

Notes on “Pragmatism” (lectures 2 and 6), by William James

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Who was William James?

- One of the founders of “Functional Psychology”
- Author of “Principles of Psychology”
- First person to offer a course in Psychology in the USA.
- Founded The American Society of Psychical Research
- Considered himself a “radical empiricist”
 - The world and experience can never be halted for an entirely objective analysis; the mind of the observer and the act of observation affect any empirical approach to truth.
- Wealthy intellectual family, well educated
 - Brother Henry was a celebrated novelist
 - Sister Alice was a known diarist
 - Father was a Swedenborgian Theologian (New Church)
- Godfather was Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Associated with:
 - Charles Sanders Pierce
 - John Dewey
 - Bertrand Russell
 - Josiah Royce
 - Mark Twain
 - Henri Bergson
 - Stanley Hall
 - Sigmund Freud
- 1872 belong to the group called The Metaphysical Club
 - Oliver Wendell Holmes
 - Chauncey Wright
 - Charles Sanders Pierce
- 1882 joined Theosophical Society
- Taught at Harvard in the 1890’s. Students included:
 - Theodore Roosevelt
 - George Santayana
 - Gertrude Stein
 - W.E.B. Du Bois
- 1907 Retired from Harvard, Published Pragmatism

Questions I would like to answer

- What does Pragmatism mean?
- How to Putting Symbols to Work In Your Life?
- What is the Cash Value of Truth?
- How do we Square what is Practical with our Innermost beliefs?

Lecture 2: What Pragmatism Means

1. The "ferocious metaphysical dispute"
 - a. Does the man go around the squirrel?
 - b. "Which party is right," I said, "depends on what you PRACTICALLY MEAN by 'going round' the squirrel."
 - c. Conclusion: "...THE PRAGMATIC METHOD. The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable."
 - d. Method: "The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences."
2. Pragmatism was introduced to philosophy in 1879
 - a. "Mr. Peirce, after pointing out that our beliefs are really rules for action, said that to develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance."
 - b. "To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all."
3. Thoughts of the chemist Ostwald
 - a. "All realities influence our practice," he wrote me, "and that influence is their meaning for us. I am accustomed to put questions to my classes in this way: In what respects would the world be different if this alternative or that were true? If I can find nothing that would become different, then the alternative has no sense."
 - b. James Concludes: "It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence."
4. Purpose of Philosophy
 - a. **"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."**
 - b. "A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once 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 towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power."
5. The primitive quest of Metaphysics
 - a. "You know how men have always hankered after unlawful magic, and you know what a great part, in magic, WORDS have always played. If you

have his name, or the formula of incantation that binds him, you can control the spirit, genie, afrite, or whatever the power may be. Solomon knew the names of all the spirits, and having their names, he held them subject to his will. So the universe has always appeared to the natural mind as a kind of enigma, of which the key must be sought in the shape of some illuminating or power-bringing word or name. That word names the universe's PRINCIPLE, and to possess it is, after a fashion, to possess the universe itself. 'God,' 'Matter,' 'Reason,' 'the Absolute,' 'Energy,' are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest. But if you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any such word as closing your quest. You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience. It appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be CHANGED. THEORIES THUS BECOME INSTRUMENTS, NOT ANSWERS TO ENIGMAS, IN WHICH WE CAN REST. We don't lie back upon them, we move forward, and, on occasion, make nature over again by their aid."

6. Pragmatism is a really just a Method
 - a. "No particular results then, so far, but only an attitude of orientation, is what the pragmatic method means. THE ATTITUDE OF LOOKING AWAY FROM FIRST THINGS, PRINCIPLES, 'CATEGORIES,' SUPPOSED NECESSITIES; AND OF LOOKING TOWARDS LAST THINGS, FRUITS, CONSEQUENCES, FACTS."
7. Introduction to the Pragmatic Theory of Truth
 - a. "One of the most successfully cultivated branches of philosophy in our time is what is called inductive logic, the study of the conditions under which our sciences have evolved."
 - b. "When the first mathematical, logical and natural uniformities, the first LAWS, were discovered, men were so carried away by the clearness, beauty and simplification that resulted, that they believed themselves to have deciphered authentically the eternal thoughts of the Almighty. His mind also thundered and reverberated in syllogisms. He also thought in conic sections, squares and roots and ratios, and geometrized like Euclid. He made Kepler's laws for the planets to follow; he made velocity increase proportionally to the time in falling bodies; he made the law of the sines for light to obey when refracted; he established the classes, orders, families and genera of plants and animals, and fixed the distances between them. He thought the archetypes of all things, and devised their variations; and when we rediscover any one of these his wondrous institutions, we seize his mind in its very literal intention."
 - c. "Their great use is to summarize old facts and to lead to new ones. They are only a man-made language, a conceptual shorthand, as someone calls

