



Practical Life in the Face of Abstract Principles in William James

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Research Article

Submitted: 23.04.2023 | Accepted: 20.05.2023

Abstract: In the history of philosophy, philosophers have defined philosophy based on their own perspectives. This situation shows that it is a difficult and meaningless endeavor to put forward an understanding of philosophy that has clear boundaries and is accepted by everyone. However, despite these differences in definitions, there are some common points. Perhaps the most important of these common points is that philosophy is a stance, a positioning activity in the face of truth. In this positioning, William James tried to find the moderate path between the currents of rationalism and empiricism and took a stance based on concrete differences in life. Like the empiricists, he tried to keep people's relations with facts alive, but at the same time, he did not exclude religion by adopting a rationalist attitude. However, James argued that abstract concepts cannot have meaning unless they find their counterpart in life. According to James, a life based only on abstract principles would not be qualified. In this study, I will try reconciling William James' attitude towards abstract principles with practical life.

Keywords: William James, abstract principles, concepts, common points, practical life.

William James directed all his criticism towards the understanding of “a principle that is eternally determined and will not change forever, but will change everything that is subject to it”. It seems more possible to explain this criticism of James with the example of the aquarium¹ he gives in his book “Pragmatism”. James asks us to look through the flat glass of an aquarium. He asks us to assume that there is a light or a candle in front of the aquarium. We can only see the reflection of the light from the candle in the water. No light from the candle will go beyond the water; all the rays will be completely reflected into the depths. In this example given by James, the water represents the world of facts and the air above the water represents the world of abstract thoughts. James says that both are real and interact with each other, but that this interaction can only take place on their borderline. If people ignore the world of facts in which they live and turn only to abstract principles, then the inevitable result will be that they will be crushed under the realm of ideals they cannot reach.

James gives another example reflecting his perspective on abstract principles in the chapter “Pragmatism and Humanism” of his book “Pragmatism”. In this chapter, James discusses the concept of winter behind the cold nights and talks about the abstractness of this concept.² According to James, the fact that there is winter behind the cold nights does not guarantee anything, as the weather may warm up again tomorrow. Concepts like winter are the naming of certain habits. At this point, the concrete difference that the concept of winter makes in practice is that we behave in a way that is appropriate for winter. For example, we take an umbrella with us or we prefer warmer clothes. As Suckiel notes, a philosophical claim is pragmatically meaningless if it does not have reasonable consequences in the lives of those who believe in it.³

¹ William James, *Pragmatizm*, Tr. trans. Tahir Karakař (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2015), 107.

² James, *Pragmatizm*, 192.

³ Ellen Kappy Suckiel, *William James'in Pragmatik Felsefesi*, Tr. trans. Celal Türer

As can be seen, James does not reject the existence of abstract concepts but emphasizes their functionality. James' emphasis on the functionality of concepts is important in terms of showing us that it would be wrong to make our own truths into a single truth and uniformize people and that no idea is worth defending with fire as if it will never change.

Wherever we look in history, we see that human identification with truth always brings with it an exclusionist attitude. Deleuze called classical philosophy the "philosophy of representation" because of this attitude. With this philosophy, which is based on the principle of identity, the representation of the unrepresentable was made possible, and it was concerning it that an ahistorical understanding of truth could be put forward.⁴ In classical philosophy, where "One" has priority and superiority over many and "Identity" over difference, reality is constructed through abstract conceptual generalizations far from becoming and life. Indeed, as Deleuze puts it regarding Proust, "truth is never the product of pre-formed good intentions, but the result of a violence in thought."⁵ In this respect, James' philosophy states that relying only on abstract principles would make it impossible for us to see and understand others as a requirement of these principles.

