



WILLIAM JAMES AND JAKOB VON UEXKÜLL: PRAGMATISM, PLURALISM AND THE OUTLINE OF A PHILOSOPHY OF ORGANISM

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Abstract: *This study aims to bring together the pragmatist and pluralistic notions of meaning of William James and Jakob von Uexküll, respectively, to develop the outline of a philosophy of organism. From this perspective, meaning or signification processes occur during the life processes of different organisms.*

Keywords: *James. Uexküll. Pragmatism. Pluralism. Meaning.*

WILLIAM JAMES E JAKOB VON UEXKÜLL: PRAGMATISMO, PLURALISMO E O ESBOÇO DE UMA FILOSOFIA DO ORGANISMO

Resumo: O presente estudo tem como objetivo reunir as noções pragmáticas e pluralísticas de significado de William James e Jakob von Uexküll, respectivamente, para a formulação do esboço de uma filosofia do organismo. A partir desta perspectiva, os processos de sentido ou de significado ocorrem durante os processos vitais de diferentes organismos.

Palavras-Chave: James. Uexküll; Pragmatismo. Pluralismo. Significado.

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Introduction

This paper addresses several works by two contemporary authors: the American philosopher William James and the Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll. In a previous paper (Araújo, 2012), which is supported by Sharov (*Pragmatism and Umwelt-Theory*, 2001), I identified a particular form of pragmatism in Uexküll's Theory of Meaning ([1934] 1956; 1982): meaning corresponds to a functional relationship between an organism and its environment, i.e., if something has value for an organism, it is because of the particular way in which this organism perceives and acts in the world (or what Uexküll designates as the organism's *Umwelt*, which translates as 'mundo-próprio' in Portuguese, 'self-world' in English or 'monde vécu' in French) (see Araújo, 2010, p. 43). The Theory of Meaning corresponds to Part II of Uexküll's Theory of *Umwelt* and is not a theory of object representation. In an

organism's *Umwelt*, objects signify and do not represent something as a process of 'meaning without representation' (ARAÚJO, 2012). These ideas presented in Uexküll's theory seem to match key features of William James's pragmatic theory of meaning ([1907; 1909] 2000).

The work of Jakob von Uexküll has received different interpretations over the 20th century. It has been interpreted from the viewpoints of vitalism, anti-evolutionism and mysticism (GOLDSCHMIDT, 1956). However, in addition to being quoted and commented on by many philosophers, such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Ortega y Gasset, and Cassirer, throughout the twentieth century, Uexküll has been a frequent reference for different scientific fields (Sukhdeo and Sukhdeo, 2009; Berthoz and Christen, 2009; Berthoz Petit et al, 2006; Sharov, 1998; Rütting, 2004). Thus, in addition to the physical and evolutionary conditions, there is a specific mode of signifying things and of acting in the world for different organisms: "[...] everything that a subject signifies becomes his world-of-perception, and what he performs, his world-of-action. World-of-perception and world-of-action constitute one single unit – the subject's self-world" (UEXKÜLL, [1934] 1982, p. 25, 1956, p. 6)¹. The *Umwelt* is the central idea of Uexküll's work. The primary question consists of understanding how organisms *subjectively* perceive their external environments and how this perception determines their behaviour:

This little monograph does not claim to point the way to a new science. Perhaps it should be called a stroll through into an unfamiliar worlds; worlds strange to us but known to other creatures, manifold and varied as the animals themselves [...] the world as it appears to animals themselves, not as it appears to us. This we may call the *phenomenal world* or the self-world of the animal (UEXKÜLL [1934] 1956, p. 5 – *A Stroll through the world of animal and men*).

The observer is considered to be a central problem in contemporary epistemology. However, Uexküll redefines 'observer' as it relates to the process of investigating the biology of animal behaviour and abandons the idea that a reality exists that is independent from observation (or *mind-independent*).

