

THE PRAGMATIST



William James

AS A RULE WE DISBELIEVE ALL FACTS AND THEORIES
FOR WHICH WE HAVE NO USE.

William James

15

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- WHAT IS *PRAGMATISM*?
- WHAT IS *PRAGMATICISM*?
- WHAT IS THE “PRAGMATIC THEORY OF MEANING”?
- WHAT IS THE “PRAGMATIC METHOD”?
- WHAT IS MEANT BY THE “CASH VALUE” OF AN IDEA?
- WHAT IS DETERMINISM?
- WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE “HEALTHY-MINDED”?
- WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE “MORBID-MINDED”?
- WHAT IS A SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY?
- WHAT IS THE “PRAGMATIC PARADOX”?



FOR YOUR REFLECTION

KEEP THESE QUESTIONS IN MIND AS YOU LEARN ABOUT THE PRAGMATIST.

1. What is pragmatism?
2. What is pragmaticism?
3. What is the “pragmatic theory of meaning”?
4. What is the “pragmatic method”?
5. What is meant by the “cash value” of an idea?
6. What is determinism?
7. What does it mean to be “healthy-minded”?
8. What does it mean to be “morbid-minded”?
9. What is a self-fulfilling prophecy?
10. What is the “pragmatic paradox”?

FOR DEEPER CONSIDERATION

A. Rationalists insist that truth is universal, that is, *contextless*. James rejects this notion and argues that “truth happens to an idea.” What does he mean? What evidence does he offer to support his position? Provide one or two current examples of what seems to be “truth happening” to an idea. Is that what really goes on, or does truth only appear to happen? That is, does our opinion of truth change even though “the truth” does not? What’s the difference, if any, between “the truth” and our sincere opinion of what’s true? What would James say?

B. James says that living “at home in the universe” depends on believing things that suit us temperamentally, and he divides the human temperament into two types: the tender-minded and the tough-minded. Contrast these two types by categorizing political parties, churches, academic subjects, and tastes in art or music as tender-minded or tough-minded. Is it easy, or possible, to find pure examples of each type? Do nations and historical eras fall into these categories? What did James think happens to us if we can’t find beliefs that resonate with our temperamental type? Do you agree, or do you think that we can and should mold our temperaments to fit the facts—“the truth”?



In Chapter 1 we saw that philosophy has a reputation for being dangerous and subversive, for destroying people's beliefs without replacing them. We also noted that it has the almost contradictory reputation of being irrelevant, of making no real difference in our lives. "Philosophy bakes no bread," it is said. We have seen very powerful minds disagree about the most fundamental things: Does the "mind" exist? Do we have free will? Do the consequences of our actions matter if the motives are good? What is knowledge? Is reason more reliable than experience, or is it the other way around? Is there only one reality? Is there a God? What is virtue? Can we know anything? Is objectivity possible?

What can a reasonable person, a person of so-called common sense, make of all this? It seems as if each of the great philosophers builds a whole system around one or two insights. These systems can appear farfetched and bizarre compared with life as most of us experience it; though intellectually stimulating and interesting, they hardly seem *useful*. Isn't life too short to waste on philosophical arguments full of abstract terms that have no practical use except perhaps to provide philosophers with jobs?

The first truly great American philosopher demanded that philosophy answer these kinds of questions. **William James** (1842–1910) was the most original and influential advocate of **pragmatism**, an empirically based philosophy that defines knowledge and truth in terms of practical consequences. Like Mill, Marx, and Kierkegaard, James believed that philosophy must be more than a mere intellectual enterprise. For James, philosophy's true purpose is to help us live by showing us how to discover and adopt beliefs that fit our individual needs—and temperaments. James thus shifted the focus of inquiry from the search for objectively true universal beliefs to the search for *beliefs that work for us*. His philosophy is provocative, enthusiastic, optimistic, and vigorous; it speaks to the nearly universal need for ideas and truths that matter to individuals. Voicing the lament of the common person—"What difference does this or that philosophy make to my life?"—James offers an uncommonly rich answer.

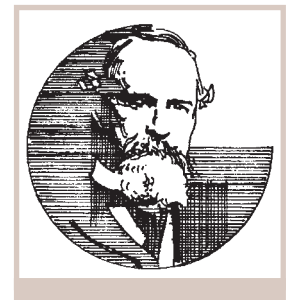
■ AN AMERICAN ORIGINAL ■



William James was both a product and shaper of his time. The last half of the nineteenth century was a period of great confidence in science. People believed in continuous progress, influenced in part by a social interpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution that promised never-ending growth and improvement. This was also an age of bold action, as the Rockefellers and Carnegies and Vanderbilts carved up the land and established great industrial empires. People were impatient, wanting to move on, to get things done. In America, especially, this was an era of expansion, of strength. James captured this spirit so well and expressed himself in such a clear, powerful, "anti-intellectual" way that he became one of the best-known, most popular, and most influential American philosophers so far.

pragmatism

From the Greek for "deed"; belief that ideas have meaning or truth value to the extent that they produce practical results and effectively further our aims; empirically based philosophy that defines knowledge and truth in terms of practical consequences.



William James

These, then, are my last words to you: Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact. The “scientific proof” that you are right may not be clear before the day of judgment (or some stage of being which that expression may serve to symbolize) is reached. But the faithful fighters of this hour, or the beings that then and there will represent them, may then turn to the faint-hearted, who here decline to go on, with words like those with which Henry IV greeted tardy Crillon after a great victory had been gained: “Hang yourself, brave Crillon! we fought at Arques, and you were not there.”

WILLIAM JAMES

My first act of freedom will be to believe in free will.

WILLIAM JAMES

The Education of a Philosopher

William James’s father was a restless man, so William spent a considerable part of his childhood moving about. In 1855, James’s father lost faith in American education and moved the entire family to Europe. They left America in June; in August, James’s father sent William and his younger brother Henry (who became the famous novelist) to school in Geneva; by October the entire family had moved to England. Later they moved to France. In Boulogne, sixteen-year-old William started college and for the first time managed to attend the same school for an entire year.

That spring, however, the Jameses moved to Rhode Island. William wanted to continue his college studies, but his father was unimpressed with American colleges and prevented him from attending. A year and a half later, the family moved back to Switzerland. By this time, William’s early interest in science had been replaced by a desire to be an artist, but after a year of art study, he turned back to science.

In 1861, William James entered Harvard as a chemistry major. His interests shifted to biology, anatomy, and ultimately physiology. James was so impressed by Jean Louis Agassiz (1807–1873), one of Harvard’s most influential faculty members, that he accompanied him on an expedition to the Amazon. After eight months, James had had enough. He said, “When I get home I’m going to study philosophy all my days,” but what he actually did was return to Harvard Medical School, where he had already taken some classes.

During his years as a student, James suffered mentally and physically. He described himself as being “on the continual verge of suicide.” Unable to continue his medical studies because his hospital work put too much strain on his back, he went to Germany for the mineral baths. His letters home were funny and lighthearted, but elsewhere he noted that “thoughts of the pistol, the dagger and the bowl” were never far from him.¹ When he felt up to it, he returned to medical school and ultimately passed his licensing exam at age twenty-six. Later in the same year, though, he went into a severe depression, writing in his diary, “Nature & life have unfitted me for any affectionate relations with other individuals.”² He was in a constant state of anxiety and dreaded being alone.

James was saved by an idea from the French philosopher Charles Renouvier (1815–1903), who had characterized free will as the ability to hold on to one idea among a number of possibilities. Willing himself to hold on to the idea of health and well-being, James effectively *decided* to get well: He *willed* himself well, by concentrating all his mental energy to produce “the self-governing resistance of the ego to the world.”³ James announced, “My first act of freedom will be to believe in free will.” His depression lifted like a veil, and he was at last free to follow the restless intellect he had inherited from his father. As a result of his lingering sickness and unhappiness, he developed an interest in the relationship between mind and body. Speaking of James, a friend said:

“Active tension,” uncertainty, unpredictability, extemporized adaptation, risk, change, anarchy, unpretentiousness, naturalness—these are the

Pragmatic Study Habits

It is your relaxed and easy worker, who is in no hurry, and quite thoughtless most of the while of consequences, who is your efficient worker; and tension and anxiety, and present and future, all mixed up together in our mind at once, are the surest drags upon steady progress and hindrances to our success. . . .

