

William James's Pragmatism: The Practical Value of Personal Truth and Liberation from Truth

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It is easy to mistake one's beliefs about the world as absolute knowledge. In this paper, I argue that any view of knowledge as absolute, or objective, is a misrepresentation of the limits of human understanding. In contrast, I argue for the pragmatic use of truth as conceived by William James. I contend that if one views truth as a practical instrument valued solely for its ability to help humans, one can place scientific and religious beliefs on equal footing. By valuing truth for its practical effects, one may return truth to its intended function: to be one's closest ally in overcoming life's challenges.

"The influences of the senses has in most men overpowered the mind to the degree that the walls of space and time have come to look solid, real and insurmountable; and to speak with levity of these limits in the world is the sign of insanity."

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

With *Pragmatism*, William James expounds the practical value of truth by applying the pragmatic method to abstract metaphysical questions. James challenges the traditional view of truth as objective, existing separate from the human experience. Rather, he offers a method of "experiential empiricism" to explore life's most important and challenging questions. The essays comprising *Pragmatism* employ easily intelligible language, as they were originally delivered as eight separate lectures in 1906 and 1907. Motivated by his own dissatisfaction with scientific theory and spiritual belief as sufficient guides to human satisfaction and sources meaning, James offers more than an academic treatise. With the work, James directly addresses the seemingly incompatible views of spiritual belief and modern scientific discovery in order to illustrate *Pragmatism's* ability to, "be the happy harmonizer of empiricist [scientific] ways of thinking with the more religious demands of human beings" (70). To accomplish such a task, James expounds a practical method for navigating life that requires open-mindedness and intellectual humility. He proposes that a belief's validity is determined by its tangible impact on or usefulness for human beings, rather than by some external standard of Truth (Capital T for an objective, singular, eternal Truth). James rejects society's obsession with the ever-elusive "Objective Truth," and calls for a shift of focus onto simply what works, or what "pays." Thus, to test a belief's validity, the pragmatist must ask, "what difference would it practically

make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true?" (60).

In this paper, I will delineate James's pragmatic view of truth and its proposed effect on the way that we navigate our lives and derive meaning. As I discuss his philosophy, I will point out and respond to common objections to James's philosophy. I will argue that James's practical epistemology is a refreshing view that frees a thoughtful person from the distractions of "Object Truth" and abstract ponderings by reorienting the belief-verification process towards tangible experience. In doing so, *Pragmatism* leads the thoughtful individual out of contemplative stagnation and towards action. I will argue that by allowing a person to amalgamate the most life-enhancing and instrumental beliefs with full conviction, Pragmatism empowers the individual to craft a personal philosophy capable of overcoming their most pressing challenges and of satisfying their most fundamental needs.

In order to fully understand the purpose of James's philosophy and the function it seeks to serve, it is necessary to first describe *Pragmatism's* historical context, James's view of human psychology, and his motivation for developing a guide to life. James grew up in an affluent family and received little practical guidance as to what to do with his life. Driven by intellectual curiosity, James studied medicine and eventually the new field of psychology, both of which shaped his understanding of human beings and subsequently his pragmatic method. As the author of *Pragmatism's* introduction notes, for James, "the world was constituted by the activity of mind or consciousness acting upon a confusion of unorganized data. And it was the willing aspect of consciousness that imposed the order which gave us a world of reality and which enabled us to survive in a precarious universe" (xii). Or, as James poetically states

in reference to our knowledge and awareness, “the trail of the human serpent is thus over everything” (68). As will become clear, James’s understanding of human consciousness as *subjective* perceptions, unique to the individual, likely contributed to his epistemology and his promotion of the practical use of truth. Upon completing his degree, James moved back in with his parents and struggled with extended bouts of depression due to a sense of aimlessness and meaninglessness.

Unfortunately, scientific and philosophic pursuits provided little guidance for James, because in his eyes, both fields offered unsatisfactory and contradictory answers to life’s questions. On the one hand, the empirical approach of science offered the Darwinian explanation for life. This ontology meant materialism, determinism, and fatalism to James: an existence of arbitrary origin, meaningless existence, and definite extinction¹. On the other hand, after classical religion had been extinguished by scientific findings, James saw only “retreating” religions and abstract philosophies. Each belief system offered ontologies crafted outside of tangible fact, likely in order to remain semi-compatible with Darwinism, which for James meant that they were inapplicable to the human experience. As he articulates, the abstract philosophies that developed in response to Darwin force the believer to, “pay for your escape by losing contact with the concrete parts of life.... You can deduce no single actual particular from the notion of it. It is compatible with any state of things whatever being true here below” (49). But does this incompatible dichotomy still exist today, tormenting those who crave evidence for the eternal meaning of their lives?

