The Lesson of the Master: Learning and Cognition in *What Maisie Knew*

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What Maisie Knew is manifestly concerned with learning and teaching. Maisie receives instruction from no fewer than four nurses and governesses in the novel, not to mention the edifying public lectures and books of essays gaily prescribed by Sir Claude, and rich resources of irony are discovered in the contrast between what Maisie doesn't learn in the schoolroom and the travesty of education she absorbs from her bruising encounters with the sordid, helter-skelter adult world.[1] No less manifestly, and by common critical consent, *What Maisie Knew* is also concerned with cognition or, as William James put it, 'the function of knowing' – in the words of one recent critic, the novel is 'an exploration of what it might mean for a child to "know"'.[2] Yet while questions of cognition or knowing have been a leitmotif of criticism on the novel (frequently approached under the banners of epistemology or phenomenology), and education as metaphor has been productively explored, its literal instances of learning and instruction have proven of less interest.[3] My aim in this paper is to

[1] Maisie's nurses and governesses, in order of appearance, are Moddle, Miss Overmore, the unnamed child minder employed briefly by Beale Farange, and Mrs Wix.

[2] William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover, 1950), p.271. Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.325.

[3] Christina Britzolakis writes that Maisie 'has often been seen by critics as an 'experimental' precursor of modernism at the level both of structural innovation and in its concern with problems of epistemology'. Christina Britzolakis, 'Technologies of Vision in Henry James' *What Maisie Knew*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 34, no. 3 (2001): 370. For Paul B. Armstrong, 'To know and how to know, that is the question for James the epistemological novelist'. Paul B. Armstrong, *The Phenomenology of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), p.3. Britzolakis gives a sophisticated reading of the 'metaphor of the city as traumatic nursery' (p.372), engaging with Juliet Mitchell's

draw attention to the theme of education in *What Maisie Knew* and to read the novel's concern with cognition specifically in relation to the model of learning it entails. How one understands cognition is, after all, likely to influence how one approaches education, as is apparent from the educational applications of both modern and classical cognitive psychology. In what follows, I argue that one effect of the novel's satirical jibes at inadequate educational ventures is to throw into relief its own contrastive model of learning. While many critics have understandably found cognition and vision in *What Maisie Knew* to be tightly intertwined, close attention to the trope of learning suggests that cognition for James was just as dependent on doing as on seeing. In this respect, I suggest, the model of learning and cognition depicted in *What Maisie Knew* resembles the approach to cognition developed by William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) and in two important papers later collected in *The Meaning of Truth*: 'On the Function of Cognition' (1885) and 'The Knowing of Things Together' (1895).

William James, cognition and learning

Many critics have argued for a connection between Henry James' fiction and William James' pragmatism, often deriving encouragement from Henry's 1907 statement, made in a letter congratulating William on his *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, that 'I was lost in the wonder of the extent to which all my life I have (like M. Jourdain) unconsciously pragmatized'.[4] Some commentators also posit affinities with

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classic reading of the novel as a story of aesthetic education: 'a process of initiation into vision'. Juliet Mitchell, '*What Maisie Knew*: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl', in *The Air of Reality: New Essays on Henry James*, ed. John Goode (London: Methuen, 1972), p.177.

[4] Quoted in Richard A. Hocks, *Henry James and Pragmatistic Thought: A Study in the Relationship between the Philosophy of William James and the Literary Art of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), p.151. For Armstrong, this connection travels by way of phenomenology: 'A phenomenological approach to describing and explaining these connections suggests itself because of the close relation between James' art and his brother William's philosophy'. Armstrong, *The Phenomenology of Henry James*, p.3. See also Joseph J. Firebaugh, 'The Pragmatism of Henry James', *Virginia Quarterly Review* 27 (1951), H.B. Parkes, 'The James Brothers', *Sewanee Review* 56 (1948), William McMurray, 'Pragmatic Realism in *The Bostonians*', in *Henry James: Modern Judgements*, ed. Tony Tanner (Nashville: Aurora, 1970), Harvey Cormier,

other of William's writings, not primarily concerned with expounding pragmatist doctrine, and Sämig Ludwig and Melba Cuddy-Keane have recently elaborated the connection between the two brothers in interesting ways by introducing the third term of contemporary psychology.[5] I follow these two critics in considering William James primarily as a psychologist rather than a pragmatist philosopher. What interests me here is the 'chapter in descriptive psychology, – hardly anything more' that James offered in essays like 'On The Function of Cognition' and in *The Principles of Psychology*, and not his later explicit dispute with properly philosophical doctrines, such as rationalism or idealism, and his defence of a contradictory view under the headings of pragmatism and radical empiricism.[6] My focus on cognition does, however, have some bearing on the more general question of the relationship between Henry James and pragmatism, since the germs of William James' later philosophical stances are present in the views on cognition that he articulated as early as 1885.

In *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), William James acknowledges the puzzle posed to epistemologists and metaphysicians by the fact of knowing: 'Now the relation of knowing is the most mysterious thing in the world'.[7] As a psychologist, however, he brackets out the mysteries pondered in'*Erkenntnisstheorie* and metaphysics', proposing instead to differentiate between knowledge and non-noetic mental states ('subjective state[s] pure and simple') by using 'the tests we all practically use'.[8] This solution goes some way towards anticipating the definition of truth later elaborated in *Pragmatism*, in that these tests include the common sense expedient of asking, of a given mental state and its real-world referent, whether 'it seems to imply that reality and refer to it by operating upon it

'Jamesian Pragmatism and Jamesian Realism', *The Henry James Review* 18, no. 3 (1997).

