

**James, William. *The Will To Believe*. 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 I.** James constructs a defense of the right to believe religious concepts, though those concepts may not be susceptible of rational proof. Belief is an hypothesis. An hypothesis is alive for the individual if one is willing to act irrevocably upon the hypothesis. Decision between hypotheses is an option. Live options appeal (however marginally) to the individual. Forced options leave no alternatives. Momentous options require staking one's life on the choice. Genuine options are live, forced, momentous options.

**Section II.** One cannot make facts true simply by believing them. Pascal's wager (belief promises eternal reward; unbelief eternal damnation. No rational gambler would choose to roll the dice where he might win perdition; that gambler would believe, because, if wrong, he loses nothing) leads to empty belief. Scientists overstate when they urge that no belief should be adopted but on adequate evidence.

**Section III.** Our passions affect our beliefs. Where exists a predisposition to a belief, we require precious few reasons to believe. Our faiths are inherited from those who have gone before us. The more doubtful the faith, the more we rely. We disbelieve hypotheses that seem to us useless. So, faith and empirical evidence intertwine in a way difficult to tease out.

**Section IV.** One must choose by emotion where genuine options occur, but intellectual considerations prove inconclusive. To fail to decide is itself an act of faith.

**Section V.** Skeptics deny the possibility of knowing truth. James does not consider their view. Empiricists believe they know truth, but do not know when they are knowing it and when they are deluded. Scientists favor empiricism. Absolutists believe they know truth, and know when they know it. Philosophy favors absolutism. No empiricists are true to their faith. All cling to their faiths unconsciously, except when pausing for reflection.

**Section VI.** Everyone thinks their faiths infallible. We must resist that tendency by adopting a humble empiricism. Seek objective evidence, formulate truths, but recognize the difficulty. Truth is more elusive than most suppose. Any of our truths may be errors. All are subject to re-examination. The human experience is cacophony. No test of truth is agreed. Calling evidence "objective" is a subjective judgment. We never know when we know. Still, one seeks truth, in the conviction that examining our growing fund of experience will lead to truth. In the storm of faith and evidence, experience with careful reflection confirms some assertions and discards others.

**Section VII.** One must know truth and avoid error. These are not identical, and emphasizing one over the other determines the flavor of one's thinking. To avoid all error, one must set aside much that is likely true. To adopt truth, one will grab some error in the bag. James believes our errors should be taken less seriously than we might think, since we are bound to adopt error. We should be humble and avoid wringing our hands about erring. This is the attitude of true empiricism.

**Section VIII.** When an issue is not forced or momentous, dispassionate patience awaiting objective evidence recommends itself. The best observer weds curiosity in a matter to fear of understanding it wrongly. But one cannot always wait. Some matters require aggressive truth formulation: moral questions usually require prompt answers.

**Section IX.** Moral questions address what is or might be good in a circumstance. No proof is possible. One accepts a moral world by faith, or none such exists. Passions themselves create

moral facts. Unwarranted affection precedes human trust. Confidence signals the person to follow, to support. As a society, we trust other members to do their jobs satisfactorily without our supervision.

**Section X.** Religion argues, first, that eternal things better temporal things, and, second, that humans prosper believing this, even in the present, and suffer not believing it. The skeptic prefers (emotionally) to avoid all possibility of error to faith, just as the believer prefers (emotionally) the adoption of dubious truth to its loss. The best of religious sentiment believes the universe personal, asking response from every person. Nasty rationality refuses this possibility for lack of proof. James accepts no rule that precludes certain sorts of truths, even if those truths may exist, merely because of difficulty of proof. Every person has freedom to believe and live as they will, however ill-advised. An odd conviction held by some agnostics is that one should set aside faith for the sole purpose of waiting for something better, presuming religious faith to be wrong, until doomsday. This attitude also entails refusing to act as if faith were true; yet faith entails and is measured by action. There is no bell that goes off in the agnostic's head when he encounters truth. In what matters, each of us acts without complete knowledge, taking substantial risks. If we are wrong, we suffer; if right, we prosper. We may be deceived, but we have no alternatives to action. Life is action. So we act, hoping the best, coping with the results. If we perish, we perished well.