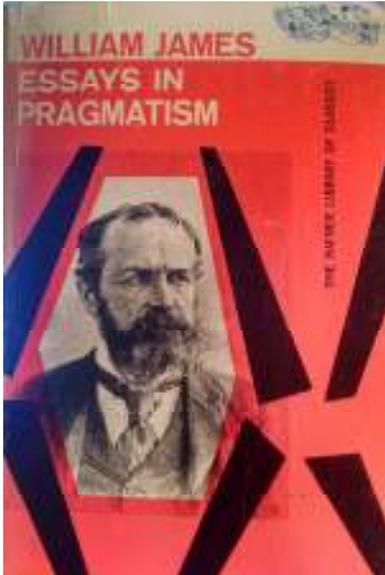


## The Will To Believe by William James



This essay is not about why having religious beliefs is good; it's about why having religious beliefs isn't bad. That, and some cool dating advice. It's one of seven essays in the book, *Essays in Pragmatism* by William James (The Hafner Library of Classics, 1948).

Summarized by Erik Johnson (10/15)

In our day of resurgent atheism it's rare to come across a philosopher who argues for the legitimacy of religious belief. As one who aspires to be a person of faith I was delighted to read *The Will To Believe* by American philosopher William James. Too bad it's 119 years old.

This dandy 21 page lecture—he calls it a sermon—given in 1896 to the Philosophical Clubs at Yale and Brown Universities inspires me. His outline includes ten sections which he didn't name. For convenience sake I've given each section a descriptive title.

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Intro: James says we have a right to, “adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced.” In other words, we can, do, and sometimes should believe things even if they lack empirical evidence. There are reasons to embrace certain beliefs besides intellectual reasons, specifically, emotional reasons.

### I. What makes beliefs believable?

This section lays the groundwork for what is to come; these definitions are important.

James calls a belief a hypothesis. Hypotheses come in two varieties: living or dead. Whether or not a hypothesis is living or dead depends more on the one doing the believing than on the merits of the hypothesis itself. “The deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker.” (89). In other words, beliefs about objective realities are subjective.

We are presented with competing hypotheses all the time. When we have to choose between two competing hypotheses it's called an option. Options themselves are living or dead, forced or avoidable, momentous or trivial. A genuine option is one that is living, forced, and momentous.

1. A genuine option is living, one where competing hypotheses “make some appeal” to us. That is, there is an emotional component. This is subjective, not rational. A dead option is one which has no appeal.
2. A genuine option is forced, one where competing hypotheses are unavoidable with “no possibility of not choosing.” That is, not believing it would be foolish. Choosing whether to live or die is forced because there is no third alternative. Choosing not to believe  $2+2=4$  is foolish because the sum is unavoidable.

3. A genuine option is momentous, one where competing hypotheses are unique—what we'd call once in a life time—significant, and irreversible. That is, it's an important, non trivial option. Trivial options don't make much difference one way or another.

## II. The psychology behind human belief.

Do we embrace hypotheses on intellectual (logical), passional, (emotional), or volitional (willful) grounds? James says our beliefs are not only intellectual but emotional and willful. He offers several popular arguments for NOT basing beliefs on the will alone...and then gives his rebuttals.

1. Basing a belief on mere choice, without evidence, simply because we choose to, isn't sound. Why? Because the will has limits. We can't will ourselves to believe what we know isn't true like the existence of Abe Lincoln or sums in math.
2. We also can will ourselves not to believe what we don't want to believe. Pascal's wager tries to force us to adopt certain beliefs but "leaves us unmoved" if we don't have a "pre-existing tendency to believe." Religious belief "adopted willfully after such a mechanical calculation would lack the inner soul of faith's reality."
3. Science and scientists laud logic and intellect as the only sources truth. They say, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for every one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence," and they mock sentimentalists and subjectivists.

James's rebuttals come in the next section.

## III. Beliefs without logical warrant are common.

"If one should assume that intellectual insight is what remains after wish and will and sentimental preference have taken wing, or that pure reason is what then settles our opinions, he would fly quite as directly in the teeth of the facts." This means we adopt certain beliefs not always based on intellect alone. There are other reasons we make decisions besides reason.