My advice to students . . . would be somewhat similar. Just as a bicycle chain may be too tight, so may one's carefulness and conscientiousness be so tense as to hinder the running of one's mind. Take, for example, periods when there are many successive days of examination impending. One ounce of

good nervous tone in an examination is worth many pounds of anxious study for it in advance. If you really want to do your best in an examination, fling away the book the day before, say to yourself, "I won't waste another minute on this miserable thing, and I don't care one iota whether I succeed or not." Say this sincerely, and feel it; and go out and play, or go to bed and sleep, and I am sure the results next day will encourage you to use the method permanently.

William James, "The Gospel of Relaxation," in *Talks to Teachers of Psychology*, quoted in Lin Yutang, *The Wisdom of America* (New York: John Day, 1950), p. 243.

qualities of life which James finds most palatable, and which give him the deepest sense of well-being. They are at the same time the qualities which he deems most authentic, the accents in which the existent world speaks to him most directly.⁴

In 1872, James completed his education and took a job teaching physiology at Harvard. Within three years he was made assistant professor and remained affiliated with Harvard for nearly thirty-six years—the rest of his professional life.

In 1876, James's father announced to William, "I have met your future wife." And indeed he had. Alice Gibbens was a bright, vibrant, strikingly honest young woman. Though they fell in love, William declared himself unfit to marry her and sent her a series of self-critical, suffering letters designed to discourage any thoughts of marriage. Alice understood William well and so went to Quebec, saying she did so "to remove temptation from his path." The distance apparently diminished James's fears, however, and made Alice even more appealing. His letters became ardent efforts at courtship. Two years after his father's announcement, William and Alice were married.⁵

Though William James had found the support and care he needed to help steady his restless temperament and tendency to depression, for the rest of his life he struggled to remain healthy, using his particular good humor, aggressive intellect, and psychological insights—but he gave credit for what success he achieved to his wife for saving him.

The problem of human freedom is confused somewhat by the distinction between the self and the will. The will is only the self in its active side and freedom of the will really means freedom of the self. It is determination by the self.

SARVEPALLI
RADHAKRISHNAN

The Philosopher as Hero

James's interest in medicine and physiology developed into curiosity about psychology, and in 1878 the Henry Holt Company signed him to write a

The late nineteenth century teetered between pessimistic despair and optimistic faith in scientific progress. Thomas Eakins's painting *The Agnew Clinic* depicts the kind of medical theater William James might have attended as a medical student.



The Agnew Clinic by Thomas Eakins. ©Geoffrey Clements/Corbis

psychology textbook. It took him twelve years to finish *Principles of Psychology* (1890), but the wait was worth it, and the book's wide appeal established James as an important figure in the early history of modern psychology.

About this time, his focus began to shift once more. He became increasingly interested in philosophy, but because of his broad interests, his bouts with depression, and his experience in science, medicine, and psychology, he saw philosophy in a different light than did most professional philosophers of his time. James regarded philosophy as a matter of personal involvement, as a function of the will, and as a means to overcome despair and futility. He developed the kind of philosophy *he needed to cope* with his life and presented it in an appealing and powerful series of lectures that made it accessible to others.

Much of James's work is couched in heroic, often masculine terms, which were more fashionable and common then than they are now. But we would be doing ourselves and James a serious disservice if we rejected his philosophy for that reason. Pragmatism is not a *male* philosophy but, rather, a philosophy that includes an element of heroic struggle, a philosophy of courage and action, a philosophy of vitality. A product of his times, James expressed these values in typically masculine terms. He was trying to resist inertia, to resist giving in to self-pity and self-defeat—and he used a vocabulary of heroic action to do so. James called on us to become consciously responsible for our lives by strenuous exertion of will. In our contemporary era, which seems so often to reduce us to the helpless products of environment and heredity, a philosophy like James's is a refreshing vote of confidence in the individual human spirit.

If . . . man's nature . . . makes him do what he does, how does his action differ from that of a stone or a tree? Have we not parted with any ground for responsibility? . . . Holding men to responsibility may make a decided difference in their future behavior; holding a stone or tree to responsibility is a meaningless performance.

JOHN DEWEY

James himself did not actually live the kind of life he described as ideal. But he wanted to. He recognized the dangers and limits of too much sentimentality, too much “tender-mindedness,” and offered what he saw as a healthier, more useful alternative. He understood—from his own weaknesses—the frustration of being unable to stick to anything, the frustration of not knowing what we want, the frustration of trying to make up our minds and choose one important thing. James’s own experiences convinced him that life was too important, too complex, too rich to reduce to any of the philosophical systems that had gone before. And so he refused to offer a system; instead, he offered a *method* for marshaling the will. But his method was grounded in philosophy, because only philosophy “has the patience and courage to work continually at a problem when common sense and even science have long since set it aside or given it up.”⁶

There are some people, and I am one of them, who think that the most important and most practical thing about a man is still his view of the universe. We think that for a landlady considering a lodger it is important to know his income, but still more important to know his philosophy.

G. K. CHESTERTON

The Philosopher as Advocate

William James published his first philosophy book, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, in 1896. In 1898, he was invited to give the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh, Scotland, a rare honor for an American. These lectures were published in 1902 as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. A classic of contemporary philosophy, this superb book still sells widely, its popularity extending far beyond academic circles.

After returning to Harvard, James delivered a series of lectures on pragmatism and repeated these lectures at Columbia University to an audience of more than one thousand people. They were published as *Pragmatism* in 1907. *Pragmatism* also sold well and attracted the interest of both scholars and the general public. James was cheered up by its reception, to the point of announcing to his brother:

I shouldn’t be surprised if ten years hence it should be rated as “epoch-making,” for of the definitive triumph of that general way of thinking I can entertain no doubt whatever—I believe it to be something quite like the protestant reformation.⁷

James’s work became so influential that he effectively altered the shape of what came to be known as American philosophy. He taught, among others, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Teddy Roosevelt, writer Gertrude Stein, and philosopher George Santayana. (Of all his students, he particularly disliked Roosevelt and Santayana.)

In 1907, the same year *Pragmatism* appeared, James retired from Harvard at the age of sixty-five. Responding at last to the criticism that he had failed to present a sustained, systematic explanation of his ideas, James resolved to craft a fuller expression of pragmatism in his remaining years. To his brother he wrote, “I live in apprehension lest the Avenger should cut me off before I get my message out. I hesitate to leave the volumes I have already published without their logical complement.”⁸

James compiled a volume of essays, *The Meaning of Truth*, and one of lectures, *A Pluralistic Universe*. He hoped these books would be considered more scholarly and systematic than his others, but they were not the “logical complement” he

If we take the whole history of philosophy, the systems reduce themselves to a few main types which, under all the technical verbiage in which the ingenious intellect of man envelops them, are just so many visions, modes of feeling the whole push, and seeing the whole drift of life, forced on one by one’s total character and experience, and on the whole preferred—there is no other truthful word—as one’s best working attitude.

WILLIAM JAMES

sought. Alas, the Avenger did cut off the old rebel, the anti-intellectual champion of living philosophy, and these final books were published one year after his death, in 1911. Ironically, perhaps, William James remained truer to his philosophy than if he had written a more scholarly, systematic version of it, for then he would have been required to present an appeal to the abstract and logical niceties he had spent his whole life denouncing.

The very last words of James's very last essay reflect the spirit of pragmatism better than any scholarly system: "There is no conclusion. What has concluded that we might conclude regarding it? There are no fortunes to be told and there is no advice to be given. Farewell."⁹

■ CHARLES SANDERS PEIRCE ■



Charles Sanders Peirce

I regard Logic as the Ethics of the Intellect—that is, in the sense in which Ethics is the science of the methods of bringing Self-Control to bear to gain our Satisfactions.

CHARLES SANDERS
PEIRCE



The first expression of pragmatism actually appears in the work of **Charles Sanders Peirce** (1839–1914). The son of a Harvard mathematics professor, Peirce studied philosophy, science, and mathematics, receiving a master's degree in mathematics and chemistry from Harvard. After working at the Harvard astronomical observatory for three years, he went to work for the United States Coastal and Geodetic Survey, where he remained for thirty years. He also lectured briefly at Johns Hopkins University. A brilliant but eccentric man, Peirce was never able to secure a full-time university position. As a result, he had a difficult time publishing his work. The last years of his life were clouded by physical infirmity, poverty, and social isolation and rejection. Through it all, William James remained his friend, supporting him and presenting his ideas to a wide audience. After Peirce's death, his writings were collected and published. Although massive and difficult, his work has achieved a measure of success and is experiencing renewed interest among philosophers.

