

# **Writings, 1902-1910 Study Guide**

**Writings, 1902-1910 by William James**

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# Plot Summary

Writings 1902-1910 is a collection of William James writings on psychology, religion, philosophy, science, and social critique. In particular, James defends his theory of pragmatism with extraordinary academic rigor, using concepts and principles from several different fields to support his conclusions.

The book begins with one of James' most influential writings "The Varieties of Religious Experience." James begins by attacking the idea that current practice of religion is simply an atavistic response to an attempt of our ancestors to explain natural phenomena before the advent of science. He asserts that religious experience is real and serves to connect people to a 'spiritual universe'. Finally he claims that religious experiences impact people in a positive fashion, making them better members of the world society.

James next outlines his theory of pragmatism. The pragmatic theory is a way of approaching philosophy and indeed general life in which the difference of the outcome is used to measure the validity of the argument. James is thus able to argue for the existence and importance of internal experience (some of which being religious) by virtue of the fact that it impacts people's behavior, experience, and beliefs. The pragmatic approach thus allows theories to become 'instruments' instead of answers to difficult problems.

The thesis is continued by focusing on the debate between pluralistic and monistic views of the universe. The monists focus on deductive reasoning which moves from wholes to parts, and the pluralists focus on inductive reasoning moving from parts to wholes. James explores the philosophy of Hegel as well as Fechner, both monists. He then explores the philosophy of Bergson who argues that 'mere conceptual logic' can not tell us what is possible. James argues for the pluralistic view with particular focus on the importance of subjective experience.

The next section of his writings has to do with how truth is determined. James holds that from a pragmatic view, truth must include the experience of the subject and the practical consequences for that subject. He goes on to state that understanding of the truth necessarily includes a treatment of the process by which that truth was arrived at. James then answers critiques by several theoreticians, in particular claims that pragmatism is a renewal of positivist theory.

James then outlines some of the major pitfalls being encountered in philosophy. In particular, James focuses on the difference between concepts and percepts and how they are both used to create meaning. James asserts that percepts are of a higher order because they are immediate and related to the flow of experience. He also explores novelty, the finite, and the infinite through conceptual and perceptual lenses.

Finally James concludes with various essays on such topics as higher education, philosophy, truth, humanism, and consciousness. He offers social critique on trends

occurring within higher education including exclusivity and preference for doctoral degrees. In addition, he writes about social issues including war and conquest. James also tackles the idea of the existence of consciousness as well as continued writing on earlier topics.



# The Varieties of Religious Experience

## Section 1 (Lectures I-X)

### The Varieties of Religious Experience Section 1 (Lectures I-X) Summary and Analysis

#### Lecture I - Religion and Neurology

In the first lecture, James posits two important points about the nature of inquiry. On one hand inquiry is designed to evaluate what is the essential nature of a thing, and on the other hand what is the meaning or importance of that thing. He states that the first line of inquiry leads to an "existential judgment" and that the second leads to a "proposition of value."

James comments on medical materialism and the focus on the existential judgment piece and lack of proposition of value while the religious do the opposite. Mystical experience carries with it a sense of authority; however, it is often contradicted by the day to day experience and it is this contradiction that causes so much uncertainty in terms of spiritual judgments.

#### Lecture II - Circumscription of the Topic

In the second lecture, James outlines what he means by the term religion, and the specific areas that he intends to treat on the topic. He defines religion as, "... the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (pg 36). James also discusses the idea that for men to experience the divine it is often that they must let go of their ego and allow God to flow through them and be carried away. James has no intention to define religion scientifically.

#### Lecture III - The Reality of the Unseen

In the third lecture, James refers to the work of Emerson and Kant and attempts to describe the qualities of internal subjective experience. He describes it thus, "...It is as if there were in the human consciousness a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we might call 'something there'" (pg 59). It is with the understanding of this 'something there' that James posits the reality of internal experience. He suggests that the absence of that something can lead to a sense of unreality that people experience when in a deep or suicidal depression. He then compares mysticism with rationalism and suggests that people will act out of instinct first and logic second.

#### Lecture IV,V - The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness



In the fourth and fifth lectures, James focuses on "healthy-mindedness" or a kind of deliberate attempt to see goodness in the world and one's personal life. The goodness or badness of any person or situation is created in one's mind and thus it is a matter of choice upon which one is focused. James suggests that this way of being is at the root of American optimism. He goes on to suggest that states such as 'misery' and 'martyrdom' are habitual ways of thinking and perceiving instead of concrete reality. James himself experienced a healing through this kind of approach.

#### Lecture VI,VII - The Sick Soul

In the sixth and seventh lectures, James focuses on the concept of the "sick soul" a state where one has reached 'rock bottom' psychologically. He suggests that the experience of evil is necessary from an existential viewpoint in order to access deeper levels of truth. He discusses the idea that one must die in a sense to the old life before they can begin a new one. This is why people contemplate suicide at this point. It is a metaphorical death that is needed but is interpreted as a concrete physical death. James refers to Tolstoy's experience of being fundamentally fed up with life and feeling that it no longer had any meaning for him.

#### Lecture VIII - The Divided Self, and the Process of its Unification

In the eighth lecture, James focuses on experiences of duality within the self as well as "unitive" experiences. James suggests that the "Naturalist" approach consists of living on the positive side of experience. The "Salvation" approach on the other hand relies on an experience of the divine in which the positive and negative merge and inform each other. James states that the "normal" process of the development of character is to strive towards this integration. He refers to the person who has not achieved this integration as having a "Heterogeneous Personality" or "Discordant personality." Finally James asserts that there is relief from these dual personalities when one has a mystical experience.

#### Lecture IX - Conversion

In this section, James discusses the types and character of the conversion experience. He suggests that people have a group of interests that shift and flow based on "emotion, desire, and volition." When any of these elements shift, interests that were once at the edges may become more important. James asserts that this is the case with a conversion experience. He goes on to state that there are two kinds of conversion, "volitional" and "self-surrender." In the self-surrender form, a person must often reach exhaustion and 'give-up' for the conversion to take place. In the volitional form, one consciously engages in practices designed to create a conversion experience.

#### Lecture X - Conversion - Concluded

In this lecture James explores the mechanics of the conversion experience. He suggests that in the case of an "Instantaneous conversion" that it is necessary for a person to know disharmony so that they are aware of what they are being saved from. James asserts that they is a "subconscious incubation" of experience that leads to



conversion and that this is the area in which "deity" can be accessed. He continues that the more dramatic examples of conversion have tended to be permanent and that there are particular changes in experience that accompany conversion. He suggests these states are "the willingness to be," "a sense of perceiving truths not known before," and "an objective change to the world."



# The Varieties of Religious Experience

## Section 2 (Lectures XI-Postscript)

### The Varieties of Religious Experience Section 2 (Lectures XI-Postscript) Summary and Analysis

#### Lectures XI, XII, and XIII - Saintliness

In the lectures on saintliness, James outlines distinguishing characteristics of the saints and how they differ from regular people. He refers to the previous chapters and reiterates how people have different interests. James states that "will" is used to sort out what gets expressed and what gets inhibited. He then goes on to state qualities of saintliness including asceticism, strength of soul, purity, and charity. James asserts, "Religious rapture, moral enthusiasm, ontological wonder, cosmic wonder are all unifying states - selfhood disappears and tenderness rules"(pg 256). It is through these unifying states that the qualities come online. James states that purity arises from a sense of "sensitivity to inner inconsistency." Finally, James likens the difference of those who are saintly to those who are not as the difference between 'being' and 'doing.'

