

THE PRAGMATIST



William James

AS A RULE WE DISBELIEVE ALL FACTS AND THEORIES
FOR WHICH WE HAVE NO USE.

William James

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- WHAT IS *PRAGMATISM*?
- WHAT IS *PRAGMATICISM*?
- WHAT IS THE “PRAGMATIC THEORY OF MEANING”?
- WHAT IS THE “PRAGMATIC METHOD”?
- WHAT IS MEANT BY THE “CASH VALUE” OF AN IDEA?
- WHAT IS DETERMINISM?
- WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE “HEALTHY-MINDED”?
- WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE “MORBID-MINDED”?
- WHAT IS A SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY?
- WHAT IS THE “PRAGMATIC PARADOX”?

PHILOSOPHICAL

QUERY

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If James is correct, those who criticize his free-floating style and apparently inconsistent views might be expressing their tough-minded temperaments. Do you agree with his distinction between tough- and tender-mindedness? Does it account for philosophical differences? Is it possible to evaluate this distinction without falling into one camp or the other? Which side are you on? Discuss the distinction.

Individual action is a means and not our end. Individual pleasure is not our end; we are all putting our shoulders to the wheel for an end that none of us can catch more than a glimpse at—that which the generations are working out.

CHARLES SANDERS
PEIRCE

The Will to Believe

According to James, we live according to beliefs that are products of our own temperaments and experience; our beliefs are not the products of abstract reasoning. Rather, we manage to find reasons to believe what we want and need to believe. And we have the right to do that, according to James, who once said he would have been better off titling his famous lecture *The Right to Believe* rather than *The Will to Believe*.

Because life *demand*s a response, *demand*s action, we have no choice but to believe *something*. Life presents us with what James calls *forced options*. We must make decisions whether we want to or not (even “not deciding” is a decision). We *cannot* remain detached and disinterested; life simply does not allow it. We are compelled to decide and to act, and reason is not a sufficient force for action. We do not act on what we understand, but on what we believe. The rationalist’s and skeptic’s demands for certainty cannot be met, yet we continue to live and act—without intellectual certainty.

I, therefore, for one cannot see my way to accept the agnostic rules for truth-seeking, or willfully agree to keep my willing nature out of the game. I cannot do so for the plain reason that *a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.* . . . If we had an infallible intellect with its objective certitudes, we might feel ourselves disloyal to such a perfect organ of knowledge in not trusting to it exclusively. 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—I hope you do not think I am denying that—(we ought, on the contrary, delicately and profoundly to respect one another’s mental freedom) but if we do wait, we do so at our own peril as much as if we believed.¹⁷

The intellect does not discover the truths in which we believe; the will creates truth.

Truth Happens to an Idea

The rationalists’ model of truth was taken from logic and mathematics. Rationalists said truth is universal, which amounts to saying it is *contextless*. The sum “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” is true at all times, in all languages, for all creeds, for all ages, ethnicities, and genders

of people, in all conditions of health or sickness. Indeed, because it is true for all “rational entities,” it is true throughout the universe. (See Chapters 5 and 9.)

James rejected this simplistic, universalist notion of truth. He said experience makes it clear that ideas *become* true. Elsewhere, he said “truth *happens* to an idea.” We *decide* whether or not an idea is true by “testing” it, as Peirce pointed out. James extended Peirce’s pragmatist theory of truth:

Any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor, is true for just so much, true in so far forth, true instrumentally.¹⁸

If James is correct, we accept ideas as true only after we test them against our past experiences. Even if we have a tendency to reject new ideas, the public, communitywide aspect of truth-seeking (which Peirce emphasized) forces us—or most of us—to test and reevaluate ideas, keeping some and discarding others as we and the world change.

We have all witnessed this process. It is especially clear in the areas of moral and religious belief (areas James thought vital to human happiness). For example, looking back over history, we see that ideas about vice have changed. Few contemporary Americans believe that it is wrong for women to appear in public with bare ankles, but many people used to believe that it was. Churches regularly convene councils to modify basic articles of faith, and entirely new religions emerge when old ones no longer *pay*.

Individuals and groups may simply refuse to accept changes, but on the whole, our beliefs do change, and thus our notion of what is true about the world changes—though, as James observed, we try to hang on to as many of our old ideas as possible until

The individual . . . meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions . . . until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock. . . .

This new idea is then adopted as the true one. It preserves the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification, stretching them enough to make them admit the novelty, but conceiving them in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible. [A radical] explanation, violating all our preconceptions, would never pass as a true account. . . . We would scratch around industriously till we found something less eccentric. The most violent revolutions in an individual’s beliefs leave most of his old order standing.¹⁹

Ideas are tested and accepted or rejected based on how well they work for us. Sometimes we see the virtue in a new idea; other times, we can no longer live with the stress and energy it takes to hold on to an old one. So there is no such thing as disinterested truth. *Pragmatic truth is human truth.* “Purely objective truth,” James asserts, “plays no role whatsoever, is nowhere to be found.” He adds that the

Truth is made, just as health, wealth, and strength are made, in the course of experience.

WILLIAM JAMES

Man is not to blame for what he is. He didn’t make himself. He has no control over himself. All the control is vested in his temperament—which he did not create—and in the circumstances which hedge him round from the cradle to the grave and which he did not devise. . . . He is as purely a piece of automatic mechanism as is a watch. . . . He is a subject for pity, and not blame.

MARK TWAIN

William James believed that as conditions change “truth happens to an idea.” Changes in health care and medical technology have led to longer lives for more people, yet not everyone wants to stay alive at any cost. So we find ourselves wrestling with ancient philosophical questions about the meaning of life, the virtues of suffering, and the right to die. Truth is happening here.



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most absolute-seeming truths “also once were plastic”: “They were called true for human reasons. They also mediate between still earlier truths and what in those days were novel observations.”²⁰

Useful, human truth is alive; rationalistic, abstract, dogmatic truth is “the dead heart of the living tree.” Truth grows.

PHILOSOPHICAL

QUERY

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Can you think of recent examples supporting the claim that “truth happens to an idea”? Some Protestant churches, for example, have begun revising their policies regarding birth control, abortion, and gay marriages because older beliefs lack “cash value” for many of today’s churchgoers. These churches usually experience a period of soul-searching turmoil, wrestling with the dilemma of holding on to old beliefs or losing touch with their congregations. Can you cite one or two recent examples of truth happening to an idea from current events or from your own situation?