Peirce's "Pragmaticism"

Peirce first presented what he referred to as "pragmatism" in an 1878 article titled "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," written for a popular magazine. This essay was ignored by philosophers until James devoted a series of lectures to it. James had intended only to present Peirce's ideas to a wider audience, but Peirce so strenuously objected to James's version of pragmatism that he "gave" him the term and coined yet another one for himself, *pragmaticism*:

[The] word "pragmatism" has gained general recognition in a generalized sense that seems to argue power of growth and vitality. The famed psychologist, James, first took it up. . . . So then, the writer, finding his bantling "pragmatism" so promoted, feels that it is time to kiss his child good-bye and relinquish it to a higher destiny; while to serve the precise purpose of expressing the original definition, he begs to announce the birth of the word "pragmaticism," which is ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers.¹⁰

Peirce was not just being cranky in insisting on clear and precise use of his term. His philosophy rested on a new theory of meaning. He coined the term *pragmaticism* from the Greek word *pragma*, which means "an act" or "a consequence."

He wanted to show that the meanings of words depend on some kind of action. Peirce argued that ideas are meaningful only when they translate into actions and predict experiences associated with actions.

Pragmatic Theory of Meaning

Peirce argued that the *only differences between the meanings of words are how they test out in experience*. He thus equated meaning with the effects related to words, saying, “Our idea of anything is our idea of its sensible effects.” Meaningful statements refer to predictable, observable, practical effects (consequences). “Consequently, the sum of experimental phenomena that a proposition implies makes up its entire bearing upon human conduct.”¹¹ If a word cannot be tied to any observable practical results, it is thereby meaningless, for its meaning is the sum total of its practical consequences.

Peirce’s scientific background and interests influenced his strong dislike for the kind of vague, abstract rationalism found in Descartes and other “impractical” system spinners. Descartes had separated the mind and thinking from any necessary connection with experience. Peirce pointed out, however, that all thinking and all meaning are *context dependent*. Context includes material, social, and emotional components, as well as an intellectual one.

Agreeing with the empiricists, Peirce argued that meaning is based on experience and determined by experiment. He did not mean just formal, scientific experiment, but also the kind of informal testing we do every day, as when, say, we test a recently varnished tabletop to see whether it is hard yet. We “test” to see whether it is appropriate to apply the word *hard* to this surface; we “experiment” by looking to see whether it looks damp, by touching it lightly, and so on. Things are not hard in some abstract, ideal, constant sense but in the real world of causal and material relationships.

Let us illustrate this rule by examples; and, to begin with the simplest one possible, let us ask what we mean by calling a thing *hard*. Evidently that it will not be scratched by many other substances. The whole conception of this quality, as of every other, lies in its conceived effects. There is absolutely no difference between a hard thing and a soft thing so long as they are not brought to the test.¹²

If there is no way of testing the effects of words (and ideas), no way of verifying their public consequences, they are meaningless. *Meaningful ideas always make a practical difference.*

The rational purport of a word or other expression lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing upon conduct; if one can define accurately all the conceivable experimental phenomena which the affirmation or denial of a concept implies, one will have therein a complete definition of the concept, and there is absolutely nothing more in it. . . .

CHARLES SANDERS
PEIRCE

■ PRAGMATISM ■



Like Peirce, James yearned for a philosophy free of “meaningless abstractions,” a philosophy that stretched far beyond the merely technical and rationally coherent to embrace the whole of life. Building on Peirce’s foundation, James advocated a new vision of a philosophical approach that he claimed others had recognized before, but only in parts. In the process, James went beyond Peirce’s intentions and used pragmatism to present a moral

Materialism fails on the side of incompleteness. Idealism always presents a systematic totality, but it must always have some vagueness and this leads to error. . . . But if materialism without idealism is blind, idealism without materialism is void.

CHARLES SANDERS
PEIRCE

The philosophy which is so important in each of us is not a technical matter; it is our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means.

WILLIAM JAMES

We all, scientists and non-scientists, live on some inclined plane of credulity. The plane tips one way in one man, another way in another; and may he whose plane tips in no way be the first to cast a stone.

WILLIAM JAMES

theory and to make a case for religious belief. We might even say he made pragmatism into a kind of philosophical religion. That is, James attempted to present a philosophy that could provide values and ideals worth striving for and that could satisfy our need to believe without appealing to metaphysical abstractions.

Pragmatic Method and Philosophy

James reflected a growing trend among philosophers to resist the abstract, to demand relevance and immediacy, and to deal with the “living issues” that face us. As he put it, “The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.” There is a strong moral tone implicit in this position: It is not enough for philosophers to tackle questions of consistency or spin out grand theories. People are struggling through their lives, suffering, rejoicing, searching, and dying. We have a right—indeed, an obligation—to ask, “What difference does the theory of forms make to me, *now*? How is my life *different* if a tree falling in the forest does or does not make a sound? What *practical difference* does it make to me if the mind and body are two different substances?”

James often talked about feeling “at home” in the universe. Pragmatism was meant to be a *method* for solving those problems that interfere with feeling at home. James looked for what he called the *cash value* of statements, the practical payoff, and he rejected any philosophy that lacked it. This includes virtually all metaphysics.

The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. Is the world one or many?—fated or free?—material or spiritual?—here are notions either of which may or may not hold good of the world; and disputes over such notions are unending. The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other’s being right. . . .

A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once and for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns toward concreteness and adequacy, toward facts, toward action and toward power.¹³

James referred to theories as “only man-made language, a conceptual shorthand . . . in which we write our reports of nature” and he added that “languages, as is well known, tolerate much choice of expression and many dialects.”¹⁴

If any theory with a practical payoff is true, does it not follow that one theory is as good as another to those who believe it? It would if James were advocating sophistic relativism, but for the most part, he did not see pragmatism that way. He saw it as a *method*, rather than a collection of beliefs. Thus, he saw a use



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Peirce and James thought that the process of testing and reevaluating ideas is vital to human happiness. As our beliefs change, our notions of what is desirable change. But these changes can be slow. For example, some people are still uncomfortable with the idea of a male teaching preschool. As more men do, however, our ideas on this matter will be reevaluated.

for various theories of verification and meaning as long as they are ultimately used to determine the “cash value” of beliefs. We might benefit from using both empirical and rational criteria, for instance.

Pragmatism . . . asks its usual question, “Grant an idea or belief to be true,” it says, “what concrete difference will its being true make in any one’s actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth’s cash-value in experiential terms?”

The moment pragmatism asks this question, it sees the answer: *True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot.* 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. . . .

Our account of truth is an account of truths in the plural, of processes. . . . Truth for us is simply a collective name for verification-processes.¹⁵

From a strictly logical perspective, James’s position seems to contradict itself, much as strict relativism contradicts itself: He asserts the truth of his theory, which in turn seems to deny the possibility of “a truth.” If a theory is merely a “man-made language,” then why should we speak James’s language?

Many of you are students of philosophy, and have already felt in your own persons the scepticism and unreality that too much grubbing in the abstract roots of things will breed. This is, indeed, one of the regular fruits of the overstudious career. Too much questioning and too little active responsibility lead, almost as often as too much sensualism does, to the edge of the slope, at the bottom of which lie pessimism and the nightmare or suicidal view of life. But to the diseases which reflection breeds, still further reflection can oppose effective remedies.

WILLIAM JAMES

*All our scientific and
philosophic ideals are altars
to unknown gods.*

WILLIAM JAMES

A possible answer is to view James as an *advocate*, whose chief purpose isn't to present a strict *argument* but, rather, to make a broad enough case to convert and convince a wide audience. If we accept at face value James's insistence that he was offering us a *method* to live by, then we have to approach him differently than if he were offering a philosophy as such. Indeed, James himself sometimes refers to pragmatism as a *creed*. A philosophical creed is a body of beliefs we can devote our lives to, whereas a philosophical *argument* is an attempt to make a rational case; the former appeals primarily to our hearts, the latter to our minds.

