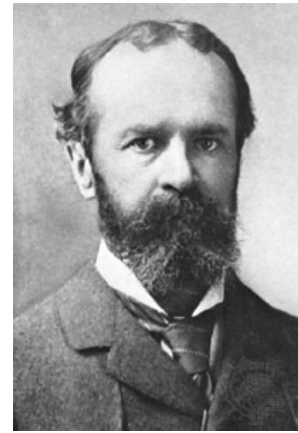


Excerpts from
The Will to Believe¹



by **William James**

I

Let us give the name of *hypothesis* to anything that may be proposed to our belief; and just as the electricians speak of live and dead wires, let us speak of any hypothesis as either *live* or *dead*. A live hypothesis is one that appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed. If I ask you to believe in the Mahdi [the expected messiah of the Muslims], the notion makes no electric connection with your nature; it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead. To an Arab, however (even if he be not one of the Mahdi's followers), the hypothesis is among the mind's possibilities; it is alive. This shows that deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker. They are measured by his willingness to act. The maximum of liveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. Practically that means belief; but there is some believing tendency wherever there is willingness to act at all.

Next, let us call the decision between two hypotheses an option. Options may be of several kinds. They may be (a) *living* or *dead*; (b) *forced* or *avoidable*; (c) *momentous* or *trivial*; and for our purposes we may call an option a *genuine* option when it is of the forced, living and momentous kind.

¹ An Address to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities. Published in the *New World*, June, 1896. This work is in the public domain.

(a) A living option is one in which both hypotheses are live ones. If I say to you: "Be a theosophist or a Mohammedan," it is probably a dead option, because for you neither hypothesis is likely to be alive. But if I say: "Be an agnostic or a Christian," it is otherwise: trained as you are, each hypothesis makes some appeal, however small, to your belief.

(b) Next, if I say to you: "Choose between going out with your umbrella or without it," I do not offer you a genuine option, for it is not forced. You can easily avoid it by not going out at all. Similarly, if I say, "Either love me or hate me," "Either call my theory true or call it false," your option is avoidable. You may remain indifferent to me, neither loving or hating, and you may decline to offer any judgment as to my theory. But if I say, "Either accept this truth or go without it," I put on you a forced option, for there is no standing place outside of the alternative. Every logical dilemma, with no possibility of not choosing, is an option of this forced kind.

(c) Finally, if I were Dr. Nansen [a Norwegian explorer and statesman] and proposed to you to join my North Pole expedition, your option would be momentous, for this would probably be your only similar opportunity, and your choice now would either exclude you from the North Pole sort of immortality altogether or put at least the chance of it in your hands. He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he tried and failed. *Per contra* [on the contrary], the option is trivial when the opportunity is not unique, when the stake is insignificant, or when the decision is reversible if it later proved unwise. Such trivial options abound in the scientific life. A chemist finds an hypothesis live enough to spend a year in its verification: he believes in it to that extent. But if his experiments proved inconclusive either way, he is quit for his loss of time, no vital harm being done. It will facilitate our discussion if we keep these distinctions well in mind.

IV

... The thesis I defend is, briefly stated, this: *Our passionate nature must, and lawfully may, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide but leave the question open," is itself a passionate decision, just like deciding "yes" or "no," and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.* The thesis thus abstractly expressed will, I trust, soon become quite clear. But I must first indulge in a bit more of preliminary work.