The Dilemma of Determinism

James agreed with most moral philosophers that free will is a necessary condition for moral responsibility. He offered a unique and intriguing argument for believing in free will in a famous essay titled “The Dilemma of Determinism.” James begins with a novel admission: “I disclaim openly on the threshold all pretension to prove to you that freedom of the will is true. The most I hope is to induce some of you to follow my own example in assuming it true, and acting as

if it were true.” Having warned us not to expect an airtight argument, James goes on to present a compelling case nonetheless.

Determinism is the belief that everything that happens must happen exactly the way it does. Some materialistic philosophers and scientists say determinism is inevitable since all matter is governed by cause and effect and follows laws of nature. Possibilities are identical to actualities; the future is already contained in the present. We cannot influence the future; it lacks ambiguity, having been sealed in the distant past. James asks:

What does determinism profess? It professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be. . . . Indeterminism, on the contrary, says that the parts have a certain amount of loose play on one another, so that the laying down of one of them does not necessarily determine what the others shall be. It admits that possibilities may be in excess of actualities, and that things not yet revealed to our knowledge may really in themselves be ambiguous.²¹

Does determinism square with our actual feelings? James suggests that we answer this question by considering a newspaper article about the brutal murder of a woman by her husband. Ignoring his wife’s screams for mercy, the husband chopped her to pieces. James asks whether any sane person can read such an account and not feel deep regret. But if the determinists are right, what is the point of regret? Determinists have no reasonable grounds for regretting anything.

The judgment of regret calls the murder bad. Calling a thing bad means, if it means anything at all, that the thing ought not to be, that something else ought to be in its stead. Determinism, in denying that anything else can be in its stead, virtually defines the universe as a place in which what ought to be is impossible—in other words, as an organism whose constitution is afflicted with an incurable taint, an irremediable flaw. . . .

It is absurd to regret the murder alone. It could not be different. . . . But how then about the judgments of regret themselves? If they are wrong, other judgments, judgments of approval, ought to be in their place. But as they are necessitated, nothing else could be in their place; and [for the determinist] the universe is just what it was before—namely, a place in which what ought to be appears impossible.²²

Isn’t it virtually impossible to think that such a murder “ought” to have occurred, given past conditions? Isn’t it virtually impossible to be indifferent that it occurred? If James is correct, no sane person can help feeling some degree of sadness and regret when confronted by such horrors. Yet, if the determinists are correct, such feelings are utterly pointless. *There is no rational ground for moral feelings, because “ought” can have no meaning.* If the determinists are correct, we are caused to have senseless, absurd, utterly false feelings and ideas.

James acknowledged that there is no scientific and objective way to refute such a possibility. But he insisted that our deep, unshakable moral sense of right and wrong, combined with our feelings of regret, make a *compelling* case for our *need* and *right* to believe in free will. We have to believe at least in the possibility, however remote, that some children will not be abused because some adults

determinism

Belief that everything that happens must happen exactly the way it does because all matter is governed by cause and effect and follows laws of nature.

I suppose life has made him like that, and he can’t help it. None of us can help the things life has done to us. They’re done before you realize it, and once they’re done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you’d like to be.

EUGENE O’NEILL



“The Problem Is Not a Real One”

It must be observed that those learned professors of philosophy or psychology who deny the existence of free will do so only in their professional moments and in their studies and lecture rooms. For when it comes to doing anything practical, even of the most trivial kind, they invariably behave as if they and others were free. They inquire from you at dinner whether you will choose this or that dish. They will ask a child why he told a lie, and will punish him

for not having chosen the way of truthfulness. All of which is consistent with a belief in free will. This should cause us to suspect that the problem is not a real one; and this I believe is the case. The dispute is merely verbal, and is due to nothing but a confusion about the meanings of words.

W. T. Stace, *Religion and the Modern Mind* (New York: Lippincott, 1952), p. 279.

The concept of responsibility offers little help. The issue is controllability. . . . What must be changed is not the responsibility of autonomous man but the conditions, environmental or genetic, of which a person's behavior is a function.

B. F. SKINNER

choose to help them; we have to believe that some bad will be avoided and some good done by our actions.

The Inner Sense of Freedom

James believed that change, surprise, and chance are regular parts of our experience. “There are novelties, struggles, losses, gains . . . some things at least are decided here and now . . . the passing moment may contain some novelty, be an original starting-point of events, and not merely a push from elsewhere.”²³

James appealed directly to our *inner sense of freedom* to verify his claim, a sense shared by most people. (The possible exceptions are philosophical and psychological extremists). He was convinced that most of us have a deep “spiritual need” to believe that we are active agents who exert control over significant aspects of our lives, that we affect events, that we make a difference. We *need* this belief for our spiritual and mental well-being—and we have a *right* to believe what we need to believe.

James thought the prestige and influence of science make people try to believe in determinism, but he did not believe that the evidence supporting determinism is conclusive. Echoing Hume, he claimed that we need to believe in a “more rational shape” for nature than our individual experience reveals. Consequently, we *believe* in the uniformity of laws of nature. But this uniformity of nature cannot be conclusively proved true, as Hume showed (Chapter 10). Belief in free will cannot be conclusively proved to be correct either, James noted, but this does not make it inferior to belief in determinism. The basic unprovable status of both beliefs is similar.

All the magnificent achievements of mathematical and physical science—our doctrines of evolution, of uniformity to law, and the rest—proceed from our indomitable desire to cast the world into a more rational shape in our minds than the shape into which it is thrown there by the crude order of our experience. . . . I, for one, feel as free to try conceptions of moral as of mechanical or logical rationality. If a certain formula for expressing the nature of the world violates my moral demand, I shall feel as free to throw

it overboard, or at least doubt it, as if it disappointed my demand for uniformity of sequence, for example; the one demand being, so far as I can see, quite as subjective and emotional as the other is. The principle of causality, for example—what is it but a postulate, an empty name covering simply a demand that the sequence of events shall one day manifest a deeper kind of belonging of one thing with another than the mere arbitrary juxtaposition which now phenomenally appears? It is as much an altar to an unknown god as the one Saint Paul found at Athens. All our scientific and philosophic ideals are altars to unknown gods. Uniformity is as much so as is free will.²⁴

In the absence of conclusive proof, we are free to *decide* which belief better suits our needs. Believing as he did in the primacy of morality, James asserted that belief in free will better serves our need for “moral rationality.” And since neither belief can be conclusively rejected, he argued that we have the right to test belief in free will against our regular experiences. If it “pays” more than believing that we have no control over our lives, then clearly it is the superior belief.