Pragmatism has been called "philosophically crude" because of its apparent indifference to theoretical precision and consistency. Yet it can be argued that precision and consistency *pay* in some areas—science and medicine, for instance—but *cost* in others—for example, when we demand rigor and precision that are inappropriate for the issue before us.

James believed our lives are shaped by our beliefs. And we *need to believe more than we can ever "prove" by overly strict, objective, neutral standards*, which he calls "agnostic rules for truth-seeking." He says, "If one should assume that pure reason is what settles our opinions, he would fly in the teeth of the facts." What does settle our opinions, then? James answers, the *will to believe*. And what we believe is a function of whether we are tough- or tender-minded.

The Temper of Belief

In addition to being a philosopher, James was an innovative, groundbreaking psychologist; as such, he refused to confine philosophy to the intellectual realm. For him, the function of philosophy shifted from revealing "the truth" to learning how to live in the world. In psychological terms, pragmatic philosophy is meant to provide a way of becoming better adjusted to the world. This helps account for the inconsistency that troubles more traditional philosophers: Living "at home in the universe" does *not*, at least according to James, depend on knowing and believing what is true, but on believing things that suit *us*.

We can classify people, James thought, into two temperamental types:

Now the particular difference of temperament that I have in mind in making these remarks is one that has counted in literature, art, government, and manners as well as in philosophy. In manners we find formalists and free-and-easy persons. In government, authoritarians and anarchists. In literature, purists or academicals, and realists. In art, classics and romantics. You recognize these contrasts as familiar; well, in philosophy we have a very similar contrast expressed in the pair of terms "rationalist" and "empiricist," "empiricist" meaning your lover of facts in all their crude variety, "rationalist" meaning your devotee to abstract and eternal principles. . . .

I will write these traits down in two columns. I think you will practically recognize the two types of mental make-up that I mean if I head the columns by the titles "tender-minded" and "tough-minded" respectively.

THE TENDER-MINDED

Rationalistic (going by
“Principles”),
Intellectualistic,
Idealistic,
Optimistic,
Religious,
Free-willist,
Monistic,
Dogmatical.

THE TOUGH-MINDED

Empiricist (going by
“facts”),
Sensationalistic,
Materialistic,
Pessimistic,
Irreligious,
Fatalistic,
Pluralistic,
Sceptical.

Each of you probably knows some well-marked example of each type, and you know what each example thinks of the example on the other side of the line. They have a low opinion of each other. Their antagonism, whenever as individuals their temperaments have been intense, has formed in all ages a part of the philosophic atmosphere of the time. It forms a part of the philosophic atmosphere today. The tough think of the tender as sentimentalists and soft-heads. The tender feel the tough to be unrefined, callous, or brutal. Their mutual reaction is very much like that that takes place when Bostonian tourists mingle with a population like that of Cripple Creek. . . . [But] few of us are tender-footed Bostonians pure and simple, and few are typical Rocky Mountain toughs, in philosophy. Most of us have a hankering for the good things on both sides of the line.¹⁶

James thought philosophy had been dominated historically by extremists, so that most philosophies are unbalanced in either the tough or tender direction. The same might be said of contemporary philosophy. Today's tough-minded philosophies view scientific knowledge as the only secure kind; they include the strictest forms of behavioristic psychology and analytically oriented philosophies, and they apply such rigid standards of meaning that most basic, meaning-of-life questions are dismissed as meaningless. The extremes of tender-minded philosophy include anti-intellectual theology, pop psychologies, and “metaphysics.” Such extremism has rendered philosophy inappropriate for the vast majority of us, who are a mixture of tough and tender. But because we are easily persuaded, we end up trying to follow fashion or what James called the “most impressive philosopher in the neighborhood”—or the most impressive theologian, politician, or psychologist.

James believed that when we succumb to the “most impressive philosopher in the neighborhood,” we do psychic violence to our unexpressed, preconscious sense of the world. We deny important parts of ourselves and exaggerate others. When we try to live according to beliefs that do not suit us, we become dissatisfied and unhappy. The issue, then, for James is how to find a *cause*, how to find beliefs worth living for, worth fighting and dying for—how to find a philosophical religion.

This life is worth living, we can say, since it is what we make it, from the moral point of view; and we are determined to make it from that point of view so far as we have anything to do with it, a success.

WILLIAM JAMES

My strongest moral and intellectual craving is for some stable reality to lean upon, and as a professed philosopher pledges himself publicly never to have done with doubt on these subjects, but every day to be ready to criticize afresh and call in question the grounds of his faith the day before, I fear the constant sense of instability generated by this attitude would be more than the voluntary faith I can keep going is sufficient to neutralize.

WILLIAM JAMES

PHILOSOPHICAL

QUERY

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If James is correct, those who criticize his free-floating style and apparently inconsistent views might be expressing their tough-minded temperaments. Do you agree with his distinction between tough- and tender-mindedness? Does it account for philosophical differences? Is it possible to evaluate this distinction without falling into one camp or the other? Which side are you on? Discuss the distinction.

Individual action is a means and not our end. Individual pleasure is not our end; we are all putting our shoulders to the wheel for an end that none of us can catch more than a glimpse at—that which the generations are working out.

CHARLES SANDERS
PEIRCE

The Will to Believe

According to James, we live according to beliefs that are products of our own temperaments and experience; our beliefs are not the products of abstract reasoning. Rather, we manage to find reasons to believe what we want and need to believe. And we have the right to do that, according to James, who once said he would have been better off titling his famous lecture *The Right to Believe* rather than *The Will to Believe*.

Because life *demand*s a response, *demand*s action, we have no choice but to believe *something*. Life presents us with what James calls *forced options*. We must make decisions whether we want to or not (even “not deciding” is a decision). We *cannot* remain detached and disinterested; life simply does not allow it. We are compelled to decide and to act, and reason is not a sufficient force for action. We do not act on what we understand, but on what we believe. The rationalist’s and skeptic’s demands for certainty cannot be met, yet we continue to live and act—without intellectual certainty.

I, therefore, for one cannot see my way to accept the agnostic rules for truth-seeking, or willfully agree to keep my willing nature out of the game. I cannot do so for the plain reason that *a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.* . . . If we had an infallible intellect with its objective certitudes, we might feel ourselves disloyal to such a perfect organ of knowledge in not trusting to it exclusively. But if we are empiricists, if we believe that no bell in us tolls to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp, then it seems a piece of idle fantasticality to preach so solemnly our duty of waiting for the bell. Indeed we *may* wait if we will—I hope you do not think I am denying that—(we ought, on the contrary, delicately and profoundly to respect one another’s mental freedom) but if we do wait, we do so at our own peril as much as if we believed.¹⁷

The intellect does not discover the truths in which we believe; the will creates truth.

Truth Happens to an Idea

The rationalists’ model of truth was taken from logic and mathematics. Rationalists said truth is universal, which amounts to saying it is *contextless*. The sum “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” is true at all times, in all languages, for all creeds, for all ages, ethnicities, and genders

of people, in all conditions of health or sickness. Indeed, because it is true for all “rational entities,” it is true throughout the universe. (See Chapters 5 and 9.)

James rejected this simplistic, universalist notion of truth. He said experience makes it clear that ideas *become* true. Elsewhere, he said “truth *happens* to an idea.” We *decide* whether or not an idea is true by “testing” it, as Peirce pointed out. James extended Peirce’s pragmatist theory of truth:

Any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor, is true for just so much, true in so far forth, true instrumentally.¹⁸

If James is correct, we accept ideas as true only after we test them against our past experiences. Even if we have a tendency to reject new ideas, the public, communitywide aspect of truth-seeking (which Peirce emphasized) forces us—or most of us—to test and reevaluate ideas, keeping some and discarding others as we and the world change.

We have all witnessed this process. It is especially clear in the areas of moral and religious belief (areas James thought vital to human happiness). For example, looking back over history, we see that ideas about vice have changed. Few contemporary Americans believe that it is wrong for women to appear in public with bare ankles, but many people used to believe that it was. Churches regularly convene councils to modify basic articles of faith, and entirely new religions emerge when old ones no longer *pay*.

Individuals and groups may simply refuse to accept changes, but on the whole, our beliefs do change, and thus our notion of what is true about the world changes—though, as James observed, we try to hang on to as many of our old ideas as possible until

The individual . . . meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions . . . until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock. . . .