Therefore, in this paper, I attempt to advance an approximation between James and Uexküll and to expand an idea of meaning that is pragmatic and an alternative to the realist perspective. From this pragmatic perspective, consequently, it stems a pluralistic perspective of significance. Incidentally, a pluralistic perspective was already anticipated by James (*A pluralistic Universe*, 1909, p. 34 e 44):

Pluralism lets things really exist in the each-form or distributively, [...] the absolute sum-total things may never be actually experienced or realized in that shape at all, and that a disseminated, distributed, or incompletely unified appearances is the only form that reality may yet have achieved. (JAMES, 1909, p. 34)

What James designates as the 'each-form' of the reality of things appears in distinct and countless forms of meaning and outside the possibility of an absolute, ultimate form (*all-form*). In comparison, in Uexküll's pluralism, the meaning of something in the world is not separate from all possible and distinct functional relations with an organism.

¹ The idea of *Umwelt* implicitly defines 'organism' as a being that is constituted by a world of perception and a world of action.

Aiming at a philosophical convergence between James and Uexküll, this paper articulates two ways of addressing the relationships of signification between organism and world: *pragmatism* and *pluralism*. In these two perspectives, a common thread can be noticed: the meaning of things corresponds to a particular way of perceiving and of acting. In addition, the meaning of things corresponds to a particular form of uncountable experiences in the world. As for the analysis of the idea of meaning, the articulation between pragmatism and pluralism is extensive to an ample degree or, according to Uexküll, *A Stroll through the Worlds of Animals and Men* ([1934] 1956).

Similarly, as an alternative approach to the mind, the goal of this paper is also to suggest a pragmatic concept of meaning that transcends a representationalist or intentionalist perspective. In this respect, in considering an approximation between James and Uexküll based on the ideas of pragmatism and pluralism and if it remains possible to accommodate the intentional character of mental states, three points must be supported: 1) an understanding of meaning without the representation of objects, 2) the deflation of the idea on intentional content and 3) the ways of signifying objects are distinct and uncountable. Thus, the consciousness of an object does not imply the duplication of two distinct facts (consciousness and object). In agreement with the new realists of the beginning of the 20th century, James excludes a commitment to a representationalist view of the mind.

Thus, from the articulation between pragmatism and pluralism, it is possible to emphasise a characteristic of the meaning of “common sense” and thus of experience, as anticipated by James ([1907] 2000, p. 74). Instead of the idea of oneness of the world, the facts regarding experience demonstrate that in actuality, what exist are always additional meanings. In this particular form of empiricism or radical empiricism, new and different meanings are added infinitely to experience. That is, instead of a form of universal meaning (*all-form*), the world appears as different forms (*each-form*). James distances himself from a metaphysical realism that discusses the meaning of the world. Regarding “common sense”, the relationship between meaning and world is not independent from the mind, or our mental states would be unable to signify anything. In effect, meaning is always the result of a particular form of experience in the world. This view also seems to emerge in Uexküll’s Theory of Meaning. Alternatively to metaphysical realism, between pragmatism and pluralism of meaning, an organism is a “subject” who has his or her own theory of the world, or *Umwelt* (SHAROV, 2001, p. 212).

Common sense and meaning

In this section, James’s notion of common sense and the pragmatic sense from Uexküll’s Theory of Meaning are summarised. For Uexküll, the particular mode of signifying and acting (or *Umwelt*) constitutes a system of signs interpreted by an organism. In comparison, for James ([1909] 2000, p. 76), ‘common sense’ characterises a particular intellectual form: “*Were we lobsters, or bees, it might be that our organization would have led to our using quite different modes from these of apprehending our experiences*”. The world is certainly unique. However, it is signified in distinct and infinite ways (e.g., by human beings, lobsters, bees, bats and ticks). The world consists more of signs or ‘significant objects’ than of independently existing realities, which surely does not represent a realistic ontological commitment to the meaning of things in the world.

