state of mind from which you can ‘set out’, namely the very state of mind in which you actually find yourself at the time you do ‘set out’

⁴ Peirce’s original expression of the pragmatic maxim was in ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’ (1878, W3:266). Other, distinct expressions of the pragmatic maxim can be found throughout Peirce’s work (cf. 1903, CP5.18; 1905, CP5.9; 1905, CP5.438). See Hookway (2012: 165-181) for an exploration of these different formulations.

- a state in which you are laden with an immense mass of cognition already formed, of which you cannot divest yourself if you would (1905, CP5.416).

Asserting that beliefs which we do not actually doubt are held to be absolutely true does not commit Peirce to anti-fallibilism. Peirce's assertion is that we must *hold* them to be absolutely true *until* we find an experience which actually leads us to *really* doubt them. Real doubt is 'only called into being by a certain finite stimulus' (1905, CP5.416). Any belief is theoretically open to doubt, but we should not doubt our beliefs until we have good reason to. Peirce likens his view of inquiry to walking on a bog, rather than walking on a bedrock of certain fact. The best we can say is 'this ground seems to hold for the present. Here I will stay until it begins to give way' (1898, CP5.589).

This talk of real doubt leads us to our next preliminary proposition: that belief is a habit of action. A belief is not a 'momentary mode of consciousness' but is a 'habit of mind essentially enduring for some time'. It is a disposition to a certain kind of conduct, in certain contexts. Doubt, on the other hand, is a 'condition of erratic activity'. One of the things which we are incapable of doubting is that we can influence our own habits. We can only consider ourselves and others responsible for conduct that is capable of being altered. Through preparation in imagination, and reflection after our actions, we alter our habits of conduct. The ideal end point of such a process is conduct which is marked by 'an entire absence of self-reproach' (1905, CP5.417-8). So, Peirce's full position is that belief is a habit of action which is subject to self-control.⁵

These are the preliminary propositions which any pragmatism has to adopt. Peirce now goes on to describe pragmatism itself. The first assertion he makes is that pragmatism is a type of 'prope-positivism' (1905, CP5.423).⁶ This essentially means that pragmatism is committed to the application of scientific methodology to the problems of philosophy. Peirce expressed such a position first in 'The Fixation of Belief', in which he argued that the method of science was superior to the method of *a priori* reasoning (1877, W3:242-57). It is through experiment and experience that we determine what is true, in any area of inquiry, and philosophy is no different. The application of the pragmatic maxim to philosophical problems allows us to determine which avenues of inquiry can reach experimentally testable conclusions, and which are 'meaningless gibberish'. Subsequently, 'what will remain of philosophy will be a series of problems capable of investigation by the observational methods of the true sciences' (1905, CP5.423).

Calling pragmatism a prope-positivism does not commit Peirce to any kind of materialism, naturalism, or claims about the reducibility of metaphysical

⁵ For more on Peirce on (moral) self-control, see CP1.591ff.

⁶ Peirce had previously defined the prefix 'prope' as marking a 'broad and rather indefinite extension of the meaning of the term to which it was prefixed' (1905, CP5.413).

propositions to propositions of a particular natural science. This is purely a position about the kind of methodology we should employ in our philosophical inquiries. Pragmatism is distinguished from other positivisms, according to Peirce, by its holding three other doctrines:

[W]hat distinguishes it from other species [of positivism] is, first, its retention of a purified philosophy; secondly, its full acceptance of the main body of our instinctive beliefs; and thirdly, its strenuous insistence upon the truth of scholastic realism (1905, CP5.423).

It is these three criteria which are doing the work in distinguishing pragmatism, not just from other positivisms, but also from other kinds of pragmatism.

The first criterion concerns Peirce's assertion that pragmatism does not reject all metaphysics, but 'extracts from it a precious essence, which will serve to give light and life to cosmology and physics' (CP5.423). Peirce wants 'pure' philosophy, such as logic, metaphysics, and ethics, to still be pursuable under pragmatism, just pursued according to the scientific method. The second criterion concerns what Peirce calls, in his second 1905 *Monist* paper, 'critical common-sensism', and which he connects with Scottish common-sense philosophy (1905, CP7.438-463). Elsewhere Peirce expresses this view by saying that pragmatism 'implies faith in common sense and in instinct, though only as they issue from the cupel-furnace of measured criticism' (1908, CP5.480). The third criteria asserts the validity of scholastic realism. In Peircean terms, this means realism about 'thirdness'. The pragmatist must be a realist about generals, laws, continuity, possibility, and relation (e.g. 1903, CP5.93ff).⁷

This is not the place to rehearse Peirce's arguments for, and defences of, these various positions. The aim of this paper is to determine whether on these criteria Peirce could legitimately separate his own pragmatism from that of James. According to his published papers of 1905, Peirce has given us six criteria by which we can recognise a pragmatist: 1) they must hold some version of the pragmatist maxim; 2) they must be committed to the 'preliminary propositions' of anti-foundationalism, anti-scepticism, and seeing belief as a habit of action susceptible to self-control; 3) they must be committed to a scientific methodology in philosophical investigations; 4) they must be committed to the possibility of metaphysical inquiry; 5) they must be a critical common-sensist, and; 6) they must be a realist about generals. The rest of the paper will aim to show that James does in fact meet these criteria.

