



# The Pragmatism of William James

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## Introduction

- Lived 1842 - 1910
- Darwin's *Origin of Species*, 1859; American civil war: 1861 - 1865
- Born in New York to wealthy intelligentsia; travelled to Europe frequently; broadly but spottily educated
- Earned M.D. at Harvard, did not practice medicine
- Taught at Harvard in physiology, psychology and philosophy
- Well-known as a research psychologist
- Contemporary and friend of C.S. Peirce
- Known for *Principles of Psychology*, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and many works on Pragmatism

## Pragmatism

- *Pragma* – Greek root meaning deed, act or action.
- Meaning and truth as practical consequences. James first called it “practicalism.”
- “The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. ... 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 any one 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.**” – *What Pragmatism Means*

## Squirrel

- A man goes around a tree, and a squirrel is on the other side, so the man never sees the squirrel. Does the man go around the squirrel?
- If by “go around” you mean going to the north, east, south and west then Yes.
- If by “go around” you mean going in front, to the right side, behind and to the left side, then No.
- The two descriptions mean practically the same thing. The dispute is purely verbal.



## Materialism vs. Spiritualism (1)

- (From *Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered*)
- Is the world the result of material causes only or is it the creation of a God?
- Looking toward the past, the world has ended up just as it is, regardless of which answer you choose. The distinction is meaningless.
- Looking toward the future
  - Materialism: The end is maximum entropy, and all is dead. It's hopeless.
  - Theism: God is free to create again; the moral order is sustained. It's hopeful.
- All else equal, Theism is preferable.

## Materialism vs. Spiritualism (2)

- All else equal, Theism is preferable, *but ...*
- “The truth of ‘God’ has to run the gauntlet of all our other truths. It is on trial by them and they on trial by it. Our *final* opinion about God can be settled only after all the truths have straightened themselves out together.” – *Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered*

## Quantum Physics

- (Not from James)
- Quantum Indeterminacy has many interpretations.
  - Copenhagen (1) – An observation produces the property observed.
  - Copenhagen (2) – “Things” exist only in potential until observed.
  - Copenhagen (3) – We know only probabilities of observational results, not an underlying reality. “Shut up and calculate.”
  - Many-worlds – When something could go either way, it goes both ways and produces separate universes.
  - Pilot wave – A wave of quantum potential guides discrete particles. We just haven’t discovered the quantum potential yet.
- All of these describe exactly the same observable phenomena.
- On what basis should we accept any of them as true?

## Pragmatic Method

- Does not specify any particular results.
- Theories are instruments to be tested, not final answers.
- Theories are bets on the future.
- The method is an “attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.” – *What Pragmatism Means*
- Look at fruits, not roots.

## Truth (1)

- “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*, to summarise them and get about among them by conceptual short-cuts .... 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.*” – *What Pragmatism Means*
- Become true? Aren't ideas already true or not?
- James means truth as we experience it, what we take to be true. He should say ideas become *believable*.

## Truth (2)

- Truth is usually taken as correspondence of a proposition's meaning with reality.
- But we have no acquaintance with reality other than through our experience.
- Hence, truth must mean correspondence of one part of what we experience, the meaning of a proposition, with some other part of our experience.
- Pragmatism's “only *test of probable truth is what works best* in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience's demands, nothing being omitted.” – *What Pragmatism Means*

## *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth*

- Chapter 6 of *Pragmatism*, 1907
- Truth is a property of ideas. It means agreement with reality.
- But what is agreement and what is reality? Apply the pragmatic method to find out.
- Pragmatism asks, "Grant an idea or belief to be true ... what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone'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?" – *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth*

## Truth as validation and verification

- "*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." – *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth*
- What do validation and verification mean? Look at practical consequences.
- True ideas lead us to other experiences such that our needs – both practical and intellectual – are satisfied.