VII

... There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion, ways entirely different, and yet ways about whose difference the theory of knowledge seems hitherto to have shown very little concern. *We must know the truth*; and *we must avoid error*—these are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers; but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws. Although it may indeed happen that, when we believe a truth A, we escape as an incidental consequence from believing the falsehood B, it hardly ever happens that by merely disbelieving the falsehood B, we incidentally must needs believe the truth A. We may, in escaping B, fall into believing other falsehoods, C or D, just as bad as B; or we may escape B by not believing anything at all, not even A. “Believe truth!” “Shun error!”—these, we see, are two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may color differently our whole intellectual life. We may regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary; or we may, on the other hand, treat the avoidance of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance. [W.K.] Clifford... tells us, keep your mind in suspense forever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies. You, on the other hand, may think that the risk of being in error is a very small matter when compared with the blessings of real knowledge, and be ready to be duped many times in your investigation rather than postpone indefinitely the chance of guessing true. I myself find it impossible to go with Clifford. We must remember that these feelings of our duty about either truth or error are in any case only expressions of our passional life. Biologically considered, our minds are as ready to grind out falsehood as veracity, and he who says, “Better go without belief forever than believe a lie!” merely shows his own preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe. He may be critical of many of his desires and fears, but this fear he slavishly obeys. He cannot detach himself from it even hypothetically or imagine any one questioning its binding force. For my own part, I have also a horror of being duped. But I can believe that worse things than being duped may happen to a man in this world, so Clifford’s exhortation has to my ears a thoroughly fantastic sound. It is like a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound. Not so are victories either over enemies or over nature gained. Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things. In a world where we are so certain to incur them in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness on their behalf. At any rate it seems the fittest thing for the empiricist philosopher.

VIII

And now, after all this introduction, let us go straight at our question. I have said, and now repeat it, that not only as a matter of fact do we find our passionate nature influencing us in our opinions, but that there are some options between opinions in which this influence must be regarded both as an inevitable and as a lawful determinant of our choice.

I fear here that some of you my hearers will begin to scent danger and lend an inhospitable ear. Two first steps of passion you have indeed had to admit as necessary—we must think so as to avoid dupery, and we must think so as to gain truth—but the surest path to those ideal consummations, you will probably consider, is from now onwards to take no farther passionate step. Well, of course, I agree as far as the facts will allow. Wherever the option between losing truth and gaining it is not momentous, we can throw the chance of *gaining truth* away, and at any rate save ourselves from any chance of *believing falsehood*, by not making up our minds at all till objective evidence has come. In scientific questions, this is almost always the case. And in human affairs in general, even, the need of acting is seldom so urgent that a false belief to act on is better than no belief at all. Law courts, indeed, have to decide on the best evidence attainable for the moment, because a judge's duty is to make law as well as to ascertain it, and (as a learned judge once said to me) few cases are worth spending much time over—the great thing is to have them decided on *any* acceptable principle, and got out of the way. But in our dealings with objective nature we obviously are mere recorders, not makers of the truth; and decisions for the mere sake of deciding promptly and getting on to the next business would be wholly out of place. Throughout the breadth of physical nature facts are what they are quite independently of us, and seldom is there any such hurry about them that the risks of being duped by believing a premature theory need be faced. The questions here are always trivial options, the hypotheses are hardly living (at any rate not living for us spectators), the choice between believing truth or falsehood is seldom forced. The attitude of skeptical balance is therefore the absolutely wise one if we wish to escape mistakes. What difference, indeed, does it make to most of us whether we have or have not a theory of the Roentgen rays, whether we believe or not in mind-stuff, or have a definitive conviction about the causality of conscious states? It makes no difference. Such options are not forced on us. On every account it is better not to make them, but still keep weighing reasons *pro et contra* [pro and con] with an indifferent hand. I speak, of course, here of the purely judging mind. For purposes of discovery such indifference is to be less highly recommended, and science would be far less advanced than she is if the passionate desires of individuals to get their own faiths confirmed had been kept

out of the game. In fact, if you want an absolute duffer in an investigation, you must, after all, take the man who has no interest whatever in its results. He is the warranted incapable, the positive fool. The most useful investigator, because the most sensitive observer, is always he whose eager interest in one side of the question is balanced by an equally keen nervousness lest he become deceived. Science has organized this nervousness into a regular *technique*, her so-called method of verification, and she has fallen so deeply in love with the method that one may even say she has ceased to care for truth by itself at all. It is only truth as technically verified that interests her. The truth of truths might come in merely oracular or affirmative form, and she would decline to look at it. Such truth as that, she might [say],... would be stolen in defiance of her duty to mankind. Human passions, however, are stronger than technical rules. "*Le coeur a ses raisons,*" as Pascal says, "*que la raison ne connaît pas*" ["The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know" Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), *Pensées*, no. 277)]; and however indifferent to all but the bare rules of the game the umpire, the abstract intellect, may be, the concrete players who furnish him the materials to judge of, are usually, each one of them, in love with some pet "live hypothesis" of his own.

