



THE PRAGMATIST VISION OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown"

1. INTRODUCTION

"Young Goodman Brown" (1835) may be Nathaniel Hawthorne's best-known short story, associated with one of the writer's chief preoccupations: America's Puritan past. In it, Goodman Brown, an exemplary member of the Puritan community, one night leaves his wife, Faith, to meet the Devil in the forest and returns a changed man after seeing the pious inhabitants of his town participate in a black mass. The tale has been analyzed countless times, but it still provides fertile ground for interpretation: it may be read, among others, as Hawthorne's commentary on the Puritan obsession with sin, as an exploration of the internal demons of the human psyche, or as an allegory of losing one's faith. Moreover, since the story does not settle whether Brown is right about his neighbors' hypocrisy, scholars tend to either argue in favor of the reality of Goodman Brown's vision or see in it a dangerous illusion.

Not only "Young Goodman Brown" but Hawthorne's work in general still enjoys great critical interest. The unfading popularity of Gothic studies contributes to the writer's central position in research on nineteenth-century American literature, a perfect illustration of which may be the special issue of the *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* titled "Hawthorne's Gothic" (2012), edited by Monika M. Elbert and Bridget M. Marshall. Apart from the genre-driven interest in its Gothic dimension, Hawthorne's oeuvre has recently been analyzed mainly in terms of its entanglements with the writer's contexts: political (such as class, race, and gender) and historical. Important examples of such scholarly works include two collections of essays: *Hawthorne and the Real: Bicentennial Essays* (2005), edited by Millicent Bell, and *Nathaniel Hawthorne*

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in *Context* (2018), edited by Monika M. Elbert, as well as Michael J. Colacurcio's book *Hawthorne's Histories, Hawthorne's World: From Salem to Somewhere Else* (2022). Analyses of "Young Goodman Brown" itself reflect similar critical tendencies: they focus on the tale as a perfect example of the Gothic (as is the case in Michael Cody's 2012 essay "As Kinsmen, Met a Night': Charles Brockden Brown and Nathaniel Hawthorne as American Gothic Romancers"), or as an expression of Hawthorne's interest in the Puritan past (e.g., Bruce R. Magee's "Faith and Fantasy in 'Young Goodman Brown'" from 2003, John Ronan's "'Young Goodman Brown' and the Mathers" from 2012, or Michael J. Colacurcio's chapter "Puritanism" from the abovementioned volume *Nathaniel Hawthorne in Context*). Interest in the philosophical dimension of Hawthorne's work is scarce—a noteworthy exception is John E. Alvis's *Nathaniel Hawthorne as Political Philosopher: Revolutionary Principles Domesticated and Personalized* (2012), which, however, has a very different focus than my essay, as it deals with the writer's connection to the American political tradition.

In this paper, I look at Hawthorne's short story through the prism of William James's philosophy of pragmatism in general, and his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) in particular, which allows me to understand better the narrator's final comment about the impossibility of deciding whether Brown's vision was true or not. I treat Hawthorne's approach to truth in this story as a proto-pragmatist one. When he describes Brown's religious experience, he is more interested in its outcomes for the protagonist's (and the community's) life than in its origins. Therefore, I argue that the seemingly central question of the story: whether Brown discovered the truth about the townspeople's evil nature, or whether he projected on them his own evil impulses, eagerly believing the Devil when it comes to the sins of others but not examining his own conscience, is, in fact, irrelevant.

2. PRAGMATISM AND AMERICAN ROMANTICISM

Looking for pragmatic elements in a Romantic writer's work is not unusual. The most well-known example of such a writer is Ralph Waldo Emerson, considered by many scholars to be a forerunner of pragmatism. This affinity is especially evident in the similarities between his thought and William James's, on whom he exerted a profound influence both as a family friend (and James's godfather) and as a philosopher who, despite his idealism, highly valued the sphere of practical action. Stanley Cavell sees Emerson's resemblance to pragmatists chiefly in his interest in "the common, the familiar,