Perhaps the strongest argument against determinism is the fact that almost no one really believes that absolutely everything he or she thinks, hopes, and does was determined from the first moments of the existence of the universe. Life presents us with inescapable moments of choice. How we respond is what matters most.

Each man must act as he thinks best; and, if he is wrong, so much the worse for him. We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? “Be strong and of a good courage.” Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes.²⁵

How can we know what is best? James says that we must discover the essence of the good.

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*Do you find it impossible to doubt that you possess free will—at least sometimes?
Is belief in the possibility of free will necessary for your happiness?*

PHILOSOPHICAL
QUERY

Morality and the Good

James rejected metaphysical attempts to define the good. He argued that the only way to understand the good life was to study what people actually want and strive for. He surveyed and rejected strictly Aristotelian, hedonistic, Christian, Kantian, and utilitarian ethics (Chapters 6, 7, 8, 11, and 12), though he borrowed from each.

When we reason about the liberty of the will, or about the free will, we do not ask if the man can do what he wills, but if there is enough independence in his will itself.

GOTTFRIED WILHELM
LEIBNIZ

There can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics until the last man has had his experience and said his say.

WILLIAM JAMES

Various essences of good have thus been . . . proposed as bases of the ethical system. . . .

No one of the measures that have actually been proposed has, however, given general satisfaction. . . . The best, on the whole, of these marks and measures of goodness seems to be the capacity to bring happiness. But in order not to break down fatally, this test must be taken to cover innumerable acts and impulses that never *aim* at happiness; so that, after all, in seeking for a universal principle we inevitably are carried onward to the *most* universal principle—that *the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand*. The demand may be for anything under the sun. There is really no more ground for supposing that all our demands can be accounted for by one universal underlying kind of motive than there is ground for supposing that all physical phenomena are cases of a single law.²⁶

We have a basic obligation to “maximize satisfactions” and minimize frustrations, not just for ourselves but for others as well, according to James. Such a course is most likely to lead to happiness and increase the world’s stock of goodness. Yet maximizing satisfaction must remain a fundamental, general obligation. The sheer number of people, coupled with the sheer number of demands we each have, makes being more specific impossible. All we can do is try our best to increase the general level of satisfaction and goodness, while remaining aware of our fallibility.

James did not offer an ethical *theory* as such, though he suggested moral guidelines. He proposed a form of altruistic utilitarianism based on an optimistic vision of social progress. He believed modern civilization is better than past eras were—he cited examples of slavery and torture—because the constant give-and-take, the “push and pull,” of history results in continual refinement of satisfactions. The radical’s forward drive is compensated for by the conservative’s inertia; the dreamer’s whimsy balances and is balanced by the scientist’s objective eye, and so on.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that James was also a psychologist and scientist. He gave more credence to observation and experience than to systematic argument. Further, he did not believe in universal moral principles or in the possibility of any finite, closed expression of morality. Thus, from his perspective, the kind of argument and system that would satisfy most philosophers would also falsify the reality of moral experience.

The Heroic Life

William James believed that life without heroic struggle is dull, mediocre, and empty. He was thinking of two approaches to life. In one, we choose (will) safety, security, and compliance. We try to avoid risks, try to avoid stress, try to avoid hassles. The other kind of life deliberately includes danger, courage, risk; it is based on a will to excitement and passion.

James was not advising us to take up hang gliding and shooting the rapids. He was talking about a “real fight” for something important, about the struggle between good and evil. He said evil is “out there,” to be resisted and fought. We

might find it in the form of discrimination or toxic dumping. When we do, we can ignore it, make a token effort at resisting it by voicing our objections, or actually do something. If we confront it, we could lose our jobs, money, time, or solid A grade-point average. We might fail. We might even be wrong: What we perceived as evil might not be evil. But at least we fought for or against something.

For my own part, I do not know what the sweat and blood of this life mean, if they mean anything short of this. If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which we may withdraw at will. But it *feels* like a real fight—as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem: and first of all to redeem our own hearts from atheisms and fears. For such is a half-wild, half-saved universe adapted. The deepest thing in our nature is . . . this dumb region of the heart in which we dwell alone with our willingness and unwillingness, our faiths and fears.²⁷

According to James, struggle and effort are vital elements of the good life. He believed that the “strenuous mood” is superior to sitting back and drifting along. Thus, he did not think much of the Epicurean ideal of the retreat to the Garden or of Stoic detachment when either meant reduced involvement in life and diminished passions, though he did admire the Stoic emphasis on strength of will (Chapter 7).

James thought he had identified a natural fact of life: An active, strenuous approach is healthier and more satisfying than a passive, easygoing one.

The deepest difference, practically, in the moral life of man is the difference between the easy-going and the strenuous mood. When in the easy-going mood, the shrinking from present ill is our ruling consideration. The strenuous mood, on the contrary, makes us quite indifferent to present ill, if only the great ideal is to be attained. The capacity for the strenuous mood probably lies slumbering in every man, but it has more difficulty in some than in others in waking up. It needs wilder passions to arouse it, the big fears, loves, and indignations; or else the deeply penetrating appeal of some of the higher fidelities, like justice, truth, or freedom. Strong belief is a necessity of its vision; and a world where all the mountains are brought down and all the valleys are exalted is no congenial place for its habitation.²⁸

What sort of thing would life really be, with your qualities ready for a tussle with it, if it only brought fair weather and gave those higher faculties of yours no scope?

WILLIAM JAMES

We are all ready to be savage in some cause. The difference between a good man and a bad one is the choice of the cause.

WILLIAM JAMES

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Discuss your formal and informal education in terms of the preceding passage. Have you been encouraged to adopt a strenuous mood or an easygoing one? Give some specific examples. Do you think James is on the right track? Why or why not?