them, in which we write our reports of nature; and languages, as is well known, tolerate much choice of expression and many dialects."

- d. "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"
 - e. "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."
 - f. "This is the 'instrumental' view of truth taught so successfully at Chicago, the view that truth in our ideas means their power to 'work,' promulgated so brilliantly at Oxford."
8. Dewey and Schiller on the adoption of new opinions
- a. "The observable process which Schiller and Dewey particularly singled out for generalization is the familiar one by which any individual settles into NEW OPINIONS."
 - b. "...in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible"
 - c. "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. He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives."
 - d. **"The most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leave most of his old order standing... New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity."**
 - e. "When old truth grows, then, by new truth's addition, it is for subjective reasons."
 - f. **"The reasons why we call things true is the reason why they ARE true, for 'to be true' MEANS only to perform this marriage-function."**
9. Truth in the modern world
- a. "But how plastic even the oldest truths nevertheless really are has been vividly shown in our day by the transformation of logical and mathematical ideas, a transformation which seems even to be invading physics."
 - b. "Mr. Schiller still gives to all this view of truth the name of 'Humanism,' but, for this doctrine too, the name of pragmatism seems fairly to be in the ascendant, so I will treat it under the name of pragmatism in these lectures."
10. Is Pragmatism an assault on Rationalism?
- a. "Pragmatism is uncomfortable away from facts. Rationalism is comfortable only in the presence of abstractions."
 - b. **"I wish now to add a word in further explanation of the claim I made at our last meeting, that pragmatism may be a happy**

harmonizer of empiricist ways of thinking, with the more religious demands of human beings."

- c. "Since, however, darwinism has once for all displaced design from the minds of the 'scientific,' theism has lost that foothold; and some kind of an immanent or pantheistic deity working IN things rather than above them is, if any, the kind recommended to our contemporary imagination. Aspirants to a philosophic religion turn, as a rule, more hopefully nowadays towards idealistic pantheism than towards the older dualistic theism, in spite of the fact that the latter still counts able defenders."
 - d. "Far be it from me to deny the majesty of this conception, or its capacity to yield religious comfort to a most respectable class of minds. But from the human point of view, no one can pretend that it doesn't suffer from the faults of remoteness and abstractness. It is eminently a product of what I have ventured to call the rationalistic temper. It disdains empiricism's needs. It substitutes a pallid outline for the real world's richness."
 - e. In the end, James appears to be saying that people lack the ability to truly capture the full description of the divine, all of the gritty details along with the noble principles. What conception they have either works, or doesn't work empirically, but no real claim to truth can be maintained about the absolute. And the Rationalist tendency is to say just the opposite of this.
11. What about Religion?
- a. "Now pragmatism, devoted tho she be to facts, has no such materialistic bias as ordinary empiricism labors under. Moreover, she has no objection whatever to the realizing of abstractions, so long as you get about among particulars with their aid and they actually carry you somewhere. Interested in no conclusions but those which our minds and our experiences work out together, she has no a priori prejudices against theology."
 - b. "IF THEOLOGICAL IDEAS PROVE TO HAVE A VALUE FOR CONCRETE LIFE, THEY WILL BE TRUE, FOR PRAGMATISM, IN THE SENSE OF BEING GOOD FOR SO MUCH. FOR HOW MUCH MORE THEY ARE TRUE, WILL DEPEND ENTIRELY ON THEIR RELATIONS TO THE OTHER TRUTHS THAT ALSO HAVE TO BE ACKNOWLEDGED."**
 - c. Referring to religion, he says: "...so far as it affords such comfort, it surely is not sterile; it has that amount of value; it performs a concrete function. As a good pragmatist, I myself ought to call the Absolute true 'in so far forth,' then; and I unhesitatingly now do so."
 - d. "What do believers in the Absolute mean by saying that their belief affords them comfort? They mean that since in the Absolute finite evil is 'overruled' already, we may, therefore, whenever we wish, treat the temporal as if it were potentially the eternal, be sure that we can trust its outcome, and, without sin, dismiss our fear and drop the worry of our

finite responsibility. In short, they mean that we have a right ever and anon to **take a moral holiday**, to let the world wag in its own way, feeling that its issues are in better hands than ours and are none of our business."

