

“The Will to Believe” by William James



William James, Thoenmes

About the author. . . . William James (1842-1909), both a philosopher and a psychologist, was an early advocate of pragmatism. He thought that a belief is true insofar as it “works,” is useful, or satisfies a function. On this theory, truth is thought to be found in experience, not in judgments about the world. James had a most profound “arrest of life”— one quite similar to Tolstoy’s as described in the first section of these readings. While Tolstoy’s solution to his personal crisis was spiritual, James advocated the development of the power of the individual self. In this effort, James exerted a greater influence on twentieth century existential European thought than he did on twentieth century American philosophy.

About the work. . . . In his *Will to Believe and Other Essays*,¹ James argues that it is not unreasonable to believe hypotheses that cannot be known or established to be true by scientific investigation. When some hypotheses of ultimate concern arise, he argues that our faith can pragmatically shape future outcomes. Much as in Pascal’s Wager, by not choosing, he thinks, we lose possibility for meaningful encounters.

1. William James. *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897.

From the reading...

“He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as certainly as surely as if he tried and failed.”

Ideas of Interest from *The Will to Believe*

1. Carefully explain James’ genuine option theory. In his characterization of three types of options, does James commit the fallacy of false dichotomy?
2. How can one be sure an option is momentous? Is it possible some momentous options are not evident to us at the time they occur in our lives? Is it possible for us to obtain a second chance to decide a momentous option? Can you construct necessary and sufficient conditions² for an option to be a momentous one?
3. James applies his theory to morals, social relations, and religion. Are there any other dimensions of living which should be included? Why cannot the genuine option theory be applied to the scientific method? How is option theory applied to the problem of free will?
4. Discuss whether or not acceptance of the genuine option theory and James’ thesis, itself, is a momentous option in a person’s life. Could such a decision be related to the philosophy of existentialism?

2. A necessary condition is a factor in the absence of which a specific event cannot take place. A necessary condition is *indispensable* or is *essential* for some other event to occur. For example, the presence of oxygen is a necessary condition for a fire to occur. A condition *x* is necessary for condition *y*, if whenever *x* does not occur, then *y* does not occur. A sufficient condition is that factor in the presence of which an event always occurs. A sufficient condition is always *enough* for some other event to occur. For example, in the U.S., having ten dimes is sufficient for having a dollar, but having ten dimes is not necessary to have a dollar because one could also have a dollar by having four quarters. Subjunctively, a sufficient condition can be expressed in the formula, “If factor *p* should occur, then factor *q* would also occur.” This subjunctive conditional statement also expresses *q* as a dispositional property of *p*.

5. Can you construct an example where James’ thesis is false? *I.e.*, is it possible for our passionate nature to decide an option which cannot be decided on intellectual grounds and have a disastrous result?

The Reading Selection from *The Will to Believe*

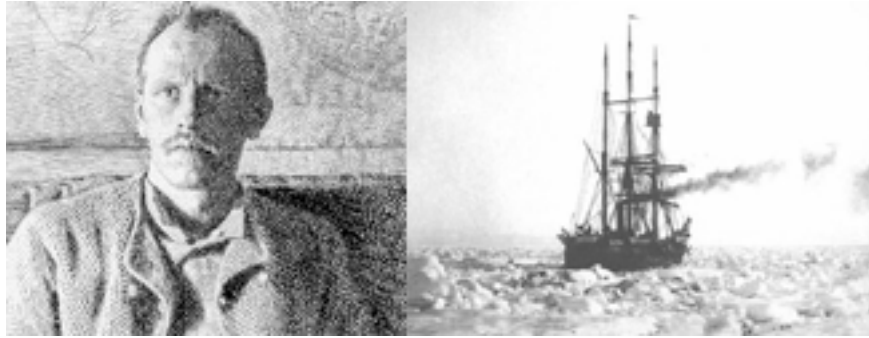
[Hypotheses and Options]

... Let us give the name of hypothesis to anything that may be proposed to our belief; and just as the electricians speak of live and dead wires, let us speak of any hypothesis as either live or dead. A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed. If I ask you to believe in the Mahdi, the notion makes no electric connection with your nature—it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead. To an Arab, however (even if he be not one of the Mahdi’s followers), the hypothesis is among the mind’s possibilities: It is alive. This shows that deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker. They are measured by his willingness to act. The maximum of liveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. Practically, that means belief; but there is some believing tendency wherever there is willingness to act at all.

Next, let us call the decision between two hypotheses an option. Options may be of several kinds. They may be (1) living or dead, (2) forced or avoidable, (3) momentous or trivial; and for our purposes we may call an option a genuine option when it is of the forced, living, and momentous kind.

1. A living option is one in which both hypotheses are live ones. If I say to you, “Be a theosophist, or be a Mohammedan,” it is probably a dead option, because for you neither hypothesis is likely to be alive. But if I say, “Be an agnostic or be a Christian,” it is otherwise: Trained as you are, each hypothesis makes some appeal, however small, to your belief.