#### Lectures XIV and XV - The Value of Saintliness

Lectures XIV and XV cover some of the cultural benefits of saintliness which he refers to as the "fruits of religion." He suggests that like other human qualities, these fruits are susceptible to 'excess'. James asserts that in excess devoutness becomes fanaticism - "'virtues change to vices," purity becomes scrupulosity - "reaching unity objectively through stamping out competition," charity can become gullibility - "utopian dreams that allow evil to flourish, and asceticism becomes a 'morbid inability to meet the world.'"

#### Lectures XVI and XVII - Mysticism

Lectures XVI and XVII outline the four aspects of a mystical experience. The first aspect is that of 'ineffability' or the inability to express the experience. The second aspect is a 'noetic quality,' meaning new knowledge has been revealed. The third aspect is 'transiency.' The fourth quality is 'passivity' or a feeling of giving up one's will. James suggests that there are other forms or levels of consciousness apart from the 'rational consciousness.' Higher states of experience are related to these levels of consciousness. James states of accessing these states, "God's knowledge is intuitive not discursive" (pg. 366). James continues that 'sensorial states' are very involved in mystical experience, however, at the higher ends of experience even these images drop. At the highest levels, the functions of the body are at such low levels that the person may appear as if they are dead. James states that mysticism is monist and optimist. He gives three aspects of mystical states in reference to the person who experiences them: they have authority over the person; the person does not demand





that others accept their experience; the experience undermines the authority of 'rational' experiences.

#### Lecture XVIII - Philosophy

In his lecture on philosophy, James asserts that conceptual thinking is necessary for religion and philosophy because they help to interpret perceptual experience. He feels that religion cannot exist on rational thought alone. James talks about the difference between objective and subjective inquiries into truth. James introduces Charles Pierce and the idea of pragmatism. This theory states that there are practical outcomes that are considered by a person in the process of determining a course of action or a particular belief. James asserts that the concept of an infinite God necessarily makes him distant and sterile. He states that 'moral attributes' of God are what drive human behavior. There is always a contradiction between the ideal and the actual - oneness with the divine serves to cross this divide.

#### Lecture XIX - Other Characteristics

In lecture XIX, James describes certain other characteristics of religion and philosophy. He asserts that there is an aesthetic value in religion - Catholicism works on "elaborate ceremony and hierarchy" while Protestantism is more in line with "individual simplicity." James states that there are three essential elements to religion: sacrifice, confession, and prayer. Sacrifice includes asceticism as well as actual sacrifice of objects or other offerings. Confession is a process through which the person is healed or brought into the correct relationship. Prayer is the foundation of the religious act. It has been shown to have healing power. In effect, prayer is the language through which individuals have a conversation and connection with the divine. Prayer is a 'transaction' - the act releases energy that was occupied with other tasks towards accomplishing the end that is prayed for. James suggests that religious 'manifestations' are connected with the subconscious.

#### Lecture XX and Postscript - Conclusions

In lecture XX, James draws some conclusions about the importance of religious experience. He begins with what he feels to be the main religious beliefs: "the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe, union with that higher universe is our true end, prayer is a real process, work is done, spiritual energy flows in and produces effects"(pg 435). He continues with some of the psychological characteristics, "a new zest for life, an assurance of safety and a temper of peace, loving affections." He believes that religion should be individual since each person is so different and unique. James asserts that there is a difference between "living the truth" and "knowing the truth." He continues that in order to know the full truth one must take account of personal experiences both objectively and subjectively. Salvation experiences deliver people from the suffering of their duality. James posits that for humans the 'chance' of salvation is sufficient to get them through.



# Pragmatism Section I (Lectures I-IV)

## Pragmatism Section I (Lectures I-IV) Summary and Analysis

### Lecture I - The Present Dilemma in Philosophy

In lecture I, James states of philosophy, "Philosophy is at once the most sublime and the most trivial of human pursuits"(pg 488). He goes on to describe two main philosophic stances; that of the rationalist and that of the empiricist. According to James, the rationalist position is "based on principles, intellectualistic, idealistic, optimistic, religious, free-willest, monistic, and dogmatic." The empiricist position is "based on facts, sensationalistic, materialistic, pessimistic, irreligious, fatalistic, pluralistic, and skeptical." James speaks to the positivist viewpoint which makes the universe larger and lessens the role of man. The religious viewpoint tends to "retreat and accommodate," while the pantheistic viewpoint is "aggressive and radical." James suggests that pragmatism can fill the needs of both religion and fact.

### Lecture II - What Pragmatism Means

In lecture II, James describes pragmatism as a philosophical stance. The method attempts to discern between different ideas of truth using the practical outcome as a guide. James states that if no practical difference exists in outcome, then the ideas themselves are practically identical. He continues that philosophy should focus more on this type of inquiry, since if it makes no practical difference to people if one idea or the other be true, then it is pointless to debate it. James describes pragmatism as a process for determining truth, "Ideas become true insofar as they help us to get into satisfactory relationship with other parts of our experience" (pg 512). He continues that in the case of new information humans tend to be wary. We tend to believe in our old ideas despite new evidence to the contrary.

### Lecture III - Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered

In lecture III, James considers some of the metaphysical issues that pose problems for philosophy as well as religion. He begins with the issue of the relationship between the words 'substance' and 'attribute'. James asserts that a substance is generally known through its attributes and that were those attributes to be removed, we would be unable to identify the substance. James uses the example of the Eucharist to explain the significance of substance. He continues by quoting Berkeley's work which suggested that there is an order behind the 'matter' which is sent by God. James also discusses the idea of 'personal identity', using Locke's work to substantiate that this identity is essentially a conscious awareness of this moment in time, while remembering other moments in time connected to the person who experiences all the memory between then and now as continuous. James explores spiritualism and materialism and makes the comment that spiritualism champions abstraction.

## Lecture IV - The One and the Many

In lecture IV, James considers the ongoing debate between a monistic vs. a pluralistic view of the universe. The monist position is that everything is essentially the same having all derived from the one. Pluralism holds that even in vast fields of sameness there is still some difference that needs to be accounted for. He suggests that the world should serve as a topic for this debate, because of the fact that we can even conceive of it as a singular gives some proof for monism. James goes on to state that there are two ways of looking at the whole of the universe - by examining unity and disunity. He states that there are parts of the universe that are discontinuous which is thus a point for pluralism. James discusses different types of unity including causal unity, generic unity, unity of purpose, and aesthetic unity. Causal unity refers to the idea that a preceding event caused a following event. For instance God's creation means that everything in the universe is related causally. Generic unity refers to things that are like each other - for example beings. Unity of purpose refers to things with similar purposes. Aesthetic unity refers to the relationship of things that seem to tell a story together.



# Pragmatism Section II (Lectures V-VIII)

## Pragmatism Section II (Lectures V-VIII) Summary and Analysis

### Lecture V - Pragmatism and Common Sense

In lecture V, James discusses the topic of common sense and how it relates to pragmatism. He begins by talking about the concept of 'noetic pluralism' which essentially states that it is reasonable that God may not be completely all knowing. This is in contradiction to 'noetic monism' which states that in order to be the 'ultimate' God must be perfect in all senses. James continues by discussing the fact that we learn in little pieces and that we hold on to much of what came before. James posits that 'common sense' is a stage of development of the human mind and that it is built upon knowledge of our ancestors that has carried through. James further discusses the ideas of permanence and impermanence and their affect on how we conceptualize. He suggests that theories are "mental modes of adaptation to reality."