the low, the near” (Cavell 215). One might add that both Emerson and James have a similarly subjectivist approach to truth (which will be elaborated on later in this paper): James’s argument for seeing a given idea’s usefulness as the criterion according to which it should be judged reminds one of Emerson’s “if I am the devil’s child, I will live them [my impulses—J. F.] from the devil” (Emerson 33). Neither writer believes in an “objective,” absolute test for ideas. Instead, they advocate utility or personal integrity as determinants of their validity. What is more, Emerson adds in the passage quoted above: “[t]hey do not seem to me to be such,” claiming that though his impulses may in fact come from the Devil, they are far more likely to be of godly origin, which is why they can be safely trusted (33). James shares Emerson’s optimism, believing in a “presumed harmony between our subjective interests and the objective world” (Myers 455)—he, too, assumes that his method is not fraught with the danger of relativism.¹

As a result of these similarities, it is easy to conclude, like Frederic Carpenter, that “[w]here Emerson was content to put forward an idea in general, literary terms, James often took the same idea, defined it more exactly, verified it by scientific methods, rephrased it, and gave it new currency” (Carpenter 458). Such affinity between the two thinkers is also seen by David M. Robinson, who in his 1999 book *Emerson and the Conduct of Life* traces a shift in Emerson’s thinking from idealism and transcendentalism towards pragmatism, thus explaining how this similarity could have occurred despite James’s empirical and anti-absolutist orientation. Jonathan Levin in *The Poetics of Transition* (published in the same year) sees Emerson as a proto-pragmatist in terms of what he calls his “paradoxical poetics of transition”—a focus on change as the most pronounced characteristic of reality, which Levin attributes also the works of pragmatist philosophers (William James, John Dewey, George Santayana) and later inheritors of pragmatist esthetics such as Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens (ix).²

At the same time, Cavell goes to great lengths to warn his readers against seeing Emerson simply as a proto-pragmatist (an effort shared by James Bense’s article “At Odds with ‘De-Transcendentalizing Emerson’”). He calls Emerson only “contentiously” a pragmatist (Cavell 216), insisting on the differences between the Romantic writer and his

1 Frederic Carpenter, too, sees a similarity between James’s pragmatism and Emerson’s passage about the “Devil’s child” (see Carpenter 466).

2 For a more exhaustive list of research dealing with Emerson as James’s precursor see (Bense 355).

alleged descendants. Cavell fears that reading Emerson as a forerunner of pragmatism “blurs the particularity, the achievement, of Emerson’s language” and is, in fact, a “repression” of his importance for American thought (7, 222). To prevent pragmatism from cannibalizing Emerson’s uniqueness, he stresses that while James and Dewey may be indebted to Emerson, they certainly do not contain him (216). Cavell’s point, however, does not change the fact that the similarities between Emerson and James (Dewey to a lesser extent) allow one to see the former as a herald of this first distinctly American philosophical movement. Can the same, though, be said of Nathaniel Hawthorne? Hawthorne’s artistic temperament and vision of human life were very different from Emerson’s; while the traditional division of American Romantics into the optimistic Transcendentalists and pessimistic Dark Romantics can be seen as an oversimplification, it is true that the two writers had very dissimilar views on religion and man’s position in society—two aspects relevant for the discussion of spiritual visions. However, I argue that despite these differences, the understanding of what counts as true experience in “Young Goodman Brown” allows one to see the story as foreshadowing—from a different vantage point than Emerson’s essays—the ideas of William James.

3. A PRAGMATIC READING OF “YOUNG GOODMAN BROWN”

“Young Goodman Brown” may be read as prefiguring the pragmatist approach to religion in particular, and towards truth in general. This contention, however, depends on one’s understanding of the main focus of the story. Jane Eberwein lists the many different interpretations scholars have given it over the years. It has been seen as

an allegorical revelation of human depravity, [...] a symbolic study of sexual initiation, [...] an inquiry into generational conflict, [...] a demonstration of Puritan hypocrisy, [...] evidence of Hawthorne’s sympathy for Puritan values, and [...] an artfully designed short story making no essential reference beyond itself. (Eberwein 23)

She, in turn, believes its gist to be a false conversion: “the awful revelation that Goodman Brown’s marriage to Faith has brought temporary happiness but not a sanctifying transformation of the natural man”—which is undoubtedly true from the theological point of view (26).