Let us agree, however, that wherever there is no forced option, the dispassionately judicial intellect, with no pet hypothesis, saving us at any rate from dupery, ought to be our ideal. The question next arises: 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? It seems a priori improbable that the truth should be so nicely adjusted to our needs and powers as that. In the great boarding-house of nature, the cakes and the butter and the syrup seldom come out so even and leave the plates so clean. Indeed we should view them with scientific suspicion if they did.

IX

Moral questions immediately present themselves as questions whose solution cannot wait for sensible proof. A moral question is a question not of what sensibly exists, but of what is good, or would be good if it did exist. Science can tell us what exists, but to compare the *worths*, both of what exists and of what does not exist, we must consult not science but what Pascal calls our heart....

Turn now from these wide questions of good to a certain class of questions of fact, questions concerning personal relations, states of mind between one man and another. *Do you like me or not?*—for example. Whether you do or not depends, in countless instances, on whether I meet you halfway, am willing to assume that

you must like me, and show you trust and expectation. The previous faith on my part in your liking's existence is what makes your liking come. If I stand aloof and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, until you have done something apt, as the absolutists say, *ad extorquendum assensum meum* ["to force my assent"], 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! The desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth's existence, and so it is in innumerable cases of other sorts. Who gains promotions, boons, appointments, but the man in whose life they are seen to play the part of live hypotheses, who discounts them, sacrifices other things for their sake before they have come, and takes risks for them in advance? His faith acts on the powers above him as a claim, and creates its own verification.

Where faith in a fact, based on need of the fact, can create the fact, that would be an insane logic which should say that faith based on inner need, and running ahead of scientific evidence, is the "lowest kind of immorality" into which a thinking being can fall. Yet such is the logic by which our scientific absolutists pretend to regulate our lives!

X

In truths dependent on our personal action, then, faith based on desire is certainly a lawful, and possibly an indispensable thing. But now, it will be said, these are all childish human cases, and have nothing to do with great cosmical matters, like the question of religious faith. Let us then pass on to that! Religions differ so much in their accidents that in discussing the religious question we must make it very generic and broad. What then do we now mean by the religious hypothesis? Science says things are; morality says some things are better than other things; and religion says essentially two things:

First, she says that the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word. "Perfection is eternal" — this phrase of Charles Secrétan seems a good way of putting this first affirmation of religion, an affirmation that obviously cannot yet be verified scientifically at all.

And the second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now *if we believe* that first religious truth.

Now let us consider what the logical elements of this situation are *in case the religious hypothesis in both its branches be really true*. (Of course we must admit that possibility at the outset. If we are to discuss the question at all, it must involve a living option. If for any of you religion be a hypothesis that cannot, by any living possibility be true, then you need go no further. I speak to the “saving remnant” alone.) So proceeding, we see, first, that religion offers itself as a *momentous* option. We are supposed to gain, even now, by our belief, and to lose by our nonbelief, a certain vital good. Secondly, religion is a *forced* option, so far as that good goes. We cannot escape the issue by remaining skeptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*, we lose the good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve. It is as if a man should hesitate indefinitely to ask a certain woman to marry him because he was not sure whether she would prove an angel or a devil after he brought her home. Would he not cut himself off from that particular angel-possibility as decisively as if he went and married some one else? Skepticism, then, is not avoidance of option; it is option of a certain particular kind of risk. *Better risk loss of truth than chance of error*—that is your faith-vetoer’s exact position. He is actively playing his stake as much as the believer is; he is backing the field against the religious hypothesis, just as the believer is backing the religious hypothesis against the field. To preach skepticism to us as a duty until “sufficient evidence” for religion be found, is tantamount therefore to telling us when in presence of the religious hypothesis, that to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true. It is not intellect against all passions, then; it is only intellect with one passion laying down its law. And by what, forsooth, is the supreme wisdom of this passion warranted? And dupery for dupery, what proof is there that dupery through hope is so much worse a kind of dupery than dupery through fear? I, for one, can see no proof. And I simply refuse obedience to the scientist’s command to imitate his kind of option, in a case where my own stake is important enough to give me the right to choose my own form of risk. If religion be true and the evidence for it be still insufficient, I do not wish, by putting your extinguisher upon my nature (which feels to me as if it had some business in this matter), to forfeit my sole chance in life of getting upon the winning side—that chance depending, of course, on my willingness to run the risk of acting as if my passional need of taking the world religiously might be prophetic and right.