### Lecture VI - Pragmatism's Conception of Truth

In lecture VI, James discusses the topic of truth and how it relates to pragmatism. James states that truth is essentially an idea's agreement with reality. He goes on to say that for intellectualists "truth is an inert static relation". For pragmatists, truth is more flexible and changing based on the value of a particular idea to the lived experience of an individual. James asserts, "Truth ideas are those we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify. False ideas are those we cannot" (pg 573). James states that relations among mental ideas can be true or false. He continues that intuitively perceived relations are also a form of truth. James suggests that beliefs are based on experience. Truth is a process and the verifiability of that truth is found within the practical application of that truth. Thus in a sense the truth, from a pragmatic standpoint is made; it is a construction.

### Lecture VII - Pragmatism and Humanism

In lecture VII, James discusses the approach of humanism and how it relates to pragmatism. He states that the 'first' part of reality is described by what truths have been taken into consideration. The 'second' part has to do with the relation that occurs between our sensorial experience and the mental images we create of them. The relation can be broken down into two types - correspondence that is changeable such as "time and place," and others that are more fixed because the correspondence is based on their essential nature such as "likeness and unlikeness." The 'third' part is the process by which 'previous truths' are considered in light of a new experience. James asserts that all three areas must be considered in any approach to understanding belief. James continues by stating that it is thus impossible to separate reality from human thinking because they are co-constructed. This is the connection with humanism - all



things must be seen through the lens of human abilities, language, consciousness, etc. James uses humanism to build his case for the consideration of 'eaches' as contributing something unique and different to the whole and is thus arguing for the concept of pluralism.

#### Lecture VIII - Pragmatism and Religion

In lecture VIII, James discusses religion and how it relates to pragmatism. He begins with a poem by Walt Whitman, "To You," and suggests that there are two ways of looking at the poem. The first way is monistic and highlights the beauty and power of union with the divine even when times may be tough for an individual personally. James states that this is the way of "quietism or indifferentism." He continues that in the pragmatic and pluralistic view the poem describes human potential and possibility. James explores the difference between a conception of unity and the possibility that the unity is not necessarily perfect. He then looks at three lenses through which people generally view the world; pessimism, optimism, and meliorism. Pessimism is the view that salvation of the world is not possible. Optimism holds that the salvation of the world is inevitable. Meliorism states that salvation is neither impossible nor inevitable, instead it is a possibility whose likelihood becomes greater "the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become"(pg 612). James asserts that this way of viewing the universe is a call to action of sorts - to experience as much as possible because this is what allows new 'truth' to be made.



# A Pluralistic Universe Section I (Lectures I-IV)

## A Pluralistic Universe Section I (Lectures I-IV) Summary and Analysis

### Lecture I - The Types of Philosophic Thinking

In lecture I, James discusses the various approaches used in philosophy. He suggests that empiricism uses parts to explain wholes through inductive reasoning and that rationalism uses wholes to explain the parts through deductive reasoning. Empiricism is pluralist and rationalism is monist. He explores the difference between spiritualism with a sympathetic temper and materialism with a cynical temper. James suggests that there are two sub-categories of spiritualism; monistic pantheism and dualistic theism. He adds that the theism position lacks intimacy, particularly with regard to individual experience, and is thus unsatisfactory.

### Lecture II - Monistic Idealism

In lecture II, James discusses the underlying suppositions of monistic idealism. James refers to the monist position as the 'all-form' and the pluralist position as the 'each-form.' He continues his argument that the God of the all-form is impersonal. He suggests that the absolute is satisfying because it is effectively out of the realm of experience. James discusses the concept of 'immanent operation' which states that when the whole changes all things contained within it change as a singular act.

### Lecture III - Hegel and His Method

In lecture III, James discusses Georg Hegel and his approach to philosophy. According to James, Hegel believes that every thing has an opposite that it is negated, a concept which he refers to as 'Dialectic'. The only way through which the opposition is healed is in the concept of the absolute. Hegel used a process of negation to connect ideas instead of using similarity. James states that rationalism attempts to take perceptual experiences and form them into concepts. James suggests that although Hegel was a professed rationalist, he proceeded empirically from his own experience.

### Lecture IV - Concerning Fechner

In lecture IV, James discusses Gustav Fechner and his approach to philosophy. According to James, Fechner's religious and cosmological faiths saved him from a grave illness. This experience informs his views and philosophy, and he essentially founded scientific psychology. Fechner states, "Our biggest mistake is to view spiritual not as the rule but as the exception"(pg 698). Fechner uses analogy and difference in his reasoning. Analogy allows Fechner to posit Earth systems based on human

systems. Fechner believed that consciousness is based on the organization and needs of the particular organism. Fechner also believed that the more 'inclusive forms of consciousness' are partly generated by 'less inclusive forms of consciousness.'



# A Pluralistic Universe Section II (Lectures V-Appendix C)

## A Pluralistic Universe Section II (Lectures V-Appendix C) Summary and Analysis

### Lecture V - The Compounding of Consciousness

In lecture V, James discusses Josiah Royce and his empirical approach to the human relationship with the divine. Royce asserts that ignorance is in fact 'inattention.' He goes on to state that human beings are limited because we are only a piece of the 'absolute will.' He then posits that limitations in will cause inattention and thus ignorance of total experience. James suggests that the concept of the 'whole' is a convenience of conception and as such behaves more as an 'each' than as a 'whole'. He continues that 'each' and 'whole' are two different 'levels of witness.' Because of this difference James argues for the pluralist position.

### Lecture VI - Bergson and His Critique of Intellectualism

In lecture VI, James discusses Henri Bergson and his philosophical approach. James suggests that when time is structured it serves to bring 'objectivity' to the 'subjective experience.' He continues that math is structured in a similar way and thus brings objectivity, but loses the sense of experience. Bergson asserts that a 'continuous' reality can not be manufactured out of 'discontinuous' elements which is exactly what concepts are. Bergson continues that concepts freeze movement and can give no full account of what is possible experientially. Bergson states, "What really exists is not things, but things in the making"(pg 751).

### Lecture VII - The Continuity of Experience

In lecture VII, James discusses the underlying concepts under the principle of continuous experience. James suggests that life consists of a constant re-ordering process. He states that 'sensational experiences' flow from one to the next, and that we only separate them by convention. One must look at points that are distant in time from each other to be able to discern any 'unblendedness'. James states, "Individuality of experience exists in the immediate and relatively unnamed stages of it"(pg 758). He continues that the 'field of consciousness' is a 'center' fringed by 'awareness.'

### Lecture VIII - Conclusions, Appendix A - The Thing and its Relations, Appendix B - The Experience of Activity, and Appendix C - On the Notion of Reality as Changing

In these lectures, James discusses conclusions from the previous chapters. James critiques other theorists by suggesting that their theories originated out of strong personal experience, yet there was no explicit mention of the importance of these





experiences. He asserts that the way out of monism is a determinist stance in which the 'superhuman is finite.' He continues by stating that all experiences are related to each other. James suggests that within the realm of sensory experience that is prior to cognition, there is freedom. James states that 'radical empiricism' holds that mind connections made between ideas are just as valid as other truths. He asserts that the 'each-form' allows for intimacy with the divine. James states that the fact of activity is evidenced by change happening. He continues that the 'prevalence of one set of ideas' is in itself action.



