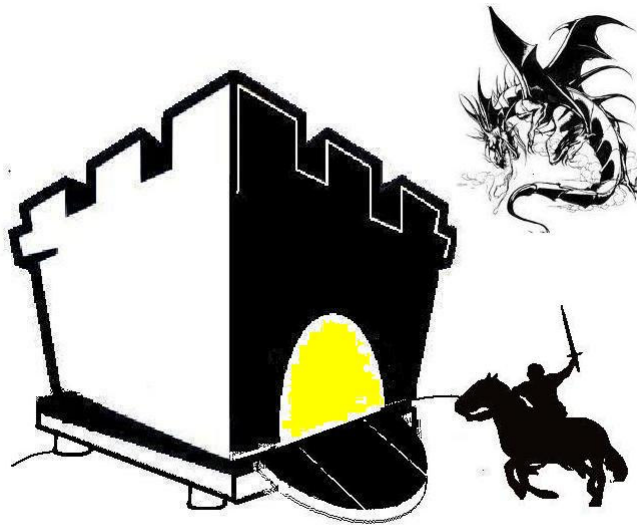# Fortress Living

Three Solutions for Your Greatest Problems in Life

Fortress Living: Three Solutions for your Greatest Problems in Life

Lesson Eleven   *"Modern" Solutions to the Greatest Problems in Life*

Seven Historical Periods

PERIOD	YEARS	Normative Solutions (Philosophy and Theology)	Situational Solutions (Arts and Culture)	Relational Solutions (Ethics and Spirituality)
Ancient	5th Century BC to 5th Century AD	The State Gives Norms – – – – – – – – – – – – *Rationalism*	Classicism – – – – – – – – – – – – Stauary	* Ethical Hedonism * Bad: religious persecution * Good: religious purification
Medieval	500 AD to 1400	The Church Gives Norms – – – – – – – – – – – – *Scholasticism*	Mysticism – – – – – – – – – – – – Byzantine	* Ethical Legalism * Bad: Biblical illiteracy * Good: Piety and Devotion
Renaissance	1400 to 1600	Reason Gives Norms – – – – – – – – – – – – *Humanism*	Naturalism – – – – – – – – – – – – Giotto	* Ethical Dualism * Bad: compartmentalization * Good: helpful inventions
Enlightenment	1600 to 1800	Subjective Mind Gives Norms – – – – – – – – – – – – *Rational Idealism*	Neoclassicism – – – – – – – – – – – – Beethoven and J.L David	* Ethical Utopianism * Bad: idolatry of the state * Good: religious liberty
Scientific	1800 to 1900	Science Gives Norms – – – – – – – – – – – – *Empiricism*	Romanticism – – – – – – – – – – – – R. Wagner *Ring Cycle*	* Ethical Positivism * Bad: reason over revelation * Good: reasons to believe
Modern	1900 to 2000	Self Gives Norms – – – – – – – – – – – – *Pragmatism*	Impressionism – – – – – – – – – – – – Monet *Poplars at Giverney*	* Ethical Individualism * Bad: social isolation * Good: inner spirituality
Post-modern	2000 and Beyond	No Norms – – – – – – – – – – – – *Nihilism*	Deconstructionism – – – – – – – – – – – – Picasso *Le Demoiselles*	* Ethical Relativism * Bad: reject tradition * Good: truth alone

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Modern	1900 to 2000	Self Gives Norms – – – – – – – – – – – – *Pragmatism*	Impressionism – – – – – – – – – – – – Monet *Poplars at Giverney*	* Ethical Individualism * Bad: social isolation * Good: inner spirituality

The Period: 1900 to 2000

The term "modern history" was first used in the Renaissance to distinguish it from the "pre-modern history" of ancient and medieval times. You can appreciate why those Renaissance Humanists would want to so divide history. They truly believed that everything before them was inferior. The word itself simply means "right now." Living 400 years after the term was first used, it is a bit ironic that it continues to make people think everything that took place before "now" is ancient. But that is part of the appeal of modernity in all its forms. It tends to reject the past as irrelevant or erroneous and insists that what is happening right now is all that matters.

