

Pragmatism was formulated in 1878 in an article called **HOW TO MAKE OUR IDEAS CLEAR** by [Charles Pierce, the inventor of statistics and semiotics](#). It was expanded upon and disseminated by his friend [the philosopher and founder of psychology, William James](#), together with philosopher and [progressive educator John Dewey](#) (and closely read by jurist and eventual Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes) from the 1890s for more than 30 years. James and Dewey considered [Pragmatism as a method rather than a theory](#), and, moreover, that method is all there is and all there needs to be. They abandoned Truth, Reality, etc. as separate, capitalized philosophical constructs for a theory of truth that is less a theory, and more a performed (written and lived) holistic awareness of the relation between humans and their surroundings in time. Pragmatist reality is [simply the back-and-forth between the self and the world](#), and the process of trial and error as it exists [in time](#), contingent on conditions in the world. Early in his description, [James suggests that Pragmatism involves the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories', supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.](#) (**PRAGMATISM: A NEW NAME FOR SOME OLD WAYS OF THINKING (1907)**, Dover 1995: ISBN 0-486-28270-8, p 22) **Pragmatism shifts the philosopher's definition of Truth from a finished ideal, separate from existence:** [The universe has always appeared to the natural mind as a kind of enigma, of which the key must be sought in the shape of some illuminating or power-bringing word or name. That word names the universe's principle, and to possess it is, after a fashion, to possess the universe itself. 'God,' 'Matter,' 'Reason,' 'the Absolute,' 'Energy,' are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest. . . . into the only thing that exists, which is always in the making:](#) *But if you follow the pragmatist method, you cannot look on any such word as closing your quest. You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of experience. It appears less as a solution than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be changed.* (p 21) Pragmatism only follows here the example of the sister-sciences, [interpreting the unobserved by the observed](#). . . . *It converts the absolutely empty notion of a static relation of 'correspondence' (what that may mean we ask later) between our minds and reality, into that of a rich and active 'commerce' (that anyone may follow in detail and understand) between particular thoughts of ours, and the great universe of other experiences in which they play their parts and have their uses.* (**PRAGMATISM**, p 27) **Rather than Truth as distinct and complete, truth is the story of how it becomes true:** [The process here is always the same.](#) *The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. . . . the result is an inward trouble to which his mind had until then been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives. So he tries to change first this opinion, then that . . . until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter, some idea that mediates between the stock and the new experience and runs them together most felicitously and expediently. This new idea is then adopted as the true one. . . . An outré explanation, violating our preconceptions, would never pass for a true account of a novelty. We should scratch round industriously till we found something less eccentric. . . .* (**PRAGMATISM**, p 24) Although this can, from one point of view, be read as relativism, Pragmatism [has not thrown truth away](#). **Truth is understood as a truth-making process which is best understood as conservative, its movements as incremental, as the bodies of knowledge of science and law:** *The point I now urge you to observe particularly is the part played by older truths. Their influence is absolutely controlling. Loyalty to them is the first principle -- in most cases it is the only principle; for by far the most usual way of handling phenomena so novel that they would make for a serious re-arrangement of our preconceptions is to ignore them altogether.* (**PRAGMATISM**, p 24)