In the context of abstract principles, it would be useful to mention William James' views on truth and reality. James says that when people are young, they pursue the question "What is truth?" and think that truth must be the same. According to him, this thought causes an exclusionist attitude and creates a certain monopolism in the field of truth. However, as one grows older, one does not even look at the question "What is truth?" as a real question but realizes that what we call truth are expressions that fulfill certain functions in life.⁶

(İstanbul: Paradigma Yayınları, 2003), 7.

⁴ Kasım Küçükcalp, "Gilles Deleuze," *Çağdaş Fransız Felsefesi*, ed. Işıl Bayar Bravo - Hamdi Bravo - Banu Alan Sümer (Ankara: Phoenix Yayınevi, 2019), 260.

⁵ Küçükcalp, "Gilles Deleuze," 263.

⁶ James, *Pragmatizm*, 176.

With these statements, James establishes a direct connection between truth/reality and human beings. Indeed, knowing is learning by seeing. The things we look at and see are in complete chaos. Wherever we look, we see that everything is connected to everything else. But when we try to catch this connection, we realize that it is not so easy. Or we think that nothing is connected, but in some situations, we feel as if there is a connection between things. James argues that we develop “theories” to eliminate this complexity in the way reality is presented to us and to make sense of it. Thus, we now form a chain of meanings by addressing some of the multiplicity and complexity of reality.

James's emphasis on human beings in theorizing does not mean that everything has to be completely recreated from the ground up. Indeed, James says that our truths should not conflict with other truths and vital interests. We only need to know that our truths are in fact “our truths”. When the first mathematical, logical laws of nature were discovered, people were fascinated by the fact that their work became stable, easy and beautiful, and they thought they had correctly decoded the eternal ideas of God. But as the sciences progressed further, they found that many, perhaps all, of the laws were far from certain. With the continuity of human discovery and the vast increase in the number of laws discovered, the idea that laws were absolute truths was replaced by the idea that they were something that could be utilized. “The great utility of our theories is that they summarize old facts and lead us to new ones”, says William James.⁷ So laws are conceptual shorthand languages that allow us to summarize.

The division of human behavior into legal or illegal, of speech into right or wrong, is something that developed by random chance. Beliefs are built on previous beliefs, laws on previous laws, truths on previous truths, and change them. At this point, it cannot be considered independent of the past. William James states that it is a mistake to think that truths, laws and beliefs are

⁷ James, *Pragmatizm*, 67.

predetermined and will last forever.⁸ Our rights, wrongs, punishments, namely everything about us are abstract names that express the results of the historical process.

William James in his essay “Humanism and Truth” stated that his pragmatism was surpassed by John Dewey and Schiller with a bold pragmatism. In this respect, there has been an expansion in the meaning of pragmatism. With this expansion, pragmatism has come to be understood not only as a style for discussing abstract concepts but also as a theory of truth.

Schiller states that even the most basic principles of reason are directed toward solving practical problems. All human thought is directed towards a certain goal. Even the most absolute truths emerged as a result of a process determined by human elements and gained the title of truth after passing certain tests. Schiller thought that laws and languages were human creations and applied them to beliefs and suggested that this attitude should be called “Humanism”.⁹ When we look at William James’ “The Principles of Psychology” published in 1890, we can find many points that overlap with Schiller’s views. We can say that this work of James is generally discussed under four headings: Stream of Consciousness, What is Emotion, Habits, and Will. William James emphasizes four points in the stream of consciousness.¹⁰

The first of these is that consciousness is always conscious of something, the second is that consciousness is in a flow, the third is that we tend to certain things within this flow, and the fourth is that the mind has a teleological (purposive) structure. According to James, human beings pursue a goal when they tend towards something. The mind transforms the chaos of the senses into a cosmos by making certain choices in the face of the things to which it is directed and thus reveals its functionality.¹¹ Understanding this

⁸ James, *Pragmatizm*, 177.

⁹ James, *Pragmatizm*, 177.

¹⁰ William James, *Bilinç Akışı: Zihin ve Deneyim Üzerine*, Tr. trans. Celal Türer (Ankara, Fol Kitap, 2021), 124-143.