Dominant Normative Solutions: Pragmatism

As we've seen 19th century empiricism emphasized normative answers to the greatest problems in life through induction and aposteriori reasoning. It looked for answers not in the pages of Scripture, from the king's palace, or even in the ancient libraries of the world. It looked for them in the laboratory. Perhaps you can imagine that, depending on the person running the experiment, there would be different interpretations of the results. In other words, if the laboratory is where the solutions to the greatest problems in life are found, different laboratories would arrive at different solutions. And that's exactly what happened at the end of the 20th century. Few disputed that the problems of danger, pain and failure had solutions (notwithstanding Carl Jung's early skepticism). But there was little agreement on what those solutions were. Most intellectuals and experts had long since rejected the possibility of some kind of supernatural or eternal solution. There was no confidence in the existence of an "upper level" in the cosmos where those solutions were found. It was either unknown or non-existent. Therefore, all we have is "right now." So, how do we know if one solution is better than another? It's by whatever works.

UPPER LEVEL: Unknown/Non-Existent
_____

LOWER LEVEL: Whatever Works

Fortress Living: Three Solutions for your Greatest Problems in Life

Philosophy at the beginning of the 20th century faced as big a crisis as that in Athens 2500 years before—perhaps greater. Once man had rejected belief in God and religion as some kind of solution, to what could he appeal? Even in the laboratory, how would one solution be evaluated over another? It was in this maelstrom that a distinctively American philosophy was born. It had roots in post-Kantian Europe. But the way it advanced was uniquely American. Its chief proponent was William James. And the philosophical school he promoted is called Pragmatism.
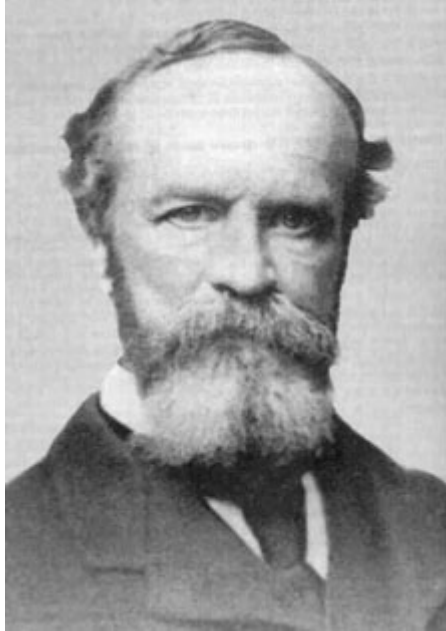
Of all the philosophies of history and culture, it seems to me that Pragmatism is the easiest to understand. Simply stated, Pragmatism focuses on what *works*. Pragmatism spends little time trying to figure out how we know truth. It cares little about certainty or even about transcendent values like "goodness" or "evil." When evaluating a solution to the great problems of life it only cares about one thing: "Does this solution work?"

A key phrase in James' pragmatic philosophy was "cash value." What is the "cash value" of a particular idea or practice to the one espousing it? For James, this was what made it true or not. Though he was a prolific writer, one of his most influential works was on religion, titled, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Using his pragmatism, James concluded that religious experience is true insofar as it has cash value in someone's life. In other words, if it works for some good purpose. It mattered little to him the content or meaning of those religious experiences. Whether or not they were "true" in some old-fashioned metaphysical sense was irrelevant. Thus, in a given neighborhood around his home near Harvard University, one might find an Episcopalian, a Unitarian, Methodist, Baptist, and even an atheist. James had no interest in determining if one of them was right and the others wrong. Indeed, those issues were meaningless to him. The test of right and wrong—truth and error—simply meant that their particular belief system worked for them. It had cash value in their lives.

It is not coincidental that James lectured in both philosophy and psychology at Harvard. For him those disciplines were directly linked by pragmatic theory. Studying the mind explained not only the varieties of religious experience but the varieties of philosophical experience. And, as I said, his interest was not to prove or disprove one over another but to show how people put them to work in their experience.

