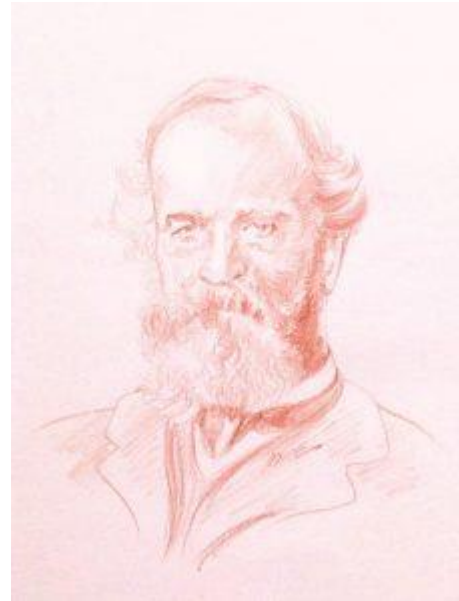


How Do We Hold to a Stock of Old Opinions?

American philosopher and psychologist William James describes the 'observable processes' of how people *settle into new opinions* by starting with the fact that any individual has a "stock of old opinions" (p.23-4).

A person's current stock of opinions is put under strain when she or he meets a 'new experience', such as somebody contradicting their opinions, finding that their opinions contradict each other, becoming aware of facts with which their current opinions are incompatible, or new desires arising which the current stock of opinions does not satisfy.



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James suggests that these types of confrontations with the existing stock of opinions give rise to an 'inward trouble' to which, until then, the person's mind had been 'a stranger'. Consequently, the person seeks to escape from this unease by modifying her or his 'previous mass of opinions'. People do this, according to James, in the following way: a person saves as much of the stock of opinions as she or he can – "for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives" – so that a person

*"...tries to change first this opinion, and then that (for they resist change very variously), until at last **some idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter**"*

that is, some idea is found that

"...mediates between the stock [of old opinions] and the new experience [challenging the existing stock] and runs them into one another most felicitously and expeditiously." (p.24)

In other words, the new idea facilitates accommodating the new experience into the existing stock of opinions with the least discomfort as possible. This *new idea*, as James puts it, is taken on as *the true one*, since it

*"...preserves the older stock of truth with a minimum of modifications, **stretching them just enough to make them admit their novelty**, but conceiving that in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible."*



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The result is little change in that the "...most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leave most of his old order standing" and fundamental ideas, such as, "[t]ime and space, cause and effect, nature and history, and one's own biography remain untouched." (p.24; emphases added)

James continues to explain, first, that the **role of the new idea (truth)** is to limit disruption and maintain the current position as it is

"... always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions..."

Since, in its role, it

*"...marries old opinions to new fact so as ever to show a **minimum jolt**, a **maximum of continuity**. We hold a theory true just in proportion to its success in solving this 'problem of maxima and minima'..."*

He points out to success in solving the problem of minimizing jolt and maximizing continuity as being a '*matter of approximation*' because

*"[w]e say that this theory solves [the 'problem of maxima and minima'] on the whole more satisfactorily than that theory; but that **means more satisfactorily to ourselves**, and individuals will emphasise their points of satisfaction differently."
(p.24; emphases added)*

He then addresses, second, the **role played by the older truths** (current stock of opinions) whose influence he sees as 'absolutely controlling'. This is because 'loyalty to them is the first principle' and, as far as James is concerned, 'in most cases it is the only principle' since

*"...by far the usual way of handling phenomena so novel that they would make for a serious rearrangement of our preconceptions is to **ignore them altogether**, or to **abuse those who bear witness for them**."
(p.24; emphases added)*

ECHOES OF JAMES TODAY

"Increasingly, we are snugly wrapped in our worldviews. Conservatives see everything in blue, progressives in red. The internet seems designed to back up our opinions, because when we're online we make a habit of seeking out the like-minded. We gang up on those we disagree with, rather than listening carefully to contrary opinions."

David Mikics, What Crime and Punishment can teach you that the internet can't, *New Statesman*, 25 November 2013.

The **overall outcome of the interaction of the two aspects** identified by James is that:

*"A **new opinion** counts a 'true' just in proportion as it gratifies the individual's desire to assimilate the novel in his experience to his beliefs in stock. It must both **lean on old truth and grasp new fact**; and its success...in doing this, is a matter for the individual's appreciation. When old truth grows, then, by new truth's addition, it is for **subjective reasons**."
(p.25; emphases added)*

Therefore, pointing out that “[w]e are in the process and obey its reasons”, James states that the “truest idea” is the one that “performs most felicitously its function of satisfying our double urgency”. First, this idea

i. “makes itself true, gets itself classed as true, by the way it works”

and, second,

ii. “grafting itself then upon the ancient body of truth, which thus grows much as a tree grows by the activity of a new layer of cambium.” (p.25)

In this way, according to James, we revise slowly our opinions and only under strong pressures for change. Incrementally we add thin layers of the new to the bulk of the old. We lean towards the closed feeling for holding to certainty rather than open feeling of searching for truth.

Slowly, reluctantly and with a sense of loss we may move from the past to the future. Otherwise, as Robert Pirsig famously said, in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, we are in ‘stuckness’.