12. What is True should also be Good for us

- a. **"I am well aware how odd it must seem to some of you to hear me say that an idea is 'true' so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives. That it is GOOD, for as much as it profits, you will gladly admit. If what we do by its aid is good, you will allow the idea itself to be good in so far forth, for we are the better for possessing it. But is it not a strange misuse of the word 'truth,' you will say, to call ideas also 'true' for this reason?"**
- b. "Surely you must admit this, that if there were NO good for life in true ideas, or if the knowledge of them were positively disadvantageous and false ideas the only useful ones, then the current notion that truth is divine and precious, and its pursuit a duty, could never have grown up or become a dogma. In a world like that, our duty would be to SHUN truth, rather."
 - i. ??? True ???
- c. "If there be any life that it is really better we should lead, and if there be any idea which, if believed in, would help us to lead that life, then it would be really BETTER FOR US to believe in that idea, UNLESS, INDEED, BELIEF IN IT INCIDENTALLY CLASHED WITH OTHER GREATER VITAL BENEFITS."
- d. "Ought we ever not to believe what it is BETTER FOR US to believe? And can we then keep the notion of what is better for us, and what is true for us, permanently apart? Pragmatism says no, and I fully agree with her."

13. The enemy of our truths is our other truths

- a. "I said just now that what is better for us to believe is true UNLESS THE BELIEF INCIDENTALLY CLASHES WITH SOME OTHER VITAL BENEFIT. Now in real life what vital benefits is any particular belief of ours most liable to clash with? What indeed except the vital benefits yielded by OTHER BELIEFS when these prove incompatible with the first ones? In other words, the greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths."
- b. "Her 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. If theological ideas should do this, if the notion of God, in particular, should prove to do it, how could pragmatism possibly deny God's existence? She could see no meaning in treating as 'not true' a notion that was pragmatically so successful. What other kind of truth could there be, for her, than all this agreement with concrete reality?"

Lecture 6: Pragmatism's Conception of Truth

1. Accepted Definition within Philosophy
 - a. "Truth, as any dictionary will tell you, is a property of certain of our ideas. It means their 'agreement,' as falsity means their disagreement, with 'reality.'"
 - i. Above is a definition of the Correspondence Theory of Truth.
 - b. "Pragmatists and intellectualists both accept this definition as a matter of course. They begin to quarrel only after the question is raised as to what may precisely be meant by the term 'agreement,' and what by the term 'reality,' when reality is taken as something for our ideas to agree with."
 - i. This second thought hints at the Coherence Theory of Truth.
2. Ideas must copy reality
 - a. "The popular notion is that a true idea must copy its reality. Like other popular views, this one follows the analogy of the most usual experience. Our true ideas of sensible things do indeed copy them."
3. Idealists
 - a. "Some idealists seem to say that they are true whenever they are what God means that we ought to think about that object. Others hold the copy-view all through, and speak as if our ideas possessed truth just in proportion as they approach to being copies of the Absolute's eternal way of thinking."
 - b. "When you've got your true idea of anything, there's an end of the matter."
4. Pragmatism
 - a. "Pragmatism, on the other hand, asks its usual question. "Grant an idea or belief to be true," it says, "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?" 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."
 - b. "This thesis is what I have to defend. The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth HAPPENS to an idea. It BECOMES true, is MADE true by events."**
5. Verification and Validation
 - a. "It is hard to find any one phrase that characterizes these consequences better than the ordinary agreement-formula—just such consequences being what we have in mind whenever we say that our ideas 'agree' with reality."