This new idea is then adopted as the true one. It preserves the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification, stretching them enough to make them admit the novelty, but conceiving them in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible. [A radical] explanation, violating all our preconceptions, would never pass as a true account. . . . We would scratch around industriously till we found something less eccentric. The most violent revolutions in an individual’s beliefs leave most of his old order standing.¹⁹

Ideas are tested and accepted or rejected based on how well they work for us. Sometimes we see the virtue in a new idea; other times, we can no longer live with the stress and energy it takes to hold on to an old one. So there is no such thing as disinterested truth. *Pragmatic truth is human truth.* “Purely objective truth,” James asserts, “plays no role whatsoever, is nowhere to be found.” He adds that the

Truth is made, just as health, wealth, and strength are made, in the course of experience.

WILLIAM JAMES

Man is not to blame for what he is. He didn’t make himself. He has no control over himself. All the control is vested in his temperament—which he did not create—and in the circumstances which hedge him round from the cradle to the grave and which he did not devise. . . . He is as purely a piece of automatic mechanism as is a watch. . . . He is a subject for pity, and not blame.

MARK TWAIN

William James believed that as conditions change “truth happens to an idea.” Changes in health care and medical technology have led to longer lives for more people, yet not everyone wants to stay alive at any cost. So we find ourselves wrestling with ancient philosophical questions about the meaning of life, the virtues of suffering, and the right to die. Truth is happening here.



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most absolute-seeming truths “also once were plastic”: “They were called true for human reasons. They also mediate between still earlier truths and what in those days were novel observations.”²⁰

Useful, human truth is alive; rationalistic, abstract, dogmatic truth is “the dead heart of the living tree.” Truth grows.

PHILOSOPHICAL

QUERY

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Can you think of recent examples supporting the claim that “truth happens to an idea”? Some Protestant churches, for example, have begun revising their policies regarding birth control, abortion, and gay marriages because older beliefs lack “cash value” for many of today’s churchgoers. These churches usually experience a period of soul-searching turmoil, wrestling with the dilemma of holding on to old beliefs or losing touch with their congregations. Can you cite one or two recent examples of truth happening to an idea from current events or from your own situation?

The Dilemma of Determinism

James agreed with most moral philosophers that free will is a necessary condition for moral responsibility. He offered a unique and intriguing argument for believing in free will in a famous essay titled “The Dilemma of Determinism.” James begins with a novel admission: “I disclaim openly on the threshold all pretension to prove to you that freedom of the will is true. The most I hope is to induce some of you to follow my own example in assuming it true, and acting as

if it were true.” Having warned us not to expect an airtight argument, James goes on to present a compelling case nonetheless.

Determinism is the belief that everything that happens must happen exactly the way it does. Some materialistic philosophers and scientists say determinism is inevitable since all matter is governed by cause and effect and follows laws of nature. Possibilities are identical to actualities; the future is already contained in the present. We cannot influence the future; it lacks ambiguity, having been sealed in the distant past. James asks:

What does determinism profess? It professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be. . . . Indeterminism, on the contrary, says that the parts have a certain amount of loose play on one another, so that the laying down of one of them does not necessarily determine what the others shall be. It admits that possibilities may be in excess of actualities, and that things not yet revealed to our knowledge may really in themselves be ambiguous.²¹

Does determinism square with our actual feelings? James suggests that we answer this question by considering a newspaper article about the brutal murder of a woman by her husband. Ignoring his wife’s screams for mercy, the husband chopped her to pieces. James asks whether any sane person can read such an account and not feel deep regret. But if the determinists are right, what is the point of regret? Determinists have no reasonable grounds for regretting anything.

The judgment of regret calls the murder bad. Calling a thing bad means, if it means anything at all, that the thing ought not to be, that something else ought to be in its stead. Determinism, in denying that anything else can be in its stead, virtually defines the universe as a place in which what ought to be is impossible—in other words, as an organism whose constitution is afflicted with an incurable taint, an irremediable flaw. . . .

It is absurd to regret the murder alone. It could not be different. . . . But how then about the judgments of regret themselves? If they are wrong, other judgments, judgments of approval, ought to be in their place. But as they are necessitated, nothing else could be in their place; and [for the determinist] the universe is just what it was before—namely, a place in which what ought to be appears impossible.²²

Isn’t it virtually impossible to think that such a murder “ought” to have occurred, given past conditions? Isn’t it virtually impossible to be indifferent that it occurred? If James is correct, no sane person can help feeling some degree of sadness and regret when confronted by such horrors. Yet, if the determinists are correct, such feelings are utterly pointless. *There is no rational ground for moral feelings, because “ought” can have no meaning.* If the determinists are correct, we are caused to have senseless, absurd, utterly false feelings and ideas.

James acknowledged that there is no scientific and objective way to refute such a possibility. But he insisted that our deep, unshakable moral sense of right and wrong, combined with our feelings of regret, make a *compelling* case for our *need* and *right* to believe in free will. We have to believe at least in the possibility, however remote, that some children will not be abused because some adults

determinism

Belief that everything that happens must happen exactly the way it does because all matter is governed by cause and effect and follows laws of nature.

I suppose life has made him like that, and he can’t help it. None of us can help the things life has done to us. They’re done before you realize it, and once they’re done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you’d like to be.

EUGENE O’NEILL



“The Problem Is Not a Real One”

It must be observed that those learned professors of philosophy or psychology who deny the existence of free will do so only in their professional moments and in their studies and lecture rooms. For when it comes to doing anything practical, even of the most trivial kind, they invariably behave as if they and others were free. They inquire from you at dinner whether you will choose this or that dish. They will ask a child why he told a lie, and will punish him

for not having chosen the way of truthfulness. All of which is consistent with a belief in free will. This should cause us to suspect that the problem is not a real one; and this I believe is the case. The dispute is merely verbal, and is due to nothing but a confusion about the meanings of words.

W. T. Stace, *Religion and the Modern Mind* (New York: Lippincott, 1952), p. 279.

The concept of responsibility offers little help. The issue is controllability. . . . What must be changed is not the responsibility of autonomous man but the conditions, environmental or genetic, of which a person's behavior is a function.

B. F. SKINNER

choose to help them; we have to believe that some bad will be avoided and some good done by our actions.

The Inner Sense of Freedom

James believed that change, surprise, and chance are regular parts of our experience. “There are novelties, struggles, losses, gains . . . some things at least are decided here and now . . . the passing moment may contain some novelty, be an original starting-point of events, and not merely a push from elsewhere.”²³

James appealed directly to our *inner sense of freedom* to verify his claim, a sense shared by most people. (The possible exceptions are philosophical and psychological extremists). He was convinced that most of us have a deep “spiritual need” to believe that we are active agents who exert control over significant aspects of our lives, that we affect events, that we make a difference. We *need* this belief for our spiritual and mental well-being—and we have a *right* to believe what we need to believe.

James thought the prestige and influence of science make people try to believe in determinism, but he did not believe that the evidence supporting determinism is conclusive. Echoing Hume, he claimed that we need to believe in a “more rational shape” for nature than our individual experience reveals. Consequently, we *believe* in the uniformity of laws of nature. But this uniformity of nature cannot be conclusively proved true, as Hume showed (Chapter 10). Belief in free will cannot be conclusively proved to be correct either, James noted, but this does not make it inferior to belief in determinism. The basic unprovable status of both beliefs is similar.

All the magnificent achievements of mathematical and physical science—our doctrines of evolution, of uniformity to law, and the rest—proceed from our indomitable desire to cast the world into a more rational shape in our minds than the shape into which it is thrown there by the crude order of our experience. . . . I, for one, feel as free to try conceptions of moral as of mechanical or logical rationality. If a certain formula for expressing the nature of the world violates my moral demand, I shall feel as free to throw

it overboard, or at least doubt it, as if it disappointed my demand for uniformity of sequence, for example; the one demand being, so far as I can see, quite as subjective and emotional as the other is. The principle of causality, for example—what is it but a postulate, an empty name covering simply a demand that the sequence of events shall one day manifest a deeper kind of belonging of one thing with another than the mere arbitrary juxtaposition which now phenomenally appears? It is as much an altar to an unknown god as the one Saint Paul found at Athens. All our scientific and philosophic ideals are altars to unknown gods. Uniformity is as much so as is free will.²⁴

In the absence of conclusive proof, we are free to *decide* which belief better suits our needs. Believing as he did in the primacy of morality, James asserted that belief in free will better serves our need for “moral rationality.” And since neither belief can be conclusively rejected, he argued that we have the right to test belief in free will against our regular experiences. If it “pays” more than believing that we have no control over our lives, then clearly it is the superior belief.