It is important to mention a review by the parasitologists Sukhdeo and Sukhdeo (2004) on “trematode behavior and the perceptual worlds of parasites”. In their review paper, Sukhdeo and Sukhdeo (2004, p. 294) cite Uexküll’s example of the relationship between butyric acid and tick behaviour as an illustration of how animals perceive objects by different means, depending on their respective sensory equipment. Butyric acid, which is exhaled by mammals, must be perceived and interpreted in the self-world of the tick as a sign or signal of a “significant object” (or mammal). From the tick’s viewpoint, compared with the human self-world, butyric acid has a completely different meaning because of our sensory equipment. Sukhdeo and Sukhdeo (ibid.) present another example from Uexküll ([1934] 1982, p. 66-67) in relation to the perceptual world of *Paramecium*, which he analyses in terms of “elementary self-worlds”. *Paramecium* responds negatively to stimuli from the environment except when a bacterium (their only source of food) responds positively and moves toward them. In the midst of a wealth of elements in its environment, in its self-world, *Paramecium* selects and interprets as a positive signal the presence of bacteria and ignores the rest, or assigns them a negative sign.

Additionally, compared with Thomas Nagel’s idea of the ‘point of view’ of an organism (NAGEL, 2004, p. 37), the interpretation of the relationship between experience and reality is always *incomplete* and fulfilled by innumerable different viewpoints and not by one viewpoint, which is what Nagel refers to as the “view from nowhere”. This metaphor illustrates well the type of pluralism of James and Uexküll regarding the ideas of the particular and uncountable types of meaning of the existence of things in the world (on *qualia* and *Umwelt*, see Araújo, 2010).

For example, a pragmatic and characteristic trait of Uexküll’s Theory of Meaning is the idea that the meaning of something plays a role in the way of perceiving and acting in the world of an organism. Among the different aspects of the environment, some are completely irrelevant for an organism, and some are not. Therefore, what determines something’s relevance or meaning is the role that it has in the organism’s *Umwelt*. Thus, something’s relevance or meaning is determined by a functional condition. Although James and Uexküll most likely did not understand meaning in the strict linguistic sense, both men seemed to understand meaning as a function or use of something: “you can say of [a belief] then either that ‘it is useful because is true’ or ‘it is true because it is useful’” (JAMES [1907] 2000, p. 90). However, surely, the idea of meaning as ‘use’ does not indicate a linguistic pragmatism as understood by Wittgenstein:

There is thus an incipient pragmatism in James’s statement [PP], which fits hand in glove with Wittgenstein’s suggestion that “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (PI, 34) [...] Yet James does not – as Wittgenstein does – think of the uses of words as constituting the meanings of those words. In fact, James is not particularly interested in what constitutes linguistic meaning, which is of course a central question for Wittgenstein (GOODMAN, 2002, p. 123).

A previous reference to Uexküll’s Theory of Meaning might explain the idea that meaning corresponds to the function or to the use of something as a significant object in relation to an organism:

All reality is subjective appearance [...] It is utterly vain to go through the world for causes that are independent of the subject; we always come up against objects; which owe their construction to the subject

[...] When we admit that the objects owe their construction to the subject, we tread on firm and ancient ground, especially prepared by Kant. [He] set the subject, man, over against the objects, and discovered the fundamental principles according to which objects are built up by our mind (UEXKÜLL, 1926, p. xv – *Theoretical Biology*).

Thus, regarding this reference to Kant and Kant's influence on Uexküll, it can be said that the meaning or significance of something in the world becomes a subjective apprehension. In fact, the idea of "use" does not necessarily imply the meaning of words as understood by Wittgenstein. At issue here is the idea of use beyond the linguistic domain, that is, "use" understood as the subjective apprehension of something that becomes meaningful or, in Uexküll's terms, a 'significant object'.

Meaning and mental objects

Incidentally, and equally relevant here, is James's definition of the term 'pragmatism':

The term is derived from the same Greek word *πάγμα*, meaning action, from which our words "practice" and "practical come" [...] To attain perfect clearness in our thought of an object, then we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve – what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare (JAMES, [1907] 2000, p. 25).