It is instructive to see how James used Pragmatism to explain the greatest problems in life. Obviously, he would not say there were only three solutions to them. His theory allowed any number of solutions, limited only by what works. But let's consider how a pragmatist even frames the problems.

Fortress Living: Three Solutions for your Greatest Problems in Life

In the field of psychology, one of William James' enduring contributions relates to his theory of emotion, particularly fear. He asked the question, Why does a man fear a bear? Does he run because he is afraid or is he afraid because he runs? Which answer we choose makes all the difference in our understanding not only of fear but also of the mind itself.

Prior to James, most people would have said, "we run from the bear because we are afraid of it." In this they indicate their assumption that fear exists as some objective and reasonable response to the great problem of danger. James put it like this:

> *Our natural way of thinking about... emotions is that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression.*

In other words, a man sees a bear and that triggers the emotion within which caues him to run. However, James rejects this premise.

> *My thesis on the contrary is that the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion.*

In other words, the emotion of fear follows the experience of running away and, over time, that experience becomes labeled in our mind as fear. "Fear feels like this." Thus, when a person sees a bear he runs away. During this act of escape his body goes through a physiological upheaval including elevated blood pressure, increasing heart rate, dilated pupils, sweating palms and muscle contraction. In each case, it is this physiological response we identify as the emotion of fear. Again, wee do not tremble because we are afraid. We do not cry because we feel sad. Rather, we are afraid because we tremble and are sad because we cry.

If normative solutions must come from somewhere, where do pragmatic ones arise? William James did not look to the church, the State or to academia. In the tradition of Immanuel Kant, he looked to the mind of man. Thus, if you are being chased by a bear and need a solution to the great problem of danger, to avoid the great problem of pain, and avoid the risk of the great problem of failure? You need look no further than within your own mind: What do you want to do? Whether you should run or not depends on you, not the bear. While running away may "work" best for you, there are other options equally as workable. In the Daniel Boone legends from the south, it was said that he didn't run from bears himself but "grinned them" down until they ran away from him. Perhaps it was in this context that President Franklin Roosevelt made his famous statement about fear: "we have nothing to fear but fear itself." It isn't the bear chasing us we need to be afraid of, it's the fear of bears.

Dominant Situational Solutions: Impressionism

Situational solutions are those that attempt to arrange and order the various circumstances and events of life into some meaningful pattern. I've stated all along that the artists, as sensitive men, are particularly focused on these situational solutions, using their artistic skill and devotion to express them. Within the Modern Period, just as there was a "variety of religious experience" so there was a variety of artistic expression. It was less and less common to find rules and standards for painting, music or literature. Artists had thrown off most of those restraints so that the primary goals were two: express yourself and get paid for it. Talk about cash value!

One of the dominant artistic forms of this period, especially the first half of the 20th century, was Impressionism. Think of Impressionism as a comedian going on stage to do an impersonation of some president or celebrity. Though he is certainly trying to imitate the person, it's more than imitation. It's impression. This is why comic impersonators often caricature their subjects, dramatizing or embellishing certain mannerisms or speech patterns for effect. It's not what the person "really" is but what we "feel" about him.

Impressionistic style during the latter half of the 19th and early part of the 20th century included many famous artists. In music, Claude Debussy composed his famous, "Clair de Lune"—"The Light of the Moon,"---and, "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Fawn." Both pieces have a melodic, dreamlike quality to them fitting well the definition of Impressionism as the subjective experience of fawns and moonlight, rather than the fawns and moon themselves.

Around the turn of the 20th century, another French artists, Claude Monet, set out to pain trees near his home. Like Debussy's music, Monet was not interested in painting "real" trees. Here is a modern photograph of poplar trees like those he observed:

Artists for hundreds of years had been trying to depict trees in their landscape drawings and paintings. This meant very little to Monet. So he set out to portray what he *felt* when looking at poplar trees. This was Monet's "impression" of trees:
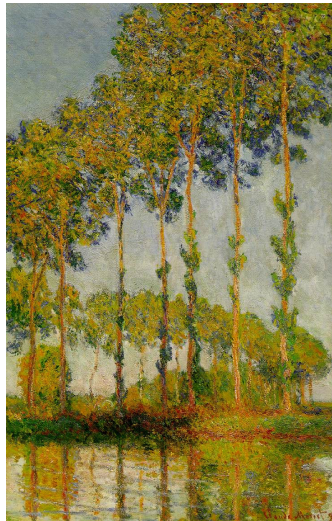
Obviously, Monet was not just trying to take a snapshot. Actually, there were now cameras that could do that. Besides, in a post-Kantian world, objects meant very little in themselves. The meaning and significance of poplar trees was how they made a person feel inside, not what they looked like outside.