- b. "The connexions and transitions come to us from point to point as being progressive, harmonious, satisfactory. This function of agreeable leading is what we mean by an idea's verification."
6. What is Truth Worth?
- a. "... the possession of true thoughts means everywhere the possession of invaluable instruments of action; and that our duty to gain truth, so far from being a blank command from out of the blue, or a 'stunt' self-imposed by our intellect, can account for itself by excellent practical reasons.
 - b. "The practical value of true ideas is thus primarily derived from the practical importance of their objects to us. Their objects are, indeed, not important at all times."
 - c. Of truth: **"You can say of it then either that 'it is useful because it is true' or that 'it is true because it is useful.'"**
 - d. "Primarily, and on the common-sense level, 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. This is a vague enough statement, but I beg you to retain it, for it is essential."
 - e. "Woe to him whose beliefs play fast and loose with the order which realities follow in his experience: they will lead him nowhere or else make false connexions."
7. Unverified Beliefs
- a. "Where circumstantial evidence is sufficient, we can go without eye-witnessing. Just as we here assume Japan to exist without ever having been there, because it WORKS to do so, everything we know conspiring with the belief, and nothing interfering, so we assume that thing to be a clock. We USE it as a clock, regulating the length of our lecture by it. The verification of the assumption here means its leading to no frustration or contradiction."
 - b. **"Truth lives, in fact, for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs 'pass,' so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them."**
 - c. "You accept my verification of one thing, I yours of another. We trade on each other's truth. But beliefs verified concretely by SOMEBODY are the posts of the whole superstructure."
 - d. "Another great reason—beside economy of time—for waiving complete verification in the usual business of life is that all things exist in kinds and not singly. Our world is found once for all to have that peculiarity. So that when we have once directly verified our ideas about one specimen of a kind, we consider ourselves free to apply them to other specimens without verification."

8. What about pure abstractions, or what he calls "Purely Mental Ideas"
 - a. "Truth here has an 'eternal' character. If you can find a concrete thing anywhere that is 'one' or 'white' or 'gray,' or an 'effect,' then your principles will everlastingly apply to it. It is but a case of ascertaining the kind, and then applying the law of its kind to the particular object. You are sure to get truth if you can but name the kind rightly, for your mental relations hold good of everything of that kind without exception. If you then, nevertheless, failed to get truth concretely, you would say that you had classed your real objects wrongly."
 - b. "...many realities our ideas can only be symbols and not copies. 'Past time,' 'power,' 'spontaneity'—how can our mind copy such realities?"
 - c. "...often agreement will only mean the negative fact that nothing contradictory from the quarter of that reality comes to interfere with the way in which our ideas guide us elsewhere."
 - d. "Thus, NAMES are just as 'true' or 'false' as definite mental pictures are. They set up similar verification-processes, and lead to fully equivalent practical results."
 - e. **"All truth thus gets verbally built out, stored up, and made available for everyone. Hence, we must TALK consistently just as we must THINK consistently: for both in talk and thought we deal with kinds. Names are arbitrary, but once understood they must be kept to."**
9. Truth must be relevant
 - a. "The overwhelming majority of our true ideas admit of no direct or face-to-face verification"
 - b. "That past time itself was, is guaranteed by its coherence with everything that's present. True as the present is, the past was also."
 - c. **"True ideas lead us into useful verbal and conceptual quarters as well as directly up to useful sensible termini. They lead to consistency, stability and flowing human intercourse. They lead away from excentricity and isolation, from foiled and barren thinking. The untrammelled flowing of the leading-process, its general freedom from clash and contradiction, passes for its indirect verification; but all roads lead to Rome, and in the end and eventually, all true processes must lead to the face of directly verifying sensible experiences SOMEWHERE, which somebody's ideas have copied."**
10. When a choice of working systems exist, the truth is elegant/simple
 - a. "We must find a theory that will WORK; and that means something extremely difficult; for our theory must mediate between all previous truths and certain new experiences. It must derange common sense and previous belief as little as possible, and it must lead to some sensible terminus or other that can be verified exactly. To 'work' means both these things; and the squeeze is so tight that there is little loose play for any

hypothesis. Our theories are wedged and controlled as nothing else is. Yet sometimes alternative theoretic formulas are equally compatible with all the truths we know, and then we choose between them for subjective reasons. We choose the kind of theory to which we are already partial; we follow 'elegance' or 'economy.' Clerk Maxwell somewhere says it would be "poor scientific taste" to choose the more complicated of two equally well-evidenced conceptions; and you will all agree with him."