PHILOSOPHICAL

QUERY



Choosing a Philosophy Is a Test of Character

It is simply our total character and personal genius that are on trial; and if we invoke any so-called philosophy, our choice and use of that also are but revelations of our personal aptitude or incapacity for moral life. From this unsparing practical ordeal no professor's lectures and no array of books can save us. The solving word, for the learned and the unlearned man alike, lies in the last resort in the dumb willingnesses and unwillingnesses of their interior

characters, and nowhere else. It is not in heaven, neither is it beyond the sea; but the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart, that thou mayst do it.

William James, "The Moral Philosopher and Moral Life," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897; reprinted in *Human Immortality*, New York: Dover, 1956), pp. 214–215.

■ PRAGMATIC RELIGION ■



James had deep respect for a religion that enriches our lives, that has "cash value." He noted that people in all cultures turn to a god (or gods) who *gets things done*, an active god, a god of the "strenuous mood," not a passive, ineffective god. This led James to offer an intriguing suggestion: If people do not believe in God, it might be because God is not *doing anything* in their lives. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James attempted to discover how God *works* in people's lives. Combining an empirical, psychological study of a number of cases with a keen philosophical analysis, *Varieties* is one of James's most influential, popular, and still widely read works.

James asserted that we judge the truth of religious ideas by what he calls their "immediate luminousness," adding, "in short, *philosophical reasonableness and moral helpfulness* are the only available criteria." He concluded that religious faith is important and meaningful on pragmatic grounds: Its presence or absence makes a clearly observable, practical, and concrete difference in our lives.

*Certain of our positivists
keep chiming to us that,
amid the wreck of every
other god and idol, one
divinity still stands
upright,—that his name is
Scientific Truth, and that he
has but one commandment,
but that one supreme,
saying, Thou shalt not be a
theist.*

WILLIAM JAMES

The practical needs and experiences of religion seem to me sufficiently met by the belief that beyond man and in a fashion continuous with him there exists a larger power which is friendly to him and his ideals. All that the facts require is that the power shall be other and larger than our conscious selves.

God is the natural appellation, for us Christians at least, for the supreme reality, so I will call this higher part of the universe by the name of God. We and God have business with each other; and in opening ourselves to his influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled.²⁹

James thought that a religious orientation is more effective than a nonreligious one because it encompasses more. It derives from and addresses a wider range of experiences, including a wider, more expansive consciousness than a purely secular point of view. Besides the obvious psychological benefits of having God as a support and comfort, religious conversion can open us up and make us more responsive to all of life, according to James.

A Religious Dilemma

In his study of religious experience, James distinguished between two basic personalities, the “healthy-minded” and the “morbid-minded.” Healthy-minded people “look on all things and see that they are good.” Such people are vital, enthusiastic, and exuberant. In contrast, the attitude of the morbid-minded person is “based on the persuasion that the evil aspects of our life are its very essence, and that the world’s meaning most comes home to us when we lay them most to heart.”³⁰ In other words, morbid souls are negativistic and pessimistic.

Interestingly, James the optimist says morbid-minded persons have a clearer, more realistic perspective than healthy-minded ones because they recognize a wider range of experience.

The method of averting one’s attention from evil, and living simply in the light of good is splendid as long as it will work. It will work with many persons; it will work far more generally than most of us are ready to suppose; and within the sphere of its successful operation there is nothing to be said against it as a religious solution. But it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes. . . .

The normal process of life contains moments as bad as any of those which insane melancholy is filled with, moments in which radical evil gets its innings and takes its solid turn. The lunatic’s visions of horror are all drawn from the material of daily fact. Our civilization is founded on the shambles, and every individual existence goes out in a lonely spasm of helpless agony. If you protest, my friend, wait till you arrive there yourself! . . . The completest religions would therefore seem to be those in which the pessimistic elements are best developed.³¹

To better grasp this point, think of what it means to be *always* joyful and enthusiastic in a world such as ours. This lopsided kind of “healthy-mindedness” might result from a lack of true empathy with the condition of other people. A shallow enough view of things can result in a childish (not childlike) view of life in which nothing is really bad. Or, if it is bad, it is not *that* bad. Or, if it is *that* bad, then it is somehow deserved.

In his analysis of healthy- and morbid-mindedness, James is interested in identifying the most practical spiritual balance. A soul that is blocked off from a major portion of experience (which, for want of a better word, we may refer to as evil) will be less effective, less “alive,” than a soul that is not blocked off.

One cannot criticize the vision of a mystic—one can but pass it by, or else accept it as having some amount of evidential weight.

WILLIAM JAMES

God is real since he produces real effects.

WILLIAM JAMES

The healthy-minded . . . need to be born only once . . . sick souls . . . must be born twice—born in order to be happy. The result is two different conceptions of the universe of our experience.

WILLIAM JAMES

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What do you think of James’s claim that morbid-minded people have a fuller, more realistic view of things than healthy-minded ones? How would you classify yourself? Discuss some of the strengths and weaknesses of both orientations.

PHILOSOPHICAL

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Religion and Pragmatism from 'The Will to Believe' to *Pragmatism*

Wayne Proudfoot

1 The Will to Believe

William James' essay, 'The Will to Believe', has been read in many different ways. James describes the article as a 'defense of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced'.¹ His criticism seems to be directed chiefly at William Clifford's claim that 'It is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.'² But this is not so clear. We might expect that in cases in which the evidence is insufficient, or in James' terms 'our logical intellect has not been coerced', Clifford's principle would call for withholding assent. But James tries to set up the issue in such a way as to preclude this possibility.

He begins by writing not of whether to adopt a particular hypothesis, but of options, that is to say, choices between two hypotheses, and restricts his focus to what he calls genuine options. A genuine option, for James, is one in which both hypotheses are live ones, the opportunity at stake is momentous, and the choice is forced. The fact that the choice is forced means that there is no place on which to stand that is outside the two alternatives. So the difference with Clifford cannot be over whether or not one should withhold assent, or remain agnostic, when the evidence is insufficient. James has already built into the description of the cases that he will consider a stipulation that the choice is forced. To withhold assent is actually to choose. He thinks that there is a practical and momentous difference between a life informed by religious belief and one without it, that therefore the choice is forced, and that the evidence is insufficient to settle the matter one way or another. For Clifford, of course, the burden of proof is

on the person who adopts the religious hypothesis, and the default condition is to reject it in the absence of convincing evidence. James has replaced Clifford's asymmetric description with one in which both logic and evidence are insufficient to determine a choice between two live hypotheses.