Perhaps the strongest argument against determinism is the fact that almost no one really believes that absolutely everything he or she thinks, hopes, and does was determined from the first moments of the existence of the universe. Life presents us with inescapable moments of choice. How we respond is what matters most.

Each man must act as he thinks best; and, if he is wrong, so much the worse for him. We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? “Be strong and of a good courage.” Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes.²⁵

How can we know what is best? James says that we must discover the essence of the good.

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*Do you find it impossible to doubt that you possess free will—at least sometimes?
Is belief in the possibility of free will necessary for your happiness?*

PHILOSOPHICAL

QUERY

Morality and the Good

James rejected metaphysical attempts to define the good. He argued that the only way to understand the good life was to study what people actually want and strive for. He surveyed and rejected strictly Aristotelian, hedonistic, Christian, Kantian, and utilitarian ethics (Chapters 6, 7, 8, 11, and 12), though he borrowed from each.

When we reason about the liberty of the will, or about the free will, we do not ask if the man can do what he wills, but if there is enough independence in his will itself.

GOTTFRIED WILHELM
LEIBNIZ

There can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics until the last man has had his experience and said his say.

WILLIAM JAMES

Various essences of good have thus been . . . proposed as bases of the ethical system. . . .

No one of the measures that have actually been proposed has, however, given general satisfaction. . . . The best, on the whole, of these marks and measures of goodness seems to be the capacity to bring happiness. But in order not to break down fatally, this test must be taken to cover innumerable acts and impulses that never *aim* at happiness; so that, after all, in seeking for a universal principle we inevitably are carried onward to the *most* universal principle—that *the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand*. The demand may be for anything under the sun. There is really no more ground for supposing that all our demands can be accounted for by one universal underlying kind of motive than there is ground for supposing that all physical phenomena are cases of a single law.²⁶

We have a basic obligation to “maximize satisfactions” and minimize frustrations, not just for ourselves but for others as well, according to James. Such a course is most likely to lead to happiness and increase the world’s stock of goodness. Yet maximizing satisfaction must remain a fundamental, general obligation. The sheer number of people, coupled with the sheer number of demands we each have, makes being more specific impossible. All we can do is try our best to increase the general level of satisfaction and goodness, while remaining aware of our fallibility.

James did not offer an ethical *theory* as such, though he suggested moral guidelines. He proposed a form of altruistic utilitarianism based on an optimistic vision of social progress. He believed modern civilization is better than past eras were—he cited examples of slavery and torture—because the constant give-and-take, the “push and pull,” of history results in continual refinement of satisfactions. The radical’s forward drive is compensated for by the conservative’s inertia; the dreamer’s whimsy balances and is balanced by the scientist’s objective eye, and so on.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that James was also a psychologist and scientist. He gave more credence to observation and experience than to systematic argument. Further, he did not believe in universal moral principles or in the possibility of any finite, closed expression of morality. Thus, from his perspective, the kind of argument and system that would satisfy most philosophers would also falsify the reality of moral experience.

The Heroic Life

William James believed that life without heroic struggle is dull, mediocre, and empty. He was thinking of two approaches to life. In one, we choose (will) safety, security, and compliance. We try to avoid risks, try to avoid stress, try to avoid hassles. The other kind of life deliberately includes danger, courage, risk; it is based on a will to excitement and passion.

James was not advising us to take up hang gliding and shooting the rapids. He was talking about a “real fight” for something important, about the struggle between good and evil. He said evil is “out there,” to be resisted and fought. We

might find it in the form of discrimination or toxic dumping. When we do, we can ignore it, make a token effort at resisting it by voicing our objections, or actually do something. If we confront it, we could lose our jobs, money, time, or solid A grade-point average. We might fail. We might even be wrong: What we perceived as evil might not be evil. But at least we fought for or against something.

For my own part, I do not know what the sweat and blood of this life mean, if they mean anything short of this. If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which we may withdraw at will. But it *feels* like a real fight—as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem: and first of all to redeem our own hearts from atheisms and fears. For such is a half-wild, half-saved universe adapted. The deepest thing in our nature is . . . this dumb region of the heart in which we dwell alone with our willingness and unwillingness, our faiths and fears.²⁷

According to James, struggle and effort are vital elements of the good life. He believed that the “strenuous mood” is superior to sitting back and drifting along. Thus, he did not think much of the Epicurean ideal of the retreat to the Garden or of Stoic detachment when either meant reduced involvement in life and diminished passions, though he did admire the Stoic emphasis on strength of will (Chapter 7).

James thought he had identified a natural fact of life: An active, strenuous approach is healthier and more satisfying than a passive, easygoing one.

The deepest difference, practically, in the moral life of man is the difference between the easy-going and the strenuous mood. When in the easy-going mood, the shrinking from present ill is our ruling consideration. The strenuous mood, on the contrary, makes us quite indifferent to present ill, if only the great ideal is to be attained. The capacity for the strenuous mood probably lies slumbering in every man, but it has more difficulty in some than in others in waking up. It needs wilder passions to arouse it, the big fears, loves, and indignations; or else the deeply penetrating appeal of some of the higher fidelities, like justice, truth, or freedom. Strong belief is a necessity of its vision; and a world where all the mountains are brought down and all the valleys are exalted is no congenial place for its habitation.²⁸

What sort of thing would life really be, with your qualities ready for a tussle with it, if it only brought fair weather and gave those higher faculties of yours no scope?

WILLIAM JAMES

We are all ready to be savage in some cause. The difference between a good man and a bad one is the choice of the cause.

WILLIAM JAMES

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Discuss your formal and informal education in terms of the preceding passage. Have you been encouraged to adopt a strenuous mood or an easygoing one? Give some specific examples. Do you think James is on the right track? Why or why not?

PHILOSOPHICAL

QUERY



Choosing a Philosophy Is a Test of Character

It is simply our total character and personal genius that are on trial; and if we invoke any so-called philosophy, our choice and use of that also are but revelations of our personal aptitude or incapacity for moral life. From this unsparing practical ordeal no professor's lectures and no array of books can save us. The solving word, for the learned and the unlearned man alike, lies in the last resort in the dumb willingnesses and unwillingnesses of their interior

characters, and nowhere else. It is not in heaven, neither is it beyond the sea; but the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart, that thou mayst do it.

William James, "The Moral Philosopher and Moral Life," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897; reprinted in *Human Immortality*, New York: Dover, 1956), pp. 214–215.

■ PRAGMATIC RELIGION ■



James had deep respect for a religion that enriches our lives, that has "cash value." He noted that people in all cultures turn to a god (or gods) who *gets things done*, an active god, a god of the "strenuous mood," not a passive, ineffective god. This led James to offer an intriguing suggestion: If people do not believe in God, it might be because God is not *doing anything* in their lives. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James attempted to discover how God *works* in people's lives. Combining an empirical, psychological study of a number of cases with a keen philosophical analysis, *Varieties* is one of James's most influential, popular, and still widely read works.

James asserted that we judge the truth of religious ideas by what he calls their "immediate luminousness," adding, "in short, *philosophical reasonableness and moral helpfulness* are the only available criteria." He concluded that religious faith is important and meaningful on pragmatic grounds: Its presence or absence makes a clearly observable, practical, and concrete difference in our lives.

*Certain of our positivists
keep chiming to us that,
amid the wreck of every
other god and idol, one
divinity still stands
upright,—that his name is
Scientific Truth, and that he
has but one commandment,
but that one supreme,
saying, Thou shalt not be a
theist.*

WILLIAM JAMES

The practical needs and experiences of religion seem to me sufficiently met by the belief that beyond man and in a fashion continuous with him there exists a larger power which is friendly to him and his ideals. All that the facts require is that the power shall be other and larger than our conscious selves.