I argue yes; science and spirituality are equally incompatible today, especially for those who crave coherent evidence for why human lives matter on an eternal scale. Science has not yet offered an explanation of the existence of human beings beyond the random chance of evolution and life’s precursors, and all empirical evidence indicates that there is no life after death. Similarly, explanations that attempt to give human life eternal meaning lack scientific evidence to support their ontologies. So where does this leave a fact-minded person seeking *evidence* for the meaning of his or her existence? As James succinctly puts it, “you find an empirical philosophy that is not religious enough, and a religious philosophy that is not empirical enough for your purpose” (47). Separately, each belief system falls short of fully satisfying human’s practical and value-centered needs. So what type of philosophical system does one need? James puts it perfectly:

You want a system that will combine both things, the scientific loyalty to facts and willingness to take account of them, the spirit of adaptation and accommodation, in short, but also the old confidence in human values and the resultant spontaneity, whether of the religious or of this romantic type” (49).

For James, the pragmatic method accomplishes this goal of marrying fact with human meaning in a valid and life-enhancing way, by reframing the way that we appraise our knowledge of the world (using *we* in reference to all human beings). James starts by challenging our epistemological abilities and by defining a pragmatic definition of truth.

James rejects the common human conviction that we can witness facts and deduce perfect knowledge about the world untouched by human bias, stating that, “purely objective truth...is nowhere to be found” (68). In contrast to pragmatism’s view of truth, James points out that individuals frequently mistake their understanding of the world as constant, unyielding, and determined (46). As the scientific method encourages, we measure the world through our senses, acting as, “an absorber,” of information. However, “the great [false] assumption of the intellectualists is that truth means essentially an inert static relation” (124), where the information we receive and the ideas we hold are pure, “copies [of] reality” (123). This view lead one to believe that we, “record truth, inhuman though it be, and submit to it!” (48). With this epistemological view, your focus becomes that of a passive observer such that you can only believe what you can *verify*. Once verified or experienced, the knowledge gained is considered perfect knowledge of the observed phenomenon, object, or system: an assumption resting on both the infallibility of the knowledge and the permanence of the world. Further, knowledge is valued without reference to the belief’s effect on human beings and is considered a possession of the mind. With such a view, “when you’ve got your true idea of anything, there’s an end of the matter. You’re in possession; you *know*; you have fulfilled your thinking destiny... Epistemologically you are in stable equilibrium” (124). By believing one’s knowledge to be objective in this way, one easily falls into passivity after developing a belief; you consider the world to be permanent and your truths to be objective knowledge of that world, so you do not need to reevaluate your beliefs or develop a more thorough understanding of the world. Searching for the answers to more metaphysical questions,

¹ Pragmatism, x.

you crave the true *principle* of the universe, be it *God*, or *Matter*, or another. You feel that once you *know* the universe's fundamental nature, "you can rest," because, "you are at the end of your metaphysical quest" (63). This attitude leads to narrow-minded and dogmatic belief. For a person craving a "factual" source of human meaning on an eternal, spiritual level, he or she must find evidence for the universe's *principle* using instruments unrelated to the human organism. But as previously mentioned, the scientific method has produced the antithesis to spiritual fruits. Thus, believing knowledge to be objective when indicated by science can restrict more abstract human ideas, confining belief to what one can observe and test. For example, one must conclude that there is no God, regardless of the positive effects of such a belief on human life, until one can measure and demonstrate His existence with scientific rigor. In short, by taking the objective view of knowledge, your knowledge is limited and static, forcing you to be limited and static.

In contrast to abstract ponderings and the false idol of objective Truth, James's pragmatic method grounds truth in experience by proposing that an idea's validity is determined by its practical, instrumental use for human beings. Before delving into the pragmatic method in application, it is necessary to first describe the properties of truth so that the truth-metric employed by the pragmatic method becomes clear. For James, truth means:

...nothing but this, *that ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience*, to summarize them and get about among them by conceptual short-cuts instead of following the interminable succession of particular phenomena. (65)