After stipulating what he means by a genuine option, James turns to look at what he calls the 'actual psychology of human opinion'. He notes that it seems impossible to decide to believe something. If I am engaged in inquiry about a particular topic, it seems both impossible and illegitimate to try to settle the question by just deciding. Charles Peirce had addressed this question in his essay 'The Fixation of Belief', in which the first and least effective way of resolving a problem and eliminating doubt that he considers is what he calls the method of tenacity, to just will to hold on to a particular belief come what may.³ As Peirce points out, this is very difficult to achieve and usually does not satisfy the inquirer.

James is not concerned with this kind of willing, but with something much broader. What has made certain hypotheses dead for us, he says, and unavailable for belief, is for the most part a previous action of our willing nature. By 'willing nature', he writes,

I do not mean only such deliberate volitions as may have set up habits of belief that we cannot now escape from—I mean all such factors of belief as fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumppressure of our caste and set. As a matter of fact we find ourselves believing, we hardly know how or why.⁴

James' topic in the article is not solely, and not chiefly, explicit acts of volition, but the ways in which believing and change of belief are shaped, in part, by interests, by something other than logic and evidence. As he writes after introducing Clifford's jeremiad against believing on insufficient evidence: 'if anyone should ... assume that intellectual insight is what remains when wish and will and sentiment have taken wing, or that pure reason is what settles our opinions, he would fly ... directly in the teeth of the facts'.⁵

An important point in James' essay is his identification of empiricism with fallibilism, or what we might call anti-foundationalism. We can know something, but we can never know with certainty that we know it. No concrete test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon. Different philosophers have proposed different criteria, but none of these criteria is infallible. As empiricists, he says, we give up the doctrine

of objective certitude, but we don't give up the quest or hope of truth itself. Pragmatists, James writes, represent the empiricist attitude in a more radical and less objectionable form.⁶

James' thesis then reads:

Our passional nature not only lawfully may but must 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 passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.⁷

The main point of this thesis is a descriptive one: not that our willing nature *may* tip the balance in such instances, but that it *must*; that is to say, it always does. So the essay is not so much a proposal that we decide these matters as it is a claim that our interests are always at work in fixing belief. Given that our interests, or willing nature, play this role, James wants his readers to acknowledge that, to make those interests explicit, and in some cases to self-consciously endorse one or another of them. Later in the essay he adopts the rhetoric of persuasion to encourage the reader to ask what she can do with a particular belief and then to actively side with that interest, when the issue is one that cannot be decided on intellectual grounds.

When James arrives at the point in the essay where he identifies what he takes to be the religious hypothesis, it seems frustratingly vague and empty. He writes:

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 ... is the first affirmation of religion ... The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off now if we believe her first affirmation to be true.⁸

To unpack the meaning of this cryptic summary we need to look briefly at the development of James' conception of religion.

The volume *The Will to Believe* was published in 1897 and dedicated 'To my old friend Charles Sanders Peirce, to whose philosophic comradeship in old times and to whose writings in more recent years I owe more incitement and help than I can express or repay.' The first six essays in

that volume, those most relevant for the philosophy of religion, are the product of twenty years of reflection on the fact that interests shape belief and on the extent to which that might be epistemically acceptable. In 'The Fixation of Belief', published in 1877, Peirce had argued that genuine inquiry is elicited by doubt, had described several ways of satisfying that doubt, and had concluded that 'it is necessary that a method should be found by which our beliefs may be caused by nothing human, but by some external permanency—by something upon which our thinking has no effect'.⁹ In articles beginning with 'The sentiment of rationality' in 1879, James argues that it is neither possible nor desirable to find a method by which our beliefs are caused by something on which our thinking has no effect. Our non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions, and that is a normal factor in our making up our minds.

In three articles published in the early 1880s James sets out what he takes to be the religious question. 'The radical question of life', he says, is 'whether, at bottom, this be a moral or unmoral universe'.¹⁰ It is the question of materialism. Despite the comments of some of his critics to the contrary, James was interested, both as a philosopher and as a person, in the truth of the matter. Clearly it is underdetermined by the evidence and his interests motivate the inquiry. In these articles James considers how we might fix belief on such an issue. He reflects on the criteria by which we decide that one belief is more rational than another.

In 'Rationality, Activity, and Faith' (1882), James writes that 'of two conceptions equally fit to satisfy the logical demand, one may awaken the active impulses or satisfy other aesthetic demands far better than the other. This one will be accounted the more rational conception and it will deservedly prevail'.¹¹ This statement, like its analogues in 'The Will to Believe', is first descriptive ('It will prevail') and then normative ('It deserves to prevail'). What are those demands? James proposes two: (1) it must define expectancy in a way that fits with future consequences, and (2) it must define the future congruously with our spontaneous powers. The first means that it must not be refuted by future experience. The second is more elusive, but is central to James' conception of religion. The future, and in fact the universe of which we are a part, must be characterized in a way that is congruous with, or continuous with, our moral life, where 'moral' is not narrowly defined but means our interests and our powers. Idealism is to be preferred over materialism, James says, because it makes the universe more intimate, more continuous with us and with our values. When he tries to set out the lineaments

of his metaphysics in his final book, *A Pluralistic Universe*, he proposes that intimacy be used as a criterion for an adequate metaphysics. Here, in this early essay, he writes: 'A nameless *Unheimlichkeit* comes over us at the thought of there being nothing eternal in our final purposes, in the objects of those loves and aspirations which are our deepest energies ... We demand in (the universe) a *character* for which our emotions and active propensities shall be a match.'¹²

Approaching the same topic in a different way in 'The Dilemma of Determinism', James writes, descriptively, that we work to cast the world into a more rational shape than we have found it, and, prescriptively, that he is 'as willing to try conceptions of moral, as of mechanical or logical necessity'.¹³ We employ logical and scientific concepts to make sense of the world and there is no reason to think that we don't, or shouldn't, try to make moral sense of it as well. His argument in this article is that determinism, which he takes to be a 'block universe' devoid of freedom or novelty, makes a mockery of our moral perceptions and judgments, especially the judgment that some actions and events are bad and that the universe would be better off without them.