¹¹ Ahmet Hamdi İşcan, *Bölünmüş Benlik Sorunu* (Ankara: Eski Yeni Yayınları, 2022), 46.

purpose only as utilitarianism does not seem to be consistent with James' philosophical framework. This is because when turning towards something, one also considers that it is good and pleasant, that it provides benefit and pleasure. Pursuing a goal does not mean turning towards only one of these. A goal implicitly includes all of them.

When talking about intentionality, James tells us that something presents itself to us, we turn towards it and it turns towards us. In other words, we can only understand the object in our connection with the object. As James puts it, what we receive is raw marble, it is up to us to carve the sculpture. In other words, the fact that the essence of the world is plastic makes it impossible for us to understand something just because it is itself. The essence of the world is plastic, it can be combined in different ways like Lego. It stands before us as a sea of possibilities. Because of this understanding, Schiller was subjected to intense criticism, especially by rationalists.¹² However, James, in his book *Pragmatism*, sided with Schiller by saying that "all our truths are our beliefs in reality."¹³

At this point, it is necessary to consider what James says about reality. According to James, the first part of reality is the flow of our sensations. We cannot know where sensations come from, they impose themselves on us. We cannot call them true or false, they just exist. If we can call anything true or false, it is our theories about them.

The second part of reality is the relations between our senses or their copies in the mind. In this relationship, we can speak of two sub-parts. The first is changeable, and incidental, in terms of date and place; the second is fixed and essential in terms of similarity and dissimilarity. According to James, it is the second type of relationship that is important. According to the second type of relation, the world is reconstructed every day. However, to make

¹² James, *Pragmatizm*, 73.

¹³ James, *Pragmatizm*, 178.

it meaningful, we carry our past experiences into our present through similarity or dissimilarity. In this way, we establish a relationship of continuity between what we experienced yesterday and what we experience now or will experience today. For example, when we eat yesterday's food today, today's food is neither the same as yesterday's food nor is there a sameness between yesterday's and today's self.

It is also possible to say this about human character. One puts oneself under a continuity or a standard and tries to reassure oneself and others by carrying one's past to one's present by resembling or not resembling it. In this way, one provides self-confidence by saying I shouldn't have done this and motivation by saying I will try not to do this because continuity can only be achieved through self-realization.

The third part of reality is prior truths.¹⁴ As mentioned above, most of our knowledge is based on prior truths. To illustrate this with a human example, an individual has a pile of ideas beforehand. But after a while, he encounters an experience that puts him in a difficult situation. However, like every human being, he wants to keep his stock of ideas and this new information causes him some inner distress. He changes his ideas until he minimizes his inner distress. But this stockpile is still there and the new arrival is linked to the stockpile.¹⁵ The previous pile of truth is thus preserved with minimal change.

New knowledge only comes and is added, we can only speak of it as "there is". The truth is what we say about them.¹⁶ What is constant is that we read the same facts in different ways. James gives the example of the Battle of Waterloo to illustrate this. For the British, Waterloo is a victory, for the French it is a defeat. The same thing can be interpreted differently depending on where one looks. We are not talking about reality but about our point of view. What that thing is depends entirely on us, while its existence

¹⁴ James, *Pragmatism*, 179.

¹⁵ James, *Pragmatism*, 69.