[5] Melba Cuddy-Keane, 'Narration, Navigation, and Non-Conscious Thought: Neuroscientific and Literary Approaches to the Thinking Body', *University of Toronto Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (2010), Sämi Ludwig, *Pragmatist Realism: The Cognitive Paradigm in American Realist Texts* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), Eliseo Vivas, 'Henry and William (Two Notes) ', *The Kenyon Review* 5, no. 4 (1943).

[6] William James (1885), 'On the Function of Cognition', *Mind,* 10(37): 28.

[7] William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, p.216.

[8] Ibid., pp.216–17. James did change his mind about this five years later, as he moved towards the philosophical position-taking of *Pragmatism*. William James, 'The Knowing of Things Together', *The Psychological Review* 2, no. 2 (1895): 123–24.

through the bodily organs'.[9] However, what I would like to emphasise for the purpose of this discussion is not only the way in which this definition looks forward to pragmatism, but more particularly how defining knowledge in this way makes knowing depend on doing: you know something if your observable behaviour is consistent with what you are supposed to know. This expedient, and its affinities with the doctrines expounded in *Pragmatism*, are more fully developed in the 1885 paper 'On The Function of Cognition', later collected in *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to 'Pragmatism'* (1909). In that essay James likewise proposes observable behaviour as a simple test for knowledge, again bolstering his argument with an appeal to common sense:

> And thus do men invariably decide such a question. *The falling of the dream's practical consequences* into the real world, and the *extent* of the resemblance between the two worlds are the criteria they instinctively use. All feeling is for the sake of action, all feeling results in action, – to-day no argument is needed to prove these truths.[10]

This appeal to '*practical consequences*' as a test for knowledge, which James formulates elsewhere in the essay as whether or not a mental state 'operates on' a reality, points still more overtly towards his later reduction, in the lecture entitled 'Pragmatism's Conception of Truth', of true ideas to 'those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify', where 'verification and validation … signify certain practical consequences of the verified and validated idea'.[11] Mental states dispose one, directly or indirectly, actually or potentially, to action, and it is by reference to the practical consequences of this belief-driven action that 'the relation of knowing' is defined.

James explored the implications of this theory for 'representative knowledge' – knowledge whose object is not present to the senses – in the 1895 paper 'The Knowing of Things Together', also excerpted in *The Meaning of Truth*.[12] As in 'On the Function of Cognition', knowledge of absent objects in the 1895 essay is explained simply as mental 'pointing',

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[9] William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, p.217.
[10] William James, 'On the Function of Cognition', p.36.
[11] Ibid., p.40, William James, *Pragmatism: a new name for some old ways of thinking; together with Four Related Essays Selected from The Meaning of Truth* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1949), p.201.
[12] William James, 'The Knowing of Things Together', p.109.

whose status as knowledge is determined by the behaviour it is apt to give rise to. Our knowledge of tigers in India, for example,

> is known as our rejection of a jaguar, if that beast were shown us as a tiger; as our assent to a genuine tiger if so shown. It is known as our ability to utter all sorts of propositions which don't contradict other propositions that are true of the real tigers. It is even known, if we take the tigers very seriously, as actions of ours which may terminate in directly intuited tigers, as they would if we took a voyage to India for the purpose of tiger-hunting.[13]

'The Knowing of Things Together' resorts to the commonsense idea of 'pointing' as a way of defining knowledge of absent objects, where the accuracy of the pointing is determined by behaviour and its practical consequences. James does allow that some of the consequences of knowing about tigers may be mental, but his examples seem to incorporate behaviour as an essential component of the concept of knowledge: to know there are tigers in India means to be able to demonstrate that knowledge in a number of ways, including rejecting, assenting, uttering and, at the limit, hunting.[14] This 'pointing' emphatically does not mean any metaphysical relation between a knower and a thing known, independent of the experiences that such knowledge might lead to: 'there is no self-transcendency in our mental images taken by themselves. They are one physical fact; the tigers are another; and their pointing to the tigers is a perfectly commonplace physical relation, if you once grant a connecting world to be there'.[15] Hence, when James encapsulates his views on cognition in the 1904 essay 'Does "Consciousness" Exist?', he proposes to dispense with the notion of 'consciousness' by focusing on 'what the knowing actually and practically amounts to – leading-towards, namely,

[13] Ibid., p.108. Like Ernst Mach and other turn-of-the-century positivists, William James believed that all knowledge was ultimately underwritten by sense impressions: all knowledge had the potential to 'terminate' in some sensory perception or other. James, 'The Knowing of Things Together', p.106–07.
For a persuasive correlation of the binary theory of cognition developed in this paper and 'The Beast in the Jungle', see H. Lewis Ulman, 'A Possible Lair', 'The Tigers in India' and 'The Beast in the Jungle'. *The Henry James Review*, 12, no.1 (1991).

[15] William James, 'The Knowing of Things Together', p.108.

and terminating-in percepts, through a series of transitional experiences which the world supplies'.[16]

James elaborated the pedagogical ramifications of his psychological doctrine himself, first in an 1892 series of public lectures, and then in the book *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* (1899). James' ambition in this volume was to 'make [teachers] conceive, and, if possible, reproduce sympathetically in their imagination, the mental life of their pupil as the sort of active unity which he himself feels it to be', and its fifteen chapters largely rehearse the picture of mental life put forward in *The Principles of Psychology*.[17] The chapters on 'Habit' and 'Memory', indeed, reproduce James' *magnum opus* verbatim, and several other chapter headings are carried over directly from the earlier book. Not much attention is given to cognition per se in *Talks to Teachers*, but one can discern the lineaments of James' functional theory of knowledge underlying his insistence on the 'The Necessity of Reactions' – on, in other words, the need for pupils to act on their knowledge in order to retain it.