Reflecting on the need to define the universe congruously with our spontaneous powers, James thinks that only a conception of reality defined in a way similar to the way God is described in traditional theism is both rational and possible for the mind.¹⁴ While idealism is more intimate than materialism, mysticism and the idea of the rational absolute go too far. They amount to a kind of gnosticism, of which he thinks that Hegel's philosophy is the most recent variety. Theism lies between gnosticism and agnosticism and accords most fully with the mind's interests.

Peirce also held that there is a natural fit between the mind and the cosmos. His later metaphysics reflects this and his 'Neglected argument for the reality of God' rests on it.¹⁵ But it wasn't an open question for Peirce and therefore not a central topic for inquiry, as it was for James. James expressed what he took to be a universal need for this kind of fit and looked constantly for confirmation or legitimation of belief in it. The question of whether or not this is a moral universe is not meaningless, he wrote, because contrary answers lead to contrary behavior. The religious hypothesis could not be verified in a single lifetime, but a person could act on it and see whether or not it harmonized with experience. 'If this *be* a moral universe,' he wrote, 'all acts I make on that assumption will fit with the phenomena, and ... the more I live, the more satisfactory the consensus will grow.'¹⁶ If (it is) not, experience will produce even more impediments.' This wasn't solely a speculative

matter for James. 'If this (life) is not a real fight,' he writes, 'it is only play-acting. But it *feels* like a real fight.'¹⁷

James thought that confirmation need not come only from individual experience, but from historical evidence as well. In the preface to *The Will to Believe* he writes:

If religious hypotheses about the universe be in order at all, then the active faiths of individuals in them, freely expressing themselves in life, are the experimental tests by which they are verified, and the only means by which their truth or falsehood can be wrought out. The truest scientific hypothesis is that which as we say, 'works' best; and it can be no otherwise with religious hypotheses. Religious history proves that one hypothesis after another has worked ill, has crumbled at contact with a widening knowledge of the world, and has lapsed from the minds of men. Some articles of faith, however, have maintained themselves through every vicissitude, and possess even more vitality today than ever before: it is for the 'science of religions' to tell us just which hypotheses these are. Meanwhile the freest competition of the various faiths with one another, and their openest application to life by their several champions, are the most favorable conditions under which the survival of the fittest can proceed.¹⁸

The scientist ought not to worry about this, James says, because those faiths that best stand the test of time will adopt her hypotheses and incorporate them into their own. James' language here echoes not only Darwin, but also John Stuart Mill's argument in *On Liberty* for freedom of opinion and experiments in living.

2 Pragmatism and *Varieties*

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* James proposes that philosophy of religion transform itself from theology to a critical science of religions. Such a science would begin with spontaneous religious constructions as well as doctrine, eliminate those beliefs that conflict with natural science, and arrive at some conceptions and hypotheses that are possible, testing them and trying to distinguish what is to be taken literally from symbolic expressions. It would be a critical reconstruction that depended for its original material on facts of personal experience.

In 1898 James traveled to Berkeley to deliver a lecture entitled 'Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results', which was the first public use of the term 'pragmatism' as the name for a philosophical

method.¹⁹ There he introduced the pragmatic criterion of meaning, giving full credit to Peirce and applying this criterion to the concept of God. This lecture was also, as he wrote to his son, a rehearsal for the Gifford Lectures he was to give in Edinburgh, which became *Varieties*. Much of the lecture is included verbatim in *Varieties* and most of the rest of it in the book *Pragmatism*. David Lamberth argues that James' pragmatism is unimportant for understanding *Varieties*, which grows out of his independent work on radical empiricism.²⁰ Lamberth offers an excellent reading of *Varieties* and calls attention to some important supplementary material, but it is misleading to suggest, as he does, that the book is only marginally related to James' pragmatism.

James introduces the principle of pragmatism in the Berkeley lecture by paraphrasing accurately from Peirce's 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear'. The same thought may be expressed in different words, Peirce writes, but if the words suggest no different conduct, they contribute nothing new to the meaning of the thought. In order 'to develop a thought's meaning we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce; that conduct is for us its sole significance'.²¹ 'Consider what effects,' Peirce wrote, 'which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is our whole conception of the object.'²² Peirce illustrates this criterion by examining the concept 'hard', in the sense in which we say that a diamond is hard. We can elucidate its meaning, Peirce says, by noting that a diamond cannot be scratched by most objects. 'Hard' means 'not easily scratched'.

Peirce wrote 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear' for a series he called *Illustrations in the Logic of Science*, and his model here is the clarification of scientific terms and hypotheses by designing and conducting experiments. To elucidate a thought we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce. We can use a diamond to cut glass or to scratch most metals, but we cannot expect to scratch it easily.

James comments at this point that he would like to interpret Peirce's principle more broadly, and his reinterpretation is in fact a revision. He removes it from the logic of experiment to that of descriptive phenomenology:

I should prefer for our purposes this evening to express Peirce's principle by saying that the effective meaning of any philosophic proposition can always be brought down to some particular consequence, in our future practical experience, whether active or passive; the point lying in the fact that the experience must be particular, (rather) than in the fact that it must be active.²³

James has broadened the principle and has changed it considerably. In Peirce's diamond example, the meaning of 'hard' tells us what to expect, what reactions to prepare, if we act with or on the object. We can't expect to scratch it. This is what Peirce takes to be required for the clarification of scientific concepts. James is interested in the difference made to our future experience but not in the logic of the concept. The effect could be something that we take ourselves to experience rather than the result of some active intervention on our part.²⁴ (James' focus on particular experience is also a sign of what Peirce referred to as James' nominalism. In the diamond example, Peirce is interested in the general case, in what 'hard' means. James looks rather toward particular experiences.)