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Fridtjof Nansen and the Fram in the North Atlantic, from Fridtjof Nansen, Farthest North, Harper & Bros., 1897—Nansen’s account of the polar expedition of 1893-1896.

2. Next, if I say to you, “Choose between going out with your umbrella or without it,” I do not offer you a genuine option, for it is not forced. You can easily avoid it by not going out at all. Similarly, if I say, “Either love me or hate me,” “Either call my theory true or call it false,” your option is avoidable. You may remain indifferent to me, neither loving nor hating, and you may decline to offer any judgment as to my theory. But if I say, “Either accept this truth or go without it,” I put on you a forced option, for there is no standing place outside of the alternative. Every dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing, is an option of this forced kind.

3. Finally, if I were Dr. Nansen and proposed to you to join my North Pole expedition, your option would be momentous; for this would probably be your only similar opportunity, and your choice now would either exclude you from the North Pole sort of immortality altogether or put at least the chance of it into your hands. He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he tried and failed. *Per contra* the option is trivial when the opportunity is not unique, when the stake is insignificant, or when the decision is reversible if it later prove unwise. Such trivial options abound in the scientific life. A chemist finds an hypothesis live enough to spend a year in its verification: He believes in it to that extent. But if his experiments prove inconclusive either way, he is quit for his loss of time, no vital harm being done.

It will facilitate our discussion if we keep all these distinctions well in mind. . .

[James’ Thesis]

The thesis I defend is, briefly stated, this: Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is an genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, “Do not decide, but leave the question open,” is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth. . .

[Options in Science]

Wherever the option between losing truth and gaining it is not momentous, we can throw the chance of gaining truth away, and at any rate save ourselves from any chance of believing falsehood, by not making up our minds at all till objective evidence has come. In scientific questions, this is almost always the case; and even in human affairs in general, the need of acting is seldom so urgent that a false belief to act on is better than no belief at all. Law courts, indeed, have to decide on the best evidence attainable for the moment, because a judge’s duty is to make law as well as to ascertain it, and (as a learned judge once said to me) few cases are worth spending much time over: The great thing is to have them decided on any acceptable principle and gotten out of the way. But in our dealings with objective nature we obviously are recorders, not makers, of the truth; and decisions for the mere sake of deciding promptly and getting on to the next business would be wholly out of place. Throughout the breadth of physical nature facts are what they are quite independently of us, and seldom is there any such hurry about them that the risks of being duped by believing a premature theory need be faced. The questions here are always trivial options; the hypotheses are hardly living (at any rate not living for us spectators); the choice between believing truth or falsehood is seldom forced. The attitude of skeptical balance is therefore the absolutely wise one if we would escape mistakes. What difference, indeed, does it make to most of us whether we have or have not a theory of the Roentgen rays, whether we believe or not in mind-stuff, or have a conviction about the causality of conscious states? It makes no difference. Such options are not forced on us. On every account it is better not to make them, but still keep weighing reasons *pro et contra* with an indifferent hand.

From the reading...

“Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual ground. . .”

[Discovery in Science]

I speak, of course, here of the purely judging mind. For purposes of discovery such indifference is to be less highly recommended, and science would be far less advanced than she is if the passionate desires of individuals to get their own faiths confirmed had been kept out of the game. . . On the other hand, if you want an absolute duffer in an investigation, you must, after all, take the man who has no interest whatever in its results: He is the warranted incapable, the positive fool. The most useful investigator, because the most sensitive observer, is always he whose eager interest in one side of the question is balanced by an equally keen nervousness lest he become deceived. Science has organized this nervousness into a regular technique, her so-called method of verification; and she has fallen so deeply in love with the method that one may even say she has ceased to care for truth by itself at all. It is only truth as technically verified that interests her. The truth of truths might come in merely affirmative form, and she would decline to touch it. Such truth as that, she might repeat with Clifford, would be stolen in defiance of her duty to mankind. Human passions, however, are stronger than technical rules. “*Le coeur a ses raisons,*” as Pascal says, “*que la raison ne connait pas:*”³ and however indifferent to all but the bare rules of the game the umpire, the abstract intellect, may be, the concrete players who furnish him the materials to judge of are usually, each one of them, in love with some pet “live hypothesis” of his own. Let us agree, however, that wherever there is no forced option, the dispassionately judicial intellect with no pet hypothesis, saving us, as it does, from dupery at any rate, ought to be our ideal.

The question next arises, Are there not somewhere forced options in our speculative questions, and can we (as men who may be interested at least as much in positively gaining truth as in merely escaping dupery) always

3. “The heart has its reasons that reason does not know.” *Ed.*

wait with impunity till the coercive evidence shall have arrived? It seems *a priori* improbable that the truth should be so nicely adjusted to our needs and powers as that. In the great boarding-house of nature, the cakes and the butter and the syrup seldom come out so even and leave the plates so clean. Indeed, we should view them with scientific suspicion if they did.