To illustrate his pragmatic conception of truth, James offers the example of a being lost in the woods. Finding a cowpath, he suspects it may lead to a house and to safety. After following it, James finds the house and his safety (125). The belief that a cowpath might lead to a house was verified to be true because it led him from being lost to the house and to safety. James did not have to walk in every direction aimlessly, "following the interminable succession of particular phenomena." Rather, James could rely on past experiences to identify the cowpath, its typical properties, and objects that are usually related to cowpaths, in order to interact with the cowpath in a useful

way. Taking the example further, the fact that the cowpath led to a house in this example does not necessarily hold true for all cowpaths and all situations. The *truth* prior to following the path was simply a prediction, one that was verified for *that unique situation* only after following the path. Thus, "true is the name for whatever starts the verification-process, useful is the name for its completed function in experience" (126). Had James walked along the path in the opposite direction, he might have ended up in a field and further away from safety, thus falsifying the cowpath-house connection. Unlike the intellectualist, who views truth as an inert, static property of an object or belief, the pragmatist believes that, "truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *verification*" (125).

For the pragmatist, the *truth* of an idea is actively tested through the *use* of the idea in practice, where the concrete consequences arising from its use determine the idea's validity. If a belief guides a person from one part of their experience to another, allowing the individual to have agency over some aspect of his or her reality, then truth has been verified through the belief's instrumental use; its "cash-value" has been demonstrated. As James states, "the essential thing is the process of being guided. Any idea that helps us to *deal*, whether practically or intellectually, with either the reality or its belongings, that doesn't entangle our progress in frustrations, that *fits*, in fact, and adapts our life to the reality's whole setting, will agree sufficiently to meet the requirements. It will hold true of that reality" (130). For example, we can read a map and believe it to be accurate so long as evidence does not indicate anything to the contrary. If the information we receive from the map "*works*," as in the directions obtained from the map leads us to our chosen destination, then the map is considered by the pragmatist to be true. The map's scale can be incorrect and it will still be *true* so long as one is not caused to experience a "frustration" by the information: the "entanglement" of getting lost due to the map.

Similarly, generalized information can be considered true for the pragmatist if the information proves instrumental. It makes common sense to make generalizations of categories of objects or events and apply those generalizations to specific objects and events within their categories. James notes that, "all things exist in kinds and not singly... when we have once directly verified our ideas about one specimen of a kind, we consider ourselves free to apply them to other specimens without verification" (128). For example, if I have found that one man-

made map takes me to my destination in sufficient order, I can reasonably predict that other maps will function sufficiently until I am proven wrong.

Further, “indirect as well as direct verifications pass muster. Where circumstantial evidence is sufficient, we can go without eye-witnessing... because it *works* to do so” (127). Logically, we do not need to verify all conclusions by ourselves. Rather, we can trust the beliefs and information offered by our fellow humans so long as it “pays” to do so; “pays” by leading us through our semi-hospitable world towards our goals, both big and small. We rely on the advice and experience of other people, where, “we trade on each other’s truth. But beliefs verified concretely by somebody are the posts of the whole superstructure” (128). We do not need to derive all information personally since we can rely on other individual’s experienced truth in a sort of “commerce” of *what works*. Information can be received second-hand, or it can be slightly “imperfect,” or information can be applied as a generalization, so long as a belief guides us expediently. If a belief allows us to function successfully in our concrete, human reality, then the belief is true for the pragmatist.

I would briefly like to discuss an objection to James’s definition of truth. Returning to the cowpath example, did not the path always lead to a house, objectively, regardless of whether or not James had followed the path and verified the truth? If the map’s scale was slightly off, was the map not always incorrect, in absolute terms, regardless of its verification via leading us to our desired destination?

The pragmatic approach to answering these types of metaphysical questions is to reject abstract ponderings and the search for objective truth and instead to ask what concrete consequences would arise from the question’s possible answers. For the pragmatist, ideas unverifiable by humans, ideas extrapolated beyond experience and assumed True apart from their usefulness to human beings, have no instrumental use or basis in human reality, and thus no importance whatsoever. Recall that James rejects the belief that humans can deduce objective knowledge about the world; for James, human consciousness is a subjective organization of sensory data such that our ideas are never perfect copies of reality. Stepping out of the pragmatic approach, consider the question: does the house exist at the end of the cowpath prior to verification, as a concrete, absolute property of our reality’s space and time? How would one *know* that the cowpath-home exists without any grounding in finite experience? Since James verified the house’s location, by asking the question retrospectively it seems perfectly logical that the house