Applying his revision of Peirce's criterion to the term 'God', James asks what is at stake in the debate between theism and materialism. Continuing the reflection from his earlier essays, James says that theism and materialism point to completely different practical consequences, to opposite outlooks on future experience. The notion of God, he writes,

guarantees an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved. A world with a God in it to say the last word, may indeed burn up or freeze, but we then think of him as still mindful of the old ideals and sure to bring them elsewhere to fruition; so that, where he is, tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution not the absolutely final things. This need of an eternal moral order is one of the deepest needs of our breast. Materialism means simply the denial that the moral order is eternal, and the cutting off of ultimate hopes; theism means the affirmation of an eternal moral order and the letting loose of hope.²⁵

It is clear, James says, that this is a genuine issue and not some empty metaphysical debate, but abstract theological ideas and systems do often seem empty. The place to look for what is at stake in religion is not religious doctrine, but concrete religious experiences in the lives of ordinary people. As examples, James lists 'conversations with the unseen, voices and visions, responses to prayer, changes of heart, deliverances from fear, inflowings of help, assurances of support, whenever certain persons set their own internal attitude in certain appropriate ways'.²⁶ What the word 'God' means, he says, is just those passive and active experiences. Theological doctrines are secondary effects on these direct experiences of the spiritual life. In both this characterization and in *Varieties* James' understanding of what difference religion makes

is highly influenced by what seemed most salient in late nineteenth century American religious life, Protestant revivalism, and various forms of spiritualism.

The project of a science of religions as pursued in *Varieties* rests on an examination of personal experiences described from the first person point of view. James writes in the book that 'feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue'.²⁷ He defines religion as 'the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine'.²⁸ In his proposal for a science of religions he says that people always define the divine in ways that harmonize with their temporary intellectual preoccupations, but philosophy ought to be able to eliminate the local and accidental from these definitions. As a result, even though James' quotations are sometimes extensive, he doesn't attend to the details of what a particular person considers the divine and how he takes himself to stand in relation to it.

James writes at the outset of *Varieties* that his descriptive account of religious experience has filled the whole book and that the philosophy has had to be postponed until later. But, in fact, philosophical distinctions and judgments are at work throughout the book and are often made explicit. After introductory methodological comments in the first three chapters, James structures the book around a classification of his often quite vivid first person narrative accounts.

One of James' methodological remarks is especially important. He says that in recent books on logic a distinction is made between two orders of inquiry.²⁹ The first is an inquiry into what something is, including its constitution, origin, and history; the second is an inquiry into its value. They proceed, he says, from diverse intellectual preoccupations and one cannot be deduced from the other. These two judgments, the first of which he calls existential and the second spiritual, must be made separately. The allusion to recent books on logic is to Peirce's point in 'The Fixation of Belief' that the epistemic value of a hypothesis is to be judged not by its origin, but by how well it works. A physicist who has been working on a problem might come upon a hypothesis or formula that she finds promising. The value of that hypothesis will depend on how well it works when she plugs it into the appropriate equations or designs an experiment to test the hypothesis. How the formula or hypothesis came to her is irrelevant, whether it came in a dream, from poring over her notes, or by association from something seemingly unrelated. What matters is how it works for the task at hand.

James takes this to be a descriptive point as well as a normative one. Despite what people claim, he says, they don't judge the significance or value of a hypothesis or an experience by its origin, whether they are appealing to the Bible or Aristotle or some other source for authority. In fact, when Luther goes back to the New Testament, for example, he is quite selective about what he takes from there. He takes those things that will be of value and use to him. The criteria we employ when judging experiences, James says, are three: (1) immediate luminousness, that is, the authority it seems to convey, (2) philosophical reasonableness, and (3) moral helpfulness.³⁰ The first is often unreliable and usually gives way, upon reflection, to the other two.

These remarks shed some light on the problems with James' examination of experiential reports. James defines religion as the feelings, acts, and experiences of individuals so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. This means that a religious experience is identified under a description, and that that description includes reference to the way the person who has the experience understands himself or herself to stand in relation to what he or she considers the divine. But James does not take his own definition sufficiently seriously. The first of his two chapters on conversion is devoted chiefly to a description of the experience of the convert and the second to explanations of that experience. He speculates that sudden conversions might be explained by activity that goes on subliminally in the subconscious mind, and that invasive experiences from that region abruptly interrupt the primary consciousness. After making that suggestion, he writes: 'I don't see why Methodists need object to such a view.'³¹ 'You may remember', he writes,

how (in my first lecture) I argued against the notion that the worth of a thing can be decided by its origin. Our spiritual judgment, I said, our opinion of the significance and value of a human event or condition, must be decided on empirical grounds exclusively. If the *fruits for life* of the state of conversion are good, we ought to idealize it and venerate it, even though it be a piece of natural psychology; if not, we ought to make short work with it, no matter what supernatural being may have infused it.³²

For a person who has a sudden conversion experience, a belief about the cause of the experience is itself a part of the experience. A convert at a revival experiences what happened to her as the work of the Holy Spirit. Were she to become convinced that it could be exhaustively explained

by crowd psychology, or by some other natural explanation, it would no longer be the same experience. James seems to recognize this in his definition, but he forgets it when he says that he doesn't see any reason why a convert would object to such a view. A belief about the cause of the experience, in this case the belief that it cannot be completely explained by natural causes, is itself constitutive of the experience.

James' sharp separation of judgments about what an experience is and how it is to be explained, on one hand, and judgments about its value or significance on the other, may have blinded him to the fact that for the one who undergoes the experience a judgment about its proper explanation might figure into, or be assumed in, a judgment about its significance. Ordinary perceptual judgments are of this sort. If I discover that what I took to be a sighting of a tree up ahead was the result of a certain kind of reflection or refraction of light through the fog, I will change my judgment about whether or not there is a tree in that spot. Similarly, for some of the subjects whose reports James quotes, learning that what they had taken to be the action of the Holy Spirit on their hearts could be convincingly explained by natural psychological and social causes might diminish the importance of the experience. By arguing that causal explanations and judgments of value are completely independent, James misses this point.

In an essay published in 1905 John Dewey criticizes appeal to immediate experience in a way that raises questions about James' extensive use in *Varieties* of first person narratives. He cites as an example a person's being frightened by a strange noise. After investigation, she realizes that the source of the noise is the wind tapping the shade against the window. Reality is now changed, reorganized. Her fright, as a reaction to the sudden noise, turns out to be useless or even detrimental. It is, he says, a maladaptation. Then he adds: 'pretty much all of experience is of this sort ..., and the empiricist is false to his principle if he does not duly note this fact'.³³ Immediate experience, what something is experienced as, is only what something seems to be. It is not knowledge until it has been tested, subjected to inquiry, explained and thus understood.