> An impression which simply flows in at the pupil's eyes or ears, and in no way modifies his active life, is an impression gone to waste. It is physiologically incomplete. It leaves no fruits behind it in the way of capacity acquired. Even as mere impression, it fails to produce its proper effect upon the memory; for, to remain fully among the acquisitions of this latter faculty, it must be wrought into the whole cycle of our operations. Its *motor consequences* are what clinch it. Some effect due to it in the way of an activity must return to the mind in the form of the *sensation of having acted*, and connect itself with the impression. The most durable impressions are those on account of which we speak or act, or else are inwardly convulsed.[18]

This kinetic *practice* of instilling knowledge dovetails precisely with the pragmatic *theory* of knowledge that James had articulated elsewhere. Just as knowledge of absent objects – like the tigers in India – is not an absolute or metaphysical relation, but is rather contingent on the practical

[16] William James (1904), 'Does "Consciousness" Exist?', *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, 1(18): 486.
[17] William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on some of Life's Ideals* (New York: Henry Holt, 1915), p.iv.
[18] Ibid., p.33.

consequences of acting on that knowledge – on the 'series of transitional experiences which the world supplies' – so the knowledge acquired by a pupil, in order really to *be* knowledge, must be allowed to condition the pupil's behaviour. One might indeed say that, for James, the claim that '*motor consequences* are what clinch it' applies just as well to knowledge in general as to pedagogy. 'The pointing of our thought to the tigers', he wrote in 'The Knowing of Things Together', 'is known simply and solely as a procession of mental associates and motor consequences that follow on the thought'.[19]

On the face of it, William James' functional approach to the problem of knowledge belongs to that side of his sensibility which readers have found least sympathetic to the literary imagination of his brother. F.O. Mathiesson, for example, identified cognition as the root of their intellectual antipathy:

> All their other discrepancies in thought and expression would seem to stem back to their contrasting conceptions of knowledge, since the knower as actor and the knower as spectator are bound to behold different worlds, and to shape them to different ends.[20]

This judgement seems intuitively apt when we think of certain touchstones of James' literary theory: most notably, the famous description of the 'house of fiction' in the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, where the artist is described as a 'pair of eyes', a 'watcher' at the 'human scene' rather than an actor. The same passage goes on to equate personal identity with an accretion of mental states rather than with a history of deeds: 'Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has *been* conscious'.[21] And the temperamental fissure that Mathiesson finds between the brothers seems to widen to a chasm when we turn our attention to the passage from *Talks to Teachers* above, with its cool dismissal of all passive impressions as 'waste'.

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[19] William James, 'The Knowing of Things Together', p.108.
[20] F.O. Matthiessen, *The James Family: Including Selections from the Writings of Henry James, Senior, William, Henry, & Alice James* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), p.673.
[21] Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p.46.

To be sure, more recent criticism has revised this conception of James as the poet laureate of passive spectatorship; phenomenological approaches, in particular, have refined the sense in which Jamesian centres of consciousness are always already embedded in the world, and are responsible for generating their own horizons of understanding.[22] In phenomenologically informed discussions of *What Maisie Knew*, Paul B. Armstrong and Merle A. Williams both emphasise the active dimension of knowing and its inseparability from moral action, and both critics propose an affinity between James' fiction and his brother's philosophy.[23] But although Mathiesson's distinction between the knowing spectator and the knowing agent now seems overly clearcut, the poetics of perception still tends to loom large in discussions of what and how Maisie knows. In the phenomenological tradition, Williams sees the child focaliser as enabling James to execute a Husserlian *epoché*, while a recent reading of the novel in the context of *fin de siècle* urban consumerism posits a 'metaphoric conflation of visual and cognitive experience – what one might call an ocular rhetoric of understanding – upon which the narrative turns, and which runs through the entire novel'.[24] There certainly is an important relationship between what Maisie knew and what she saw, and James does figure her improper knowledge in terms of vision: 'She saw more and more; she saw too much'.[25] However, without wishing to dispute the

[22] Paul B. Armstrong's 1983 study provides the most direct formulation of this phenomenological turn: 'For Husserl, consciousness is not a passive receptacle for contents from the outside world but, instead, directs itself actively and even creatively toward its objects to posit, constitute, and give meaning to them'. Armstrong, *The Phenomenology of Henry James*, p.7. Sharon Cameron's application of Husserl does not enlist the phenomenological project quite so programmatically, but it too argues for a more dynamic picture of consciousness in James' novels than the traditional image of the solitary watcher: 'In the novels I have described, consciousness is not stable, not subjective, not interior, not unitary, as James' Prefaces claim. But it is also, as a consequence, not dismissed or deconstructed. Rather, it is disseminated. In the novels consciousness is not in persons; it is rather between them' Sharon Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p.77.

[23] Paul B. Armstrong, *The Phenomenology of Henry James*, pp.37–68, Merle A. Williams, *Henry James and the Philosophical Novel: Being and Seeing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.27–48.

[24] 'Like Husserl himself, she is a perpetual beginner in her perceptual and social explorations'.Williams, *Henry James and the Philosophical Novel: Being and Seeing*, p.3; Britzolakis, 'Technologies of Vision in Henry James' *What Maisie Knew*', p.375.

[25] Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (London: Penguin, 1985), p.43.

importance of vision in the novel, I want to pursue the analogy with William James' functional model of cognition and his advice to teachers in order to suggest that doing, rather than seeing, is proposed at crucial junctures of the novel as the *sine qua non* of knowledge and learning alike. Seen in this way, an unexpected affinity emerges between William James' stern proscription on wasted impressions and Henry James' attitude toward cognition.