Leo B. Levy explains that, in psychoanalytic terms, the tale may be read as one “about the defeat of the id by the ego and the superego,” Brown being unable to accept the evil within himself and thus repressing it (379). The critic’s main interest, however, is the protagonist’s relation-

ship with his wife. Levy claims that while “[t]he last paragraph turns Brown into an object lesson; [...] as is often the case with Hawthorne’s tales,” the story’s true point is expressed well before its ending—and that is, for Levy, the realization that “there is no necessary connection between our critical need for faith and the responsiveness of faith” (386). The fact that the scholar believes the ending to be unimportant stems from the fact that he reads it as a relatively conventional lesson against despair: its point being, for Levy, to show the devastating psychological consequences of a constant search for sin in other people. While this interpretation is certainly correct, I believe that this is not the most interesting aspect of the final paragraphs. What is central for the discussion that will follow is the fact that the narrator wonders whether Goodman Brown’s experience was a reality or a dream, and does not answer the question, instead commenting: “Be it so if you will; but, alas! It was a dream of evil omen for young Goodman Brown” (Hawthorne, “Young” 288). How one should treat the ontological status of Brown’s experience, and whether it is at all relevant, is directly connected to how Hawthorne sees religious experience in the tale.

What happens to Brown is by no means unequivocal: the story seems, on the most basic level, to offer three possibilities: either Brown dreams about the whole event but treats it, mistakenly, as reality, or he indeed has a vision, whose nature, however, is unclear. On the one hand, it may be brought about by the Devil, who misleads Brown into believing that the inhabitants of his town are all evil; on the other hand, Brown may be granted access (by God?) to the truth about the townspeople’s hypocrisy. Many scholars tend to lean toward one of these three interpretations and dismiss the rest; others believe that it is impossible to decide which option is correct (see Mosher 6). Harold Mosher shows how this uncertainty is rooted in the very way the story is constructed. The constant switches of point of view between Brown’s and the narrator’s confound the “realistic/objective” and the “allegorical/subjective” perspectives and make the reader unable to decide whether Brown is, in the end, praised or condemned by the author (7, 15).

What is more, some scholars see the narrator’s doubt about the reality of Brown’s experience as shared by the protagonist; according to them, Brown dies in despair not because he thinks that he has seen the true nature of his neighbors, but because he “loses the ability either to trust the evidence of his senses or to dismiss it completely” (Magee 8). The text, however, does not claim straightforwardly that the source of Brown’s suffering is doubt; the only reason for believing that the protagonist is not sure about the trustworthiness of his vision is that, as David Levin argues, “[i]f he were certain that they [the townspeople—J. F.]

had been present in the forest, he would not treat them even so civilly as he does during the rest of his life" (351).

While early twentieth-century critics tended to trust the content of the vision and read the tale as criticizing Puritan sanctimony, at least since the 1950s, there have been more interpretations that assume Brown is too quick to judge others based on "spectral evidence" (see D. Levin 344; Eberwein 27). Thus, for instance, David Levin sees only two ways of understanding Brown's experience: it is either a dream, or "a reality that is unquestionably spectral," and he rules out the possibility that the townspeople are indeed Devil-worshippers (D. Levin 352).³ The scholar believes that Hawthorne's purpose was to "reveal the faultiness of Goodman Brown's judgement," since the protagonist is oblivious to the fact that the vision is presented to him by the Devil and, thus, that the specters he sees are not real people (345, 344). Levin, however, can reach so clear and unequivocal conclusions only by virtue of ignoring any passages from the tale that would testify to the contrary, in which the narrator describes the forest scene as if he were speaking of independent reality and not of Brown's thoughts.⁴

Levin's seeing Brown as decisively mistaken stems from the fact that he reads the tale as a Puritan story, and stresses that false visions were an important problem in Puritan theology: the Devil was seen as able to "impersonate innocent people" to mislead others, which is why Cotton Mather warned against believing "specter evidence" (D. Levin 346). What is more, Bruce Magee adds that even evidence coming from God could, according to the Puritans, be spectral, so even if the source of Goodman Brown's vision is not the Devil, he could still be wrong (Magee 9). Such readings, however, disregard the fact that Hawthorne was not a Puritan writer and neither is his story a Puritan one—in any case, not only. For sure, Goodman Brown is a product of his society, and his imagination has been furnished by elements

3 Levin's reading, however, destroys the story's ambiguity, which seems to be its point. A useful way of thinking about Goodman Brown's problem would be referring to the hauntological understanding of specters as not conforming to the presence/absence or being/non-being divide (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 63). As Edyta Lorek-Jezińska and Katarzyna Więckowska put it, the specters' "presence cannot be fully acknowledged, yet it cannot be denied either" (Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska 9), which is why the story's reader can never truly reduce it to Levin's alternative.