11. Truth is practical

- a. "Truth for us is simply a collective name for verification-processes, just as health, wealth, strength, etc., are names for other processes connected with life, and also pursued because it pays to pursue them. Truth is MADE, just as health, wealth and strength are made, in the course of experience."

12. Rationalist Objections:

- a. "Truth is not made," he will say; "it absolutely obtains, being a unique relation that does not wait upon any process, but shoots straight over the head of experience, and hits its reality every time. Our belief that yon thing on the wall is a clock is true already, altho no one in the whole history of the world should verify it."
- b. "You pragmatists put the cart before the horse in making truth's being reside in verification-processes. These are merely signs of its being, merely our lame ways of ascertaining after the fact, which of our ideas already has possessed the wondrous quality. The quality itself is timeless, like all essences and natures. Thoughts partake of it directly, as they partake of falsity or of irrelevancy. It can't be analyzed away into pragmatic consequences."
- c. "Like wealth, health also lives in rebus. It is a name for processes, as digestion, circulation, sleep, etc., that go on happily, tho in this instance we are more inclined to think of it as a principle and to say the man digests and sleeps so well BECAUSE he is so healthy. With 'strength' we are, I think, more rationalistic still, and decidedly inclined to treat it as an excellence pre-existing in the man and explanatory of the herculean performances of his muscles. With 'truth' most people go over the border entirely, and treat the rationalistic account as self-evident."

13. Live in the Now

- a. "The 'absolutely' true, meaning what no farther experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge."
- b. "Meanwhile we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood. Ptolemaic astronomy, euclidean space, aristotelian logic, scholastic metaphysics, were expedient for centuries, but human experience has boiled over those limits, and we now call these things only relatively true, or true within those borders of experience. 'Absolutely' they are false; for we know that those limits were

casual, and might have been transcended by past theorists just as they are by present thinkers.”

14. More Rationalist Objections

- a. “Reality stands complete and ready-made from all eternity, rationalism insists, and the agreement of our ideas with it is that unique unanalyzable virtue in them of which she has already told us.”

15. James counters:

- a. “Thus, just as pragmatism faces forward to the future, so does rationalism here again face backward to a past eternity. True to her inveterate habit, rationalism reverts to 'principles,' and thinks that when an abstraction once is named, we own an oracular solution.”
- b. “The 'sentimentalist fallacy' is to shed tears over abstract justice and generosity, beauty, etc., and never to know these qualities when you meet them in the street, because there the circumstances make them vulgar.”
- c. “Identical whys exist in the case of wealth and health. Truth makes no other kind of claim and imposes no other kind of ought than health and wealth do. All these claims are conditional; the concrete benefits we gain are what we mean by calling the pursuit a duty. In the case of truth, untrue beliefs work as perniciously in the long run as true beliefs work beneficially. Talking abstractly, the quality 'true' may thus be said to grow absolutely precious, and the quality 'untrue' absolutely damnable: the one may be called good, the other bad, unconditionally. We ought to think the true, we ought to shun the false, imperatively. But if we treat all this abstraction literally and oppose it to its mother soil in experience, see what a preposterous position we work ourselves into.”
- d. “When Berkeley had explained what people meant by matter, people thought that he denied matter's existence. When Messrs. Schiller and Dewey now explain what people mean by truth, they are accused of denying ITS existence. These pragmatists destroy all objective standards, critics say, and put foolishness and wisdom on one level. A favorite formula for describing Mr. Schiller's doctrines and mine is that we are persons who think that by saying whatever you find it pleasant to say and calling it truth you fulfil every pragmatistic requirement.”
- e. “Schiller says the true is that which 'works.' Thereupon he is treated as one who limits verification to the lowest material utilities. Dewey says truth is what gives 'satisfaction.' He is treated as one who believes in calling everything true which, if it were true, would be pleasant.”
- f. “I have honestly tried to stretch my own imagination and to read the best possible meaning into the rationalist conception, but I have to confess that it still completely baffles me. The notion of a reality calling on us to 'agree' with it, and that for no reasons, but simply because its claim is 'unconditional' or 'transcendent,' is one that I can make neither head nor tail of.”