

# Pragmatism and the Meaning of Life (in 10 minutes)

Sandy LaFave

Pragmatism is a movement in American philosophy.

It is primarily associated with

- Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914)
- William James (1842 – 1910)
- John Dewey (1859 – 1952)

I.

Pragmatists urge philosophy to talk about “living” philosophical issues – issues that actually affect how people get along in the world.

For pragmatists, many traditional philosophical questions are not “living” because they *make no difference* to people’s actual lives and decisions.

Examples of “dead” philosophical issues:

“Is the table really here?”

“Is everything determined?”

2. William James' essay [\*Is Life Worth Living?\*](#) (1895) explores the question of suicide as that question arises for people who *think* a lot (e.g., people who study philosophy):

- “overstudious” people who
- engage in “too much questioning” and
- “too little active responsibility”

As a result of “too much grubbing in the abstract roots of things”, such “men” (*sic*) feel melancholy and pessimistic and may contemplate suicide. The meaning of life is a living issue for them.

I think suicide is more plausibly a living issue for

- chronically depressed people
- people experiencing open-ended suffering with no realistic prospects of relief
- people facing painful death
- people losing the ability to engage actively in life, and incapable of enjoying the things that used to make life enjoyable (“can’t walk, can’t eat, can’t shit, can’t f\*\*k”)

3. On the other hand, a lot of folks do not feel at a loss in their lives; they are energized and engaged in the world.

I would say this is the normal state, especially for younger people in good health who are busy with projects they value.

If you told such people that life has no meaning, it would likely make no difference at all to the way they behave in the world.

4. James' answer to the question of suicide for sad, pessimistic-but-not-crazy people:

*"... is ... nothing more than religious faith".*

He says "Pessimism is essentially a religious disease."

James defines "religion" very broadly, though.

For James religion is NOT any particular religion, with its unique doctrines.

It is not “license to define in detail an invisible world and to anathematize and excommunicate those whose trust is different.”

Rather, for James, the religious impulse is simply “believing that this world of nature is a sign of something more spiritual and eternal than itself.”

It is “the bare assurance that this natural order is not ultimate.... This bare assurance is ... enough to make life seem worth living.”

Here is James' argument in his essay [\*The Will to Believe\*](#) (1896):

P1: We often make “momentous” decisions in life on the basis of insufficient evidence.

P2: Those decisions are often “forced” – i.e., it’s now or never. You can’t wait for the evidence to present itself.

P3: Besides, the practical effects of *not choosing* can be identical to the practical effects of *choosing “no”*.

P4: A pessimistic, melancholy, overly rational person will tend *not* to choose or to choose “no” (in effect the same thing) when in truth, there is not enough evidence to justify *any* choice. This is the important point. No choice – choosing yes, choosing no, or not choosing – is rationally justified at the moment you must choose. The choice is inevitably made on non-evidential grounds.

P5: “Often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result *is the only thing that makes the result come true.*”

James' conclusion:

“In such a case (and it belongs to an enormous class), the part of wisdom as well as courage is to *believe what is in the line of your needs*. ... You make one or the other of two possible universes true by your trust or mistrust, — both universes having been only *maybes* ... before you contributed your act.”

“Believe that life *is* worth living and your belief will help create that fact.”

James gives an interesting example: the stranded climber.

“Suppose ... that you are climbing a mountain, and have worked yourself into a position from which the only escape is a terrible leap.”

Suppose you have done some long-jumping and you see that the distance is one you have managed to make only once in thousands of leaps.

What is the *rational* belief (the one based on experience and evidence)? That you are toast.

But suppose your chances of making it are even a little bit improved if you believe you *can* make it.

You should believe what is in the line of your needs.

You should not believe the “rational” claim.

## Summary:

When a choice of a belief is living, momentous, and forced, and there is not enough evidence to justify any decision (but you must choose because not choosing is choosing “no”), it is both wise and brave to choose your belief on the basis of what you need.

Optimism is not a “rational” response to the world, but neither is pessimism; in fact, optimism and pessimism sometimes change the world.

Alternative worlds might be brought into being by our optimism or pessimism.

That's what William James thinks.

Here's where I agree with him.

James is certainly right that we often must make big decisions without knowing as much as we would like to know about the outcomes down the line.

He is right that optimism is a more energizing, active attitude than pessimism, and that optimism itself can create more satisfactory outcomes.

I have problems with a lot of what he says, though.

1. James seems to think a person can just believe “religious” propositions such as “The world I see is not all there is” or “Everything will be all right in the end.” I don’t understand what it means to “just believe” something I have no reason to believe, even if I would like it to be true. How exactly do you move from unbelief to belief?

James talks as though you can move from unbelief to belief by an act of the will alone.

Do you think the stranded climber can will to *believe* he can make it?

I think the climber can maybe, by an act of the will, push aside thoughts of his previous failures. He can “focus.” He can encourage himself, maybe.

But this is far from believing that he can make it.

2. James, of course, could not have known about the neurological bases of depression.

But as a matter of fact, tweaking brain chemistry can relieve serious depression (where the depressed person is actually contemplating suicide) much more effectively than any discourse, religious or pragmatic.

See my paper "[Appropriate Joy: Making Peace with Prozac](#)".

3. As a matter of fact (pragmatically), it doesn't work to urge what James calls "religious" claims on clinically depressed people – claims like "There is more to life than what you can see right now" or "The good will ultimately win out."

As a matter of fact, saying those things to a depressed person is about as effective as saying "Cheer up" or "Snap out of it".

To the depressed person, this sounds like you're saying the depression would go away if they just "made more of an effort".

4. No personal God

5. Optimism doesn't solve everything – sometimes death is preferable to life.

6. A lot of people would interpret “Believing  $p$  makes it so” as ... [the Secret](#).

7. Does too much immersion in reflection really cause people to want to kill themselves?

8. My Platonic interpretation

I think Plato would explain the problem of melancholy and pessimism using a broader psychological category. (This isn't contemporary psychology, but there are correlates within contemporary psychology for this view.)

For Plato, spirit (*thumos*) is the energetic-aggressive part of the tripartite soul, prominent in athletes and soldiers.

People who ask about the meaning of life have a “*spiritual*” problem, in that they don’t have enough “spirit” (*thumos*).

Again, antidepressants are very helpful for this.

No faith or belief in any “religious” claims is required.

For depressed people, the meaning of life is a living issue.

For most people, the meaning of life is a dead issue.

For depressed people, antidepressants turn the meaning of life into a dead issue.

*Requiescat in pace.*

(May it rest in peace.)