God is the natural appellation, for us Christians at least, for the supreme reality, so I will call this higher part of the universe by the name of God. We and God have business with each other; and in opening ourselves to his influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled.²⁹

James thought that a religious orientation is more effective than a nonreligious one because it encompasses more. It derives from and addresses a wider range of experiences, including a wider, more expansive consciousness than a purely secular point of view. Besides the obvious psychological benefits of having God as a support and comfort, religious conversion can open us up and make us more responsive to all of life, according to James.

A Religious Dilemma

In his study of religious experience, James distinguished between two basic personalities, the “healthy-minded” and the “morbid-minded.” Healthy-minded people “look on all things and see that they are good.” Such people are vital, enthusiastic, and exuberant. In contrast, the attitude of the morbid-minded person is “based on the persuasion that the evil aspects of our life are its very essence, and that the world’s meaning most comes home to us when we lay them most to heart.”³⁰ In other words, morbid souls are negativistic and pessimistic.

Interestingly, James the optimist says morbid-minded persons have a clearer, more realistic perspective than healthy-minded ones because they recognize a wider range of experience.

The method of averting one’s attention from evil, and living simply in the light of good is splendid as long as it will work. It will work with many persons; it will work far more generally than most of us are ready to suppose; and within the sphere of its successful operation there is nothing to be said against it as a religious solution. But it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes. . . .

The normal process of life contains moments as bad as any of those which insane melancholy is filled with, moments in which radical evil gets its innings and takes its solid turn. The lunatic’s visions of horror are all drawn from the material of daily fact. Our civilization is founded on the shambles, and every individual existence goes out in a lonely spasm of helpless agony. If you protest, my friend, wait till you arrive there yourself! . . . The completest religions would therefore seem to be those in which the pessimistic elements are best developed.³¹

To better grasp this point, think of what it means to be *always* joyful and enthusiastic in a world such as ours. This lopsided kind of “healthy-mindedness” might result from a lack of true empathy with the condition of other people. A shallow enough view of things can result in a childish (not childlike) view of life in which nothing is really bad. Or, if it is bad, it is not *that* bad. Or, if it is *that* bad, then it is somehow deserved.

In his analysis of healthy- and morbid-mindedness, James is interested in identifying the most practical spiritual balance. A soul that is blocked off from a major portion of experience (which, for want of a better word, we may refer to as evil) will be less effective, less “alive,” than a soul that is not blocked off.

One cannot criticize the vision of a mystic—one can but pass it by, or else accept it as having some amount of evidential weight.

WILLIAM JAMES

God is real since he produces real effects.

WILLIAM JAMES

The healthy-minded . . . need to be born only once . . . sick souls . . . must be born twice—born in order to be happy. The result is two different conceptions of the universe of our experience.

WILLIAM JAMES

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What do you think of James’s claim that morbid-minded people have a fuller, more realistic view of things than healthy-minded ones? How would you classify yourself? Discuss some of the strengths and weaknesses of both orientations.

PHILOSOPHICAL

QUERY

■ TRUTH IS ALWAYS PERSONAL ■



By the end of his life, James increasingly equated “true” with “useful.” In “Is Life Worth Living?” he uses an analogy of a trapped mountain climber to illustrate his claim that sometimes psychological survival rests on the *will to believe whatever is necessary*:

Please remember that optimism and pessimism are definitions of the world, and that your own reactions to the world, small as they are in bulk, are integral parts of the whole thing, and necessarily help to determine the definition.

WILLIAM JAMES

Suppose, for instance, that you are climbing a mountain, and have worked yourself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Have faith that you can successfully make it, and your feet are nerved to its accomplishment. But mistrust yourself, and think of all the sweet things you have heard the scientists say of *maybes*, and you will hesitate so long that, at last, all unstrung and trembling, and launching yourself in a moment of despair, you roll into the abyss.

In such a case (and it belongs to an enormous class), the part of wisdom as well as of courage is to *believe in the line of your needs*, for only by such belief is the need fulfilled.³²

Thus, we see in James, as in Kierkegaard (Chapter 14), a turning of the tables as it were, so that subjectivity takes precedence over objectivity. Truth is always personal. In the end then, is James merely another Sophist advocating radical relativism born of his inability or unwillingness to understand and accept objective reality and the universal truths that flow from it? Is James manifesting “weakness” in his unwillingness to accept the world as it really is, in his refusal to face the hard fact that the world does not conform to our wishes?

James’s ultimate position is that beliefs are “adaptations.” As such, they can only be justified if they help us navigate our way through life. He did not think that encouraging wholehearted faith in *necessary* beliefs is the same thing as asserting that any belief that one holds is necessary *simply because one holds it*.

James’s basic goal was to free us from enslavement to the notion that we *must believe* whatever science asserts—regardless of the consequences to our spiritual health and general well-being. Specifically, James argued that science should be evaluated in terms of the extent to which scientific beliefs are conducive to human happiness. Accordingly, if belief in scientific determinism and materialistic reductionism are inimical to human happiness, then disbelief is necessary for psychic survival and vitality.

For example, in testimony before the Massachusetts legislature, James spoke against a bill that would have prohibited Christian Scientists from practicing what were called “mind cures.” “You are not to ask yourselves,” James told the legislators, “whether these mind-curiers really achieve the successes that are claimed. It is enough for you as legislators to ascertain that a large number of your citizens . . . are persuaded that a valuable new department of medical experience is by them opening up.”³³

As we have learned, for James, “the truth” is not the chief value. Usefulness is, but usefulness in the moral sense of producing healthy results. We can turn to James’s personal life for an example of the kind of “necessary belief” that James considered preferable to the truth. James considered Charles Sanders Peirce his friend and mentor, despite Peirce’s rejection of James’s pragmatism. Unlike James,

Our own universe, of which we see only a small part today, may not be unique.

Its beginning is not the beginning of everything. Other universes may exist at an earlier stage.

VICTOR WEISSKOPF

Peirce was unable to support himself as a philosopher, and James wanted to help his friend. Knowing that Peirce would not welcome charity, James supported and protected Peirce with money that James told him came from Peirce's many anonymous admirers. In fact, the money came from James. In this kind of case, James practiced his own principle: Better a *necessary lie* than a destructive—and unnecessary—truth.

Danger Signs

Viewed from a modern or Enlightenment perspective, William James, like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche (Chapters 14 and 16), is seen as an advocate of a potentially explosive, “anti-intellectual,” “unscientific,” subjectivistic philosophical doctrine. James believed that there are no neutral observers of the human condition. Everything is a “point of view.” According to James, moral absolutes are impossible, and attempts to impose them are especially bad. At best, we can have moral rules of thumb, flexible guidelines. James says:

There is hardly a good which we can imagine except as competing for the possession of the same bit of space and time with some other imagined good. . . . Shall a man drink and smoke, or keep his nerves in condition?—he cannot do both. Shall he follow his fancy for Amelia or for Henrietta?—both cannot be the choice of his heart. Shall he have the dear old Republican party, or a spirit of unsophistication in public affairs?—he cannot have both, etc. So that the ethical [or materialistic] philosopher's demand for the right scale of subordination in ideals is the fruit of an altogether practical need. Some part of the ideal must be butchered, and he needs to know which part. It is a tragic situation, and no mere speculative conundrum, with which he has to deal.³⁴

What the hell, reality is a nice place to visit but you wouldn't want to live there.

JOHN BARTH

Ultimately, James came to the “inconclusive conclusion that since nothing can be proved one way or the other, each of us is entitled to believe whatever he wants to believe.”³⁵ “We all,” he said, “scientists, and non-scientists, live on some inclined plane of credulity. The plane tips one way in one [person], another way in another; and may [the person] whose plane tips in no way be the first to cast a stone.”³⁶ And since belief in scientific method is merely *one belief* competing among many possible beliefs, belief in scientific method is no more sacrosanct than any other belief. Science, like various philosophies and religions, must compete for our allegiance against other visions and belief systems.

According to James, faith in science can be as powerful and effective as faith in religion or philosophy. He is not advocating that we commit ourselves to whatever whim or fancy strikes us. The vision that best suits our individual natures will win out. James's position is that we are entitled to commit ourselves to whatever beliefs best express our deepest selves, the fundamental quality of our “passional life.” He was less worried about being “duped” by a false belief than he was about being unhappy:

He who says, “Better go without belief forever than believe a lie!” merely shows his own preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe. He may be critical

Yet it is essential to realize that our way of perceiving the world in everyday life is not radically affected by scientific conceptions. For all of us—even for the astronomer, when he goes home at night—the sun rises and sets, and the earth is immobile.

