

William James (1842-1910)

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Learning Objectives

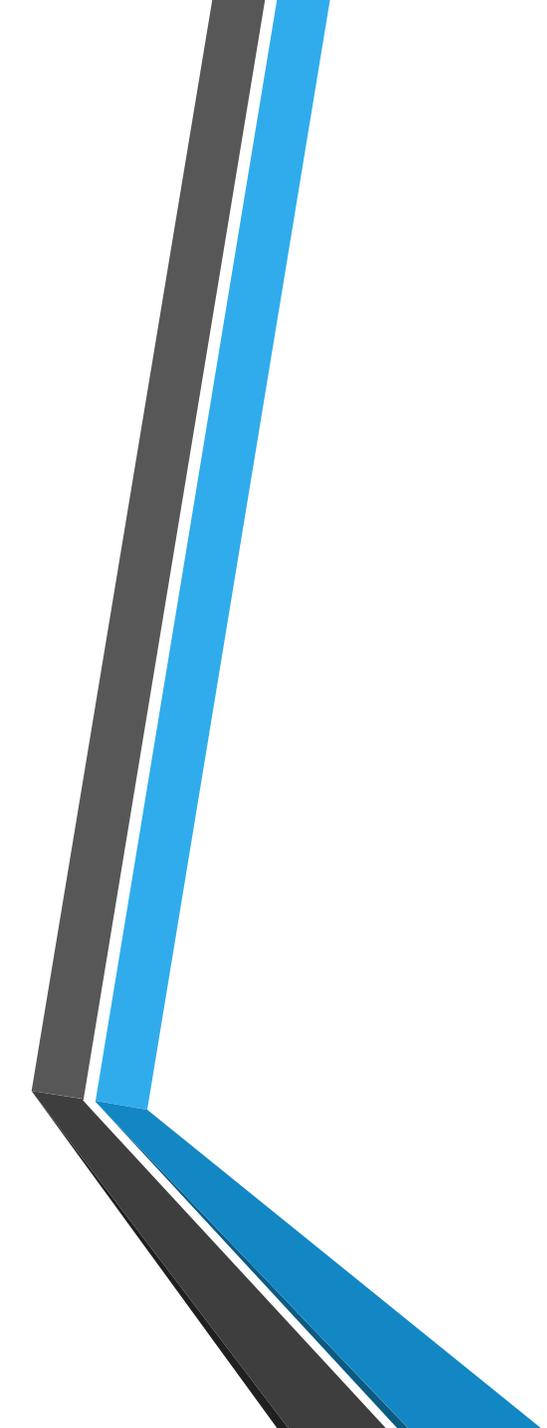
- Identify his works
 - “What Pragmatism Means”
 - “The Will to Believe”
- Explain the idea that Pragmatism is:
 - Method for settling metaphysical disputes
 - Theory of Truth
 - How we discover New Truths
 - Role of ‘old’ truths
- Discuss the Scope of Pragmatism
- Define Hypothesis, option and genuine option
- Describe the connection between ‘will’ and the perception of truth
- Discussion James’ argument for believing in God

Live

- Brother of Novelist Henry James
- Found it difficult to decide on a career
 - painting but no talent
 - Earned an MD but never practiced medicine
 - 1873 became an instructor of physiology at Harvard
 - Suffered from depression
- Psychologist
- Published his first philosophy paper in 1878 – Together with Charles Sanders Peirce is regarded as a founder of pragmatism

Works

- “What Pragmatism Means”
- “The Will to Believe”