Learning in *What Maisie Knew*

What Maisie Knew signals its concern with pedagogy by offering several burlesques of inept, irresponsible, ill-conceived or old-fashioned approaches to education. Parts of Maisie's schooling, for example, resemble what William James dismisses in *Talks to Teachers* as 'The older pedagogic method of learning things by rote, and reciting them parrot-like in the schoolroom'.[26] Rote learning was passé enough to be dismissed out of hand in William's 1892 lectures, but it features nonetheless in the education of Maisie, who recalls, when interrogated about her 'moral sense', 'how she sometimes couldn't repeat on Friday the sentence that had been glib on Wednesday, and she dealt all feebly and ruefully with the present tough passage'.[27] James' ironic catalogue of the superior intellectual attainments of Miss Overmore, 'who could say lots of dates straight off (letting you hold the book yourself), state the position of Malabar, play six pieces without notes and, in a sketch, put in beautifully the trees and houses and difficult parts', (*WMK* 50–51) situates her in the same pedagogic paradigm: the daft miscellaneousnesss of this hodgepodge underlines not only the emphasis on memorisation, but also the way in which knowledge in this reified form is divorced from any practical application. Mrs Beale displays the same dizzy inconsequence when outlining the 'subjects' that Maisie will encounter at public lectures – 'All the most important ones. French literature – and sacred history' (*WMK* 118) – and the lectures that Maisie eventually attends at 'Glower Street' (an allusion to University College London, on Gower Street) are themselves another exhibit in the novel's *sottisier* of educational malpractice. Like Miss Overmore's lessons, these lectures are portrayed as comically far removed from practical life, with James borrowing an image from *Hard*

[26] William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on some of Life's Ideals*, p.34.
[27] Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (London: Penguin, 1985), p.260. Subsequent references are given in the text.

Times to pillory their moral seriousness and earnest futility: 'the fountain of knowledge, in the form usually of a high voice that she took at first to be angry, plashed in the stillness of rows of faces thrust out like empty jugs' (*WMK* 139).[28] The glimpses that James gives us of these lectures are enough to identify them with the rote learning and the passive reception of knowledge criticised by William James in *Talks to Teachers*. Indeed, if knowledge is defined as ideas that stand to be verified by behaviour and by its practical consequences, then what is taught Maisie by her governesses and at 'Glower Street' does not count as knowledge at all.

By contrast, the other, dominant sense of 'knowledge' in *What Maisie Knew* – the precocious knowledge that Maisie acquires of moral misconduct and the *demi-monde* – meets William James' criteria for knowledge handsomely, embedded as it is in a rich framework of risks, stakes and consequences. Maisie has ample opportunity to test her hypotheses in this sphere, and, as we will see, the consequences of error can be brutal. As I have suggested, the novel cultivates a comparison between these two kinds of knowing and learning, and it sometimes does so by showing how they are, for Maisie, confounded. 'She had not had governesses for nothing', Maisie thinks at Boulogne: 'what in the world had she ever done but learn and learn and learn?' (*WMK* 213) From one point of view, Maisie mistakes one kind of learning for another here, conflating the illicit knowledge that has prompted Mrs Wix's hand-wringing with the learning conventionally imparted by governesses. But in another sense, she is quite right to merge the two, since the 'successive stages of her knowledge' (*WMK* 213) in question in this scene have indeed been nurtured by Miss Overmore and Mrs Wix, who are responsible for neglecting Maisie's formal education and diverting her attention onto the more immediate mysteries of her entourage. Mrs Wix, who reproaches herself at Boulogne with corrupting her charge, actively blurs the line between the two kinds of knowing by introducing Sir Claude as a subject of schoolroom study: Maisie's 'lessons these first days and indeed for long after seemed to be all about Sir Claude' (*WMK* 76); he seems to hover over 'the principal dates and auxiliary verbs'; and teacher and student finally abandon Maisie's lessons in order to 'draw up to the fire and talk about him; and if the truth must be told this edifying interchange constituted for the time the little girl's chief education' (*WMK* 80). This invasion of the

[28] In the opening scene of that novel, the pupils of Mr Gradgrind's school are figured as 'little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim'. Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (London: Penguin, 1985), p.48.

pedagogical by the personal repeats on a larger scale what has already occurred with Miss Overmore, who instructs Maisie in the names of her own siblings instead of the multiplication tables (*WMK* 44), and the unnamed governess briefly encountered in chapter three, who quizzes Maisie about her father rather than her lessons (*WMK* 46). Thus does the novel underscore the negligence of Maisie's reprehensible guardians and the distorted nature of her upbringing, but the same device also brings into relation two kinds of knowing: all that Maisie does not learn in the classroom, and all that she does come to know about the adult characters on whom she is dependent.