I will assume that it is fairly uncontentious that James meets criteria 1) and 3). James expressed his own and Peirce's version of the pragmatic maxim repeatedly (1898, P: 257ff; 1907, P: 29-30). He also held that philosophical investigations such as moral, religious, and metaphysical inquiries should be performed in a way

⁷ See Peirce, 1903, CP5.93ff; c.1888, W6:172ff.

which is analogous to science (1891, WB: 157; 1896, WB: 8-9). Peirce agrees that he, James, and the other pragmatists agree on these two points (c.1906, CP4.464-5). Both hold that a proposition's meaning is located in the future, and found by tracing what experiences would follow from it being true (Peirce, 1905, CP5.427; James, 1907, P: 44ff).

James also meets the second criterion. He consistently held a version of anti-scepticism, on the grounds that we must reject it if we are to continue with our practices of philosophy, morality, and finding our lives meaningful (1891, WB: 141; 1896, WB: 20; 28; 1909, MT: 107-8). He also rejects foundationalism, on the ground that no belief is self-certifying. Though we can become more certain of our beliefs as experience continues to confirm them, none of our beliefs can be shown to be so certain that they could not be revisable in the long run (1896, WB: 20-24). James linked pragmatism with the theory that beliefs were habits of action (1898, P: 259), and also held that these habits were subject to self-control (1890, PP1: 126ff). These are all of Peirce's 'preliminary propositions'.

Operating on the fairly safe assumption that James accepts the first three criteria, I will spend the rest of the paper arguing that James meets the latter three.

§3. JAMES AND METAPHYSICS (CRITERION 4)

In his review of James's *Principles of Psychology*, Peirce criticises James for bracketing metaphysical questions out of his psychology (1890, CP8.60). James's move at the beginning of the *Principles* is to uncritically assume the propositions required for the science of psychology to proceed: that there are minds with thoughts and feelings, that there is a physical world, and that minds can know that world. All these assumptions can be called into question, but, according to James, 'the discussion of them [...] is called metaphysics and falls outside the province of this book' (1890, PP1: 6). James restricts his psychology to the investigation of what he takes to be the empirical phenomena of feelings, thoughts, brain states, and their relations. Explanations of these phenomena which appealed to entities such as 'souls' or 'transcendental egos' would be, again, metaphysical. So, James aims to separate psychology as a natural science from metaphysics.

James's position in the *Principles* might be taken as an example of him rejecting the possibility of usefully and scientifically inquiring into metaphysical propositions. However, it is not at all clear that James *is* denying that certain metaphysical considerations have a bearing on psychology, or that these considerations can be inquired into. Indeed, he suggests that his adopted assumptions, which appear to be metaphysical in nature, *can* be discussed in a separate metaphysical inquiry. This presumably means that such an inquiry could disprove, alter, or criticise these assumptions in a way that would effect empirical

psychology. James just does not think that such an inquiry should be performed *within* empirical psychology. His aim appears to be the delineation of different avenues of inquiry, with the understanding that that they can influence each other when appropriate.

In actual fact, James is quite clear from a very early point in his career that metaphysical inquiry is unavoidable. For instance, in his 1879 version of 'The Sentiment of Rationality', James says the following:

Metaphysics of some sort there must be. The only alternative is between the good Metaphysics of clear-headed Philosophy, and the trashy Metaphysics of vulgar Positivism (1879, EPh: 56-57).

James makes at least two points about the necessity of pursuing metaphysical inquiry. The first concerns the idea that *any* account of the world will involve some metaphysics. Even apparently metaphysically innocent statements about 'Nature' and 'Law' involve taking an implicit ontological stance. We can either accept the unexamined materialist metaphysics of 'vulgar positivism' without question, or we undertake some more careful philosophical investigation into metaphysics.

James's second point about metaphysics concerns the necessity of metaphysical inquiry for *practical* life. Each of us carries around some metaphysical formula, some picture of the way we think the universe is, 'under [our] hat' (1879, EPh: 32). In most cases these metaphysical ideas are confused and unexamined. They tell us what we ought to expect from the world, what possibilities the universe allows for, and what meanings our actions can or cannot have within it. These metaphysical systems have real practical effects on our lives, and can lead to real practical and existential problems when they go wrong (e.g. 1896, WB: 39-40). It is in some sense the philosopher's task to make explicit, organise, and improve these various inchoate metaphysical positions.

James's primary use of the pragmatic maxim, in later years, was its application to metaphysical and other philosophical problems in an attempt to elucidate the pragmatic issues which were at stake. In some cases, this would lead to the discovery that there *were* no pragmatic or experiential effects, and so a dissolution of the problem. In other cases, the application of the maxim would reveal the practical difference between the competing options so that they could be frankly evaluated and tested on their pragmatic effects (e.g., 1907, P: 45ff). In this regard, James seems to be following Peirce's suggestion that the application of the pragmatic maxim to philosophy would separate problems which can be solved through the experimental method, and those which were 'meaningless gibberish' (1905, CP5.423).

Overall, James seems to be committed to the view that we should reject ‘vulgar positivism’, and its distaste for metaphysics, and consider a scientifically conducted metaphysical inquiry a necessary part of philosophy.