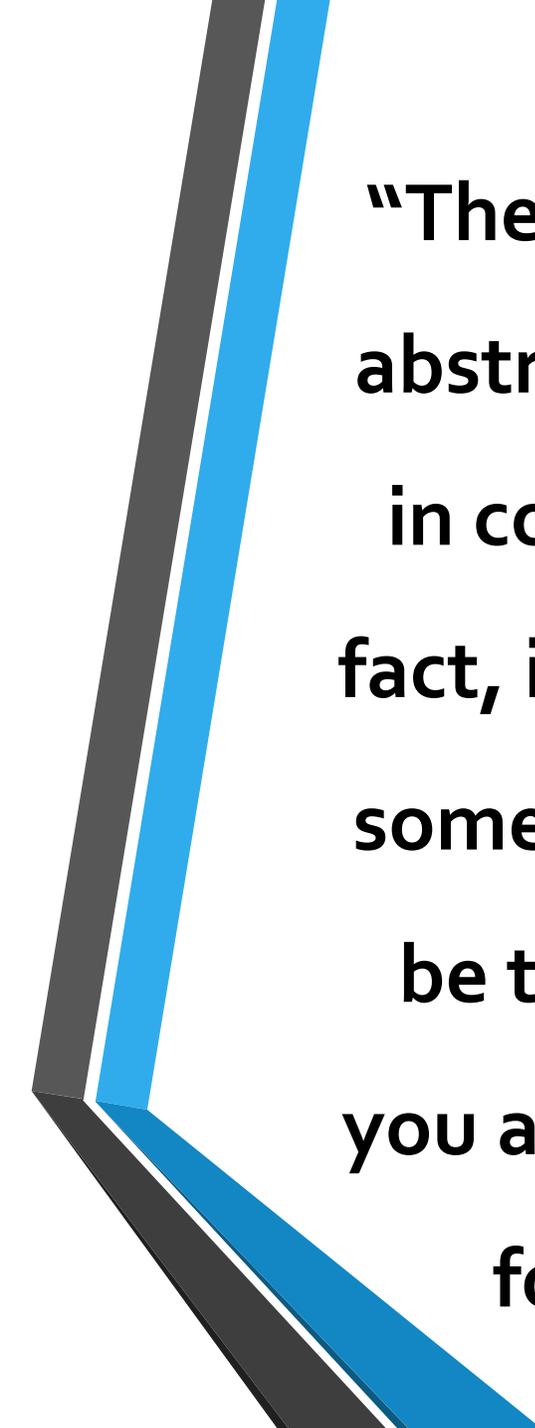
“What Pragmatism Means”

Pragmatism

- Method for settling metaphysical disputes
- Theory of truth

Method for settling metaphysical disputes

- Clarifying the meaning of concepts by making distinctions
- We ought to be able to show some practical difference that follows from one side or the other's being right
- Rival views can mean practically the same thing



“There can *be* no difference elsewhere-no difference in abstract truth that doesn’t express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere and somewhen. 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.”

Method for settling metaphysical disputes

- Pragmatism is a form of empiricism
- Turns away from: Abstraction and insufficiency, verbal solutions, bad *a priori* reasons, fixed principles, closed system, and pretended absolutes and origins
- Turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and power

Method for settling metaphysical disputes

- Does not stand for any result - It is a method only
 - Metaphysics – followed a primitive kind of quest – compared to “knowing names – binding spells”
 - God
 - Matter
 - Reason
 - Absolute
 - Energy
 - Pragmatic method – must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience

Method for settling metaphysical disputes

- *Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest*
- Harmonizes with many ancient philosophic tendencies
 - agrees with nominalism – in always appealing to particulars
 - utilitarianism – emphasizing practical aspects
 - Positivism – in its disdain for verbal solutions
- *The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking toward last things, fruits, consequences, facts."*

Theory of Truth

- Attempt to clarify what is involved in the claim that truth is agreement with reality

"...Ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience, . . ."

Theory of Truth

- There are many relations of agreement
- Belief leads to expectations of future experiences, and when these are not disappointed or as long as they are not disappointed, we regard the belief as true
- True beliefs are of the utmost importance; they are good to believe

Theory of Truth

- We are not free to believe what we want – our beliefs must harmonize with past experience
- The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets anew experience that puts them to a strain

Theory of Truth – New Truths

- Something or someone contradicts our truths = inward trouble to which the minds seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions
- Grafts the new opinion on the old
- New truth is always a go between – it marries old opinion to new fact
- Older truths are controlling

Scope of Pragmatism

- Scope of pragmatism – first, a method; and second, a genetic theory of what is meant by truth
 - Pragmatism is uncomfortable away from facts – Rationalism is comfortable only in the presence of abstractions
- The pragmatist clings to facts and concreteness, observes truth at it work in particular cases, and generalizes. Truth, for him, becomes a class-name for all sorts of definite working-values in experience