Even though our will can not "bring to life" dead hypotheses, it has tremendous power over what we believe. For example, when our will is antagonistic to an idea it's very hard to believe it. We willfully reject some ideas not because of logic but because of "fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure [environment] of our caste and set. As a matter of fact we find ourselves believing, we hardly know how or why."

- "We believe in molecules and the conservation of energy" with "no more inner clearness, and probably with much less, than any disbeliever in them might possess."
- "Our faith is in someone else's faith." We look to leaders and authorities and copy their beliefs. Logic doesn't dictate our beliefs, faith does.
- "Our belief ...that there is a truth, and that our minds and it are made for each other—what is it but a passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs up?"
- "If a skeptic asks how we know all this, can our logic find a reply? No."
- "We disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use." This means we don't reject ideas because of logical arguments; we reject them because it suits our fancy.
- "Our non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions."
- "There are passional [emotional] tendencies and volitions which run before and others which come after belief, and it is only the latter that are too late for the fair; and they are not too late

when the previous passional work has been already in their own direction. Pascal's argument, instead of being powerless, then seems a regular clincher, and is the last stroke needed to make our faith ... complete."

- "Pure insight and logic...are not the only things that produce our creeds."

#### **IV. William James's theory stated.**

"Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions."

#### **V. Two ways of believing in truth: empiricism and absolutist.**

The absolutist way: we can know truth and we know when we know it. This type of certitude is most popular in philosophic circles. "There is something that gives a click inside us." The empiricist way: we can know truth but we're not sure if and when we do. This approach is most popular in scientific circles.

#### **VI. James prefers empiricism.**

James is no fan of absolutism; other than in mathematics there are few if any beliefs that we can be absolutely certain about. "Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-filled planet are they found?"

#### **VII. Knowing Truth vs. Avoiding Error.**

It's possible to believe truth and error at the same time. It's also possible to avoid error and truth at the same time. Which is worse? To believe truth or not believe error? If one had to choose it would be better, James says, to believe truth and error rather to avoid error and in the process miss truth.

Some people are so averse to believing lies that they don't mind missing truth. This isn't good, says James. "The risk of being in error is a very small matter when compared with the blessings of real knowledge." The belief, "Better to go without belief forever than believe a lie!" is itself a belief motivated not by intellect but by a fear of being duped. James says go ahead and risk being duped and if you get duped, laugh it off. "In a world where we are so certain to incur [errors] in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness."

#### **VIII. Passions, not just intellect, influence our beliefs.**

Sometimes the desire to avoid being duped is so strong we wait for all the evidence to come in before we embrace a belief. This route risks missing truth but James said that's okay as long as the truth we miss is inconsequential and non momentous. "The attitude of [skepticism] is absolutely wise if one would escape mistakes."

However, when missing truth is momentous skepticism isn't worth the risk. "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 wait with impunity till the coercive evidence shall have arrived?" In other words, it's prudent to embrace a belief even if it's wrong when refusing to embrace it puts us at greater risk.

## **IX. When waiting for evidence isn't wise.**

It is okay, James says, to postpone a scientific belief until sufficient evidence arrives. But this is not the case with morals, deciding “what is good if good exists,” and what is “worthy.” To make conclusions in these areas one must “consult the heart.” To back up this assertion James offers the following points.

1. “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.”
2. “The question of having moral beliefs at all or not having them is decided by our will.”
3. “If your heart does not want a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one.”
4. “Moral skepticism can no more be refuted or proved by logic than intellectual skepticism can.”
5. “Do you like me or not?” If you wait for objective evidence before making a move you may wait a long time.
6. “His faith acts on the powers above him as a claim, and creates its own verification.”
7. “Faith in a fact can help create the fact.”

## **X. Tying all these loose ends together.**

Is embracing a religious belief without evidence prudent? Yes says James. Here's why.

Religious claims are living. For many, the religious claims “perfection is eternal” and “we are better off believing perfection is eternal,” might be true even without scientific evidence. However, “If for any of you religion be a hypothesis that cannot, by any living possibility, be true then you need no go further.”

Religious claims are momentous. We gain by belief and lose by non-belief. Remaining skeptical and waiting for sufficient evidence before believing is, “as if a man should hesitate indefinitely to ask a certain woman to marry him because he was not perfectly sure that she would prove an angel after he brought her home.”