# The Meaning of Truth Section I (Lectures I-VII)

## The Meaning of Truth Section I (Lectures I-VII) Summary and Analysis

### Lecture I - The Function of Cognition

In lecture I, James discusses how cognition is understood. James suggests that the truth of an idea is based on how well it works and not on the thing to which the idea points. He posits that cognition is a 'function of consciousness' and that feeling is a 'state of consciousness considered subjectively.' James asserts that feelings are important because they are direct 'percepts' of the outside world and they also determine response actions in the external world.

### Lecture II - The Tigers in India

In lecture II, James discusses different ways of knowing. James posits two ways of knowing; one is 'immediate and intuitive,' the other is 'conceptual and representational.' He suggests that knowing is a way of mentally 'pointing' at an object. In order to 'know' an object, James asserts that we must go through a particular context of associations - thus the 'mental content' and the object become identical.

### Lecture III - Humanism and Truth

In lecture III, James discusses the relationship between humanism and truth. According to James, pragmatism's conception of truth holds that the truth must have 'practical consequences,' generally positive. Humanism refers to wider truth, which takes into account the human dimension of all human processes. Humanism also is the relation of 'less fixed parts of experience' to 'more fixed parts of experience'. Truth comes through an idea reaching an accord with an element outside of itself. Humans tend to conserve truth; thus, new experiences are typically added.

### Lecture IV - The Relation Between Knower and Known

In lecture IV, James discusses the relationship between the knower and the known. James suggests the 'knower' is a point of beginning and the 'known' is the point of ending. He also theorizes that the 'knower' and the 'known' are, "Two pieces of actual experience belonging to the same subject with definite tracts of conjunction transitional experience between them"(pg 881).

### Lecture V - The Essence of Humanism



In lecture V, James returns to humanism and discusses some of the underlying concepts. James suggests that 'subject and object' become one in the act of sensory perception. Experience is thus 'self-contained.' The objective reality is a 'terminus' in an entire group of possibilities. James asserts that an experience that falls too far outside of previous experiences will be considered to be 'false.'

#### Lecture VI - A Word More About Truth

In lecture VI, James returns to the subject of truth. James describes the difference between saltatory truth - arriving at a truth instantaneously, and ambulatory truth, which results from a process. James asserts that truth results from an exploration of experiences and that this process gives us a sense of distance.

#### Lecture VII - Professor Pratt on Truth

In lecture VII, James explores J.B. Pratt's ideas on truth. James states that there is a sphere of circumstances that surrounds an object and a subject which he refers to as a 'fundamentum.' He states, "The idea shall lead us into the same quarters of experience as the object world"(pg 911). Because the idea is similar to the object, James asserts that people make shortcuts in their reasoning.



# The Meaning of Truth Section II (Lectures VIII -XV)

## The Meaning of Truth Section II (Lectures VIII -XV) Summary and Analysis

### Lecture VIII - The Pragmatist Account of Truth and its Misunderstanders

In lecture VIII, James explores critique of the theory of pragmatism. The critics make several statements about pragmatism including: it is a re-vision of positivism; pragmatism is a call to action; and pragmatists are not realists because they believe in the subjective. James refutes all of these criticisms. He goes on to state that pragmatism is not against solipsism; objective reality is not necessary.

### Lecture IX - The Meaning of the Word Truth

In lecture IX, James explores what some meanings of the word truth might be. James asserts that his conception of truth is 'realistic' and follows the 'epistemology of common sense.' Pragmatism looks at 'agreement' between objective and subjective experience as being a way of 'working' or truth.

### Lecture X - The Existence of Julius Caesar

In lecture X, James uses Julius Caesar to illustrate a point about truth. James asserts that you can't verify the truth of a statement without referring to 'a concept of the statement's workings'(pg 937). James continues that there are both 'connotative' and 'denotative' aspects of the 'truth' about Julius Caesar.

### Lecture XI - The Absolute and the Strenuous Life

In lecture XI, James discusses the concept of the absolute. James states that his philosophy requires a kind of stoutness from those who would follow it. He suggests that belief in the absolute is a kind of balm that negates the need for experience.

### Lecture XII - Professor Hebert on Pragmatism

In lecture XII, James discusses Hebert's critique of pragmatism. James responds to Hebert's criticism by stating that both the objective and subjective are both valid parts of reality. He goes on to say that the chain of 'workings' to reach a truth are also true.

### Lecture XIII - Abstractionism and Relativity

In lecture XIII, James discusses the concepts of abstraction and relativity. James explores rationalism and refers to the concept of 'vicious abstractionism' which he states limits the ability of a novel way of conception to arise. He also posits that 'free will' and



'action' describe a kind of discontinuity of experience. Finally he asserts again that truth is a process.

#### Lecture XIV - Two English Critics, Lecture XV - A Dialogue

In lecture XIV, James answers criticism from Bertrand Russell and Ralph Hawtrey. Russell implies that within James' conception of truth is a 'motive' to have the consequence bear out the belief. James responds by stating that concepts 'signify consequences'. In lecture XV, James engages in a hypothetical philosophical dialogue between a pragmatist and an anti-pragmatist.



# Some Problems of Philosophy Section I (Chapters I-VII)

## Some Problems of Philosophy Section I (Chapters I-VII) Summary and Analysis

### Chapter I - Philosophy and Its Critics

In Chapter I, James discusses the importance of philosophy and the criticism it receives. James opens by stating that philosophy is 'the love of wisdom.' An important aspect of the discipline is to be able to imagine the world as operating in a different fashion than has been thought of before. James describes Descartes' famous statement, "I think therefore I am," in terms of philosophy and how it contributes to the separation of mind and body. James asserts that humans are on a constant quest of 'indefinite self-correction and increase.'

### Chapter II - The Problems of Metaphysics

In Chapter II, James discusses the challenges of certain metaphysical problems. James explores the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and some of the primary metaphysical questions: What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope? What is the origin of the world? James continues that 'rationalists deduce facts from principles, and empiricists induce principles from facts.'

### Chapter III - The Problem of Being

In Chapter III, James discusses the challenges of addressing being. James suggests that humans are the only life forms to wonder about their own existence. He continues that often people are tempted to simply not think about existential questions because they are simply too difficult. James describes the paradox of the assumption of a beginning to the universe, which implies that there was a time of non-being before the time of being. James discusses the "ontological proof of God's being," which essentially states that if God is perfect and infinite then he must possess all aspects of the universe including being. James argues that 'being' may be thought of having grown, versus manifesting all at once.

### Chapter IV - Percept and Concept - The Import of Concepts

In Chapter IV, James discusses the differences between direct experience and the meaning we make of it with particular attention to concepts. James states that percepts are 'continuous' and concepts are 'discrete.' He adds that the perceptual experience occurs 'within the flux' of the current moment. James states, "The intellectual life of man consists almost wholly in his substitution of a conceptual order for the perceptual order in which his experience originally comes"(pg 1008). He defines a concept as being 'a



word, a picture, or a 'symbol.' James asserts that concepts give us a way of handling the constant flow of 'perceptual information' and can serve as a guide or 'map' for how we move in that flow.