James selects his examples because they are vivid and because they are experienced by their subjects as religious. Any one of them could be similar to the frightening noise in Dewey's example. Further testing and inquiry might yield other causes that would give rise to a new explanation, reinterpretation, and thus a changed reality. The religious explanations, and thus the religious experiences, might be transient stages in the inquiries into the causes of each of these examples. James assembles and classifies them, observes that all attest to something

More beyond and continuous with what he calls the higher parts of the self, and adds his overbelief that though this may be partially explained by appeal to the subconscious it is not exhausted by that kind of natural explanation. Dewey's point is that experience only tells us what something is experienced as, that is to say, what it is taken to be. To focus on the fact that these experiences seem to their subjects to be religious, may arrest inquiry rather than serving it.

In the postscript to *Varieties* James criticizes those whom he calls universal supernaturalists, transcendental idealists like his colleague Josiah Royce and others who affirm an absolute mind beyond the world of natural causes, but hold that it is indiscernible and that its existence would not make any difference in what we could observe and do. James thought that this was too facile. Such a claim is meaningless if it doesn't make some kind of experienceable difference. While *Varieties* was directed chiefly against naturalism, offering examples of experiences that seemed to suggest something beyond the natural realm, James' 1907 lectures on *Pragmatism* were directed chiefly at Royce and the idealists. Early in the lectures James distinguishes between two types of philosophy of religion, transcendental idealism and traditional theism. The pragmatic criterion, he says, requires us to ask 'What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion be true?' Not what difference would it make if we were to believe this hypothesis rather than that, but what difference it would make if it were true. James agrees with the idealists that truth is correspondence with reality, but wants to transform the empty and static notion of correspondence into some kind of active commerce between particular thoughts and experiences. The rationalist philosophy of absolute mind, he thinks, doesn't allow for any such commerce. 'It is no *explanation* of our concrete universe, it is another thing altogether, a substitute for it, a remedy, a way of escape.'³⁴

James repeats in *Pragmatism* the passage from the Berkeley lecture in which he says that the practical meaning of the concept of God is a guarantee of an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved. 'Materialism', he writes, 'means simply the denial that the moral order is eternal, and the cutting off of ultimate hopes; spiritualism means the affirmation of an eternal moral order and the letting loose of hope.'³⁵ At the end of *Varieties* he had concluded that such a guarantee may not be possible and may not be necessary for religion. In the final chapter of *Pragmatism* James elaborates on this point. He has argued that pragmatic reflection on the issue of one and many shows that while we unify our world in our knowing the idea of an already existent unity in an

absolute knower is empty. Both our knowing and our moral experience of the world are best accounted for by pluralism. There is in the world as much unity as we can find or can make, but we should not begin by assuming it. James says that this pluralistic view fits better with pragmatism. Perfection is not guaranteed, but is contingent on actual agents doing their best. The pragmatist is willing to accept this moralistic religion, without a guarantee and with real losses. Evil is not *aufgehoben*. It is up to us to bring about the moral order. But, James adds, 'I firmly disbelieve, myself, that our human experience is the highest form of experience extant in the universe ... We may well believe, on proofs that religious experience affords, that higher powers exist and are at work to save the world on ideal lines similar to our own.'³⁶

In his review of *Pragmatism* Dewey argues that when James applies the pragmatic principle to determine the meaning of the term 'God' and of the debate between theism and materialism, he assumes that that meaning is already fixed ahead of time.³⁷ James proceeds as a teacher who is trying to elucidate the meaning of a certain concept rather than as a philosopher who is trying actively to determine the meaning in a way that might possibly transform it. This, Dewey says, is quite different from Peirce's procedure. To use one of Peirce's examples, the meaning of the term 'force' is determined by asking what consequences we can expect if we act on an object in a certain way. That is not an elucidation of traditional meanings of the term 'force', but it is a clearly defined meaning that has served useful for modern physics.

James writes: 'The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instances of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.'³⁸ Dewey responds that this is not the whole function of philosophy. The pragmatist should first determine the meaning of the world-formula, not just accept it as given and then try to elucidate its meaning. After concluding that the concept of God means a 'guarantee of an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved', James had written in the same paragraph: 'Here then, in these different emotional and practical appeals, in these adjustments of our concrete attitudes of hope and expectation, and all the delicate consequences which these differences entail, lie the real meanings of materialism and spiritualism.'³⁹ Dewey argues that James takes the latter specification of its consequences to illumine and to justify the traditional use of the term 'God' when the pragmatist ought not just accept that traditional use but transform it so that it refers directly to something like the adjustments of our concrete attitudes of hope and expectation.

For James, Matthew Arnold's conception of God as 'an eternal power, not ourselves, that makes for righteousness', a description to which James alludes at several points, is a live option. The religious question for him, from the outset, is whether or not there is such an order, whether this is a moral or unmoral universe. It is a pressing question for James. He eventually relinquishes his requirement that such a God would guarantee that an ideal order be permanently preserved, but he still believes 'that higher powers exist and are at work to save the world on ideal lines similar to our own'. For Dewey that is no longer a live option. Dewey takes this to be James' failure to pursue the pragmatic method thoroughly. But Dewey is already well on the way toward a naturalism from which it seems clear that the idea of 'God' defined as an antecedently existing source of moral order is of no practical use and therefore is in need of radical transformation. That shift, from the search for a 'power, not ourselves, that makes for righteousness' to a belief that any moral order in the world is one that we ourselves make using the resources of the natural world, is not solely the result of applying the pragmatic method to religious concepts and questions, but of larger changes in their conceptions of the world.

Notes

1. W. James (1979) *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 13.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
3. C. S. Peirce (1992) 'The Fixation of Belief' in *The Essential Peirce*, Vol. 1 (1867–1893), eds. N. Houser and C. Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 109–23.
4. James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 18.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.
9. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, I, p. 120.
10. James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 84.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 66. 'The Rationality of Faith' was published in *Princeton Review*, 2 (1882), pp. 58–86, and was subsequently incorporated into 'The Sentiment of Rationality' in *The Will to Believe*.
12. James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 71.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
15. C. S. Peirce (1998) 'A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God' in *The Essential Peirce*, Vol. 2, ed. Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), pp. 434–50.