[Moral Beliefs]

Moral questions immediately present themselves as questions whose solution cannot wait for sensible proof. A moral question is a question not of what sensibly exists, but of what is good, or would be good if it did exist. Science can tell us what exists; but to compare the worths, both of what exists and of what does not exist, we must consult, not science, but what Pascal calls our heart. Science herself consults her heart when she lays it down that the infinite ascertainment of fact and correction of false belief are the supreme goods for man. Challenge the statement, and science can only repeat it oracularly, or else prove it by showing that such ascertainment and correction bring man all sorts of other goods which man’s heart in turn declares. The question of having moral beliefs at all or not having them is decided by our will. Are our moral preferences true or false, or are they only odd biological phenomena, making things good or bad for us, but in themselves indifferent? How can your pure intellect decide? If your heart does not want a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one. . .

[Social Relations]

Turn now from these wide questions of good to a certain class of questions of fact, questions concerning social relations, states of mind between one man and another. Do you like me or not?—for example. Whether you do or not depends, in countless instances, on whether I meet you half-way, am willing to assume that you must like me, and show you trust and expectation. The previous faith on my part in your liking’s existence is in such cases what makes your liking come. But if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, until you shall have done something apt, as the absolutists say, *ad extorquendum assensum meum*, ten to one your liking never comes. How many women’s hearts are vanquished by the mere sanguine insistence of some man that they must

love him! He will not consent to the hypothesis that they cannot. The desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth's existence; and so it is in innumerable cases of other sorts. Who gains promotions, boons, appointments but the man in whose life they are seen to play the part of live hypotheses, who discounts them, sacrifices other things for their sake before they have come, and takes risks for them in advance? His faith acts on the powers above him as a claim, and creates its own verification.

A social organism of any sort whatever, large or small, is what it is because each member proceeds to his own duty with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs. Wherever a desired result is achieved by the cooperation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precursive faith in one another of those immediately concerned. A government, an army, a commercial system, a ship, a college, an athletic team, all exist on this condition, without which not only is nothing achieved, but nothing is even attempted. A whole train of passengers (individually brave enough) will be looted by a few highwaymen, simply because the latter can count on one another, while each passenger fears that if he makes a movement of resistance, he will be shot before anyone else backs him up. If we believed that the whole car-full would rise at once with us, we should each severally rise, and train-robbing would never even be attempted. There are, then, cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. And where faith in a fact can help create the fact, that would be an insane logic which should say that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the “lowest kind of immorality” into which a thinking being can fall. Yet such is the logic by which our scientific absolutists pretend to regulate our lives!

In truths dependent on our personal action, then, faith based on desire is certainly a lawful and possibly an indispensable thing.

[Religious Questions]

But now, it will be said, these are all childish human cases, and have nothing to do with great cosmic matters, like the question of religious faith. Let us then pass on to that. Religions differ so much in their accidents that in discussing the religious question we must make it very generic and broad. What then do we now mean by the religious hypothesis? Science says things are; morality says some things are better than other things; and religion says essentially two things.

First, she says that the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word. . .

The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true.

From the reading. . .

“Whenever the option between losing truth and gaining it is not momentous. . . The attitude of skeptical balance is therefore the absolutely wise one if we would escape mistakes.”

Now, let us consider what the logical elements of this situation are in case the religious hypothesis in both its branches be really true. . . So proceeding, we see, first, that religion offers itself as a momentous option. We are supposed to gain, even now, by our belief, and to lose by our nonbelief, a certain vital good. Secondly, religion is a forced option, so far as that good goes. We cannot escape the issue by remaining skeptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way if religion be untrue, we lose the good, if it be true, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve. . . Skepticism, then, is not avoidance of option; it is option of a certain particular kind of risk. Better risk loss of truth than chance of error—that is your faith-vetoer’s exact position. He is actively playing his stake as much as the believer is; he is backing the field against the religious hypothesis, just as the believer is backing the religious hypothesis against the field. To preach skepticism to us as a duty until “sufficient evidence” for religion be found is tantamount therefore to telling us, when in presence of the religious hypothesis, that to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true. It is not intellect against all passions, then; it is only intellect with one passion laying down its law. And by what, forsooth, is the supreme wisdom of this passion warranted? Dupery for dupery, what proof is there that dupery through hope is so much worse than dupery through fear? I, for one, can see no proof; and I simply refuse obedience to the scientist’s command to imitate his kind of option, in a case where my own stake is important enough to give me the right to choose my own form of risk. If religion be true and the evidence for it be still insufficient, I do not wish, by putting your extinguisher upon my nature (which feels to me as if it had after all some business in this matter), to forfeit my sole chance in life of getting upon the winning side that chance depending, of course, on my

willingness to run the risk of acting as if my passional need of taking the world religiously might be prophetic and right.