#### Chapter V - Percept and Concept - The Abuse of Concepts

In Chapter V, James discusses how concepts have been abused in terms of creating a world view. James states that conception is a 'secondary process' to perception and is a kind of 'snapshot in time.' Because of these qualities, James suggests that concepts should not have the power that they have been given to direct our thinking. He suggests that certain attributes are conceptually impossible including knowledge, personal identity, activity, a sense of telos, and causation. James states, "The deeper features of reality are found only in perceptual experience"(pg1031).

#### Chapter VI - Percept and Concept - Some Corollaries

In Chapter VI, James discusses some corollaries to the ideas of percept and concept. James states that percepts are 'parts' and that conceptual information helps to build them into 'wholes,' which is an empirical move. He asserts that concepts are 'singular' and that 'concept stuff' is unable to be changed, they are in effect frozen. James states, "The concept 'reality' is a practical relation to our Will - perceptively experienced"(pg1039).

#### Chapter VII - The One and the Many

In Chapter VII, James returns to the discussion of the forms of monism and pluralism. James states that monism refers to a 'collective form of being' and pluralism refers to a 'distributive form of being.' He gives various examples of 'kinds of oneness': mechanical, gravitation, chemical, physical, temporal, spatial, and unity of purpose. He refers to Locke's concept of identity, "Experientially our personal identity consists in nothing more than the functional and perceptible fact that our later states of mind continue and remember our earliest ones"(pg 1044).



# Some Problems of Philosophy Section II (Chapters VIII-Appendix)

## Some Problems of Philosophy Section II (Chapters VIII-Appendix) Summary and Analysis

### Chapter VIII - The One and the Many - Values and Defects

In Chapter VIII, James returns to the discussion of the forms of monism and pluralism with emphasis on positives and negatives. James states that one of the negatives of monism is that it does not allow for 'finite consciousness.' In other words, perfection at the source must be infinite. James continues that monism is counter to the way reality is 'perceptually experienced.' He concludes by listing the virtues of pluralism including: involves free will, has a melioristic outlook, is scientific, and agrees with 'the moral and dramatic expressiveness of life.'

### Chapter IX - The Problem of Novelty

In Chapter IX, James discusses the concept of novelty and how it presents philosophical challenges. James suggests that the flow of time brings new perceptual experience which will never be the same again. He continues, although this fact seems obvious, that the novelty of perceptual experience is often ignored or dismissed as being illusion. James asserts that novelty would seem to 'contradict continuity.' He concludes that 'continuity' implicates the 'infinite.'

### Chapter X - Novelty and the Infinite - The Conceptual View

In Chapter X, James discusses the relationship between novelty and the infinite using a conceptual framework. James talks about 'Discontinuity Theory' which suggests that time comes in small 'drops.' The theory continues that time is either understood as nothing or discrete countable units. Time and space considered as concepts allows for continuity. James also pulls on the work of Kant, who states that 'infinity defies enumeration' and that 'a given existent reality gives reality to all of its parts.'

### Chapter XI - Novelty and the Infinite - The Perceptual View

In Chapter XI, James discusses the relationship between novelty and the infinite using a perceptual framework. James talks about time and space as 'standing;' in other words, they have 'real existence and numerical infinity.' He continues that other concepts such as 'motion, change, and activity' are 'growing.' He also discusses the concept of 'transfinite numbers,' which are numbers that are beyond infinity derived from adding to the infinite. James then concludes that due to the 'growing' elements the universe is infinite, but also growing and therefore not static.





## Chapter XII - Novelty and Causation- The Conceptual View

In Chapter XII, James discusses the relationship between novelty and causation using a conceptual framework. James discusses the 'Principle of Causality' which essentially states that the effect lives within the cause and therefore nothing is novel, which then refutes the idea of pluralism. James explores several types of causes and their natures including material cause, formal cause, efficient cause, and final cause. James concludes that the error of the conception of causality is that it takes two concepts which are 'different' and turns them into 'sames.'

## Chapter XIII - Novelty and Causation- The Perceptual View, Appendix - Faith and the Right to Believe

In Chapter XIII, James discusses the relationship between novelty and causation using a perceptual framework. James describes causation as being 'continuously developing perceptual states.' He continues that causation is a case of a 'whole subsequent field' arising out of a 'whole antecedent field.'

In the Appendix, James describes various philosophical stances including intellectualism, rationalism, and empiricism. He concludes by describing the 'faith ladder.'



# Essays Section I (Essays 1-10)

## Essays Section I (Essays 1-10) Summary and Analysis

### The PhD Octopus

In "The PhD Octopus," James discusses the fact that through higher learning institutions, youth are being redirected towards passing tests instead of 'direct dealings with truth.'

### Address at the Centenary of Ralph Waldo Emerson

In the Emerson address, James discusses some of Emerson's best qualities including his ability to be true to his own form of expression, his limits, and his passion to write and communicate.

### The True Harvard

In "The True Harvard," James extols the virtues of the school with particular reference to the inclusion of 'exceptionality' and 'eccentricity,' as well as diminished focus on sports and the like.

### Address on the Philippine Question

In the Philippine address, James discusses American expansionism and defends the anti-imperialist stance. He maintains that America should withdraw from the islands.

### The Chicago School

In "The Chicago School," James discusses the contributions of John Dewey, who is responsible for starting the Chicago School, a new school of thought that is decidedly empiricist in nature.

### Does 'Consciousness' Exist?

In "Does Consciousness Exist?," James discusses the concept of consciousness, with particular attention to the mind-body split. James asserts that body and mind, soul and spirit are one.

### A World of Pure Experience, Answers to a Questionnaire

In "A World of Pure Experience," James discusses his ideas on empiricism, conjunctive relations, the cognitive relation, substitution, and objective reference to support his ideas on the importance of perceptual experience.

In "Answers to a Questionnaire," James writes his personal beliefs in response to questions by J.B. Pratt.



### How Two Minds Can Know One Thing

In "How Two Minds Can Know One Thing," James asserts that an experience can be 'an object for several different minds.' He puts forth several arguments for how this condition may come to be based on his philosophy.

### Humanism and Truth Once More

In "Humanism and Truth Once More," James responds to criticism from a Mr. Joseph, particularly with reference to Joseph's assertion that pragmatism and humanism deny reality.



## Essays Section II (Essays 11-20)

### Essays Section II (Essays 11-20) Summary and Analysis

#### Is Radical Empiricism Solipsistic?

In "Is Radical Empiricism Solipsistic?" James responds to criticism from a Mr. Bode who implies that empiricism is solipsistic or negates the need for objective reality.

#### The Place of Affectional Facts in a World of Pure Experience

In "The Place of Affectional Facts," James responds to critics who suggest that the affections (emotions) of a person negate his thesis on pragmatism and pure experience.

#### On Some Mental Effects of the Earthquake

In "Mental Effects of the Earthquake," James discusses his mental experience of having been through an earthquake while in California. In particular he focuses on the concrete character of the experience.

#### The Energies of Men

In "The Energies of Men," James discusses the degree of energy that is available to people in order to run 'mental and moral operations' and the implications for behavior and experience.

#### Social Value of the College Bred

In "Social Value of the College Bred," James gives an address to alumni at Radcliffe college and focuses on the idea that a good education gives one the ability to 'know a good man when you see him.'