4 For example, when among those gathered in the forest the narrator enumerates "high dames well known to her [the governor's wife—J. F.], and wives of honored husbands, and widows, a great multitude, and ancient maidens, all of excellent repute, and fair young girls" (Hawthorne, "Young" 285), no phrase suggests that this is a description of specters rather than real people.

important to his culture. This is why his obsession with the townspeople's hidden sinfulness may have served Hawthorne as a handy metonymy for the Salem witch trials (Bromwich 153). At the same time, though, as Eberwein points out, the world created by Hawthorne in the story is not really Christian: it is devoid of grace or any hope for salvation (30). Even if Brown is wrong from the start in thinking that his marriage to Faith has made him spiritually safe, real Puritans believed that a mistaken conversion could still be followed by a real one.

In effect, not only Levin but most critics offer a Puritan reading of the story, trying to pinpoint the nature of Brown's experience. The need to decide whether what he sees in the forest is a dream, a vision sent by the Devil, or a vision sent by God is very much like the need to know whether one's conversion has been real. Magee stresses the importance of epistemology for Calvinists and their constant state of suspension between certainty and uncertainty as a characteristic feature of their religious life (8). The Puritans kept wondering whether they were of the elect or not, and so do scholars look for certainty about Brown's credibility or lack thereof. While the Puritans, however, would indeed need to know for sure the nature of Brown's vision, Hawthorne has a much more modern view of religion—which, I argue, foreshadows pragmatism—in making his narrator state that this dilemma is in fact irrelevant.

Those who are inclined to believe that the protagonist just dreams the whole thing face a double challenge: first, as Levy points out, the story does not lend itself perfectly to this interpretation, since it is not clear when exactly the dream would start (385). Second, and more importantly, such reading does not change anything, since the content of a dream could still be true. From a religious point of view, there is a whole tradition including prophetic dreams in the Bible and the dream in *Pilgrim's Progress* which suggests that dreams may be God's means of communicating with people about waking reality. A secular interpretation brings us back to Jamesian pragmatism: from this perspective, too, even if Brown falls asleep and the forest scene is merely a product of his unconscious, this does not necessarily make its message false. As James puts it, "it is logically conceivable that *if there be* higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch us, the psychological condition of their doing so *might be* our possession of a subconscious region which alone should yield access to them" (James, "Varieties" 223, emphasis in the original). In other words, the unconscious may well mediate between God and humans, allowing us to experience something "more" than the world accessible to senses (Myers 473). In this sense, the psychoanalytic reading, which stresses that Brown's journey into the forest is an immersion

in the labyrinth of his own unconscious, does not preclude the possibility of seeing his vision as relevant to objective reality.

Whether we see Brown's vision as "true" depends, of course, on the definition of truth we refer to, and I argue that the story's narrator, by focusing on how witnessing the scene in the forest changes the protagonist's life, refers in this case to what we might term a proto-pragmatist conception of truth. For James, what really matters in determining an idea's truthfulness are its practical consequences, since a thought always leads us to forming a belief, which, necessarily, influences our actions (Myers 294). A thought is "true" if it is useful, or adaptive: if it allows us to function better in the world. As Gerald Myers points out, "[b]ecause James often equated utility with subjective satisfaction," he has been criticized repeatedly for "remov[ing] all external constraints on truth" (302–3). However, James does not mean by his stress on utility to contradict physical reality; a thought will never be "useful" if it ignores the said constraints. What is more, the pragmatic approach to truth is applicable only in the case of "metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable," that is, when there is no other way of settling them (James, "Pragmatism" 506).