Unlike the spurious knowledge that Maisie receives about the 'position of Malabar' or 'sacred history', the knowledge she acquires of her parents and step-parents meets William James' criteria of susceptibility to verification by 'practical consequences'. By the same token, it also conforms to his lectures on pedagogy by lending itself to practical application and testing. Rather than passively receive instruction, James insists, students must implement their knowledge in the form of an 'expression', which in turn elicits a response:

> We thus receive sensible news of our behavior and its results. We hear the words we have spoken, feel our own blow as we give it, or read in the bystander's eyes the success or failure of our conduct. Now this return wave of impression pertains to the completeness of the whole experience.[29]

The novel shows us Maisie inferring rules from her own experiences, such as the reliability of governesses as opposed to parents (*WMK* 59), which she then tests and, if necessary, revises, as when her 'researches had hitherto indicated that to incur a second parent of the same sex you had usually to lose the first' (*WMK* 64). The fallibility of her knowledge is also repeatedly exposed by the responses of adults to her hypotheses, as when she is disabused by Miss Overmore of the supposition that Sir Claude might live with her as a tutor, by analogy with a governess (*WMK* 59). Maisie is, indeed, constantly reminded of mysterious lacunae in her knowledge by the adult habit of 'going off' in response to her utterances and questions (*WMK* 70–71). 'Everything', she learns, 'had something behind it: life was like a long, long corridor with rows of closed doors. She

[29] William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on some of Life's Ideals*, 86–67.

had learned that at these doors it was wise not to knock – this seemed to produce from within such sounds of derision' (*WMK* 54–55). Maisie wants to know more in order to avoid the wounding practical consequence of 'derision', with the feelings of confusion, shame and embarrassment it can produce.

Just as it is Ida who most makes her regret her direct questions – 'Find out for yourself!' (*WMK* 55) – so too it is Maisie's mother who inflicts on her the novel's most lacerating lesson in social behaviour. When, at Folkestone, Maisie unhappily breaks her own rule of silent 'diplomacy' (*WMK* 176) to relay to her horrified mother the Captain's gallant tribute to her 'goodness', James again invokes the imagery of formal learning to underline the way in which Maisie's *faux pas* is related to learning and knowing:

> Her mother gave her one of the looks that slammed the door in her face; never in a career of unsuccessful experiments had Maisie had to take such a stare. It reminded her of the way that once, at one of the lectures in Glower Street, something in a big jar that, amid an array of strange glasses and bad smells, had been promised as a beautiful yellow was produced as a beautiful black. She had been sorry on that occasion for the lecturer, but she was at this moment sorrier for herself. (*WMK* 176)

Unable to foresee the many shades of offence potentially contained in her statement – not least of which is the mere impropriety, as ever, of her own blasé allusions to moral indecency, and the reflection cast by this unwitting impropriety on her mother – Maisie is made painfully aware, once again, of the fallibility of her knowledge. Whereas the lectures at 'Glower Street' are divorced from the active lives – the behaviour – of their audience, the 'failure of [her] conduct' in this instance is present to Maisie as a felt affective wounding: 'nothing had ever made for twinges like mamma's manner of saying: "The Captain? What Captain?"' (*WMK* 177). Maisie has only a distant sympathetic involvement with the 'experiments' she witnesses, feeling kindly 'sorry' for the lecturer, but this vicarious emotion can't compare with the practical consequences of experiments that she performs for herself.

Knowing how and knowing that

The imagery of this passage invites us to consider Maisie's 'experiments' as directed towards the acquisition of knowledge, in a sort of counterpoint to the academic knowledge imparted at the 'Glower Street' lectures, but at the same time it doesn't seem quite right to ascribe Maisie's gaffe to something she doesn't know. What she tells Ida is, after all, correct; what Maisie lacks is not fact but tact: the tact that would have told her not to risk making an indelicate allusion. It will be helpful to borrow a classic distinction from analytic philosophy to supplement the vocabulary used so far in this essay to describe different kinds of knowing in *What Maisie Knew*. In an influential 1946 essay and then in the second chapter of *The Concept of Mind* (1949), Gilbert Ryle argued that large problems in the philosophy of mind stemmed from a failure to understand the relationship between 'knowing how' and 'knowing that', and specifically from a tendency to make the former kind of knowledge depend upon the latter. Ryle's forceful analysis of 'mental conduct verbs', sometimes labelled philosophical behaviourism, bears certain affinities to the pragmatic attitude to cognition elaborated by William James. To be sure, James, unlike Ryle, retained a logical distinction between 'representative knowledge' as a cause and behaviour as an effect, but on the occasions when he refers to the cash value of knowledge – 'what the knowing actually and practically amounts to' – it seems clear that his definition of cognition, in most contexts, is inextricably linked to behaviour. For him, drilling down into what it means to know an object will almost always lead to talk of actions and practical consequences – as with the rejecting, assenting, uttering and hunting we find in the tiger example. Ryle's vocabulary will be useful here in order to clarify how Henry James, too, approached cognition as unavoidably bound up with doing.

It is customary to assume, Ryle says,

> (1) that Intelligence is a special faculty, the exercises of which are those specific internal acts which are called acts of thinking, namely, the operations of considering propositions; (2) practical activities merit their titles 'intelligent', 'clever', and the rest only because they are accompanied by some such internal acts of considering propositions.[30]

[30] Gilbert Ryle, 'Knowing How and Knowing That', in *Collected Papers, Volume II: Collected Essays 1929–1968* (London: Hutchinson, 1971), p.212.

Ryle argues, however, that this dualistic view of intelligent practices – 'the mythical bifurcation of unwitnessable mental causes and their witnessable physical effects' – is mistaken, and that:

> Intelligently to do something (whether internally or externally) is not to do two things, one 'in our heads' and the other perhaps in the outside world; it is to do one thing in a certain manner.[31]

Playing chess, for example, does not involve consulting an inward register of the rules of chess and then making moves in accordance with those rules. Knowledge-how of this kind refers to a disposition or capacity to act in certain ways, and not to the possession of certain pieces of knowledge-that:

> When a person is described by one or other of the intelligence epithets such as "shrewd" or "silly", "prudent" or "imprudent", the description imputes to him not the knowledge, or ignorance, of this or that truth, but the ability, or inability, to do certain sorts of things.[32]

Ryle's analysis of knowledge-how has particular relevance to the context of education. Ryle draws largely in *The Concept of Mind* on his experiences in educational institutions and in the military to expound the common sense force of his thesis; to show how:

> In ordinary life … as well as in the special business of teaching, we are much more concerned with people's competences than with their cognitive repertoires, with the operations than with the truths that they learn.[33]

At the same time, however, he believes that education in particular is liable to be mistakenly associated with the imparting of such truths: 'The

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[31] Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1949), p.33, Ryle, 'Knowing How and Knowing That', p.214.