Dominant Relational Solutions: Ethical Individualism

If the meaning of a religious experience was simply its "cash value," what does this say about ethics? Recall that relational solutions are the bridge between the norms and situations of life. Since absolute and transcendent norms had long been rejected, it should be no surprise that universal moral standards and ethics were also considered old-fashioned. The 20th century saw the blossoming of a system of ethics variously termed, "Situational Ethics", "Ethical Relativism" or "Ethical Individualism." All these terms describe the same thing: no longer were decisions about truth and error, good and evil, right and wrong universal and fixed. It was totally up to the individual to decide for himself. And just because something was right today, didn't guarantee it would be right tomorrow.

This individualistic ethic was evident in virtually every corner of society and culture. In the theoretical expression it was heavily influenced by a philosophy of life called Existentialism. I could have listed Existentialism as the dominant normative solution instead of Pragmatism. I chose rather to include it here because it was also a dominant relational solution. Existentialism describes a way to relate to others. It describes how we view ourselves in our communities and families. One of the early proponents was a French intellectual named Jean Paul Sartre.

Existentialists, like Sartre argued that the only morality with any meaning is one that unleashes the self to "exist." This is why the word "exist" is part of the term "existentialism." Existentialism is a belief system about why and how we exist. In William James' terms, it would be decisions that "works for us." To what end? to affirm our existence as individuals. Concepts like, right and wrong, good and evil, truth and error are meaningless unless they enable us to affirm our existence. Many of the early Existentialists urged their followers to seek "Existential Experiences" as a way to accomplish this. An Existential Experience was a defining moment in life that made sense of everything else. The nature of such an experience was different for everyone.
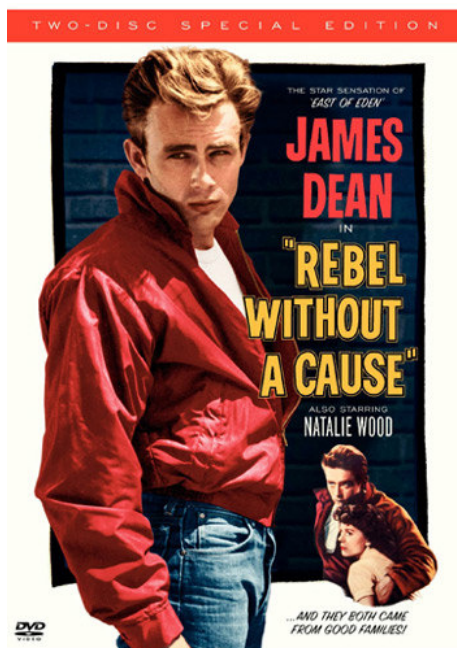
For example, during the 1960s, Dr. Timothy Leery urged the "hippy generation" to "tune out and turn on" with psychedelic drugs as a way of having an Existential Experience. Much of the music and motif of the 60s generation, including the movies and plays, was an expression of this kind of Ethical Individualism. James Dean's acted in *Rebel Without a Cause*—about a disillusioned teen who found his meaning and purpose in rebelling against every rule in society when they stood in his way. There was literally no end of possibilities for defining, existential moments. In James' terms, whatever worked was okay. Some even hinted at the possibility that suicide was a means to an Existential Experience.

The Limits of Modern Pragmatism

- **The Pragmatic Foundation –The Norms of Life**

Truth works. In any age, in any philosophical or theological system, there is a concern for practical—cash—value. This was nothing new in the 20th century. However, in prior generations, the workability of truth was always secondary to its accuracy. In fact, this would be a good time to describe the three historic viewpoints on how truth relates to life.