§4. JAMES AND CRITICAL COMMON-SENSISM (CRITERION 5)

It is in his second *Monist* article on this topic, entitled ‘Issues of Pragmaticism’, that Peirce clarifies exactly what he means by ‘Critical Common-Sensism’. Critical common-sensism is a variety of Scottish common-sense philosophy, but differentiated by six different characteristics. I’ll briefly run through these characteristics now.

Any common-sensism involves the assertion that there are foundational beliefs which are indubitable. For Peirce, this means indubitable in the sense that they are not currently susceptible to real doubt. The first characteristic of *critical* common-sensism is that there are *inferences* as well as beliefs which are indubitable in this sense. The second is that common-sense beliefs *evolve* over generations as a result of human beings’ interactions with their environment. The third character is that we should think of these beliefs as *instincts* which are indubitable when applied to contexts similar to those in which they evolved. The further from their appropriate contexts, the more *vague* these beliefs become, which is the fourth character of critical common-sensism. Fifth, the critical common-sensist not only revises these beliefs in the light of appropriate experience, but also *seeks out* experiences which might lead them to doubt these beliefs, before asserting them to be indubitable. And sixth, critical common-sensism is *critical* of itself, regular common-sensism, psychologism, and Kantianism (1905, CP5.440-452).

According to Peirce the ‘most distinctive’ character of the critical common-sensist is the fourth, that ‘the acritically indubitable is invariably vague’ (1905, CP5.446). Peirce’s notion of vagueness is complex, but here it will be sufficient to connect vagueness with indeterminacy of application or interpretation. In an unpublished paper on the same topic, Peirce tells us that:

[a] sign is objectively *vague*, insofar as, leaving its interpretation more or less indeterminate, it reserves for some other possible sign or experience the function of completing the determination (c.1905, CP5.505).

It is with this in mind that we should interpret Peirce’s claim that the principle of contradiction does not apply to vague propositions. A vague proposition is still open to being interpreted in a number of definite ways. Until we know which

determinate form a vague proposition should take, 'it may be true that a proposition is true and that a proposition is false' (1905, CP5.448).⁸

Perhaps the simplest way to think about critical common-sensism is that it is the thesis that there are indubitable (in the sense of not available to real doubt) beliefs and inferences which are fallible (in the sense that they can be revised if we encounter the right kinds of experience) and vague (in the sense that they require more definite articulation in contexts further away from their original context), which form a basic foundation for many of our practices.

James deals with the idea of common-sense in his *Pragmatism* lectures. There he presents the view that every individual is an 'extreme conservative', in the sense of naturally wanting to preserve their beliefs. When we are compelled by experience to adopt a new belief, we try to minimize the effect this new addition has on beliefs which we already hold. However, once a new belief has been adopted, it tends to alter those which it is inferentially related to. In this way '[o]ur minds [...] grow in spots; and like grease-spots, the spots spread' (1907, P: 83). But the new beliefs we adopt are also altered by our older ones. Any novel experience is couched in the various assumptions and predictions of our old beliefs. In this sense James gives us a kind of 'Neurath's boat' image, not dissimilar to Peirce's bog metaphor: '[w]e patch and tinker more than we renew. The novelty soaks in; it stains the ancient mass; but it is also tinged by what absorbs it' (1907, P: 83).

The 'ancient mass' James is talking about here is our store of inherited beliefs, which James also terms common-sense. These are a class of beliefs which serve as the foundation of most of our everyday practices, and include in their number notions such as 'a thing', space and time, minds and bodies, and the difference between reality and fantasy. Though critical philosophy might be able to question these foundational elements of our thought, we cannot really doubt them in our practical lives. James takes the notion of a 'thing' as an example. We might postulate in philosophy that a thing is just a 'group of sense-qualities united by a law'. Or we might in physical science learn that a thing is a swirling mass of atoms. Nonetheless, when 'critical pressure is relaxed', and we leave the classroom or laboratory, we return to our common-sense ideas of things. 'Our later and more critical philosophies', James tells us, 'are mere fads and fancies compared with this natural mother-tongue of thought'. It is only 'minds debauched by learning' which even suspect common-sense beliefs of not being 'absolutely true' (1907, P: 85-89).

Despite their foundational role, these ideas are neither permanent nor absolute. Like Peirce, James holds them to be the result of generations of evolution. All common-sense beliefs were once hypotheses, adopted by our primitive ancestors,

⁸ See Hookway (2000: 135-158) for a more detailed elaboration of the subject of vagueness in Peirce, and the usefulness of vague propositions.

applied to experience, and found to work so successfully that they became a fundamental part of our thought. As James puts it, '*our fundamental ways of thinking about things are discoveries of exceedingly remote ancestors, which have been able to preserve themselves throughout experience of all subsequent time*' (1907, P: 83). The fundamentality of these beliefs makes them harder to question, and makes it less likely that we will encounter an experience which will make us doubt them. But we should not consider them infallible or self-evident, as the rationalistic scholastic philosophers did. No matter how old they are, we should still consider our common-sense beliefs to be 'a collection of extraordinarily successful hypotheses', and so subject to revision in appropriate circumstances. At least in philosophical inquiry, then, we should maintain a healthy 'suspicion' about common-sense ideas, rather than assuming their eternal veracity (1907, P: 90-94).