existed at the end of the cowpath all along. But how can one know for sure without making the assumption that we live in a singular and semi-permanent space and time? To know that the house-cowpath connection exists would be to verify it by experience or to assume it by applying our assumption that the world is constant; the truth again only exists in terms of human-centered, instrumental knowledge, and the rationalist claim remains unsubstantiated. This may seem quite odd to consider, so briefly contemplate the possibility that all of our perceptions are simply hallucinations, projected onto our minds, without our knowledge, by some machine similar to that depicted in the movie *The Matrix*. In such a case, might the house exist *only* when we approach it, an image that is otherwise not projected onto our minds? Can you prove that ontology to be impossible? Would it even matter to our lives? Following the rationalist assumption that the cowpath-house connection exists outside of human experience, the discussion soon decays into meaningless, unsubstantiated, and endless ponderings. To assume that the world, in its entirety, exists apart from the mind requires an unsubstantiated mental leap and serves no function for human beings. Instead, the pragmatist rejects this habit of inferring principles of the universe from instrumental truths, considering it a distracting abstraction. However, the pragmatist would not reject the idea of a singular universe, or of facts existing beyond finite experience in a permanent manner.

When assumptions about our world are evaluated for their instrumental use and impact on human lives, they become guiding truths in the pragmatic sense. As James retorts, “one misunderstanding of pragmatism is to identify it with positivist tough-mindedness:” that pragmatism rejects all unified systems intellectually crafted by humans. That the pragmatist, “can not look beyond the obvious pluralism of the naturalist... to a logical unity in which they take no interest” (155). This assumption neglects the evidence that the pragmatist values most: human experience. James states that, “we live in a world of realities that can be infinitely useful or infinitely harmful. Ideas that tell us which of them to expect count as the true idea... The procession of truth, so far from being here an end in itself, is only a preliminary means towards other vital satisfactions” (125). Phrased differently, the “possession of true thoughts means everywhere the possession of invaluable instruments of action” (125). As discussed, the question of whether the house-cowpath connection exists as an objective Truth apart from any human-centered experiential verification proves impossible to answer and pointless for the pragmatist because there is no use for it: no ap-

plication to human experience. However, as the pragmatic definition of truth asserts, a belief is true if it allows a human to “deal” with their reality. Rather than assume there to be no spiritual power until one is proven, as a naturalist would, the pragmatist turns towards human experiences to evaluate the benefits and likelihood of a belief system: towards human experience to evaluate its validity. For the pragmatist, beliefs extrapolated beyond finite experience have a “cash-value” in terms of their reflective impact as guiding principles for humans, principles that impart meaning or self-understanding.

By quoting a chemist, James emphasizes that, “all realities influence our practice...and that influence is their meaning for us” (61). “Is the world one or many? – fated or free? – material or spiritual?” (60). The answers to these questions constitute our reality and thus hold sway over our lives, but for James, the only legitimate answers lie in each question’s immediate impact on finite human beings. For example, we do not have scientific evidence for the existence of a God, but belief in the system is verified by its impact on human beings. As James states, “if theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much. For how much more they are true, will depend entirely on their relations to the other truths that also have to be acknowledged” (72). These beliefs, though unsubstantiated by science, are validated for the pragmatist by their usefulness to humans. The unity of our world, spirituality, free will – these ideas create a logical and meaningful framework for us to function within; they even form our realities by coloring our perceptions of the world: how we subjectively interpret our unique cerebral and sensory perceptions. And as with all pragmatic belief, if you can act on an idea, be guided by it to some concrete benefit, then the idea is true, true *via* that process of finite, experiential verification, because it “pays,” in so much as it works to improve human lives. So how should we proceed, with the pragmatic definition of truth in mind, to evaluate our world?

James puts his pragmatic method succinctly: “Grant an idea or belief to be true...[and ask], what concrete differences will it being true make in any one’s actual life?”. Restated in more Americanized terminology, “what, in short, is the truth’s cash value in experiential terms?” (124). Take the previously mentioned question of the universe’s principle; is there an absolute spiritual power or is our world purely material? For the pragmatist, the question must be measured in immediate experiential terms by asking: what *concrete difference* would it make to our lives if there exists an Absolute Being? And what if

there is only matter? James elaborates on the goal of asking such questions.

The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle (60).

So as a pragmatist, asking the question of whether the world is singular or plural, one must ask which system allows you, as a singular, subjective person, to live the most meaningful and fulfilled life possible. As James proposes, “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” (62). By viewing truth as instrumental to improving human lives, rather than as an object of perfection and worship, the pragmatist is freed to pursue what knowledge and beliefs allow him or her to live the best possible life. However, humans seem to be forever improving our world: eradicating starvation, developing morality, etc. Do new truths retrospectively falsify old truths? And logically, would there not be an “ultimate” set of knowledge, a perfect belief system to achieve, one that maximizes human life-satisfaction?