#### The Confidences of a 'Psychical Researcher'

In 'Psychical Researcher,' James describes his and others' experiences as psychical researchers. He focuses in particular on some of the challenges of doing that work.

#### Bradley or Bergson?

In "Bradley or Bergson?", James discusses the work of the two philosophers and suggests that their 'battle was the same' but different strategies were used. James, as a fellow empiricist is sympathetic with Bergson.

#### A Suggestion About Mysticism



In "A Suggestion About Mysticism," James suggests that 'mystical states' may be simply, "Very sudden and great extensions of the ordinary 'field of consciousness'"(pg 1272).

#### The Moral Equivalent of War

In "The Moral Equivalent of War," James describes the history and motives of war. He points to the difficulty of imagining a world without need for war, especially in light of the positive outcomes, yet still argues for the possibility.

#### A Pluralistic Mystic

In "A Pluralistic Mystic," James discusses an author who inspired him a great deal, Benjamin Paul Blood. James asserts that his own philosophy is very similar to Mr. Blood's.



# Characters

## John Dewey

John Dewey was an American philosopher operating out of the University of Chicago. He was responsible for the foundation of the Chicago school which had a similar theoretical approach to Schiller in Oxford. Both schools were very much in line with James' Theory of Pragmatism. Dewey's conception of the truth was that ideas become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relationship with other parts of our experience. Truth is being able to link new experiences with old experiences in such a way as to have value in relationship to the world; in other words, this marriage or linking function, is known as instrumental truth.

Dewey suggested that this linking function is how people deal with novel experience and new opinions. He was subjected to a great deal of contempt and ridicule, and being similarly minded, James was called to defend him in his works. Dewey further believed that truth was a species of good in the way of belief and for definite assignable reasons. He thus felt that beliefs are a man-made construction and every approach to truth must take into account the human part of the equation.

Dewey felt that everything consists of process and change and that experience always involves an adjustment between terms. Consciousness is functionally active in the readjustment. Facts and theories are not actually different because they are made of the same stuff. Instead, a fact is a relationship that functions steadily while a theory involves hesitation. Truth is thus constantly in the process of formation. Experience is continually enlarging.

## Georg Hegel

According to William James, Hegel does more to solidify idealistic pantheism than all other influences. Hegel's vision contains two important elements, one being that reason is all inclusive and the other is that all things are dialectic. Dialectic is described as meaning that the truth of any one thing is larger than the thing itself. The fullness of life can be construed to thought only by recognizing that every object which our thought may propose to itself involves the notion of some other object which seems at first to negate the first one.

The only way out of this is higher synthesis in which the thing and its opposite enter into a kind of treaty. James states that Hegel's originality is in taking this observation out of the realm of percept and moving it into the realm of concept. Thus concepts are not static or self-contained. James asserts that Hegel moves by his own empirical observations and is thus inspired to move in his reasoning not from like to like, but from negation to negation. The only way to resolve all the contradictions is to postulate the



existence of the absolute which could contain the whole. All of these facets of Hegel's philosophy necessitate truth that is static and absolute.

Hegel refuses to account for experiential data because 'they are not their own others.' However, James posits that this in fact is the case and thus uses Hegel's authority to boost his own argument.

## Gustav Fechner

James describes Fechner as being very concrete with extreme attention to detail within his philosophy. He is born in Saxony to a pastor. When he is twenty-one he passes his medical exams, but decides to go into physical sciences instead of medicine. He is poor and in order to make extra money he translates scientific works. He publishes his own works especially in the area of electrical science and galvanism. He becomes physically ill and subsequently embraces faith. He is credited as being one of the founders of scientific psychology.

Fechner states that the greatest mistake is that humans regard the spiritual as the exception rather than the rule. James describes Fechner's genius as lying in his use of analogy while maintaining allegiance to difference. Fechner posits that the earth itself is its own collective consciousness. Fechner, like Hegel, also arrives at a form of absolute reality although with a much more robust description.

Fechner states that the more inclusive forms of consciousness are made up of the less inclusive forms. In addition, he states that the complexity of the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. As humans we add to the perceptive life of the earth while we are alive. We are distinct entities yet are part of a whole system. While James disagrees with Fechner's monism, he appreciates his elucidation of the system.

Fechner uses the term 'threshold' to name the numeric distinction in the change of sense experience.

## Henri Bergson

Bergson is born in Paris, France. He enters *ecole normale superieure* at twenty-two and teaches at lycees for seventeen years, until he is made professor. James is very impressed with him if for no other reason than his ability to speak. James states that Bergson comes to philosophy through mathematics.

Felt time is subjective. Thus, the answer is to cut time into segments and thereby be able to plot it objectively free from the emotional turbulence of the moment. These moments are then like snapshots in time. Bergson states that mathematicians see only the extremes and care not for what happens during the slices in the middle. He thus rejects the idea that logic can tell what is possible in the world.



We are looking only at pictures or snapshots and the assumption is that life has already established itself and is already complete instead of becoming complete. Bergson states that the 'function of the intellect is practical rather than theoretical.' Although James agrees with Bergson's premise, he disagrees on the latest point suggesting that the intellect is both practical and theoretical or, more to the point, that practicality is the theory.

Bergson would have us dive into the flux of experience in order to determine reality and to abandon intellectual knowledge.

## **E. D. Starbuck**

E.D. Starbuck does a great deal of work in California on the psychology of religion. He discovers that conversion in evangelical circles runs nearly parallel with normal adolescent growth into a larger spiritual life around the ages of 14-17. These adolescents experience imperfection, brooding, depression, etc. and then achieve a happy relief in an objectivity occurring through an adjustment of faculties to a wider outlook.

Starbuck asserts that conversion is a normal adolescent phenomenon. It is bringing the person out of childhood; theology brings to bear those things that will intensify the normal tendencies. It requires a personal acceptance of salvation that often happens when someone achieves a certain level of stuckness and is then able to give up.

Conversion can happen in two ways, either volitional or self-surrender. In the volitional case, there is a building up piece by piece of moral and spiritual habits. In the case of self-surrender, the personal will is given up to a higher power in realization of the limits or imperfection. Exercising personal will is living in perfection.; yielding brings in the higher power.

## **Immanuel Kant**

Immanuel Kant is a philosopher who extends his purview into religion. According to James, Kant believes that objects such as the belief in God, the soul, etc. are not true 'objects of knowledge.' In his view, Kant states that all conceptions require a 'sense-content' as a kind of base material with which to work. Kant asserts that objects such as belief in God or soul have no 'sense-content' and thus humans believe in something of which they can't form any notion. He calls his approach 'Ideas of Pure Reason.'

Transcendental Ego of Apperception has become the foundation of modern idealism. This principle states that consciousness, also understood as, "I think them," must accompany all our objects. This idea had previously existed, but in the personal I-sense. Kant abstracts and depersonalizes it making it universal but with no theology.





## Walt Whitman

All natural objects seem to have a charm for Walt Whitman. His favorite occupation appears to be strolling or sauntering about outdoors looking at the wildlife. These things seem to give him pleasure far beyond what they give to ordinary people. He likes all the men, women and children he sees. He never argues and does not speak of money. Whitman takes pleasure in the opposition of enemies and justifies their position. He doesn't experience fretfulness or antipathy, complaint and never complains.