These common-sense beliefs are the foundation of most if not all of our everyday practices, and are instrumental in the sense that they allow us to make inferences and predictions about future experience. However, the application of these common-sense beliefs outside of the contexts in which they emerged leads to them being less determinate, and the inferences we make using them less secure. For instance, our concepts of time and space work perfectly well when we apply them to our daily practical lives. But when we apply our common-sense ideas on a cosmic scale, they become 'vague, confused, and mixed'. Accordingly, James tells us that '[t]he moment you pass beyond the practical use of these categories [...] to a merely curious or speculative way of thinking, you find it impossible to say within just what limits of fact any one of them shall apply' (1907, P: 87-90). This is essentially Peirce's point concerning the indeterminacy of common-sense beliefs when applied to different contexts.

We have some reason, then, to think that James holds a common-sensism which is just as 'critical' as Peirce's. Like Peirce, James holds that there are indubitable (in the sense of us having no real reason to doubt them) beliefs and inferences, which are fallible (in the sense that they can be revised if we encounter the right kinds of experience) and vague (in the sense that they require more definite articulation in contexts further away from their original context), and which form a basic foundation for many of our practices.

§5. JAMES AND SCHOLASTIC REALISM (CRITERION 6)

Of the criteria which defined pragmatism, scholastic realism was the most important to Peirce. He called himself a realist of an 'extreme stripe' (c.1906, CP5.470), and suggested that 'pragmatism could hardly have entered a head that was not already convinced that there are real generals' (1905, CP5.503). It is also the most important criterion for our current inquiry. It is James's supposed

nominalism which is most often alluded to when drawing a distinction between his and Peirce's pragmatisms.

Scholastic realism is deeply connected with Peirce's category of 'thirdness'. Being a realist about thirdness means being committed to realism about generals, laws, relations, possibility, and continuity. Rejecting realism about thirdness is what Peirce means by nominalism. Nominalism, according to Peirce, is a flawed doctrine, which has serious negative implications for both theoretical inquiry and practical life. Despite this, he saw it as being almost universally held among contemporary and historical thinkers. In a letter to James in 1904, Peirce described refuting nominalism as by far pragmatism's 'most important consequence' (1904, CP8.258).

Peirce has a consistent definition of what it means for something to be 'real'. The real is 'that whose characters are independent of what anybody may think them to be', and is the object which is represented by that 'opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate' (1878, W3:271-273). The difference between the scholastic realist and the nominalist, then, concerns whether or not laws, generals, and relations have this kind of reality. The realist will hold that they do, whereas the nominalist will hold that they are 'constituted simply by [...] the way in which our minds are affected by the individual objects which have in themselves no resemblance or relationship whatsoever'. Note that the scholastic realist need not hold that generals are independent of *all* thought, but only that they are independent of 'how you, or I, or any number of men think' and so are independent of 'all that is arbitrary and individual in thought' (1871, W2:467-9).⁹

In this final section I aim to show that James is a realist about generals in this sense, and so meets Peirce's final criterion for being recognised as a pragmatist. I shall do so by arguing that James is *not* a nominalist in three separate areas: he is not an ontological nominalist (§5.1); he does not have a nominalist view of perception (§5.2); and he is not an epistemological nominalist (§5.3).

§5.1 ONTOLOGICAL NOMINALISM

The central ontological thesis of nominalism is that reality at bottom is *solely* made up of discrete individuals, and that laws, generals, and relations are not real. As Peirce puts it, nominalists 'recognise but one mode of being, the being of an individual thing or fact' (1903, CP1.21).

James certainly takes individuals to be of central importance in his philosophy, and this is often taken to be evidence of his nominalism. At least part of the reason James prioritised individuals in this way was his antagonism towards a specific

⁹ Cf. (Peirce 1909, CP6.453) for a later expression of the same view.

version of Absolute idealism. James argued (particularly in *A Pluralistic Universe*) that the monistic idealisms which exclusively privileged the general and the universal in their accounts of reality produced not only intellectual but also existential problems. However, denying the *priority* of generals is not the same as denying their *reality*.¹⁰

In fact, when criticising traditional empiricisms and idealisms in his metaphysical work, James suggests that they have a common problem at root. And that problem looks a lot like nominalism. Both start from the assumption that reality is fundamentally *dis*-unified. Once we start from an assumption of atomism, the patterns and the unities which we experience become mysterious. Empiricism attempts to solve this problem by appealing to conventional habits of association, and idealism by introducing trans-experiential agencies to bind the disparate elements of our experience together (e.g. 'The Absolute'). Rather than starting from a false assumption of atomism, however, James points to the fact that our normal experience contains both continuities and discontinuities. We have no more reason, he argues, for assuming that one requires explanation any more than the other. If idealists and empiricists were consistent, they would feel compelled to produce philosophical explanations for the disunity as well as the unity found in our experience. James's strategy, on the other hand, is to assume that continuity and discontinuity are on an equal ontological footing:

[I]f we insist on treating things as really separate when they are given as continuously joined, invoking, when union is required, transcendental principles to overcome the separateness we have assumed, then we ought to stand ready to perform the converse act. We ought to invoke higher principles of *dis*union, also, to make our merely experiential disjunctions more truly real. Failing this, we ought to let the originally given continuities stand on their own bottom (1904, ERE: 26-27).

Without naming it, James is criticising classical empiricism and certain forms of idealism for assuming a *nominalistic* world picture.