By measuring truth by its instrumental value and by qualifying truth as unique to each experience-based verification process, pragmatism forces the individual to find personal truth, frees belief from stagnation, and erodes dogmatism. As previously discussed, “‘The true’ is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as ‘the right’ is only the expedient in the way of our behaving” (134). Therefore, a pragmatist must keep an open mind in regard to their beliefs. Thoughts and actions expedient in one situation might not be expedient for future situations, or there may exist a more applicable and useful thought or action to employ in future situations: a “more-true” truth. James notes, “experience, as we know, has ways of *boiling over*, and making us correct our present formulas” (134). While, “the ‘absolutely’ true, meaning what no farther experience will ever alter,” is the point we always pursue, “we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood” (134). But the forever evolving frontier of truth should not make

us despair in our present reality, or view past systems as false. James explains that, “Ptolemaic Astronomy, Euclidean Space, Aristotelian Logic, scholastic metaphysics, were expedient for centuries” (134). In an absolute sense, these systems are false, but they were true in the same way that our systems today are true; they helped human beings navigate their reality and they functioned as needed. And when, “new experiences lead to retrospective judgments,” so may our truths be reformed or evolved (135). With pragmatism’s instrumental definition of truth, the pragmatist must embrace humbleness and open-mindedness for how future experiences might alter his or her beliefs about the world. Thus, “truths emerge from facts; but they dip forward into facts again and add to them; which facts again create or reveal new truth... and so on indefinitely” (135). As new evidence is experienced, whether as insignificant as a faster route home or as life-altering as a new spiritual belief, one’s total web of belief shifts and grows by that new “fact’s” addition. Therefore, “experience is in mutation, and our psychological ascertainment of truth are in mutation” (136).

As James describes, one’s stock of beliefs constantly evolves as we assimilate new evidence from experience; we develop new true ideas or reform past true ideas in order to live with minimal friction, i.e. to act without incurring unintended consequences. When new evidence or opinions are presented that conflict with one’s old set of beliefs, the individual naturally, “seeks to escape [the conflict] by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of [the old idea] as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives” (66). Take the map as an example; if one map fails to lead you to the correct location, rather than conclude that all maps are false, a logically minded person would only conclude that the *particular* map used is false. However, if the conflict is less reconcilable and if the evidence, as appraised by the individual, falls in favor of the new opinion, then, “the new idea is then adopted as the true one. [The new idea] preserves the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification, stretching them just enough to make them admit the novelty, but conceiving that in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible” (66). Consider the clash of religion and science due to their conflicting views of the age of the earth. Rather than reject either system outright, a person might just relax their understanding of the bible. They might reappraise the statement that God created the earth in seven days, six thousand years ago, to be a metaphor rather than factual: that God’s conception of a day is different from human’s conception of a day. By “stretching” their truths in this way, the believer is able to reshape

his or her spirituality around the scientific evidence. The believer stretches their old belief to retain its instrumental value (for religion, that of spiritual meaning), while fitting the new evidence to the modified old belief, “most felicitously and expediently” (66).

However, because every person’s past experiences and current challenges and needs are unique, each person must craft their truths ad-hoc to fit their own specific situation, personality, needs, et cetera. Thus, how we chose to incorporate new evidence into our belief system is done subjectively, as it depends on all of those uniquely personal characteristics. The process of assimilating new opinion into one’s web of belief is done, “in proportion as [the new opinion or evidence] gratifies the individual’s desire to assimilate the novel in his experience to his beliefs in stock” (67). Thus, our stock of beliefs, our view of the world, grows by an amalgamation of new evidence with old ideas. The process of combining new fact and old belief is done in proportion to suit the individual’s instrumental needs and personal desires in the most *comfortable* way. In most cases, new evidence is simply grafted onto one’s “ancient body of truth, which thus grows much as a tree grows by the activity of the new layer of cambium” (68). In the end, the pragmatist must believe what works best for him or her with conviction, having tested it by the rigorous metric of personal experience. But why can we not just believe anything that makes life easier? Why can we not construct our own belief system and craft our reality as a self-centered utopia, indulging in a sort-of psychological hedonism? What forces us to hold a unified “body of truth?” Readdressing the spirituality-science debate, why can the pragmatist not readily accept both views, since both offer unique perspectives on the world that “work” in their own way? They certainly apply to different aspects of the world; science explains our material experience and gives us agency over it, while God bestows meaning and provides psychological satisfaction; the views may be incompatible when taken together and evaluated on scientific terms, but pragmatism claims that an idea is *true* if it *works* to improve human life, and both *work* in just such a manner!