In this passage, the terms 'sensations' and 'reactions' correspond to perception and action that constitute an organism's *Umwelt*. Thus, meaning becomes part of the life processes of different organisms. Organisms are not simply mechanical things. Instead, they are subjects that understand reality using different forms of organisation and autonomy.

In the preface to *The Meaning of Truth* ([1909] 2000 p. 135), James states that "truth" is a "relationship" that can be obtained between an "idea" ("opinion, belief, statement or not") and an "object": "the 'truth' is a property of certain ideas of ours". Thus, regarding true and false ideas, the difference between such ideas is practice, i.e., whether ideas influence our conduct. However, it is also possible to establish a cognitive relation between an idea and an object, on one hand, when the knowledge of an object is immediate or intuitive or, on other hand, when this knowledge is conceptual or representational. Although there is immediate knowledge of objects, e.g., "as the white paper before your eyes" in this moment, "Indian tigers", for example, are only known to us symbolically or representatively.

"Exactly what do we mean by saying that we here know the tigers in India?" asks James. Although the tigers in India are not physically present, they are present in our thoughts. This statement is an example of Brentano's canonical definition of the concept of "intentional inexistence" (BRENTANO [1874] 2005). The target of James's criticisms is exactly the so-called "presence in absence" as a type of explanation for a particular type of existence, or, simply, the "intentional inexistence" of the tigers in our mind. Thus, to know the Indian tigers means a mental direction over them. However, James ([1909] 2000. p. 142-143) questions if "the pointing known-as" means the "self-transcendence" of the tigers in our minds. The answer is no. The cognitive relations between ideas and objects or 'pointing known-as' are

external and accidental operations and do not mean internal mental events of a mysterious sort:

A stone in one field may “fit”, we say, a hole in another field. But, the relation of ‘fitting’, so long as no one carries the stone to the hole and drops it in, is only one name for the fact that such an act may happen. Similarly with the knowing of the tigers here and now. (JAMES [1909] 2000. p. 136).

Unequivocally, immediate or intuitive knowledge is an illustrative example that there is no “presence in absence” or “pointing towards” (or, according to philosophy of mind jargon, the so-called “*aboutness*” of mental states). As demonstrated by the example of the white paper before our eyes, both the object and the idea or thought are indistinguishable. Thus, according to James ([1909] 2000. p. 144), contrary to representational knowledge, immediate or intuitive knowledge of “the object seen” and “to see the object” constitute two “names” for a single “indivisible fact” that is designated “*datum*, phenomenon or experience”: *To know immediately, then, or intuitively, is for mental content and object to be identical* ([1909] 2000. p. 144-145).

Subsequently, considering that in immediate or intuitive knowledge we find mental content and object (thus, we are not concerned with a relationship of two locations), we have here a form of adverbialism. In fact, for example, the “object seen” and “to see the object” of an experience could be formed in the same way that pain is formed. That is, pain is not distinct from the experience of pain; it is a property of experience. In principle, the phenomenon of pain does not have a reference to a transcendental object or it is based on a subjacent mental content. An adverbialist idea of mental contents involves a two-fold aspect regarding the properties of experience and not the relationship between two locations². For example, it is the case of contents of consciousness or phenomenal experience, or *qualia*, which are not distinct from the experience itself (regarding *Qualia* and *Umwelt*, see Araújo, 2010).

According to James, it is clear that representational or conceptual knowledge regarding objects promotes a certain economy of the Brentanian idea of intentional inexistence. Considering a possible functional relationship between object and idea, at most, James would agree to an intentional reduction of mental contents but certainly not regarding lived experience (SPRIGGE, 1997, p. 140). Thus, in *The Tigers in India* ([1909] 2000), James presents the essential elements of a pragmatic conception of the meaning and “aboutness” of ideas (SPRIGGE, 1997, p. 135) – “ideas” that James understands as a “conscious state” or simply as “thought”. Thus, the expression “tigers in India” is solely a “name” of a possible or functional relationship of fitting between an idea and an object, and the expression does not mean “self-transcendence” or “presence in absence” of a mental content as an explanation of a particular type of existence. Accordingly, James’s pragmatic theory of meaning displays characteristics of a deflationary theory of the *aboutness* of

² It is a type of adverbialism that appears among the new realists of the beginning of the 20th Century. That is, the conscious is not a relation between two locations or a duplication between the content of the mind and the content of the object. Thus, as I understand it, adverbialism becomes part of James’s monism regarding lived experience.

mental contents. Certain critics identify in James's pragmatic theory of meaning a form of externalism³.