## Truth leads to beneficial results

- Truth is “something essentially bound up with the way in which one moment in our experience may lead us towards other moments which it will be worth while to have been led to. ... The truth of a state of mind means this function of a *leading that is worth while*. When a moment in our experience, of any kind whatever, inspires us with a thought that is true, that means that sooner or later we dip by that thought's guidance into the particulars of experience again and make advantageous connexion with them.” – *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth*

## Truth as worthwhile leading

- Practical leading
  - Proposition: There is a house at the end of this path.
  - Verification: Follow the path and actually find the house.
- Intellectual leading
  - Systems of logic and math lead from premises to conclusions.
  - If we assert that a premise is true, then logic leads us to assert that the conclusion is true.
- In both cases reality constrains us: “We can no more play fast and loose with these abstract relations than we can do so with our sense-experiences. They coerce us; we must treat them consistently, whether or not we like the results.” – *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth*

## Truth is useful and good

- “You can say of [a proposition] either that 'it is useful because it is true' or that 'it is true because it is useful.' Both these phrases mean exactly the same thing, namely that here is an idea that gets fulfilled and can be verified.”  
– *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth*
- “The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons.” – *What Pragmatism Means*

## Reality and Truth

- Reality is what propositions have to agree with to be true:
  - Concrete facts
  - Abstract categories and relations
  - “The whole body of other truths already in our possession.” – *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth*
- A synthesis of correspondence and coherence theories of truth.

## Fallibilism

- We can't be sure we have reached final truth, but if a proposition works it is true enough for us to use.
- What we call absolute truth is an ideal vanishing point that we hope to get to some day.
- “Meanwhile we have to live today by what truth we can get today, and be ready tomorrow to call it falsehood.” – *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth*. For instance, Ptolemaic astronomy, Euclidean geometry, etc.
- “When new experiences lead to retrospective judgments, using the past tense, what these judgments utter *was* true, even though no past thinker had been led there.” – *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth*

## Agreement with Reality

- “To 'agree' in the widest sense with a reality, *can only mean to be guided either straight up to it or into its surroundings, or to be put into such working touch with it as to handle either it or something connected with it better than if we disagreed*. Better either intellectually or practically!” – *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth*
- “Any idea that helps us to *deal*, whether practically or intellectually, with either the reality or its belongings, that doesn't entangle our progress in frustrations, that *fits*, in fact, and adapts our life to the reality's whole setting, will agree sufficiently to meet the requirement. It will hold true of that reality. “ – *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth*

## Pragmatism Is and Is Not

- Is
  - A descriptive account of what we take to be true.
  - A definition of truth as what works to guide us in the world and to organize our ideas.
  - *“The true’ ... is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as ‘the right’ is only the expedient in the way of our behaving. Expedient in almost any fashion; and expedient in the long run and on the whole of course; for what meets expediently all the experience in sight won't necessarily meet all farther experiences equally satisfactorily.”*
- Is Not
  - Calling true whatever you find pleasant to say or think.
  - Calling true whatever leads to short-term financial or political gain.
  - Calling true whatever the ruling elite would like you to believe.

## Criticisms

- Truth is not mutable. Beliefs do not pass from being untrue to true and back. Propositions cannot be true for one person and false for another
- *“The statement ‘The earth is flat’ was, very likely, rationally acceptable 3000 years ago; but it is not rationally acceptable today. Yet it would be wrong to say that ‘the earth is flat’ was true 3,000 years ago; for that would mean that the earth has changed its shape.”* – Hillary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 1981, p. 55
- Peirce called the idea of truth as mutable one of the "seeds of death" by which James allowed his pragmatism to become "infected."

## Value of Pragmatism

- A method of clearing up conceptual confusions.
- A method for detecting the truth of propositions rather than defining truth abstractly.
  - Let's not ask what truth is; let's ask instead how we can recognize it reliably when it appears.
- Implies something about the nature of reality, that everything is connected: "There can *be* no difference anywhere that doesn't *make* a difference elsewhere." – *What Pragmatism Means*

## Sources

- "What Pragmatism Means,"  
[http://bmeacham.com/whatswhat/OP/James\\_WhatPragmatismMeans.htm](http://bmeacham.com/whatswhat/OP/James_WhatPragmatismMeans.htm)
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