PIERRE HADOT

of many of his desires and fears, but this fear he slavishly obeys. He cannot imagine any one questioning its binding force. For my own part, I have also a horror of being duped; but I can believe that worse things than being duped may happen to a [person] of this world.³⁷

We might say that for James, it is better to truly believe a personally useful lie than to pretend to believe a personally incompatible truth. James's plane tips away from theoretical completeness and purity toward the concrete, existing individual.

Probably a crab would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us classify it without ado or apology as a crustacean, and thus dispose of it. "I am no such thing," it would say: "I am MYSELF, MYSELF alone."³⁸

■ COMMENTARY ■



William James's vigorous pragmatism straddled two philosophical worlds, the modern and the postmodern. He is said to have anticipated many contemporary philosophical questions. Whatever we make of his philosophy, James reminds us, will *not* be based on "pure," objective criteria. It will—and can only—be based on what we passionately and deeply need to believe.

Like Kierkegaard before him (Chapter 14) and Nietzsche, his great German contemporary (Chapter 16), James was a foe of the passionless life, the "uncommitted" life. Like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, James challenged science's claim to ultimate, objective, universal, and absolute authority. For James, it is far better to believe passionately in a "lie" than it is to halfheartedly accept a "truth." He did not see the neatly ordered universe of the optimistic Enlightenment philosophers. The Jamesian universe is pluralistic, expansive, incomplete, and unpredictable. It is *wide open*. To survive and thrive in such a universe, James thought, we need resourcefulness, good humor, stamina, and the willingness to risk living according to convictions that cannot be objectively, universally, and scientifically established beyond doubt.

The most significant weakness in James's pragmatism is so much a part of what he saw as his mission that we must consider it from two perspectives. By tying truth to "what works" *for us*, James cuts himself off from any possibility of objective verification. Yet many philosophers still hold that the truth must refer to something beyond and not entirely determined by the individual. James seems to blur the distinction between truth and how we discover it. Although we do test ideas by acting on them and by comparing them with our more established beliefs, their *truth* is independent of this process. Penicillin remains an effective antibiotic whether or not I believe that it is, for example.

There are two different issues here. If we are looking at factual matters, this criticism of pragmatism is persuasive. But if we consider beliefs about moral and spiritual concerns, as well as some social and psychological beliefs, pragmatism has something important to say. We distort James's position if we lump both general categories of belief statements together.

Consider, on James's behalf, the pattern that social scientists refer to as a **self-fulfilling prophecy**. This is a belief that affects events in such a way that it causes itself to come true. For example, a man who believes his date will not like him might project a mood of surly defensiveness and hostility or passive, defeatist self-pity. Either mood could alienate his companion, who otherwise would have found him quite pleasant. If so, his prophecy of "She won't like me" has fulfilled itself. Similarly, students who expect to do poorly in a given course might not learn because they are frightened or depressed by their expectations of failure; they might unconsciously devote less energy to their studies than they would have if they had believed more in themselves. Conversely, students who expect to do well might be more open and pleasant in class, which can inspire the professor to be a better teacher; they might ask more questions, pay more attention, and so on, thereby fulfilling their own beliefs.

Ironically, in recent years, certain work emerging from the *scientific* study of belief has been interpreted as supporting James's sense that the "best" beliefs are not always the "truest" ones.³⁹ Lyn Abramson, of the University of Wisconsin, and Lauren Alloy, of Temple University, report that "normal, healthy" people are subject to a variety of "cognitive illusions." Among these are mild, factually unwarranted optimism and insensitivity to failure. Combined, these two "illusions" result in tendencies to make "straightforwardly false" judgments. Ironically, because they often do not suffer from such illusions, clinically depressed individuals are "Sadder But Wiser," to use the subtitle from one of Abramson and Alloy's better-known papers. In other research, social psychologist Shelley Taylor has found that victims of trauma and illness who are "unjustifiably optimistic" tend to be better adjusted and happier than more "realistic" victims of similar circumstances. Lastly, Daniel Goleman is one of a number of neo-Freudians who argue that forgetting unpleasant events (repression) is an important component of mental health.⁴⁰

This raises the basic **pragmatic paradox**: *Pragmatism works only if we believe our ideas are true according to nonpragmatic criteria*. For instance, can I really just say to myself, "Well, belief in God makes people feel secure and gives their lives meaning. I would like to feel secure and find a purpose for my life. Therefore, I shall believe in God"? Does not such belief work only when I sincerely believe it to be true—objectively and factually true, not just true because I believe it is true? Paradoxically, it seems as if only by believing in a nonpragmatic view of truth can pragmatism work.

William James spoke eloquently for the person of "moderate" convictions and temperament and for the virtues of the active, vigorous struggle for good. He offered a persuasive and unique defense of our right to believe. He showed that faith in a higher power cannot be dismissed as a form of psychological infantilism and that its grounding in personal conviction is as solid as faith in science. Further, he showed that religious faith has restorative and unifying powers often missing from faith in science. James defended the common sense of the average person without pandering to it and called on us to test the higher life of the "strenuous mood." All in all, these are impressive accomplishments.

self-fulfilling prophecy

A belief that affects events in such a way that it causes itself to come true; an example is the student who does poorly on an exam because she expects to fail it.

pragmatic paradox

Pragmatism works only if we believe that our ideas are true according to nonpragmatic criteria.

■ SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS ■

- William James's pragmatism is based on Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatic theory of meaning: Ideas are meaningful only when they translate into actions and predict experiences associated with actions. James argued that philosophy should make a "definite difference" in people's lives, and he attempted to construct a philosophical religion that could provide beliefs worth living and dying for. Pragmatism was meant to be a method for helping us feel "at home" in the universe.
 - Pragmatism rejects any philosophy that lacks "cash value." James believed that virtually no metaphysical theory has any practical payoff (cash value). "True ideas," he said, "are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those we cannot." Pragmatic truth is human truth. James expanded the realm of philosophy beyond "revealing the truth" to providing a way to become better adjusted to the world.
 - James divided people into tough-minded or tender-minded types, claiming that historically philosophy has been dominated by extremists of one type or the other and thus has remained unbalanced. He advocated what he saw as a more useful combination of these two extremes. Because life demands an active response, we have no choice but to believe something. We face "forced options." The intellect does not discover the truths in which we believe; the will to believe creates truths.
 - The pragmatic life rejects determinism as incompatible with our immediate sense of freedom.
- According to James, determinism—the idea that everything must happen exactly the way it does—is incompatible with our spiritual need for freedom. Determinism has less cash value than belief in freedom, and since neither belief can be proved conclusively, the pragmatic thing to do is believe in what we need to be happy—freedom. Feelings of regret reflect our deep belief in free will.
- Since we cannot escape choice, James advocated what he called the "heroic life," rejecting life without struggle as dull, mediocre, and empty. The heroic life is characterized by a "real fight" for something important; it is about the struggle between good and evil. James distinguished between two basic personalities: The healthy-minded personality looks at all things as good; healthy-minded people are exuberant, vital, and enthusiastic. The morbid-minded personality sees the very essence of life as evil, untrustworthy, and troublesome; morbid-minded people are negativistic and pessimistic.
 - Religious faith is important on pragmatic grounds: Its presence or absence makes an observable, practical difference in people's lives. James believed a religious orientation is more effective than a non-religious one because it encompasses more. Profound religious (rebirth) experience makes it possible to be both morally decent (without descending into the pessimism of morbid-mindedness) and happy (without resorting to the limited perspective of healthy-mindedness).

■ POST-READING REFLECTIONS ■

Now that you have had a chance to learn about the Pragmatist, use your new knowledge to answer these questions.

1. How did James's personal life influence some of his major pragmatic beliefs?
2. What prompted Charles Sanders Peirce to change the name of his philosophy to "pragmatism"?
3. Illustrate the pragmatic theory of meaning with your own example.
4. What is the core question at the heart of the pragmatic method? Why did James believe that asking that question is so important? What does the answer to the question reveal to us?
5. Discuss James's notion of the "will to believe." In what sense do "reasons serve the will," according to James? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
6. How does James deal with the dilemma of determinism? What do you think of his strategy? Does it square with your sense of the world and