Religious claims are forced. There is no third alternative to believing or failing to believe.

Skeptics avoid a certain kind of risk: being duped. They argue, “to yield to our fear of [a religious hypothesis] being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true.”

Believers avoid a different kind of risk: missing truth. They argue, “Dupery for dupery, what proof is there that dupery through hope [that the religious hypothesis is right] is so much worse than dupery through fear?”

Vetoing faith is illogical. Just as it would be churlish to demand proof before believing anyone's word, or to demand a contract for every transaction, it would be absurd to expect the gods to provide evidence before making their acquaintance. James says meet the religious hypothesis half way by exercising will and trust.

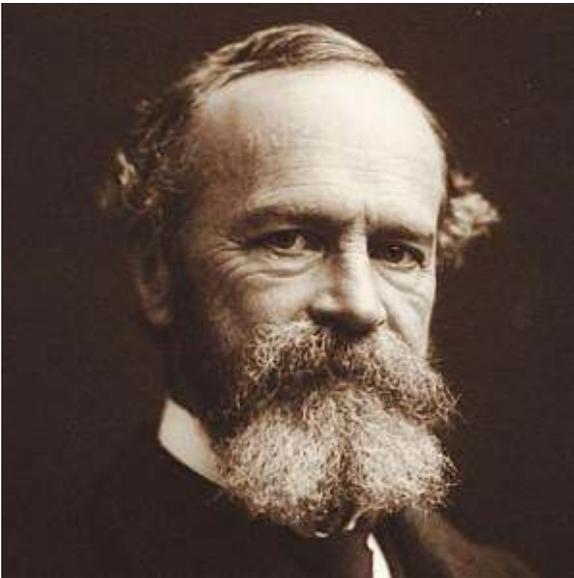
Endorsing emotional grounds for religious belief does not mean James encourages belief in superstition. The will to believe covers only “living” options.

The skeptic's command to "put a stopper on our heart, instincts, and courage, and wait—acting ... as if religion were not true—till doomsday... seems to me the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave."

Since our intellectual powers are limited and we lack objective certitude, we postpone belief to our peril.

James concludes with an appeal to civility. "No one of us ought to issue vetoes to the other, nor should we bandy words of abuse. We ought, on the contrary, delicately and profoundly to respect one another's mental freedom: then only shall we bring about the intellectual republic; then only shall we have that spirit of inner tolerance without which all our outer tolerance is soulless, and which is empiricism's glory, then only shall we live and let live, in speculative as well as in practical things."

### **Bonus section: William James's dating advice.**



Would you take dating advice from this man? I would. Ponder this 1896 quote from American philosopher William James and see if you can find any sound dating advice.

*"Do you like me or not?... 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 expectations. 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... 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."* (William James, **The Will to Believe**).

### **Let's go over it line by line and see how you did.**

*"Do you like me or not?"* This is the question which consumes people looking for love.

*"Whether you do or not depends, in countless instances on whether I meet you half-way..."* Instead of waiting for the object of your affection to make the first move, you go first.

*"...am willing to assume that you must like me..."* This takes faith. Until you get evidence to the contrary, be optimistic. Why wouldn't that person like you?

*"...and show you trust and expectations."* According to dating expert William James, by putting yourself "out there" you're giving the other person data, important information about yourself. Giving another person your trust is a huge gift.

*“The previous faith on my part in your liking’s existence is in such cases what makes your liking come.”* This means taking a leap of faith, “Yes, this person could like me! They are able to like and I am likable.”

*“But if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence...”* When fear paralyzes us our relationships stall, or never get started. Take action!

*“...until you shall have done something apt...”* Don’t wait for them to make it safe. Don’t wait for them to reassure you. In fact, the more risky it is when putting yourself out there is the more attractive and magnetic you become.

*“...ten to one your liking never comes.”* This is an old fashioned way of saying, “He who hesitates is lost.”

*“How many women’s hearts are vanquished by the mere sanguine insistence of some man that they must love him!”* Don’t demand another person to like you. Earn their affection. Being liked is sweetest when it is voluntary. If it’s forced it’s not very rewarding.

*“He will not consent to the hypothesis that they cannot.”* This describes the bossy, smothering, pushy guy who doesn’t woo the object of his desire. The more he can’t take “no” as an answer the more she pulls away.