All this is on the supposition that it really may be prophetic and right, and that, even to us who are discussing the matter, religion is a live hypothesis which may be true. Now, to most of us religion comes in a still further way that makes a veto on our active faith even more illogical. The more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having personal form. The universe is no longer a mere It to us, but a Thou, if we are religious; and any relation that may be possible from person to person might be possible here. For instance, although in one sense we are passive portions of the universe, in another we show a curious autonomy, as if we were small, active centers on our own account. We feel, too, as if the appeal of religion to us were made to our own active good-will, as if evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis half-way. To take a trivial illustration: Just as a man who in a company of gentlemen made no advances, asked a warrant for every concession, and believed in no one's word without proof would cut himself off by such churlishness from all the social rewards that a more trusting spirit would earn, so here, one who should shut himself up in snarling logicity and try to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly, or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity of making the gods' acquaintance. This feeling, forced on us we know not whence, that by obstinately believing that there are gods (although not to do so would be so easy both for our logic and our life) we are doing the universe the deepest service we can, seems part of the living essence of the religious hypothesis. If the hypothesis were true in all its parts, including this one, then pure intellectualism, with its veto on our making willing advances, would be an absurdity; and some participation of our sympathetic nature would be logically required. I, therefore, for one, cannot see my way to accepting the agnostic rules for truth-seeking, or wilfully agree to keep my willing nature out of the game. I cannot do so for this plain reason that a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule. That for me is the long and short of the formal logic of the situation, no matter what the kinds of truth might materially be. . .

Related Ideas

William James (<http://www.emory.edu/EDUCATION/mfp/james.htm>) Information, texts, and links to a wide assortment of information about James by Frank Pajares.

William James (<http://www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/james/>) *The Stanford Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: Russell Goodman’s entry summarizing James’ life and writings.

Ralph Barton Perry, *et. al.* *The Thought and Character of William James*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996. A reprint of the 1935 Pulitzer Prize winning biography.

From the reading...

“... faith in a fact can help create that fact...”



Hollis Hall, Harvard College, Library of Congress

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Compare James’ momentous option theory as applied to eternal matters with Pascal’s Wager concerning the existence of God. Notice also James quotes Pascal’s phrase, “The heart has its reasons which reason does not know.” How do these two accounts differ? Is James’ genuine option theory just a modern restatement of Pascal’s Wager? Is Pascal’s Wager just one instantiation of James’ momentous option theory?
2. How would Bertrand Russell respond to James’ conclusion: “I, therefore, for one, cannot see my way to accepting the agnostic rules for truth-seeking, or wilfully agree to keep my willing nature out of the game. I cannot do so for this plain reason that a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.” James, unlike Russell, seems unwilling to conclude we should have a disinterested view on topics of ultimate concern. Would Russell concede that, in some matters at least, faith does not prevent the “liberating” effects of doubt? Russell writes in an essay printed earlier in this text about the values of keeping an open mind and avoiding a pragmatic dogmatism:

The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty. The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason. To such a man the world tends to become definite, finite, obvious; common objects rouse no questions, and unfamiliar possibilities are contemptuously rejected.⁴

3. Discuss whether James’ genuine option theory can or should be applied to the question of how I find a meaning in life. Discuss in some detail whether he agrees with Camus that I must impose a meaning on my life or whether he agrees with Tolstoy that I seek faith in order to find a meaning to my life.
4. Carefully compare the use of the *reductio ad absurdum* proofs in philosophy and science with the application of James’ genuine option theory to matters of morals, personal relations, and religion. Is his

4. Bertrand Russell. *The Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912, 156-157.

theory just that we must assume something is true in order to ascertain whether it really is so? Is the theory a “leap of faith” without any rational restrictions? On James’ view, how could one rule out any of the beliefs of religious extremists?

5. Can you think of two or three different kinds of examples where “faith in a fact can help create the fact”? How would this kind of faith differ from Nietzsche’s notion of truth as “irrefutable error”?⁵
6. In accordance with his option theory, James wrote, “The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitudes.” Even so, a theory of the origin of attitudes independently discovered by William James and Carl Georg Lange, known as the James-Lange theory, is the view that attitudes result from physiological changes. In other words, it is our reaction to a stimulus, not the stimulus itself that is the cause of our emotions. Fear does not result in our running from the bear; running from the bear results in our fear. James also held that sensations, emotions, and ideas are all part of the “stream of consciousness”, whereas, formerly, ideas were presumed to be independent of emotions. Try to reconcile James’ option theory with the James-Lange theory.

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5. See Friedrich Nietzsche’s “Beyond Good and Evil” in this section of readings.

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