He owes his importance in literature to the systematic expulsion of all contractile elements and limits his expression to an expansive order. He writes in the first person with passionate emotion expressing that all things are good. This is the foundation of Natural Religion.

His optimism is voluntary and defiant. The good is good and so is the bad. He is a prime example of healthy-mindedness. His poem, "To You," has both monistic and pluralistic elements.

## M.I. Swift

Swift's writings constitute a revolt against the optimism of current religious philosophy and James is sympathetic with his view. Swift begins with news reports of difficulties and woe in the human experience. He scorns the religious philosophers stating of their position, "The slain men make the universe richer and that is philosophy."

Swift suggests that the thinkers are explaining away negative aspects of existence and attempting to put a religious balm on it. However, those who have experienced this existential pain are, in Swift's view, the most qualified to comment on reality. Swift goes on to state that religion is thus a 'nullity' because it does not see the whole truth.

## Leo Tolstoy

Tolstoy describes in great detail his experience of feeling that life's meaning had been withdrawn for a while. This withdrawal eventually leads to a conversion experience - a kind of transformation in the expression and experience of reality.

Tolstoy recounts moments of perplexity after the age of 50; something had broken within him. He discovers that life is fun when one is intoxicated, but being sober leaves one with the truth, which is that life is a sham or a trick. He finds himself thinking of death, but is released when he realizes the sham with which he is disgusted has to do with the kind of life he has been living rather than all of life.



## John Locke

Locke engages in a treatment of the personality or our 'spiritual substance.' He states that consciousness consists of the fact that at any time of our existence we remember other parts of our existence and experience them as being part of the same whole. He then goes on to question whether, if we remove that ability, would it impact us in any meaningful way. He suggests that 'personal identity' lives in 'pragmatically defined parameters.'

## JB Pratt

Pratt is the author of a book entitled "What is Pragmatism," in which he asserts that truthness be verifiable and that the pragmatic apparatus for determining truth is insufficient. James asserts that there is no truth without working towards it and that the ascertained truth is only valid for the one who experiences the workings. Pratt appears to value abstract truthness over concrete verifiability.

## Gottfried Leibniz

Leibniz has a rationalist mind and thus works with monism from the general to the particular. He has a strong interest in facts. He is author of Theodicee, and in it seeks to justify the ways of God to man as well as to prove that the world we live in is the best of possible worlds. Leibniz considers that the number damned is infinitely larger than those saved.

He argues for the existence of other life - an infinite number of worlds - they don't need to be inhabited by men. Compared to the great space surrounding the stars that is making up the heavens with happiness and glory, the Earth is insignificant. Therefore, the great evils that we know pale in comparison with the good in the unknown. God has made all things harmonious in perfection or fitness; the good do good things, the wicked do wicked things.

## Joseph Smith

Joseph Smith has prophetic revelations and translates the gold plates that lead to the Book of Mormon. The inspiration seems to have been primarily sensorial. He begins his translation by the use of 'peep stones' which he finds with the gold plates; this is theorized to be a form of crystal gazing. He uses the stones for other revelations in addition to asking the Lord for direct revelation.



## John Caird

John Caird's view of reality states that reality is an absolute Spirit; it is only in communion with this absolute spirit or intelligence that the finite spirit can realize itself. The faintest movement of human intelligence would wither if it did not presuppose the absolute reality of intelligence or thought itself.

Caird goes beyond Kant to confirm the omnipresence of consciousness as God. He theorizes that to acknowledge your limitations is to transcend them. Man can yield to a thought larger than himself. We will always fall short of being absolutely divine. The contradiction between actual and ideal is the defining characteristic of religion. Surrender to god. To become suffused and merged with the infinite is what resolves the contradiction.



## **Objects/Places**

### **University of Chicago**

Home of the Chicago School, headed up by John Dewey.

### **Manchester College**

Location of the lectures given on the Pluralistic universe.

### **Edinburgh, Scotland**

Location of the Gifford lectures on natural religion.

### **Harvard University**

Location of William James' faculty appointment.

### **Oxford University**

Home of Schiller who shared similar philosophical leanings as Dewey and James.

### **The Universe**

This is described as being of a pluralistic or monistic nature, containing the whole of everything.

### **The Unseen**

A wider and higher universe of abstract ideas, that lend significance.

### **Boston**

Where James consulted someone trained in mental healing to address his health concerns.

### **Sin**

This can be thought of as a maladjustment between one's life and the environment.



## **Threshold**

Symbolic designation for the point at which one state of mind passes into another.

## **Soul**

A succession of fields of consciousness.

## **California**

Professor Starbuck did much of his work on the psychology of religion here.

## **Nature**

The summation of the consciousness of the earth; Whitman's church as it were.

## **Outer Space**

Leibniz asserts that outer space is the unknown and that there are many more about which worlds we don't know.

## **The Lowell Institute, Boston**

Location of James' lectures on Pragmatism.

## **India**

James writes about the conception of knowing. He uses the example of a tiger in India to explain how we use and acquire knowledge.



# Themes

## Subjective Experience.

One of William James major critiques of philosophy and general thought at the time is that their approach is too mechanistic. The thinkers seem to put too much reliance on the external 'objective' and measurable world and to derive all sense of 'truth' from measuring this world. James feels that subjective experience is just as important and that, therefore, any measure of truth has to necessarily contain the conversation between a person's inner experience and the outer experience.

James first tackles this idea in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in which he suggests that the majority of evidence for the divine exists in individual experience. He then suggests it is exactly personal experience of the divine that can often cause people to change in meaningful positive ways, which then inform how they interact objectively with the rest of the world. James implies that conversion is almost entirely an internal experience that arises from several different methods.

In particular he talks about the sickness of the soul that seems to be a prerequisite for reaching a state in which one is able to surrender to the higher power. When this occurs, the person experiences a paradigm shift and their whole perception of reality is changed. When we organize time it brings some objectivity to subjective experience.

## Empiricism.

Empiricism is essentially the idea that the more appropriate way to arrive at truth is to move from facts or individual subjective experiences towards more unifying principles. This is an inductive logic process. Empiricism holds a pluralistic vs. monistic point of view. Monism attempts to explain the universe and how it operates by the idea of a unified whole and the 'eaches' must be simple carbon copy units of the whole. Pluralists look at the particulars of the each form and then posit how they may combine to form a whole.

Rationalism concerns conception. However, James states that conception is merely a symbolic act to stand for the actual experience in the perceptual flow. Thus, it can only point to the truth at a particular point in time. Perception, on the other hand, offers a much wider interpretative lens which is viewed through the subject. Empiricism allows for and holds the reality of the finite. Empiricism holds that the constant change and flux is nobler than fixed reality, which rationalists hold to be illusion. Rationalists use of concept reduces a percept to a thing - a thing which is that and no other.

Empiricists tend to be irreligious, fatalistic, pluralistic, and skeptical. Compromise and mediation are from the pluralistic viewpoint. There is a 'fundamentum' of circumstance surrounding object and idea. The idea can lead us to similar places of experience as the object. Religion can be pluralistic or melioristic.



## Pragmatism.

Within the theory of pragmatism are several main points. The first one states that the universe is pluralistic; one way to do this is to assume that the superhuman is finite. Every experience that one has is related to every other and is part of a vast network used to decide on truth based on interactions with the object world. 'Pure experience' is primary to cognition and thus holds more truth and depth than a concept.