In *Does consciousness exist?* [1912], part of *Essays on Radical Empiricism*, James affirms that experience does not have an internal duplicity and that consciousness is a function – it is something that flows and from which conscious states emerge. Accordingly, as a function of experience, consciousness is a relation or conjunction between terms (such as subject and object). The first term corresponds to the role of knowing and the second to the role of what is known. As a function, James negates the existence of consciousness as substance or entity and similarly denies it the property of being a representation of objects as an internal duplication. Thus, consciousness is not an intersection or intentional relation between the representation of the object and the representation of the representation of the object. In contrast, according to Brentano ([1874] 2005, p. 121), a thinking act implies a dual judgement and a reflexive judgement: the act of thinking about an object and simultaneously the act of being conscious of the former. However, from James's perspective, as a function, consciousness *means* a relationship between terms, and it does not involve internal duplicity between thought and object. If consciousness *means* something or is intentional, it does not follow that it is an internal duplication of two ways of representing content. In comparison, considering the *Umwelt* of an organism, if the meaning of something has an intentional character, this character indicates only a particular way of perceiving and acting and not a representation or internal duplicity of experience. Surely, it is possible to find between James and Uexküll a pragmatic idea regarding intentionality if this idea means to deflate the idea of intentional content or of the internal duplicity of experience.

Meaning, truth and life

Thus, contrary to a static notion of correspondence of meaning between mind and world, which also implies a conception of truth, James states that if an idea is true it means that it is something productive in our lives and is good: “an idea is ‘true’ so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives. That it is good, for as much as it profits, you will gladly admit” (JAMES, [1907] 2000, p. 37 – *What pragmatism means*). If an idea is true, then it has a productive meaning in life. In a sense, the meaning of truth becomes a fact of life. If the meaning of life is understood extensively, then certain things are not only true in our lives but also among different organisms. The true meaning of something is that which has the critical property of being productive. In comparison, in Uexküll's flower stem example ([1934] 1982, p. 145; 1956, p. 97), the meaning of truth in the human *Umwelt*, such as a headpiece, surely is not the same to an ant. The ant perceives and signifies the stem as a means to reach the flower petal. Thus, from the pragmatist conception of truth, what follows is a pluralist perspective. The meaning of truth becomes uncountable between different unique forms ('each-form') of perception regarding the reality of things.

³ 'It is evident that much of what James says about the aboutness of thought is quite similar to modern externalist conceptions of mental content. He is, indeed, similarly seeking a more naturalistic substitute for what Hilary Putnam calls “magical theories of reference” and, in effect, sense too. In short, he seems to have anticipated their view that a phenomenological investigation of thought, meaning, and reference is misguided, and that thought must be related to its objects by our concrete physical and behavioral relations to them' (SPRIGGE, 2006, p. 140).

Considering that the meaning of truth has a function in life, something is either true or false when it agrees or does not agree with reality. James ([1907] 2000, p. 87 – *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth*) designates “reality” as the term that signifies something that agrees with our ideas⁴. In the common sense, a true idea replicates reality. However, it is important to be careful. The notion of replication does not mean a form of mental representationalism. Accordingly, James ([1907] 2000, p. 88 – *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth*) emphasises the following problem: “Where our ideas cannot copy definitely their objects, what does agreement with that object mean?” He replies that to consider an idea or belief as true means that this true idea or belief becomes a concrete difference in someone’s life. Thus, the truth of an idea is capable of agreement with reality if it has a distinctive function or meaning in life. James states as follows (ibid.): “*True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we can not*”. That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known-as.