[32] Ibid., p.28.Accordingly, 'when we characterize people by mental predicates, we are not making untestable inferences to any ghostly processes occurring in streams of consciousness which we are debarred from visiting; we are describing the ways in which those people conduct parts of their predominantly public behaviour'.Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, p.50.

[33] Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, p.28.

uneducated public erroneously equates education with the imparting of knowing-that'.[34]

An over-investment in 'knowing-that' certainly characterises James' satire of the university extension lectures at 'Glower Street', which are supposed to conceive knowledge as the contents of a jug rather than a disposition to act in certain ways. It is also characteristic of the titbits of knowledge that Miss Overmore has memorised – even her playing of the piano is presented as a quality rather than an ability, part of a catalogue of attributes. By contrast, the knowledge that Maisie desperately tries to glean of how to get along in the world without being laughed at or otherwise mortified is very much a matter of knowing how. This distinction is underlined when Maisie becomes aware of the use being made of her by her parents and resolves to suppress, rather than relay, their oblique or direct messages to one another. What Maisie suppresses is, of course, knowledge-that, whose affinity with the knowledge imparted at 'Glower Street' is driven home by the duplication of the metaphor:

> The evil they had the gift of thinking or pretending to think of each other they poured into her little gravely-gazing soul as into a boundless receptacle. (*WMK* 42)

It is in these terms that Beale and Ida judge Maisie's behaviour as 'stupid', a failure of the 'receptacle' to retain knowledge, failing to recognise that Maisie's behaviour is not a deficiency of knowledge-that but an adroit application of knowledge-how. James' memorable description of how Maisie discovers at this moment a Rousseauian 'inner self' might lead us to construe what happens here as a phenomenon of inward depth, in the realm of what Ryle calls 'unwitnessable mental causes', but to this interpretation we would have to add that Maisie has at the same moment acquired a skill or an art: the 'pacific art of stupidity', to be exact (*WMK* 77). Her newfound ability not to tell her parents everything has the character of 'diplomacy', which, Maisie discovers to her chagrin at Folkestone, she is capable of exercising ineptly as well as adroitly. It does not have the nature of a rule or proposition that she can call to mind and obey; indeed, Maisie is painfully conscious of her ignorance of any such explicit formula:

> The child's discipline had been bewildering – it had ranged freely between the prescription that she was to answer when

[34] Gilbert Ryle, 'Knowing How and Knowing That', p.225.

> spoken to and the experience of lively penalties on obeying that prescription. (*WMK* 66)

The choice of whether or not to speak is akin, rather, to the non-thetic knowhow of 'tactful manners', whose 'canons', as Ryle puts it, 'remain unpropounded without impediment to the intelligent exercise of those gifts'. [35]

The fact that Maisie's parents are represented as engaged in a game also suggests that what appears from one point of view as a private enlargement of Maisie's inner life can be read just as well as the acquisition of a skill. Games are a pervasive image in the novel, and James compares Maisie to a 'shuttlecock' here to suggest the ludic and competitive nature of this third-party baiting, in which she is a pawn (*WMK* 42). A cognate image will occur to Maisie herself later, when she compares the struggle of which she is the object to a game of football (*WMK* 101). At one point or another almost all the adult characters accuse one another of playing a game rather than acting sincerely, and Ida applies the metaphor to her own conduct as she contemplates a coming change in the rules, when Maisie will be exploited more as a burden to the other parent than as a trophy: this will constitute 'a sort of game in which a fond mother clearly wouldn't show to advantage' (*WMK* 46). When Ida and Beale deplore Maisie's 'stupid' inability to retain knowledge-that, they ironically fail to see that she, too, is playing the game intelligently.

Maisie's fatal aptitude for bluffing also involves knowledge-how that is irreducible to knowledge-that. Maisie seizes every opportunity to exploit her guardians' tendency to take what she knows for granted, as when, having inquired about Mrs Wix's intentions, she quickly assents to Sir Claude's flattering 'Oh, you know!':

> 'Yes – I know!' What she knew, what she *could* know is by this time no secret to us: it grew and grew at any rate, the rest of that day, in the air of what he took for granted. (*WMK* 184)

Rather than refuse a compliment to her maturity, Maisie eagerly colludes with Sir Claude to preserve a cloak of vagueness over just what she knows, while Sir Claude for his part foregoes any 'attempt to test her knowledge'. But at the same time that Maisie misses an opportunity to enlarge her store

[35] Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, p.30.

of knowledge-that, she demonstrates an ability to make use of knowledge-how – a kind of tact – to avoid the disagreeable consequences of seeming naive.

Related to this knack for seeming to know more than she does are the moments in the text where Maisie makes a precocious-seeming remark instinctively, without reflection and even without being able to explain her words to herself. This occurs when Sir Claude responds with wry amusement to the news of a 'they' waiting in Ida's cab during her visit to Mrs Wix: Maisie feels that she has an intuitive grasp of the reason for his laughter, but 'could scarce have told you if it was to deepen or to cover the joke that she bethought herself to observe: "Perhaps it was her maid"' (*WMK* 189). It seems unlikely that Maisie's intuitive grasp of the joke really does get at the sense of Sir Claude's laughter: the combined chagrin, exasperation, incredulity and disgust underlying his response to this further news of his wife's extramarital carryings-on. But what is certain is that this kind of explicit understanding is irrelevant to her ability to participate in banter, or give the impression of precocity: Maisie is able to catch the tone of the conversation and respond aptly without knowing precisely what she means.