All this is on the supposition that it really *may* be prophetic and right, that, even to us who are discussing the matter, religion is a live hypothesis. Now to most of us religion comes in a still farther way that makes a veto on our active faith even more illogical. The more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is

represented in our religions as having personal form. The universe is no longer a mere *It* to us, but a *Thou*, if we are religious; and any relation that may be possible from person to person might be possible here. For instance, although in one sense we are passive portions of the universe, in another we show a curious autonomy, as if we were small active centers on our own account. We feel, too, as if the appeal of religion to us were made to our own active good will, as if evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis halfway. To take a trivial illustration, just as a man who, in a company of gentlemen, made no advances, asked a warrant for every concession, and believed no one's word without proof, would cut himself off by such churlishness from all the social rewards that a more trusting spirit would earn; so here, one who should shut himself up in snarling logicality and try to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly, or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity of making the gods' acquaintance. This feeling, forced on us we know not whence, that by obstinately believing that there are gods (although not to do so would be so easy both for our logic and our life) we are doing the universe the deepest service we can, seems part of the living essence of the religious hypothesis. If the hypothesis were true in all its parts, including this one, then pure intellectualism, with its veto on our making willing advances, would be an absurdity; and some participation of our sympathetic nature would be logically required. I, therefore, for one, cannot see my way to accepting the agnostic rules for truth seeking, or willfully agree to keep my willing nature out of the game. I cannot do so for this plain reason, that *a code that would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational code.* This for me is the long and short of the formal logic of the situation, no matter what the kinds of truth might materially be.

I confess I do not see how this logic can be escaped. But sad experience makes me fear that some of you may still shrink from radically saying with me *in abstracto* ["abstractly"] that we have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will. I suspect, if this is so, however, that it is because you have got away from the abstract logical point of view altogether, and are thinking (perhaps without realizing it) of some particular religious hypothesis which for you is dead. The freedom to "believe what we will" you apply to the case of some patent superstition, and the faith you think of is the faith defined by the schoolboy when he said, "Faith is when you believe something that you know ain't true." I can only repeat that this is misapprehension. *In concreto* the freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem

absurdities to him who has them to consider. When I look at the religious question, as it really puts itself to concrete men, when I think of all the possibilities which it theoretically involves, then this command that we shall put a stopper on our heart, instincts and courage, and wait—*acting* of course meanwhile more or less as if religion were *not* true—till doomsday, or till such time as our intellect and senses working together may have raked in evidence enough—this command, I say, seems to me the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave. Were we scholastic absolutists, there might be more excuse. If we had an infallible intellect with its objective certitudes, we might feel ourselves disloyal to such an organ of knowledge in not trusting to it exclusively, in not waiting for its solving word. But if we are empiricists, if we believe that no bell in us tolls to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp, then it seems a piece of idle fantasticality to preach so solemnly our duty of waiting for the bell. Indeed we may wait if we will; but we do so at our peril, as much as if we believed. In *either* case we *act*, taking our life in our hands. 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 each other'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.