Correspondence Theory of Truth – The classical view of truth (Socrates and forward) was that truth is that which corresponds to reality. Believing as they did in a two story universe—a natural and supernatural world—correspondence describes the relationship of one to the other. Any breakdown between them was considered a "contradiction" is viewed as a breakdown of basic laws of rationality.

Coherence Theory of Truth – The classical view of truth was challenged during the Enlightenment and the groundwork laid for its rejection by Immanuel Kant. I've already hinted at the reasons in a previous lesson. Kant and his followers were agnostic about the ability to know ultimate realities located in some other world. Therefore, they limited their inquiry to our own. Coherence—meaning, the internal consistency of the various facets of a system with themselves—became the new test of truth. Even so, the Law of Non-Contradiction espoused by ancient thinkers like Aristotle still held sway for if particular claims within a system did not "hold together," this was proof that something was wrong with the claims. They were not coherent.

Pragmatic Theory of Truth – As the descendants of Kant grew increasingly agnostic about truth and reality, they were eventually forced to make a choice between skepticism and hope. Skepticsm meant there was no meaning or purpose in life. Hope meant there was. Where could hope be found? Whatever works. In terms of logic, it is interesting to note that even Pragmatic Theories of Truth required an old fashioned norm: the Law of Non-Contradiction. In older times, if a "truth" contradicted what we know to be "real" it was a violation of the Law of Non-Contradiction and proved there was a problem. Even in the Enlightenment Period, the Law of Non-Contradiction was utilized within the "lower level" of the phenomenal world to evaluate the corherence of rational statements. What about in modern times? Even now, very few would dare to deny the Law of Non-Contradiction. The contrast is not between two worlds or standards or moral codes. It's not even within various truth claims within our world. It's between what works and what doesn't in a given situation. By this measure, if something doesn't work, it contradicts what is real. It must not be true—at least for now. Pragmatic theories of truth are always relativist. They don't believe in absolute values of truth.

Does this mean there is no inherent contradiction in Pragmatism as a normative solution to life? As we saw earlier, the problem is defining what "works." How do we know some solution is working? Given the variety of experiences and solutions, it isn't always apparent which one works—or which one works *best*.

The term "best" is a value statement. The Existentialist certainly tried to define it in terms of finding meaning and purpose in an otherwise meaningless and pointless existence. But is this even a legitimate answer to what is best? Who has the right to declare that this value is the best one? As brilliant a thinker as William James was, as articulate and talented a communicator as Jean Paul Sartre may have been, what authority did they have to determine how to determine what is best?

This is ultimately the problem of maintaining norms in an "antinomian" age. The word "antinomian" describes the post-Kantian rejection of universal truths and beliefs. And once these universals are rejected, it is utterly contradictory and self-defeating for anyone to insist his "new" norm is correct. In other words, if the statement, "there are no moral absolutes" is true, how do we know it is always true, everywhere? Is the statement, "there are no moral absolutes" "absolutely" true? It is the height of arrogance for modern thinkers to claim there are no absolute values when they themselves claim to speak absolutely.

The foundation of Kantian thought was flawed. But the foundation of the Modern philosophy of Pragmatism was a pile of rubble.

- **The Modern Structure –The Situations of Life**
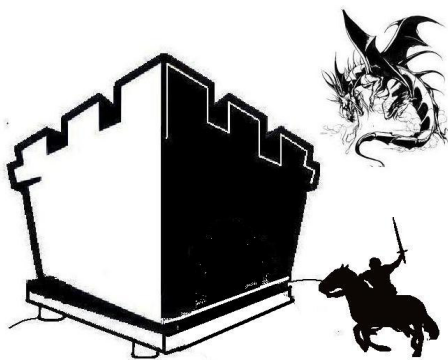
The sensitive men and women of modern times, reacting to the pile of rubble before them called "existence" tried their best to make something of it. We saw how a painter like Monet gave up trying to see any objective value in poplar trees and was content merely to pain how he felt.