The main methodological postulate of James's 'radical empiricism' is that we should treat everything which is experienceable as real, and vice-versa (1904, ERE: 22). James's assertion that we should take continuity to be just as real as discontinuity should be understood in this full metaphysical sense. Of course, any actual instance of experienced continuity might be shown to be false on

¹⁰ Peirce was certainly an 'extreme' realist, in that he held that generals were 'the most important element of being' (1898, CP4.1), and that even Duns Scotus was too nominalistic (c.1905, CP1.560). But, in his 1905 *Monist* articles, he does not claim that this extremity is required by the pragmatist, only that realism is.

subsequent examination. But there is no reason for rejecting the reality of all continuity.¹¹

Most often when James talks about continuity in his radical empiricism papers, he refers to *relations* which obtain between features of experience. The relations which he has in mind are both conjunctive and disjunctive, and include nextness, similarity and difference, tendency, causality, purpose, identity, and continuation (1904, ERE: 23-4). The relations are themselves capable of being experienced, and so are just as real as anything else under the radical empirical hypothesis. James compares his own view, in which these relations are real and objective, with rationalism and traditional empiricism:

[Relations] are undeniable parts of pure experience; yet, while common sense and what I call radical empiricism stand for their being objective, both rationalism and the usual empiricism claim that they are exclusively the ‘work of the mind’ (1905, ERE: 74).

Radical empiricism is the view that reality demonstrates an experiential unity through relations and continuities which are themselves experiential and objective (1905, ERE: 53; 1909, MT: 7), and which are independent of any individual or set of minds (1904, ERE: 40). And by presenting this view James is not only rejecting monistic idealism, but also nominalism.¹²

As well as his commitment to objective relations between objects, James holds that we can discern general empirical ‘laws of nature’, such as ‘heat melts ice’ and ‘salt preserves meat’. These are the kinds of empirical discoveries which, on a long enough time line, become common-sense beliefs in the pragmaticist sense (§4).¹³ James does not attribute the reality of such laws to the activity of human minds, but rather to the ‘habitudes of concrete things’ (1890, PP1: 1233), or the ‘immutable habits which the different elementary sorts of matter follow’ (1890, PP1: 125). Like Peirce, then, James tends to attribute a principle of habit to matter as well as to organic beings, and is even occasionally tempted by a Peircean type cosmology in which these regularities grew over time from a period of relative

¹¹ The name which Peirce gives to realism about continuity is ‘synechism’. James is quite clear that he holds this view, which he also attributes to Bergson. But Peirce disagreed on both James and Bergson’s imprecise articulation of the theory (Letters from Peirce to James, 1909, quoted in Perry 1936, vol 2: 437-440). See Dea (2015) and Haack (1977) for more on the metaphysical distinctions between James and Peirce.

¹² According to Peirce himself, this radical empiricist view would disqualify James from being an ontological nominalist. He tells us that ‘nominalists generally do not admit that there is any similarity in things apart from the mind; but they may admit that this exists, provided that they deny that it constitutes any unity among the things apart from the mind. They cannot admit the latter and remain consistent nominalists’ (1902, CP6.377).

¹³ James does hold that we must adopt our belief in the uniformity of nature *as a whole* on seemingly *a priori* grounds, before we can begin to inquire into nature as discover these more ‘proximate’ laws (1890, PP 2: 1233-4). The belief in the uniformity of nature as a whole cannot be derived from experience, but rather serve as conditions for our inquiries into nature. As such, these beliefs must be adopted on the basis of what Peirce would call ‘regulative’ or ‘intellectual’ hopes (see Peirce c.1890, CP1.405; c.1896, CP1.121; c.1901; CP7.187; CP7.219). For more on James’s account of the *a priori*, see Klein (2016).

chaos (1909, EPh: 369).¹⁴ Overall, James appears committed to the ontological reality of laws, continuity, and generality.

§5.2. PERCEPTUAL NOMINALISM

It is difficult to separate James's metaphysical view from his work on perception and experience. This is because James thinks that experience *is* the 'stuff' of which reality is composed (1904, ERE: 4). This might cause problems for the realist reading of James, however, as he appears to hold a nominalist account of perception. The nominalist tends to think of immediate experience as a kind of 'chaotic torrent of independent data' which is subsequently categorised and organised by subjects on the basis of their personal interests. Nothing objective corresponds to the conceptual categorisations these subjects use to differentiate the originary experiential confusion, as they are merely the products of personal convenience. As such they cannot be 'real' in Peirce's sense of being independent of personal opinion (Forster 2011: 4-5; see Peirce 1898 CP4.1).

It is easy to interpret James as this kind of nominalist when we remember his famous statement that experience in its immediacy is a 'blooming, buzzing confusion' (1890, PP1: 462), and his assertions that we tend to make order out of this chaos by reference to our interests, and a certain amount of 'arbitrary choice' (1907, P: 119). According to James the 'cuts we make [in the 'perceptual flux'] are purely ideal' (1910, SPP: 32):

the world we feel and live in, will be that which our ancestors and we, by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, as the sculptor extracts his statue by simply rejecting the other portions of the stone. Other sculptors, other statues from the same stone! Other minds, other worlds from the same chaos! (1879, EPs: 51-52).

James's position seems to be that sensation or experience is at base chaotic, and that we make distinctions in this chaos according to our interests.

