

James, William. *The Sentiment of Rationality*. London: Adamant Media Corporation, 2005.

William James (1842-1910), brother of novelist Henry James, taught physiology, psychology, and philosophy at Harvard University. His philosophical pragmatism and thoroughgoing empiricism deeply influenced subsequent American philosophy.

Section 1: Theoretical Rationality. Philosophers seek rational frameworks to explain experience. How do they recognize their results as rational? The subjective mark of ease and perfect fluency in a concept of the cosmos produces the Sentiment of Rationality. At the theoretic level, rationality selects ideas for their simplicity (unifying diverse phenomena under single rubrics) and clarity (knowing a thing in itself in all its complexity), which values do (and must) compete in a rational mind. Every workable philosophy balances simplicity and complexity. But all philosophies edit reality. No philosophic explanation is complete, because reality exceeds our conception of it. Insofar as a philosophy retains complexity, it fails to lift us above bewildering detail. Insofar as a philosophy precludes complexity, it creates a laughable caricature of normal experience. Theoretic philosophy can create a caricature of life, abridged by subtraction of salient matters. Nevertheless, the impulse to create theoretic simplifications is urgent. Even if we created a wholly adequate philosophical statement of the world, our philosophical dysphoria would return. Philosophically, we must grant that non-existence is as possible as existence (Schopenhauer). The philosopher's perfect system will still suffer inadequacy when considering God. One might seek solace in mystical and supra-logical approaches. But mystical certitude frequently eludes even mystics. There may exist no rational reply to the problems which the one and the many impose on philosophical theories.

Section 2: Practical Rationality. Any phenomenon may be explained in more than one way. A Beethoven quartet may be described as horse hair on cat guts, or otherwise. How to choose among competing equally-reasonable explanations? A preferable conception tends to move the thinker. First, a preferable conception lends itself to prediction of likely outcomes (expectancy). Familiarity creates a sense of rationality because one believes himself able to predict outcomes. Novelty irritates because it portends danger. Second, a preferable conception validates human inclination to respond as an actor in the cosmic drama, to express emotion and action. The intellect consists in practical concerns. All thought aims toward action. If one's philosophy offers him no guidance for action, then one makes up such assistance. Nevertheless, among preferable conceptions one cannot choose for all persons. Personality enters. The arena of faith is gripped by conflicts of its human proponents. Unity leads toward intimacy; multiplicity leads toward opposition and striving. Both are necessary. Third, a preferable conception affirms the necessity of faith. One has faith only in what can be doubted. Faith leads one to act while still possessed of concerns about how action will turn out. Normal people take risks, as they should. Faith is much maligned; the criticism is pretense. All philosophical choices arise from will, taste, and passion as much as from intellect. We believe at our peril. But this peril is unavoidable. Faiths are working hypotheses. All thinking involves various faiths. Some preferable conceptions of the universe require that faith not only be permitted, but that faith be required. In such perspectives, faith proves itself. Ultimately, people must decide if living itself is a faith worth having. Where the act and opinion of the believer are an essential part of the outcome, faith is always authorized.

Section 3: A Moral Universe? Is the universe moral or amoral? Materialists argue the world's moral demands are relative and interdependent. Nothing is at last wrong or right, merely prudent under the circumstances. The moral absolutist believes that some acts or circumstances are right or wrong, and he or she must confront them as such, regardless the consequences. In extremity are moral schemes tested. In pedestrian matters, absolutist and skeptic moralities agree. When tested, we retreat to faiths. Morality is a hypothesis. Proofs lie in how satisfactorily one's morality deals with the facts of everyday life. Amoralists advocate anesthesia; the world is trivial and serious responses overstate the case. Moralists press energy; existence exudes earnest gravity

and calls for weighty, sometimes sacrificial, responses. Choose a hypothesis; test it. Your choice is part of the experiment. Skepticism creates the ugly moral results it predicts. Hope may achieve better outcomes. The moral structure of the universe cannot be settled finally before the last human passes. Our absolutisms must leave room for dissent and variation. Every person must test his or her own idiosyncratic choices.