A similar trick of unreflected utterance occurs during one of Maisie's earnest *tête-à-têtes* with Mrs Wix in Boulogne, when, before Maisie can respond 'So do I' to Mrs Wix's declaration that she 'adore[s]' Sir Claude,

> something took place that brought other words to her lips; nothing more, very possibly, than the closer consciousness in her hand of the significance of Mrs Wix's. Their hands remained linked in unutterable sign of their union, and what Maisie at last said was simply and serenely: 'Oh I know!' (*WMK* 218)

Here again, Maisie instinctively chooses one conversational move over another, and would, one suspects, be just as hard pressed as in the previous example to explain her reply. Suppressing her first impulse, she opts rather for the words that will best give the impression of sharing in this moment of 'unutterable … union', as well as seizing the opportunity, once again, to affect knowingness.

The tension between this kind of social knowledge-how and the knowledge-that that characterises Maisie's formal education comes to a

head at the climax of the novel, when Mrs Wix badgers her to produce signs of a 'moral sense' (*WMK* 211). 'For James', as Tony Tanner notes, 'morality is not such an easy business as the edict-mongering Mrs Wix makes out', and her insistence that Maisie 'condemn' (*WMK* 214) the liaison between Sir Claude and Mrs Beale is portrayed as simple-minded priggery.[36] Mrs Wix demands that Maisie demonstrate a knowledge she doesn't possess – the knowledge that for her step-parents to live together would be a 'crime' (*WMK* 215) – and Maisie is, as ever, anxious to deflect the inquiry and dispel the imputation of ignorance:

> Never so much as when confronted had Maisie wanted to understand, and all her thought for a minute in the effort to come out with something which should be a disproof of her simplicity. (*WMK* 215)

Unable to produce the knowledge of moral transgression that Mrs Wix requires, Maisie falls back once again on her knowledge-how: her empirically acquired skills in placating and, here, hoodwinking her guardians. Following adroitly the cues that Mrs Wix gives her, Maisie hits upon an improvisation of jealousy as 'the way to show she was not simple', declaring her willingness to kill Mrs Beale as a way to 'guarantee her moral sense' (*WMK* 217). Sally Shuttleworth describes this action aptly as a 'performative lie', noting that Maisie 'has become, indeed, more adept at the social intricacies of performance than that dissolute socialite, her father'.[37] What I want to emphasise here is how this performative know-how is ironically contrasted, in this scene, with the crude knowledge-that on which Mrs Wix's ethics and pedagogics are based. The interchange between pupil and governess, which culminates in Maisie's inspired 'Oh I know', seems guided more by an instinctive feel for the right script than by a considered understanding of what Mrs Wix is driving at: instead of learning the lesson of the moral sense, Maisie deploys a different kind of knowledge to feign understanding and appease her inquisitor.

When, in the hotel at Boulogne, Maisie's 'moral sense' is again called into question for Mrs Wix, her sense of despair is explicitly compared to her experiences in the schoolroom.

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[36] Tony Tanner, *The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Realism in American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge at the University Press, 1965), p.291.
[37] Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840–1900*, p.333.

> It brought back to the child's recollection how she sometimes couldn't repeat on Friday the sentence that had been glib on Wednesday, and she dealt all feebly and ruefully with the present tough passage. Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale stood there like visitors at an 'exam'. She had indeed an instant a whiff of the faint flower that Mrs. Wix pretended to have plucked and now with such a peremptory hand thrust at her nose. Then it left her, and, as if she were sinking with a slip from a foothold, her arms made a short jerk. What this jerk represented was the spasm within her of something still deeper than a moral sense. She looked at her examiner; she looked at the visitors; she felt the rising of the tears she had kept down at the station. They had nothing – no, distinctly nothing – to do with her moral sense. The only thing was the old flat shameful schoolroom plea. 'I don't know – I don't know'. (*WMK* 260)

This passage marks the total failure of Mrs Wix's legislative moralism, which is, like the 'subjects' she vaguely plans to teach Maisie, utterly disconnected from Maisie's practical, affective life. The novel's flawed pedagogic models are invoked to underline how distant this abstract moral code is from 'practical consequences', just as James had earlier marked the contrast between the bitterly painful lessons Maisie learns from social blunders like her mention of the Captain and the impersonal experiments she observes at 'Glower Street'. Here, definitively, the model of cognition as a disembodied knowing of propositions, without reference to the pragmatist test of practical consequences on the 'bodily organs', is found wanting.

Crucially, James repudiates such a model of cognition at the level of narrative technique, by renouncing the omniscient narrator's prerogative of reducing this experience to an intelligible content. As in the moments of Maisie's virtuoso verbal improvisations, James exuberantly surpasses the cognitive model of Mrs Wix's trite moral lessons, portraying Maisie as a far more complex knowing subject than that model allows. Contrasted as it is with the trite lessons of the schoolroom and the moral sense, this 'moment of grotesque physicality, almost of automatism' (as Christina Britzolakis aptly puts it)[38] can be read as a superior fiction of the learning

[38] Christina Britzolakis, 'Technologies of Vision in Henry James' *What Maisie Knew*', p.384.

body, conforming closely to William James' prescription for durable impressions:

> Its *motor consequences* are what clinch it. Some effect due to it in the way of an activity must return to the mind in the form of the *sensation of having acted*, and connect itself with the impression. The most durable impressions are those on account of which we speak or act, or else are inwardly convulsed.