However, the story is not that simple. James is careful to never suggest that the distinctions we draw within our perception refer to nothing real. In his *Principles*, James does not tell us that we *make* distinctions through interest, but that we *detect* them by using our interest (1890, PP1: 481). Real distinctions in our environment are either practically salient to us, and so interesting, or they are not. Practical interest makes us attend to certain elements of the environment, and ignore others (1890, PP1: 487). Through practice and training, we can learn to attend to distinctions within the environment which are not of immediate practical

¹⁴ Cf. (Peirce 1898, CP6.209; CP6.262ff); (James 1904, ERE: 18; 1905, ERE: 74).

interest to us, but which are nonetheless still objective distinctions (1890, PP1: 481).

Making these conceptual distinctions is necessary for navigating the sensible flux of pure experience. Without being able to distinguish between features of experience on the basis of some purpose, we would be lost in a sea of sensation. Using concepts on this sensible flux allows us to perform all kinds of functions and operations on raw experience which prove to be useful. Just like our experience, the concepts which we use to organise it can themselves appear to be disordered and chaotic. However, in time, we come to see that there are inferential relations which connect these concepts, independent of our opinions about them, and so we begin to trace order in the conceptual realm also (1904, ERE: 9-10). James treats concepts and the inferential relations between them as a 'co-ordinate realm' of reality, just as real as percepts (1909, MT: 32). This is another sense in which James is committed to ontological realism about generals.

What sense, then, should we make of James's assertion that the cuts we make in the sensible flux are 'merely ideal'? In making this statement, James is contrasting the ideality of concepts with the real continuity of sensory experience. When they are not mistaken or misapplied, concepts respond to objective distinctions in our environment. But though concepts are useful, real, and track something objective, we should not think of concepts as definitively representing reality. Sensible reality is continuous, complex, and plural in a way that concepts are incapable of grasping. In *Some Problems*, James puts it this way:

The great difference between percepts and concepts is that percepts are continuous and concepts are discrete. Not discrete in their *being*, for conception as an *act* is part of the flux of feeling, but discrete from each other in their several *meanings* (1910, SPP: 32).

Concepts are discrete from one another in a way that is not representative of sensible experience. Concepts can contradict each other, and we can trace their differences in a relatively exact fashion. In sensible reality, on the other hand, the 'boundaries are no more distinct than are those of the field of vision [...] whatever we distinguish and isolate conceptually is found perceptually to telescope and compenetrates and diffuse into its neighbours' (1910, SPP: 32). The cuts we make through conceptualisation, then, are 'ideal' in the sense that they make exact differences which are, in sensation, vague.

James, then, does not seem committed to a nominalistic account of perception so much as he is committed to pluralistic account of experience. It is not the case that there are no objective discriminations to be made in our experience, or that our concepts refer to nothing real. It is in fact the opposite: there are too many such distinctions for *all* of them to be detected and attended to, and they are

continuous and vague in ways that concepts can often miss.¹⁵ No conceptual system will be able to completely grasp the totality of our sensory reality, because some information escapes any attempt at conceptualisation. We shape the world of our lived experience by attending to some objective discriminations, and not to others.

§5.3. EPISTEMOLOGICAL NOMINALISM

The nominalist does not believe that concepts and propositions about general laws can be judged to be ‘true’ or ‘false’, but only ‘useful’ or ‘not useful’. Again, this is because there is nothing in reality which the propositions or concepts are true *of*. As Forster puts it: ‘for nominalists, laws and general concepts are artefacts of economizing minds to which nothing in reality literally corresponds’ (2011: 5).

James is routinely criticised for his conception of truth for just this reason. James seems to suggest that truth is what is ‘expedient’ or useful for us to believe (1907, P: 106). As it appears possible to separate truth and usefulness, given the prevalence of useful false beliefs, critics tend to see James as being led to a highly subjectivist position in which it is legitimate for us to believe anything we find useful, regardless of its truth. This is not the place to deal with such a vexed topic conclusively. Here I aim only to indicate that James was not a nominalist in this regard.

James's treatment of truth emerges from his application of the pragmatic maxim. He is arguing against people who explain truth by appealing to a proposition's ‘self-transcending’ capacity to refer to an object beyond itself. James finds such talk metaphysically confusing, and in need of pragmatic elucidation (1904, ERE: 27; 1909, MT: 61). Pragmatist analysis suggests that the practical effects of some belief being ‘true’ would be that it allowed us to operate successfully in the world, and that we would encounter no problems if we continued to act according to it. A proposition is true if it would lead us through a series of experiences to a verification of it (1904, ERE: 14; 1907, ERE: 146-7). James does not deny that concepts and propositions need to agree with reality. He just elaborates what that relation means pragmatically. It means to be put in ‘*working touch*’ with reality (1907, P: 102).

Taking a concept to be true pragmatically involves making a series of predictions about what kinds of experiences we will encounter. So, to test a concept's truth, we can see if it is an accurate predictor of future experience. If our predications are successful, and in practical cases that means *useful*, then we have good reason

¹⁵ Steven Levine makes the first point well in his recent article, where he says that ‘[w]hat is important to realize is that for James the sensory flux is a much-at-onceness that contains a *plenitude* or *overabundance* of qualities and relations’ (Levine 2013: 129).

for suspecting that the concept is true. James clarifies his position in *The Meaning of Truth*, where he where he calls himself an ‘epistemological realist’ (1909, MT: 106), and argues that ‘the very condition of [concepts] having [...] utility’ is that ‘their objects should be really there’ (1909, MT: 112). So, though James is committed to the position that usefulness is a marker of truth, he is also committed to the position that what is most useful, at least in the long run, is for our ideas to agree with reality.