Pragmatism and pluralism: an outline of a philosophy of organism

James states that the truth of an idea is not a stagnant property. The truth of an idea becomes part of the process of life of any individual, and thus, it occurs practically. It is the “pragmatist thesis” of the meaning of truth that is advocated by James (ibid., p. 88): “Truth *happens* to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *veri-fication*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation*”. Interestingly, James breaks with the substantialist notion of truth and claims that truth is an event or becomes part of the process of life. Similarly, Whitehead ([1927-1928] 1978) outlines a “process philosophy” or “organic philosophy”. He replaces the traditional notion of “substance” or “being” as an invariable and static reality with a dynamic perspective. Instead of “being”, procedural or organic philosophy aims to “becoming” or to investigate what occurs and the ways in which it can occur. Thus, procedural or organic philosophy displays the characteristics of a pluralistic worldview.

Therefore, it is important to emphasise what it means to argue about the process of verification of an idea. If an idea is true, it is true because the idea has practical consequences and agrees with reality. Surely “agreement” does not involve a realist interpretation of the relationship between idea and reality as an objective correspondence and independent of the mind (*mind-independent existence*). From James’s pragmatist perspective, “to agree” means “to conduct”, and if an idea has practical consequences that can be verified, it conducts us. The verification of an idea is a function of conduct: “*This function of agreeable leading is what we mean by an idea’s verification*” (ibid). Thus, something is “true” if it has practical consequences. A belief is true because it means something useful, and it is false if it does not mean something useful. Thus, in comparison, considering Uexküll’s Theory of Meaning, if an object is significant, it is because the object has a function. That is, the object means something useful or biologically relevant in the *Umwelt* of an organism. The meaning of truth becomes part of the successful process of life in the world.

⁴ From an ontological perspective, ‘Realities mean, then either concrete facts or abstract kinds of things and relations perceived intuitively between them’ (JAMES [1907] 2000, p. 93 – *Pragmatism Conception of Truth*).

Ideas correspond to or copy reality. However, this statement does not mean that the ideas are representations as argued by traditional correspondence theories of truth. The idea of a true idea as a representation or copy of an objectively predefined reality is not involved here. Or, if an idea copies reality, it does not follow that reality is a subjective mental image. Between realism and idealism, alternatively, if an idea copies reality, the idea conducts us to what is “useful” (JAMES, [1907] 2000, p. 94 – *Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth*). Thus, considering the pragmatic sense of Uexküll’s Theory of Meaning and James’s concept of the meaning of truth, if an idea is true, it becomes an event or part of a life process:

Truth for us is simply a collective name for verification-process, Just as health, wealth, strength, etc., are names for other processes connected with life, and also pursued because it pays to pursue them. Truth is made, just as health, wealth, strength are made, in the course of experience (JAMES, [1907] 2000, p. 96 – *Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth*).

Incidentally, as James emphasises (1909, p. 7 – *A Pluralistic Universe*), empiricism favours a pluralistic view in the sense that it seeks to explain the whole by means of the parts. Although there is only one world of experiences, and this world is not duplicated between your experience or mine. Among different experiences, the meaning of truth follows from different processes and uncountable forms.

In sum, this pluralist view of the meaning of James and Uexküll can be understood as a dynamic way or an outline of a philosophy of organism in the sense that meaning becomes a fact of life and experience. Incidentally, James designates “pure experience” the “immediate flow of life”. Thus, the world is a world of experience, in which life and experience exist. In the chapter “The Thing and its relations”, James argues as follows:

I adopted in a general way the common-sense belief that the one and same world is cognized by our different minds [...] The usual given reason for its being absurd is that it assumes one object (to wit, the world) to stand in two relations at once; to my mind, namely, and again to yours; whereas a term taken in a second relation cannot logically be the same which it was at first. (JAMES, 1909, P. 353-354).

This passage is quite similar to Uexküll’s Theory of Meaning which favours a pluralist view of meaning. Finally, in James’s and Uexküll’s pragmatism and pluralism, meaning corresponds to a functional relation between different organisms and the world.

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