Radical empiricism takes conjunctive relations at their face value holding them to be as real as the terms united by them. Real effectual causation is just what we feel it to be. There is definite content in everything in that it can be experienced. The truth of an idea is merited on its workings, not its object. Pragmatism views truth to be a process instead of a static concrete conception. It is more the process at traversing different aspects of experiences and their relation to each other.

Sensational experiences are continuous: they are only broken by convention when they are being measured. Activities have actual existence. James states that pragmatism can remain religious and yet stay connected with the facts. The best way to resolve a dispute is to look at the practical consequences of each side being true. If there are no practical differences, then each side is equally true or correct. If there are practical differences, then the most practical solution is the best.

## Saintliness

Saintliness is understood as a state of grace and great piousness. There is a sense of the continuity of the ideal power with our own life. Some of the characteristics of saintly persons are asceticism, strength of soul, purity, charity, and brotherly love. This state comes about through a conversion experience, one in which the person experiences a unifying state with the rest of creation or intelligence.

Often the person who receives this experience must have some form of self-surrender to the higher power. This is what separates religion from simply moral practice. Within this experience is the abandonment of self-responsibility and thus the abandonment of the ego. The saintly qualities then arise through the awareness of inconsistencies between internal experience and external experience or action.

However, the fruits of religion are liable to corruption from excesses such as fanaticism, scrupulosity, gullibility, and morbid inability to meet the world. Saintliness is the ability to have the experience and refrain from excess through reaching unity subjectively, meeting wrongness head on, and using creative energies.

# Style

## Perspective

William James is an academic writer, who held a faculty position at Harvard University, as well as an appointment as Gifford Lecturer on Natural Religion at the University of Edinburgh. He is acquainted with some of the other great thinkers of the time such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edwin Starbuck, Canning Schiller, and John Dewey. In the book, James gives an account of his personal experience with illness and how it is subsequently cured through using mental techniques. This passage gives insight into two of his most important positions with regard to psychology, religion, and philosophy. The first position states that there is as much or more value to individual subjective experience of the world as there is to collective objective experience. The second position is that by understanding and manipulating the way we think, we may be able to effect our own happiness and even physical healing.

James continues his argument out of his own experience of illness by suggesting that there are indeed ways of measuring subjective experience empirically and that human beings are constantly doing this. The logic he uses to arrive at these positions is inductive, meaning that he works from individual units and then makes a statement of possibility about the whole. This form of reasoning permeates his entire philosophy. Because of his focus on individual experience, James includes in his philosophic approach the idea that truth is constructed between an individual and how they engage with their environment. Like his 'cure,' illness may be an individual's inappropriate relationship with their environment, or their inability to change their truth statement once they are presented with contradictory evidence. Finally, James believes in the notion that a debate between past reality and evidence to the contrary must be resolved in a pragmatic sense. In other words, there must be some practical value for a human to change their truth reality, like in the case of his illness.

## Tone

The book is divided into several sections covering James writing on various topics from 1902-1910. With the exception of the section on his essays, almost all of the selections are series of lectures given at various universities including Harvard and the University of Edinburgh. The tone is predominantly academic and has the feel of a debate. He willingly addresses the detractors of his theory of pragmatism and takes each of their points one at a time. He is at once scathing and gentlemanly as he dismantles all opposition to his theory. He has a tendency to go into a great deal of abstraction, but he never loses his direction.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James' tone is that of a careful observer. He obviously believes in mystical experience and the benefits that arise out of conversions, but attempts to allow the experiences to speak for themselves. There is an underlying



love of man that comes through in these writings, a noble striving of the spirit that seems to have captured James' attention.

Particularly in his philosophic writings, James carries an almost haughty tone and points out obvious flaws and weaknesses in his critics' arguments as well as preceding theories that he feels no longer work. He is diligent in providing examples, analogies, experience, and logic to support his thesis. The book itself reads as one large argument pointing towards the veracity of his claims and theories, including how truth itself is to be conceived.

## **Structure**

The book is structured in six different sections. The sections include The Varieties of Religious Experience, Pragmatism, A Pluralistic Universe, The Meaning of Truth, Some Problems with Philosophy, and Essays. With the exception of the essays section, the text is divided into series of lectures. Each of these lectures had been delivered at various educational institutions for an audience and thus has a somewhat conversational tone.



## Quotes

"Philosophy is at one the most sublime and the most trivial of human pursuits" (pg 488).

"It is the personal experience of those best qualified in our circle of knowledge to have experience to tell us what it is" (pg 499)

"The meaningless absurdity of life is the only uncontested knowledge accessible to man" (pg 145).

"Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (pg 36).

"Something must give way, a native hardness must break down and liquefy; and this event...is frequently sudden and automatic, and leaves on the Subject an impression that he has been wrought upon by an external power" (pg 105-106).

"Let us hereafter in speaking of the hot place in a man's consciousness, the group of ideas to which he devotes himself, and from which he works, call it the habitual centre of his personal energy" (pg 183)

"The second feature [of the affective states accompanying the faith state] is the sense of perceiving truths not known before" (pg 228).

"Religious rapture, moral enthusiasm, ontological wonder, cosmic emotion, are all unifying states of mind, in which the sand and grit of the selfhood incline to disappear, and tenderness to rule" (pg 256).

"Nevertheless, in moderate degrees it is natural and even usual to human nature to court the arduous" (pg 273)

"The fruits of religion, in other words, are, like all human products, liable to corruption by excess. Common sense must judge them" (pg 310).

"Perfect conduct is a relation between three terms: the actor, the objects for which he acts, and the recipients of the action. In order that conduct should be abstractly perfect, all three terms, intention, execution, and reception, should be suited to one another" (pg 323).

"It [Alcohol] brings its votary from the chill periphery of things to the radiant core. It makes him for the moment one with truth" (pg 348).

"It is a commonplace of metaphysics that God's knowledge cannot be discursive but must be intuitive, that is, must be constructed more after the pattern of what in ourselves is called immediate feeling, than after that of proposition and judgment" (pg 366).



"Through prayer, religion insists, things which cannot be realized in any other manner come about: energy which but for prayer would be bound is by prayer set free and operates in some part, be it objective or subjective, of the world of facts" (pg 417)

"That reason is that, so long as we deal with the cosmic and the general, we deal only with the symbols of reality, but as soon as we deal with private and personal phenomena as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term" (pg 446)

"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" (pg 508).

"I myself believe that the evidence for God lies primarily in inner personal experiences" (pg 534).

"...True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify. False ideas are those that we can not" (pg 573).

"The special thought of Fechner's with which in these lectures I have most practical concern, is his belief that the more inclusive forms of consciousness are in part constituted by the more limited forms" (pg 706)



## Topics for Discussion

Why does James find the monistic viewpoint less satisfactory than the pluralist viewpoint for description of truth?

What is the importance of studying religious experience and how does it serve to further James' theory of pragmatism?

What are the values of saintliness and how do each of these values fail when they are found in excess?

What condition is necessary in order for a conversion experience to happen and what is the purpose of that condition?

Walt Whitman is given as an example of one who embodies the healthy-mindedness approach. Describe the approach and its significance in the development of James' theory of pragmatism.

What are the main concepts and principles of pragmatism and how do they relate to current issues?

How does pragmatism relate to humanism and how does each system understand truth?

Describe Fechner's strengths in his philosophic approach and points of agreement with pragmatism.