Though this seemed to "work" for a while, it was like an engine running on an empty gas tank. Without meaning and value in the things themselves, eventually painters saw no reason to paint and musicians would see no reason to compose. Simply painting to paint or composing to compose left them depressed and hopeless.

Sadly, the artists of the later 20th century increasingly found themselves in despair. A bizarre form of theater emerged in this period called Theater of the Absurd. The Theater of the Absurd, like its name suggests, portrayed life itself as without meaning or purpose. One of the prominent playwrights was Eugene Ionesco. His dark comedy, The Chairs illustrates the "end of the line" for modernists who have given up on finding any meaning or purpose.

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The Chairs is the story of an old man and woman who spend their life waiting for a famous guest to arrive. He is called the Orator and when he comes the man assures his wife he will give a wonderful speech. They spend their days setting up and moving chairs around the apartment trying to make the best use of their resources for all the expected guests.

Eventually the Orator shows up. With much fanfare and great delight on their faces, they eagerly await his words of "truth." But, to their dismay, when he opens his mouth to speak, nothing but unintelligible gibberish comes out. There is no message. There is no truth and no meaning. It's hard to imagine anyone attending such a performance for an evening of entertainment! No wonder so many of that generation resorted to drugs and suicide.

- **The Modern Access – The Relationships of Life**
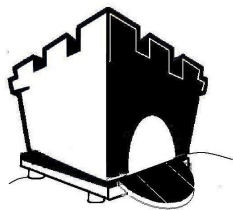
Imagine if you were the knight on a horse being chased by a fire breathing dragon. You see your fortified castle on a distant hill and are heartened at the thought of finding protection and comfort. But when you get within eyesight, imagine your dismay if the draw bridge was up and no one there to put it down. Or worse, imagine there is no bridge at all, only four solid and impenetrable walls, mocking you as it were!

Such was the condition modern man found himself in at the end of this period. Even the relationships to which people had always looked for comfort and deliverance offered little. A relationship, after all, is not just another person. A relationship is a way of interacting with another person and it requires certain skills and qualities to make that "work." A husband and wife can find great comfort and strength in each other. Their relationship can provide a place to find answers for the greatest problems in life—danger, pain and failure. As they talk and interact with one another they can actually draw from each other –or provide for the other--the protection, gratification and validation we all seek.

The great tragedy of the Modern Period was that the very ability to find answers in our relationships was undermined. For in order to make a relationship work like this it requires skills and qualities—things like trust, forgiveness and service. The fire breathing dragons of modernity had been bearing down on these qualities for hundreds of years and in the process they had been emptied of almost all meaning. If Kant were correct, if the only thing we can know is what we perceive in any given moment—how can we be sure there is even such a thing as love? The result was increasing loneliness and isolation in the most important area of life: relationships.

The most insidious attack of the Dragons of Error was its demolition of a sacred concept like "love." In previous generations love was generally understood as giving of oneself to another. But in the 20th century this traditional understanding was all but lost in many parts of the culture. Even "love" was redefined as getting a feeling from someone else. And if you could not get it, it was evident there was no love. Though we still have one time period left, there is little hope that the emasculated disillusioned thinkers and artists can offer much hope. But we'll see what they offered, in hope that they may have missed something along the way.

Quiz 11 Questions

1.The years covered in our discussion of the Modern Period are

   a. 1800 to 1900
   b. 1900 to 2000
   c. 2000 to the present

2.The dominant normative solution to the greatest problems in life during this era we called

   a. Empiricism
   b. Rationalism
   c. Pragmatism

3. The influential philosopher of modern normative solutions discussed in this lesson was

   a. William James
   b. Charles Darwin
   c. Sigmund Freud

4. Impressionistic art sought to offer situational solutions to the greatest problems in life by

   a. Accurately imitating the particular objects of nature
   b. Accurately expressing the artist's own subjective experience to the things he saw
   c. Accurately expressing the experiences of others as the artist observed them

5.The most serious flaw with Ethical Individualism is

   a. It doesn't make sense but fails to realize it
   b. It is not scientifically tested even though it claims to be
   c. It claims to be absolute but rejects all other absolutes