¹⁶ James, *Pragmatism*, 71.

depends on itself. This attitude also applies to works of truth such as mathematics and geometry, which we call eternal reality. Until these works come into being, we read them in one way or another, categorize them, and take one or another as a basis. What makes mathematics, for example, permanently true is its long-standing utility in the realm of practical experience. The facts that people add to the substance of reality with what they do, they have already added to the third part of reality without articulating them.¹⁷

As long as reality is dealt with independently of human thought, it will remain elusive and thus be reduced to some kind of abstract, imaginary principle in which human experience is not involved. Indeed, James also states that what we call reality is the interpretation of what is perceived, which leads us to one of the most important questions of philosophy: To what extent does the world we perceive represent the real world? Schiller says that where we think we have reached reality, what we have is always a fake of it. In Bradley's words, we encounter reality, but we do not possess it. James says that truth is our belief about reality.¹⁸ Therefore, it is very normal to have some human elements in it. When a person takes a step, does he use his right foot more or his left foot? Does the river make the bed or does the bed make the river? Since both possibilities are possible, it is difficult to give a definitive answer. Just like the difficulty we face when trying to answer questions like these, trying to distinguish between the real and the human in a precise way is also very difficult and meaningless.¹⁹

William James' attitude towards truth can be seen in the following statements: "There are several theories about the source of reality. Whichever of these is the most satisfactory, it acquires the

¹⁷ James, *Pragmatizm*, 181.

¹⁸ James, *Pragmatizm*, 181.

¹⁹ James, *Pragmatizm*, 183.

quality of truth.”²⁰ William James’ attitude that truth is the satisfactory one is also seen in *Will to Believe*. In the sixth chapter of the book, he states that the most correct scientific hypothesis is the one that works best, and that this also applies to religious hypotheses.

According to William James, human beings design reality to suit their purposes. Reality passively obeys this. For example, it is possible to say that a line goes eastward or westward. In a conference, the speaker may say “audience” or “guests” instead of “ladies” or “gentlemen”. None of these perceptions is wrong. These characterizations do not make one more correct or incorrect than the other. We intervene in sensible reality and reality passively allows it. James calls this conclusion the Humanist principle. It is therefore impossible to separate human elements from reality. Our beliefs determine what we perceive, what we perceive determines what we do, and what we do determines what we experience. This flow remains our own creation from beginning to end.²¹

The question is this: Do our additions to this flow add value or are they themselves worthless? Lotze says that reality stands somewhere, waiting for us to understand it, and adds: “But can't descriptions be important additions to reality?” Schopenhauer emphasizes description in one of his books with these words: There is no beauty in the world, only descriptions of it. In another book, he says that it is not what people have that should be envied, but how they describe what they have. While someone with an ordinary mind may describe an event ordinarily, the same event may be exciting for someone else. In the same way, the Stoics said that it is our descriptions that are the most important and that suffering arises not in the events experienced but in our valuation of them. As we see in these examples, we add to both the subject and the predicate of reality. What matters is our perspective on events and our evaluations.

²⁰ James, *Pragmatism*, 182.

²¹ James, *Pragmatism*, 185.

Conclusion

This attitude of James towards abstract principles distinguishes him from rationalism. In rationalism, truth has existed for eternity and is complete. The certainty of reality makes it impossible to encounter surprises in life and makes the world a safe place. According to Pragmatism, of which James is an important proponent, reality is in a state of becoming. However, in Pragmatism, the universe is full of adventures. Like Socrates' criticism of Protagoras in Ancient Greece, Bradley criticizes James by saying "According to what you say, everything you say must be accepted as true". However, this criticism ignores the fact that Pragmatists say that we should not be satisfied with a mere copy of reality and that reality is an energy that can be shaped even if it resists.²²

As mentioned above in the example of the aquarium, James does not approve of a conception of life based solely on abstract principles. Concepts have separate characteristics due to their structure. However, the experience itself is in a state of flux, providing a holistic perspective. James does not see concepts as completely unnecessary either. Indeed, as James notes, abstract principles are not objectionable as long as they help us navigate between particulars and get somewhere.

James says that abstract principles emerge from experience, while concepts leak from perceptions. In other words, experiences are at the basis of everything, and we form concepts through abstraction. James says that when these concepts return to experience, they will have a functioning structure, and that this functioning does not determine the future, but that it helps us in some respects in our lives.

²² James, *Pragmatizm*, 187.

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