

From...

ON

# JAMES

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# 3

## Philosophy in Action: William James and Pragmatism

*Philosophies, whether expressed in sonnets or systems, all must wear this form. The thinker starts*

*from some experience of the practical world, and asks its meaning. He launches himself upon the speculative sea, and makes a voyage long or short. He ascends into the empyrean, and communes with the eternal essences. But whatever his achievements and discoveries be while gone, the utmost result they can issue in is some new practical maxim or resolve, or the denial of some old one, with which inevitably he is sooner or later washed ashore on the terra firma of concrete life again.*

—“Reflex Action and Theism” (WTB, 142-143)

In the preceding chapter, we emphasized the urgency in James’s philosophical work; according to James, philosophical reflection is *not* an optional activity, but a psychological, human, necessity. Indeed James sometimes refers to philosophical thinking as a natural kind of “craving” (WTB 82)—we long for order, rationality, security, and system within a “restless universe” (WWJ, 606) of irreducibly plural facts, fluctuation, exuberance, risk, joy, tragedy, and loss. James argues that the primary mission of a radically empirical philosophy is to reconcile us to our condition, to make us feel at home in the universe. Yet if a philosophy is to do this, it must take full account of the kind of universe we are living in as well as of the kind of creatures we are. That is, as we argued earlier, the radical empiricist holds that if a philosophy is to be successful, it must satisfy two criteria: First, it must not deny or contradict any of the facts of lived experience; it must not depart from life. Second, it must not deny the power of human action to effect changes in the universe; it must not obstruct or paralyze human effort. Hence a

radically empirical philosophy will directly confront the flux and flow of life in “all its wild intensity” (WWJ, 648) and yet assure each of us that “the inmost nature of the reality is congenial to the powers which you possess” (WWJ, 331). James argued that traditional philosophical systems failed to meet the criteria of radical empiricism, and that hence a new philosophy was needed.

To this end, in 1907 James published one of the most controversial works of twentieth-century philosophy, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. In this slim book, which originated in a series of lectures James gave at the Lowell Institute in 1906 and at Columbia University in 1907, drew upon the previous work of his close friend, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and popularized “pragmatism,” the first philosophical movement indigenous to the United States. It is a discussion of James’s pragmatism that forms the subject of the present chapter; however, before we can begin, we must turn first to Peirce’s account out of which James develops his own views.

## **The Origins of Pragmatism**

James credits Peirce with originating the term ‘pragmatism’ and its leading principle, the “pragmatic maxim.”<sup>1</sup> Peirce proposed the principal tenets of pragmatism at the meetings of an informal philosophy group that met in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the early 1870s, and the group called itself the “Metaphysical Club” (recall our discussion from the previous chapter).<sup>2</sup> Drawing upon their discussions, Peirce wrote two essays, “The Fixation of Belief” (5.358-387) and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (5.388-410), which mark the birth of pragmatism.<sup>3</sup>

Peirce's "Fixation" and "Ideas" articles are today considered among the most important in philosophy; however, at the time of their publication they received little notice. The groundwork of pragmatism lay dormant for some 20 years until James made use of Peirce's ideas in an 1898 address entitled "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results." In this essay, James credits Peirce with first proposing the "principle of pragmatism" which James confesses "should be expressed more broadly than Mr. Peirce expresses it" (WWJ, 348). However, to understand James's reconstruction of Peirce's concept, we must examine briefly the leading ideas of Peircean pragmatism.

### *Peirce and the Pragmatic Maxim*

The essence of Peirce's pragmatism lies in the principle of meaning, commonly known as the 'pragmatic maxim', first expressed in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear." However, this principle is based upon the theory of belief launched in the earlier "Fixation of Belief" article, so it is to Peirce's concept of belief that we must first turn.

In "Fixation" Peirce addresses a seemingly simple question: What does it mean to have a *belief*? According to many philosophers, to have a belief is to be in a certain psychological state with regard to a given statement or idea. That is, to believe that *snow is white* is to adopt a certain psychological attitude—one of affirmation—towards the statement, 'snow is white'. On the traditional analysis, then, belief is essentially a psychological phenomenon; beliefs are inner, mental, and private. They are, consequently, inaccessible to another person's observation—one cannot tell what your beliefs are just by *looking* at you—and hence not subject to scientific examination.

Contrary to Modern philosophical tradition, however, Peirce sought to rid philosophy of the notion of an “inner” consciousness inherited from the influential French philosopher, Rene Descartes.<sup>4</sup> Wanting to set philosophy on more “scientific” ground, Peirce proposed a theory of belief according to which beliefs are not essentially mental states, but rather *rules for action*, or as Peirce would say “habits” (5.371).<sup>5</sup> On the Peircean analysis, to believe that *this knife is sharp* is to be disposed to *behave* in certain ways when presented with the knife. Put more generally, to have a belief is simply to have acquired a habit of acting in certain ways under certain conditions. This take on beliefs as, in essence, habits entails that they are not inner and private, but publicly observable. But how does a belief lead to active habitual expressions of it?

