

William James speaks

"William James laid his mind on me . . . (and has) driven the goads of his wise words into the lives of hosts of persons across the world." Many can testify to the truth of that statement, for he was one of the foremost psychologists and philosophers of the past century and among the most influential thinkers to emerge from the American scene. Law, literature, religion, and social work as well as psychology and philosophy have been deeply affected by his thinking on pragmatism, empiricism, and the "stream of consciousness" concept.

He was born in New York City in 1842 into one of America's most distinguished families intellectually,—his brother being Henry James the novelist. The family shuttled between the United States and Europe, and William James' schooling took place in the States, England, France, Switzerland, and Germany. His M.D. was from Harvard.

After an interval, he returned to his alma mater to teach, first anatomy and physiology, later psychology, and finally philosophy. In 1890 his famous *Principles of Psychology* was published, followed by *The Will to Believe*, *Talks to Teachers*, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, *Pragmatism*, *A Pluralistic Universe*, *The Meaning of Truth*, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, and *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. His vivid style of writing helped to spread widely the truths he expounded in these volumes.

The Swedenborgian faith of his father, his friendship with Charles Sanders Pierce, his extensive travels, and his long and agonizing illness were among the many influential factors in moulding the philosophy of this mental giant and understanding friend of mankind.

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ON THE AIM OF LIFE . . .

"The great aim of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it."

ON RELIGION . . .

"In saying 'God exists', all I imply is that my purposes are cared for by a mind so powerful as on the whole to control the drift of the universe."

"A man's religious faith means for me essentially his faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained."

"Our whole physical life may be soaking in a spiritual atmosphere, a dimension of being that we at present have no organ of comprehending. . . . To believe in that other world may be the most essential function that our lives in this world have to perform. May be—not a victory of any sort is gained without a may be."

"We and God have business with each other; and in opening ourselves to his influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled."

"If religion be a function by which either God's cause or man's cause is to be really advanced, then he who lives the life of it, however narrowly, is a better servant than he who merely knows about it, however much."

"In its acuter stages every religion must be a homeless Arab of the desert. The church knows this well enough, with its everlasting inner struggle of the acute religion of the few against the chronic religion of the many, enduring into an obstructiveness worse than that which irreligion opposes to the movings of the Spirit."

"God is not known, he is not understood; he is used. . . ."

ON PRAYER . . .

"Prayer is religion in act; that is, prayer is real religion."

"Energy which but for prayer would be bound, is by prayer set free and operates."

"We hear in these days of scientific enlightenment a great deal of discussion about the efficacy of prayer; and many reasons are given us why we should not pray, whilst others are given why we should. But in all this, very little is said of the reason why we *do* pray, which is simply that we cannot help praying. The impulse to pray is a necessary consequence of the fact that whilst the innermost of the empirical selves of a man is a Self of the social sort, it can yet find its adequate Socius only in an ideal world."

ON MYSTICISM . . .

"In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness."

"The basis of (mysticism) . . . is 'orison' or meditation, the methodical elevation of the soul towards God."

"We pass into mystical states from out of ordinary consciousness as from a less into a more, as from a smallness into a vastness, and at the same time as from an unrest to a rest."

" . . . In communion with the Ideal, new force comes into the world. . . ."

"As a matter of psychological fact, mystical states of a well-pronounced and emphatic sort *are* authoritative over those who have them. They have been 'there,' and know. It is vain for rationalism to grumble about this. If the mystical truth that comes to a man proves to be a force that he can live by, what mandate have we—to order him to live in another way?"

ON STRUGGLE AND SUFFERING . . .

"Suffering and hardship do not abate the love of life, they give it a keener zest. . . . The sovereign source of melancholy is repletion."

"Need and struggle are what excite and inspire us; one hour of triumph is what brings the void."

ON SELF AND INDIVIDUALISM . . .

"An unlearned carpenter of my acquaintance once said in my hearing: 'There is very little difference between one man and another; but what little there is, is *very important*'."

"No two of us have identical difficulties, nor should we expect to work out identical solutions."

"Experience is remoulding us every moment, and our mental reaction on every given thing is really a resultant of our experience of the whole world up to that date."

"There are in every one potential forms of activity that actually are shunted out from use."

". . . The deepest principle of human nature is the craving to be appreciated. . . ."