There is a second way in which James might be considered an epistemological nominalist. Careless expression on James’s part can make it seem as if he holds that the truth of a concept is determined by the practical difference it makes within the experience of an *individual*. In *Pragmatism*, for instance, he states that the purpose of philosophy is to determine what ‘definite difference it will make to you and me [...] if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one’ (1907, P: 30). Peirce, in comparison, holds that truth is independent of the ‘vagaries’ of individual opinion, and emerges only within a *community* of inquiry, over time (1868, W2:239; see 1878, W3:284-5). This individualistic move by the pragmatists who followed him greatly concerned Peirce (1908, CP6.485).¹⁶

However, James’s considered view is closer to Peirce’s than it at first seems. James does aim to provide a meaningful place for individuals within philosophical inquiry. To this end, he allows individuals to generate novel hypotheses, challenge existing practices and institutions, and decide on personal grounds which hypothesis, out of a set of equally plausible and impossible options, will be pursued (e.g. 1890, WB: 190ff). But the verification of these hypotheses always depends on whether or not the wider environment of ‘outward relations’ confirms or denies them (1880, WB: 184-6). Though James admits that he sometimes writes, for ‘the sake of simplicity’, as if the experience of one individual were sufficient for the verification of a philosophical hypothesis, he insists that any question of significant scope requires ‘the experience of the entire human race’ and ‘the co-operation of generations’ to be verified (1882, WB: 87-8). James maintains this position in his mature work, asserting that the pragmatist defines truth in terms of what is satisfactory, not to an individual, but in ‘the long run and on the whole’ (1909, MT: 9). Even in his most apparently subjectivist work, ‘The Will to Believe’, James holds that the verification of a belief is not found in any one individual’s experience, but in whether or not ‘the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it’ (1896, WB: 24). So, though James habitually talks about *individual* truth, he consistently separates what appears and functions as true *for us*, in our individual and fallible opinion, from what would be found to be true in the experience of human beings in the long run. The latter is what James calls

¹⁶ According to Misak, this opposition between truth ‘as a product of the individual’ and truth ‘as a product of the community over time’ is what is ‘at the heart of the dispute between James and Peirce’ (Misak, 2013: 60).

‘absolute truth’, meaning ‘what no farther experience will ever alter’ (1907, P: 106; see 1909, MT: 143).¹⁷

The aim here is not to prove or disprove James's pragmatic account of truth. The aim is only to show that there are no large differences between Peirce and James on this matter. In the very same *Monist* paper in which Peirce sets up his division between pragmatism and pragmaticism, we find Peirce asserting that we must talk about truth and falsity in the practical terms of doubt and belief:

If your terms “truth” and “falsity” are taken in such senses as to be definable in terms of doubt and belief and the course of experience (as for example they would be, if you were to define the “truth” as that to a belief in which belief would tend if it were to tend indefinitely toward absolute fixity), well and good: in that case, you are only talking about doubt and belief [...] Your problems would be greatly simplified, if, instead of saying that you want to know the “Truth,” you were simply to say that you want to attain a state of belief unassailable by doubt (Peirce, 1905, CP5.416).

Peirce is denying the same transcendent accounts of truth that James is. Belief for the pragmatist is a habit of action, and real doubt is the interruption of that habit. If we have a belief that works, then we hold it to be true, at least for us, and at least for now. An absolutely true belief would be one which allowed us to act successfully and which would never encounter a real doubt. None of this is different from James's position.

Perhaps the biggest difference *in expression* between the two positions is that whereas Peirce talks about a true belief as one which *would* be unassailable by doubt, James often talks about a true belief as one which *will* actually not encounter problems. This subtle difference has serious consequences. In fact, one element of scholastic realism hinges on the difference.

In later works, Peirce bemoans what he calls his first ‘nominalistic’ expression of the pragmatic maxim. In ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’, Peirce presented the view that a diamond is hard if nothing actually *will* scratch it:

[L]et us ask what we mean by calling a thing *hard*. Evidently that it will not be scratched by many other substances. The whole conception of this quality, as of every other, lies in its conceived effects. There is absolutely no difference between a hard thing and a soft thing so long as they are not brought to the test (Peirce 1878, W3:266).

¹⁷ There are still clear and interesting points of disagreement between James and Peirce in this area. The two thinkers obviously disagree on the nature and extent of individuals' contribution to inquiry; on the kinds and breadth of experience which is considered relevant to philosophical inquiry (see Misak, 2013: 67-71); and on what counts as the right community for assessing philosophical beliefs (see Klein, 2013).

This position is nominalistic because it denies that there are general laws about diamonds which obtain even in the absence of *actually* being tested.

The importance of the subjunctive over the indicative expression, then, is that it recognises that there are real generals and real possibilities, such that something *would* be the case *if* some event occurred, even if it actually does not. This is why Peirce later changes his view to say that any diamond which was destroyed before having been brought to the test should still be considered hard, because it *would* have resisted scratching *had* it been tested (1905, CP7.453).