Peirce answers in this way: the public action that expresses belief is a function of the *meaning* of the idea or statement to which the belief refers. That is, the belief that *this knife is sharp* will generate certain behavior depending upon the meaning of the idea ‘this knife is sharp’. Therefore, Peirce’s theory of belief requires a theory of meaning, and it is in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” that Peirce gives the first articulation of the “pragmatic maxim” by which one discerns the meaning of an idea:

Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.  
(5.402)

Here, again, we find Peirce resisting the traditional tendency. Not unlike the concept of a “belief,” the concept of “meaning” has been understood in traditional philosophy

to be primarily a psychological property, but on Peirce's view, the meaning of an idea is to be analyzed in terms of the effects of its object in a person's experience. "Meaning," like "belief," is thus taken out of the realm of private consciousness and placed into the world of action and behavior.

To gain a better understanding of Peirce's maxim, let us see how it is applied. When someone says of an object, *X*, that it is 'hard' what does she mean?<sup>6</sup> On Peirce's view, "our idea of anything is our idea of its sensible effects" (5.401); therefore, one can mean by the term 'hard', for example, only some set of sensory experiences. According to Peirce, to say that something is hard is to say that it will scratch other objects. Therefore, to say that '*X* is hard' is to say *X* will scratch other objects. To emphasize the behavioral aspect of Peirce's theory, we may, alternatively, state this meaning in the form of an if-then sentence (in logic, such statements are called "conditionals"). Taken this way, the statement '*X* is hard' means:

*If you rub X against another object, Y, then X will scratch Y.*

Returning, then, to the statement 'the knife is sharp', the term 'sharp' means some collection of sensible effects—namely, to say that something is sharp is to say that it will cut other objects. Hence the statement, 'the knife is sharp' means something like the conditional:

*If you draw the knife across the surface of another object, the knife will cut it.*

As these examples illustrate, meaning for Peirce is brought down to "what is tangible and conceivably practical" (5.400); the meaning of a term consists in the

“sensible effects” it predicates of an object, and the meaning of a statement is essentially a proposal, or perhaps a prediction, regarding the functioning of its object. For any idea, then, one may extract its complete meaning by drawing out the proposals for action that it suggests:

If one can identify accurately all the conceivable phenomena which the affirmation or denial of a concept could imply, one will have therein a complete definition of the concept, *and there is absolutely nothing more in it.* (5.412)

Indeed, Peirce thought that drawn-out proposals were *exhaustive* of an idea’s meaning.

With Peirce’s theory of meaning in place, let us return to the concept of belief. To have the belief that *this knife is sharp* is to be disposed to act in accordance with the various proposals that constitute the meaning of the statement ‘this knife is sharp’. One who believes *this knife is sharp* is likely to exhibit certain kinds of behavior in the presence of the knife: she will avoid contact with the blade, she will not use the knife as a back scratcher, she will store it in a place that children cannot easily access, she will apply it to those object he wishes to cut, etc. It is important to recognize that Peirce is not claiming that the belief that *this knife is sharp* is the *cause* of the various kinds of behavior, for this would be to admit that a belief is a psychological state that is separate from behavior. Rather, Peirce is arguing that believing *consists* in the behavioral dispositions; a belief *is* a habit.

In Peirce’s later writings on the topic, one discovers that principle of meaning expressed by the pragmatic maxim is all he intended to denote with the term ‘pragmatism’. In a 1905 manuscript, Peirce writes:

Suffice it to say once more that pragmatism is, in itself, no doctrine of metaphysics, no attempt to determine any truth of things. It is merely a method of ascertaining the meanings of hard words and of abstract concepts. (5.464)

Thus, on Peirce's view, pragmatism is not a philosophy *per se*, it is rather a logical rule to employ when doing philosophy. This rule is supposed to help philosophers "dismiss" the "make-believes" (5.416) of previous philosophizing. That is, the pragmatic maxim is intended to be used as a weapon against the imprecise and vague vocabulary of traditional philosophy.

To see that this is so, consider the following: Insofar as the maxim proposes a standard of meaning, it also establishes a criterion of *meaninglessness*. Since the meaning of a term consists in the sensible effects it predicates of its object, and the meaning of a statement or idea consists in the functional proposals it makes to an agent, any term that cannot be defined with reference to sensory experience, and any statement that makes no proposal to action will be without meaning.