Pragmatism would champion the combination of science and religion so long as it does not appear to be a contradiction *for the individual* and so long as it *benefits* the person to hold both beliefs. While most people do it unconsciously, a pragmatist consciously develops their own web of belief as a unique amalgamation of the many instrumental truths that serve to guide them through their own subjective reality. As James states, “the world is indubitably one if you look at it in one way, but as indubi-

tably is it many, if you look at it another" (46). There are many ways to look at our reality, and the unification of our beliefs under the banner of science is not a prescription of pragmatism. If conflicting ideas can be successfully amalgamated by the individual, through the process described in the above paragraph, such that one's web of belief makes *sense* and *works well* for the individual, then the beliefs are true for the pragmatist. Some might struggle to believe both science and religion with conviction, but pragmatism provides that possibility. Further, the pragmatist would support the construction of a mental utopia so long as it serves the individual and does not cause the individual to incur undesired consequences. But if the utopian conception of reality causes a person to become passive, ignore the demands of their reality, and incur negative consequences— e.g. ignore the need to earn an income to purchase food— then the person's psychological hedonism is shown to be inexpedient in satisfying the person's needs, forcing him or her to adopt a new or ratified belief system in order to survive.

James notes, "few people have definitely articulated philosophies of their own. But almost every one has his own peculiar sense of a certain total character in the universe;" "it is our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means" (42). As discussed, one's comprehensive view of the world includes truths as simple and universal as how to turn a knob to open a door; but each person's web also includes more personal, often metaphysical truths that serve to satisfy psychological needs and aid in overcoming the challenges life brings. These may include a comprehensive ontology and an understanding of our context within it, beliefs that instill a sense of value into one's life. As discussed, belief in a definite spiritual power that dictates why life matters and how one should live is true for the pragmatist if it guides and comforts the individual. However, these metaphysical beliefs need not be explicitly articulated. For example, subconscious "faiths" about the world color reality and make it feel hospitable are universal; one might be innately optimistic and feel predisposed to expect the best. While predestined achievement might not be the guaranteed, approaching a precarious situation with that optimistic belief can motivate a person to face challenges with vigor and confidence. The likely outcome of each challenge need not be, for lack of a better word, *objectively* good or bad, but a belief in the world's inherent goodness and in events' positive outcomes might give us the strength and confidence to face our precarious reality.

Ultimately, there is no one "right answer," but a range of ways to approach reality: a fact that can easily be

observed from the diversity of opinions about the nature of reality. Consider how differently you have felt at your strongest moment and your weakest moment; consider how vulnerable you might feel giving a speech in front of a thousand people, or in a foreign country where you do not speak the language. Then consider how confident and joyous you might feel after accomplishing a major goal, or how relaxed you might feel taking a nap on a couch in front of a fireplace. Then consider how differently you perceive the world when you are intoxicated, either from alcohol or intense anger or passionate love. All of these situations and emotions indicate life's plurality and demonstrate the need for truth to be constructed ad-hoc for each unique situation. Broad conclusions about the world fail to account for all of the different challenges and experiences that a single human encounters; conclusions about the benevolent nature of reality made on the couch in front of a fireplace may not hold pragmatically true when one is standing on stage in front of 1000 people. Further, since each person's reality is unique, a fact especially noticeable when two friends experience the same event differently, each person must develop their own guiding truths given their unique situation, personal goals, and perception of reality.

Do you believe that the world is inherently good, evil, or ambivalent? Do you feel in control of your destiny or fate? Do you believe in God, are you an Atheist, or do you ignore the question all together and assume life to have inherent meaning? The answers to these questions are of utmost importance to our psychological wellbeing, but only pragmatism offers the tools to judge them, to come to a definite conclusion, and to put the beliefs to work within our stream of consciousness. By raising "what works in practice" above the false idol of objective Truth, pragmatism empowers the individual to shape and reshape their beliefs: to combine one's most personally instrumental and life-affirming principles to meet one's unique reality. With the pragmatic method in hand, judging truth by the metric of "what pays," one returns truth to its intended function: to be one's closest ally in overcoming life's challenges.

Work Cited

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