Religious experience is, for James, such a case, since there is no satisfactory "objective" way to prove or disprove it. As he states in "The Varieties of Religious Experience," even God's existence cannot be proved by philosophical arguments, which may only "corroborate our preexistent partialities" ("Varieties" 394); similarly, attempts at intellectually proving the truth of a religious experience are, in his opinion, "absolutely hopeless" ("Varieties" 408).⁵ According to James, religion has more affinities with feelings than intellect, since many people "possess the objects of their belief, not in the form of mere conceptions which their intellect accepts as true, but rather in the form of quasi-sensible realities directly apprehended," which, therefore, cannot be disproved through argumentation ("Varieties" 387, 64). Even the source of a given experience is not a criterion of its credibility. While "medical materialists" tend to explain away mystical experiences as having a psychopathological ground, for James,

5 A similar approach may be seen in philosophy of religion to this day. Thinkers who assume the impossibility of independent verification of religious experience use the "doxastic practice approach" to accord the individual a right to believe their own religious experience if it is not clearly unreliable. What is more, the "argument from perception" states that what can make religious experience valid are, among other things, its consequences in the life of the person who has experienced it, which is further proof that James's views find continuation among contemporary philosophers of religion (see Gellman 153–54).

such an argument does not prove anything. He claims that we tend to believe certain facts not because of the origin of our knowledge, but because we have a natural inclination to believe them or because we think that they are useful (“Varieties” 19–26). This last point is true not only of religious beliefs, but of human knowledge in general; James’s pragmatism is not interested in causes and “*first things*” but rather “*last things, fruits, consequences, facts*” (James, “Pragmatism” 510, emphasis in the original). Similarly, in his essay “The Will to Believe,” James contrasts his empirical attitude with that of the “scholastic,” stating that his own system is not centered around the origin but the outcome of a given thought (468).

If we apply the pragmatic understanding of truth to “Young Goodman Brown,” the objective “truthfulness” of the protagonist’s experience (that is, whether the vision is sent by the Devil or God), as well as its source (whether it is a dream or not), becomes irrelevant.⁶ What matters are its consequences—that is, how it changes Brown’s (and the community’s) life. The narrator of the tale in all probability does not believe that “evil is the nature of mankind” and that all the townspeople are indeed Devil-worshippers; however, this fact loses its significance in the face of Brown’s individual experience (Hawthorne, “Young” 287). Brown’s reality after the forest scene becomes *as if* all the villagers were indeed Devil worshippers: he is unable to view them differently and to regain trust in their integrity. Looking at the consequences of the fateful night, for Brown, the townspeople *are* indeed evil. The forest vision has influenced not only his life but that of the whole community: in all likelihood, the change in Brown does not go unnoticed, as after his death “they carved no hopeful verse upon his tomb-stone” (Hawthorne, “Young” 289). Given Hawthorne’s interest in how society rids itself of individual anomaly expressed in the short story “Wakefield,”⁷ we can imagine that Brown’s alienation does

6 One might note here that another perspective from which the source of Brown’s vision is irrelevant could be the poststructuralist one. Suffice it to think of Derrida’s *différance*: the way Goodman Brown produces meaning is not by referring the signs (his vision) to any external reality, but to the chain of other signs he already has at his disposal (such as the Puritan vision of humans as either saints or sinners) (see Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* 10–13).

7 In “Wakefield,” the eponymous character leaves his wife for twenty years only to spy on her from an adjacent house. When, after this time, he decides to go back home, the narrator ends his tale with Wakefield crossing the threshold of his former house and leaves the consequences of his disappearance open, but he also expresses serious doubt as to the possibility of Wakefield’s ability to occupy anew the place in life which he vacated, calling him an “Outcast of the Universe” (147). One might argue that Goodman Brown makes the same mistake as Wakefield:

not allow him to reclaim the same place within the social order which he occupied before leaving Faith. In this sense, the devilish nature of the townspeople becomes the truth not only in Brown's subjective experience, but for his family and neighbors too. His beliefs shape the reality of the community, who, in turn, by being unable to produce evidence to the contrary, confirm the reality of his thoughts in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Eberwein speaks of the "internal reality" of Brown's experience, but, from a pragmatist point of view, there is no difference between "internal" and "external" reality if there are no facts which could unequivocally disprove one's internal experience (26). In a sense, as Levy puts it, in the story "reality is entirely subsumed by the consciousness of the protagonist" (376). This formulation, however, can be misleading, as it still assumes a separation between "reality" and "consciousness." For James, no such division exists: "Reality is apperception itself [...]. [T]he content of the physical is none other than the psychical. Subject and object confuse, as it were" ("The Notion of Consciousness" 186). In this sense, for Brown, there is no alternative "objective" reality in which the townspeople are pious Puritans; the only reality we can speak of is the one in which he is as miserable as if they were evil, and his close ones end up spurned as if they indeed worshipped the Devil. In terms of consequences for their lives, there is no difference between "in fact" and "as if": between things really happening and people behaving as if they happened. Pragmatically speaking, therefore, Brown's vision is as true as can be, since "[t]ruth happens to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events" (James, "Pragmatism" 574, emphasis in the original). It is Brown's later life that makes his vision true, not its divine, devilish, or psychological origin.

4. CONCLUSION

One could be tempted to think that some aspects of James's pragmatism force us to give up on the story's ambiguity and to see Brown as undoubtedly mistaken. After all, James focuses on the practical consequences of ideas because in his view "the function of knowledge is to facilitate a satisfactory adaptation to the environment"

he believes that one can suspend normal life (for twenty years or for just one night) and that the world will wait for us frozen and unchanged. This, however, is impossible: in Wakefield's case, the external world has managed to readjust to his absence; in Brown's—it is he who has changed irrevocably. James writes about the inability of those who have recognized evil to return to previous naïve happiness ("Varieties" 146); Brown is affected by a similar inability, and nothing can be the same in his life after his encounter with the Devil.

(Myers 293). For him, truth is but a tool, “*the expedient in the way of our thinking*” (“Pragmatism” 583, emphasis in the original). Does this not mean that Hawthorne’s tale is, if anything, anti-pragmatic? If we treat Brown’s vision as “knowledge,” it is easy to doubt its usefulness for the protagonist. This, however, will depend on what we mean by “adaptation to the environment.” If the purpose of knowledge is to make us happy, then Brown’s notions about the townspeople are rather “maladaptive”—he ends up miserable and isolated, unable to enjoy the relationship with his family and neighbors. James’s conception of utility does not mean, however, that knowledge in the pragmatic sense needs to lead us only to pleasant conclusions. There can be, after all, “true” or “useful” knowledge of an unpleasant reality. Therefore, Brown’s final unhappiness may be seen as simply this: unhappiness, not as a proof of his incongruity with his reality. Brown may well be wrong in his judgment of the townspeople’s true nature, but he may also be correct and devastated by the discovery of this truth; a pragmatic approach does not preclude either interpretation. What it does, however, is shift our focus from the true/false vision debate onto what seems to really matter to the narrator: Brown’s individual religious experience and how his world is influenced by his ideas. The fact that Hawthorne wrote the story in such a way as to make it impossible for the reader to decide whether Brown’s vision was a dream or not is not simply (or not only) a literary device used to keep the tale’s meaning ambiguous—a technique according to which initial polarities, here the polarities of illusion and reality, “begin to merge and become entangled with one another” (Coale 2). It is also a way of showing that one’s subjective experience may shape one’s objective reality to such an extent that the boundary between the subjective and objective becomes no longer a useful distinction.

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Abstract "Young Goodman Brown" has been read, among others, as Hawthorne's commentary on Puritan obsession with sin, as an exploration of the internal demons of the human psyche, or as an allegory of losing one's faith. Moreover, since the story does not settle whether Brown is right about his neighbors' hypocrisy, scholars tend to either argue in favor of the reality of Goodman Brown's vision or see in it a dangerous illusion. In my paper, I look at Hawthorne's short story through the prism of William James's philosophy of pragmatism in general, and his "Varieties of Religious Experience" in particular, which allows me to understand better the narrator's final comment about the impossibility to decide whether Brown's vision was true or not. I treat here Hawthorne as a proto-pragmatist, who, describing Brown's religious experience, is more interested in its outcomes for the protagonist's life than its origin.

Keywords: Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown," William James, religious experience, pragmatism, truth

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