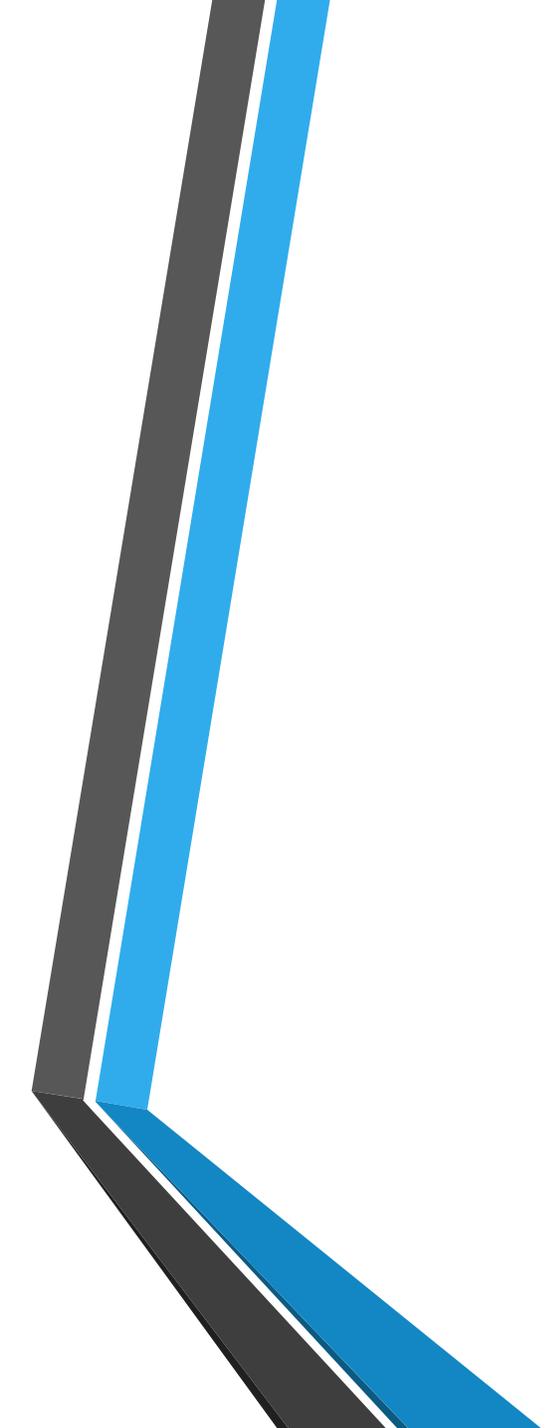
When the pragmatist undertakes to show in detail just why we must defer, the rationalist is unable to recognize the concretes from which his own abstraction is taken.If the two universes were offered, the rationalist would always choose the skinny outline rather than the rich thicket of reality. It is so much purer, clearer, and nobler."

Pragmatism

- Follows the example of the sister-sciences, interpreting the unobserved by the observed
- Brings old and new opinions together
- Converts the absolutely empty notion of a static relation of 'correspondence' between our minds and reality
- A happy harmonizer of empiricist ways of thinking, with the more religious demands of human beings.

Argument for Belief in God

- A belief in a God who, with our help, strives to make this a better world – would help us lead a better life, and therefore it would be better for us to have that belief unless it clashes with other vital beliefs



“The Will to Believe”



“I have brought with me to-night something like a sermon on justification by faith to read to you – I mean as essay in justification of faith, a defense of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced. “The Will to Believe,” accordingly, is the title of my paper.”

Technical Distinctions

- Hypothesis – anything that may be proposed to our belief
- Option – the decision between two hypotheses
 - Living or dead
 - Forced or avoidable
 - Momentous or trivial
- Genuine option is when it is of the forced, living and momentous kind

Psychology of Human Opinion

- When we look at certain facts, it seems as if our passional and volitional nature lay at the root of all our convictions
- “Will” and the perception of truth
 - Must be a pre-existing tendency to believe – must be a living option

Empiricist and Absolutist and Truth

- Absolutists say that we can attain to knowing the truth and we can *know* when we have attained knowing it
- Empiricists think that although we may attain it, we cannot infallibly know when. to *know* is one thing, and to know for certain *that* we know is another
- No concrete test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon
 - External to the moment of perception
 - Moment of Perception
 - Objective evidence



“There is this – there is that; there is indeed nothing which someone has not thought absolutely true, whilst his neighbor deemed it absolutely false;....”