"A man possesses of learning only so much as comes out of him in action. . . ."

"Let me repeat once more that a man's vision is the great fact about him."

" . . . That the course of destiny may be altered by individuals no wise evolutionist ought to doubt."

ON HABIT . . .

"We must take care to launch ourselves with as strong and decided an initiative as possible."

"Never suffer an exception to occur till the new habit is securely rooted in your life."

"Seize the first possible opportunity to act on every resolution you make and on every emotional prompting you may experience in the direction of the habits you aspire to gain."

ON EDUCATION . . .

"In the last analysis (education) consists in the organizing of resources in the human being, of powers of conduct which shall fit him to his social and physical world. An 'uneducated' person is one who is nonplussed by all but the habitual situations. On the contrary, one who is educated is able practically to extricate himself, by means of the examples with which his memory is stored and of the abstract conceptions which he has acquired, from circumstances in which he never was placed before. Education, in short, cannot be better described than by calling it *the organization of acquired habits of conduct and tendencies to behavior.*"

"Begin with the line of (the child's) native interests, and offer him objects that have some immediate connection with these."

"The art of teaching grew up in the class-room out of inventiveness and sympathetic concrete observation."

"We gain confidence in respect to any method which we are using as soon as we believe that it has theory as well as practice at its back."

"Feed the growing human being, feed him with the sort of experience for which from year to year he shows a natural craving, and he will develop in adult life a sounder sort of mental tissue. . . ."

ON A LIFE WORTH LIVING . . .

"Lives based on having are less free than lives based either on doing or on being. . . ."

"With what friendship we would all treat each other if our interest in honor and in money could but disappear from earth."

"Whenever a process of life communicates an eagerness to him who lives it, there the life becomes genuinely significant."

"Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help to create the fact."

"I hope that . . . more and more the ideal of the well-trained and vigorous body will be maintained neck and neck with that of the well-trained and vigorous mind. . . ."

"The more commonplace happinesses which we get are 'reliefs', occasioned by our momentary escapes from evils either experienced or threatened. But in its most characteristic embodiments, religious happiness is no mere feeling of escape. It cares no longer to escape. It consents to the evil outwardly as a form of sacrifice—inwardly it knows it to be permanently overcome."

ON THE MORAL EQUIVALENT OF WAR . . .

"What we now need to discover in the social realm is the moral equivalent of war: something heroic that will speak to men as universally as war does, and yet will be as compatible with their spiritual selves as war has proved itself to be incompatible. I have often thought that in the old monkish poverty-worship, in spite of the pedantry which infested it, there might be something like that moral equivalent of war which we are seeking. May not voluntarily accepted poverty be the 'strenuous life', without the need for crushing weaker peoples?"

ON EMPIRICISM AND TRUTH . . .

"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."

"Meanwhile we have to live today by what truth we can get today and be ready tomorrow to call it falsehood."

"We may talk of the *empiricist* way and of the *absolutist* way of believing in truth. The absolutists in this matter say that we not only can attain to knowing truth, but we can *know when* we have attained to knowing it; while the empiricists think that although we may attain it, we cannot infallibly know when. To know is one thing, and to know for certain we know is another. One may hold to the first being possible without the second; hence the empiricists and the absolutists, although neither of them is a sceptic in the usual philosophic sense of the term, show very different degrees of dogmatism in their lives."

"The greatest empiricists among us are only empiricists on reflection: when left to their instincts, they dogmatize like infallible popes."

"Let empiricism once become associated with religion, as hitherto, through some strange misunderstanding, it has been associated with irreligion, and I believe a new era of religion as well as philosophy will be ready to begin."

"My thesis is that if we start with the supposition that there is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff 'pure experience', then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter. The relation itself is a part of pure experience; one of its terms becomes the subject or bearer of the knowledge, the 'knower', the other becomes the object known."

TOWARDS A BETTER WORLD . . .

"Every nation has ideals and difficulties and sentiments which are an impenetrable secret to one not of the blood."

"I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition that each several agent do its 'level best'. I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of cooperative work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to take the risk?"

ON BEGINNING WITH SMALL THINGS . . .

"I am done with great things and big things, great institutions and big successes; I am for those tiny, invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual; creeping in through the crannies of the world like so many rootlets or like the capillary oozing of water, but which, give them time, will rend the hardest monuments of man's pride."

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