Maisie's inward convulsion sets the seal on a durable impression, to be added to the other cruelly affective learning experiences that James has dramatised. The content of Maisie's inner life is occluded here, situating her crisis on a level of physiological opacity far removed from the factitious intelligible truths of the 'moral sense'. What is clear, however, is that Maisie's effort at introspection has immediate practical consequences for her beside which the propositional knowledge sought by Mrs Wix is exposed as an intellectualist mirage.

What is put to the test here is, of course, a conative rather than a moral awareness: Mrs Wix's melodramatic catechism forces Maisie to cleave publicly to the terms of her ultimatum to Sir Claude. This resolution to give up both Mrs Wix and Mrs Beale in order to be with Sir Claude is itself a form of knowledge, albeit of a different order than that implied by the 'moral sense', as James makes plain some pages later: 'What helped the child was that she knew what she wanted. All her learning and learning had made her at last learn that' (*WMK* 262). Here the quasi-pun on 'learning' that James has sustained throughout the novel, where that word is used to designate both Maisie's farcical formal education and her hard-won social knowledge, recurs to define Maisie's choice of what she wants as a cognitive attainment – a learned ability. In positioning this practical choice at the apex of the novel's narrative arc, James emphatically refuses a model of cognition as transparent inward consciousness of knowledge-that. However we interpret Maisie's choice, nowhere in the novel's final chapters does James represent a process of reflective deliberation that would allow us to pinpoint the reasons, desires and beliefs that could function as putative mental causes for this decision. This crowning obscurity, familiar as a marker of the novel's proto-modernism, entails a position-taking on the question of cognition. Maisie's climactic choice is not made to depend on knowledge-that, as it would have if, for instance, the 'moral sense' had not been exposed as a chimera, and Maisie had indeed acted consciously in accordance with a learned moral principle.

Rather, the climax of Maisie's 'learning' is a practical knowledge of what she wants to do, and the novel's representation of this knowledge is conspicuously devoid of any duplicate mental process shadowing the words and actions by which she enacts this knowledge. In this way, the novel's denouement is foreshadowed by those earlier instances of unreflective speech in which Maisie demonstrates knowhow in the absence of knowledge-that. At the same time, this conative cognition, collapsing the distinction between knowing and wanting, is a radical extension of William James' theory of knowledge, making knowledge not only dependent on 'practical consequences' but indivisible from them: no knowledge is of more immediate practical consequence than knowing what one wants.

When one thinks of knowledge in Henry James, it's natural to think hermeneutically: of transitions from imperfect understanding to more astute readings of the social text. Hypocrisy, imposture and intrigue lurk latent in every social situation, and it is the task of the Jamesian protagonist to move from myopia to perspicacity in the reading of personal relations. This idea of knowledge as something hidden that can be brought to light is encapsulated in such affirmations as this, from the Prefaces:

> The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later, in one way or another; it being but one of the accidents of our hampered state, and one of the incidents of their quantity and number, that particular instances have not yet come our way.[39]

It also seems to be implied in the image, from 'The Art of Fiction', of experience as a 'spider-web' which 'converts the very pulses of the air into revelations', as though the novelist were a kind of bionic ear whose super-sensitive tympanum relayed knowledge inaudible to the common listener.[40] As it happens, we encounter precisely the same image in *What Maisie Knew*, when Maisie has the impression, at Boulogne, of being on the road to omniscience:

> She looked at the pink sky with a placid foreboding that she soon should have learnt All. They lingered in the flushed air till at last it turned to grey and she seemed fairly to receive new information from every brush of the breeze. (*WMK* 213)

[39] Henry James, *The Art of the Novel*, p.31.
[40] Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature American Writers English Writers* (New York: Library of America, 1984), p.52.

In the thirteen years separating 'The Art of Fiction' from *What Maisie Knew*, however, this image of answers blowing in the wind seems to have acquired an ironic tint. Maisie's fascinated sense of sliding inexorably towards total knowledge is fanciful, an instance of childish magical thinking, and is, moreover, determined by the influence of Mrs Wix: in this complex passage, it is quite explicitly Mrs Wix's melodramatic idea of Maisie's abominable 'knowledge' that imprints her imagination. The narrator admits, indeed, to encountering a technical difficulty in representing Mrs Wix's attitudes via Maisie's apprehension here, and there is no doubt that the linear, mechanical image of expanding knowledge that Maisie intuits and then imitates is originally an image 'for Mrs Wix' (*WMK* 212).[41] In other words, the image of the novelist as hypersensitive membrane in 'The Art of Fiction' is ironised and relativised in *What Maisie Knew*, becoming another sign of Mrs Wix's crude and superstitious approach to both knowledge and morality. In this novel, James' only full-length use of a child protagonist, the hermeneutic model of cognition is inadequate, for Maisie does not arrive at the kind of explicit, thetic understanding of her situation that so preoccupies Mrs Wix. What is required for this portrait of a young learner is an altogether different model of cognition, one which accommodates the phenomenon of knowing-how without reducing it to an effect of knowing-that. In his careful representation of such a model of cognition and such a process of learning, James came closer, perhaps, than anywhere else in his fiction to the pragmatic theory of knowledge espoused by his brother.

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[41] 'I so despair of courting her noiseless mental footsteps here that I must crudely give you my word for its being from this time forward a picture literally present to her' (*WMK* 212).