James did not tend to express his pragmatism with this distinction in mind, and he often favourably quoted Peirce's first 'nominalistic' expression of the pragmatic maxim. This might lead us to suspect that James continued to hold the original, indicative interpretation of it. However, there are plenty of instances in which James confirms that it is the *second*, subjunctive expression he would agree to. For instance, in expressing three different kinds of cognitive relation which can obtain between knower and known object, James suggests that one is that 'the known object is a *possible* experience either of that subject or another, to which the said conjunctive transitions *would* lead, if sufficiently prolonged' (1904, ERE: 27). In a reported interview of 1908, James explicitly tells his audience that 'truth is constituted by [some proposition's] verifiability, not by the act of verification' (1908, ML: 442). Seeing as James is a realist about cognitive relations of this kind, he is also a realist about possibility in the way Peirce's realism requires.¹⁸

Overall, then, James appears to have rejected ontological, perceptual, and epistemological nominalism. He has shown himself to be a realist about generals, about continuity, about laws, and about relations. Therefore, I think we can conclude that James meets the sixth and final criterion Peirce sets out to be recognised as a 'pragmatist'.

§6. CONCLUSION

In the *Monist* papers of 1905, Peirce presents a detailed account of a more precise version of pragmatism he called 'pragmaticism'. It was his aim in doing this to separate himself from other pragmatists, such as William James, whose expressions of pragmatism he found too broad or misapplied. This set the stage for scholars in years to come to separate Peircean and Jamesian pragmatisms, often on the grounds Peirce himself set out. In this paper I have argued that, in actual fact, James meets the six criteria Peirce set out in defining pragmaticism:

¹⁸ James frequently expressed realism about possibility, chance, and novelty, usually against the determinist or the intellectual monist (1884, WB: 114ff; 1910, SPP: 76ff). He connected this realism with his theory of pluralism (1896, WB: 6; 1907, P: 78; 1910, SPP: 72-75), as well as with Peirce's theory of 'tychism' (1902-3, ML: 268ff; 1909, PU: 153).

James holds a version of the pragmatic maxim (criterion 1); he meets the ‘preliminary propositions’ of anti-foundationalism, anti-scepticism, and holding that beliefs are habits of action (criterion 2); he applies the scientific method to philosophy (criterion 3); but nonetheless thinks subjects such as metaphysics and logic can be studied (criterion 4); he is a common-sensist of a critical sort (criterion 5); and most importantly he is a realist about generals (criterion 6). We should, I conclude, be willing to call James a ‘pragmaticist’ alongside Peirce.

Some of James’s more careful critics recognise that he does, at times, express Peircean sounding theses, but question their consistency in his work. Misak, for instance, recognises that when ‘at his best’ James expresses a very Peircean sounding account of truth, despite his sometimes ‘infelicitous wording’ and a popular style which ‘blur[s] the subtleties’ of the pragmatist position. However, according to Misak, James’s work also contains a thread of subjectivism which exists in tension with his more sensible pragmatism (Misak, 2013: 53-60). No-one can deny that James’s writing style often encourages misinterpretation. Nonetheless, in this paper I have argued that from his earliest work until his latest, James was keen to express a kind of pragmatism which was in line with Peirce’s more technically defined pragmaticism. It is my contention that most, if not all, of James’s more subjectivist sounding statements can and should be interpreted in line with this pragmaticism.¹⁹

That said, the aim of this paper has not been to eradicate all of the differences between these thinkers. Their common pragmaticism aside, we would be hard-pressed to find two figures with more dissimilar philosophical temperaments. Whereas Peirce – focused on rejecting nominalism – prioritised the general in his pragmaticism, James – focused on rejecting monistic idealism – prioritised the individual in his, sometimes at the expense of sounding subjectivistic. The two disagree about the types of experience that should be considered appropriate in philosophical inquiry, the nature of the relevant community of inquiry, and the extremity of their ‘scholastic’ realism. But these disagreements are interesting precisely because they are disagreements within the same philosophical approach. To see them as denoting a difference in *kinds* of pragmatism tends to block the road of inquiry, as it allows us to dismiss potentially productive disagreements as being irrelevant to whichever kind we prefer. Uniting James and Peirce on the grounds of pragmaticism means that their disagreements regain a sense of vitality and interest, and allows for new comparisons, challenges, and inquiries which will be relevant to both classical and contemporary pragmatism.²⁰

¹⁹ Of course, fully defending this position is outside the scope of this paper.

²⁰ I would like to thank Christopher Hookway, Robert Stern, Alexander Klein, Joshua Black, and two anonymous reviewers, for reading and commenting on previous versions of this paper.

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- EPh* *Essays in Philosophy*. In WWJ 5.
ERE *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. In WWJ 3.
ML *Manuscript Lectures*. In WWJ 19.
MT *The Meaning of Truth*. In WWJ 2.
P *Pragmatism*. In WWJ 1.
PP *The Principles of Psychology*. In WWJ 8-10.
PU *Pluralistic Universe*. In WWJ 4.
SPP *Some Problems of Philosophy*. In WWJ 7.
WB *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. In WWJ 6.

Charles Peirce Abbreviations:

- CP* *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. 8 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1931-60).
W *The Writings of Charles S. Peirce - A Chronological Edition*. Edited by Nathan Houser et al. 6 vols. Indianapolis: Peirce Edition Project, Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis (1982-1999).

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