Opinion

- Our Duty in the matter of opinion
 - We must know the truth
 - We must avoid error
- Our passional nature influencing us in our opinions – some options between opinions in which this influence must be regarded both as an inevitable and as a lawful determinant of our choice
- Moral questions immediately present themselves as questions whose solution cannot wait for sensible proof

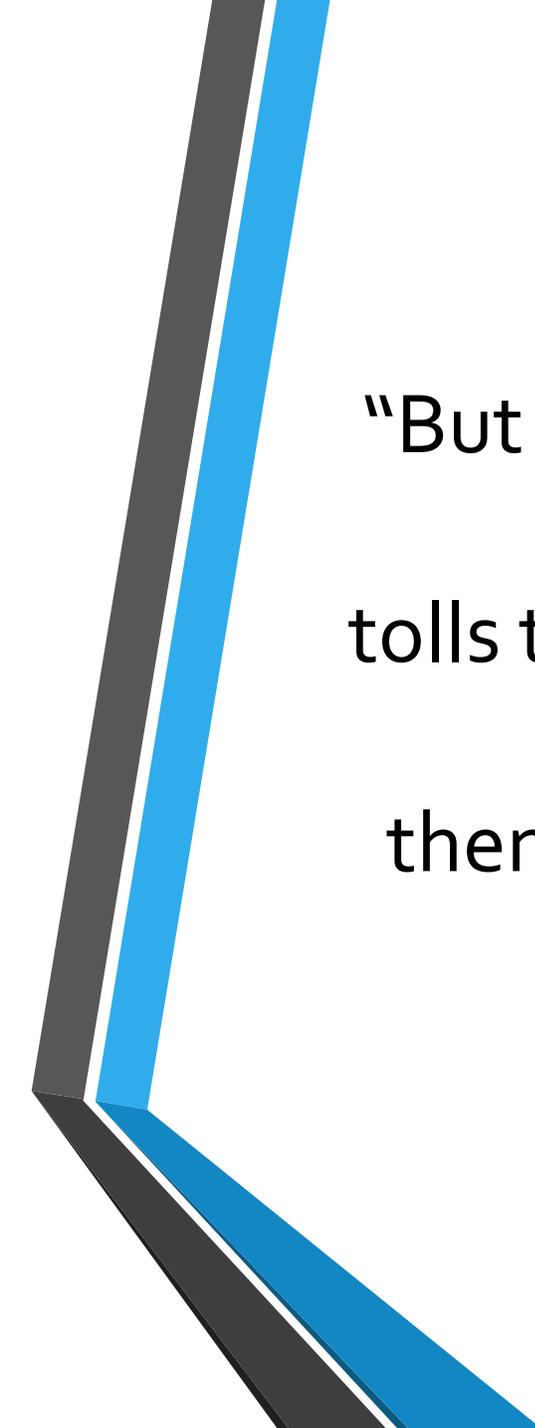
Question of Believing in god

- Science says things are; morality says some things are better than other things; and religion says essentially two things:
 - The best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe to that say the final word. “Perfection is eternal”
 - The affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true.
- Logical elements of this situation are *in case the religious hypothesis in both its branches being really true*. It must involve a living option – won't sway the atheist

Question of Believing in God

- Religion offers itself as a *momentous* option – we are supposed to gain by our belief
- Religion is a forced option, so far as that good goes – we cannot escape the issue by remaining skeptical and waiting for more light
- Believers feel as if the appeal of religion to us were made to our own active good-will, as if evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we meet the hypothesis half-way
- This feeling that by obstinately believing that there are gods we are doing the universe the deepest service we can, seems part of the living essence of the religious hypothesis

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- *"...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."*
 - We have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will
 - The freedom to believe can only cover living options



“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.”