Peirce thought that many philosophical ideas, and the disputes concerning them, were meaningless and should be therefore abandoned. Take, for example, the old metaphysical dilemma of free will. Those who believe in free will, "libertarians," maintain that one's actions are the expression of the free choice of one's will. Their opponents, "determinists," maintain that one's actions are the necessary effects of the causal force of prior events, and therefore that the will is not free.<sup>7</sup> According to the pragmatic maxim, the meaning of an idea consists in the proposals it makes to action. Does either position make such a proposal? It seems that the answer is no—behavior

is unaffected no matter how the free will question is answered. The competing claims are therefore meaningless, and the dispute between them is idle. As with the free will debate, so with traditional metaphysics in general:

[Pragmatism] will serve to show that almost every proposition of ontological metaphysics is either meaningless gibberish—one word being defined by other words, and they by still others, without any real conception ever being reached—or else downright absurd. (5.423)

Peirce imagined a time at which, through the application of his maxim, philosophy would be purged of all nonsense. At this time, all that would remain is “a series of problems capable of investigation by the observational methods of the true sciences” (5.423).

## **James’s Pragmatism**

Peirce’s emphasis on science may generate some concern. For example, can statements about values meet the criterion for meaningfulness established by the pragmatic maxim? Will statements such as *murder is wrong* and *Beethoven is a better composer than Mozart* be meaningful on a Peircean analysis? How can concerns about decidedly human matters such as how we should live and what is valuable fit into Peirce’s scientific world-view? Most generally, can Peircean pragmatism meet the requirements of a radically empirical approach to philosophy? On the face of it, the answer would seem “no.” Peirce’s pragmatic maxim seems to remove from the arena of philosophical concern the kinds of topics that James thought most vital and with which he was most eager to struggle; in this sense Peircean pragmatism is not

radically empirical. James hence saw the need to develop a more elastic and human version of pragmatism.

### *Philosophy's "Present Dilemma"*

In his *Pragmatism* lectures, James begins working towards the development of his more human version in the first lecture entitled "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy." Therein, James argues that professional philosophy is caught in the deadlock of two opposing viewpoints: rationalism and empiricism. These philosophies are, in turn, the intellectual manifestations of two opposing psychological types or, as James calls them, "temperaments": the "tender mind" and the "tough mind." The tender-minded, rationalist philosopher is devoted to "abstract and eternal principles" (WWJ, 364); he is religious, optimistic, and spiritual. According to the tender-minded philosopher, the universe exists as a complete, simple, and rational whole. Accordingly, tender-minded philosophies tend to dismiss the flux, struggle, and risk of life as merely apparent and unreal.

The tender-minded temperament is perhaps most clearly evident in one of James's favorite targets, the German philosopher, G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), who is famous for having maintained that "what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational."<sup>8</sup> On the Hegelian view, all conflicts and fluctuations are but temporary moments in the self-realization of an already immanent Absolute Reality that Hegel called *Geist* ("Spirit").<sup>9</sup> Hence the travails and struggles of human life are in reality transitory and predestined to resolve in the final culmination of an Absolute. There is thus no *risk* in the Hegelian universe; the final salvation of the world is

inevitable and *guaranteed*. Against this kind of optimism, James asserts his radical empiricism,

I find myself willing to take the universe to be really dangerous and adventurous, without therefore backing out and crying ‘no play’.... I am willing that there should be real losses and real losers, and no total preservation of all that is. (WWJ, 470)

By contrast, the tough-minded empiricist is committed to “facts in all their crude variety”; he is scientific, skeptical, and materialistic (WWJ, 364). The tough-minded thinker naturally rejects the optimism of the tender-minded philosophies, he sees the world not as a rational whole, but as a sundry collection of the kinds of hard facts uncovered by science. As such, tough-minded philosophies tend to be pessimistic, irreligious, and fatalistic (WWJ, 365).

We have already seen some of James’s criticisms of tough-minded empiricism in our discussion of radical empiricism from the preceding chapter. Recall that James rejects the *sensationalism* of traditional empiricism; that is, he rejects the idea that experience is analyzable into discreet, atomic sensations. Against this view, James promotes the idea that experience is primarily a stream, a flow of life that features both *disjunctive* and *conjunctive* relations; accordingly, the tough-minded empiricist’s distinct, atomic sensations are not the ultimate elements of analysis. On James’s view, experience is “all shades and no boundaries” (WWJ, 296)

Here James adds to this criticism the charge that tough-minded philosophies are not *living* philosophies; their commitment to the hard facts of science causes them to disregard the human features of experience. Consequently, a tough-minded philosophy cannot “return to life,” it

cannot keep in touch with the ordeals of lived experience, and so must detach itself. The Scottish empiricist, David Hume, provides a clear example of this tendency. Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* is a paradigmatic example of tough-minded empiricism.<sup>10</sup> In his *Treatise*, Hume argues against the reality of causal relations and against the reality of a unified self that exists over time. To employ the Jamesian terminology, Hume recognizes only the *disjunctions* within experience, and dismisses the *conjunctions*. Hume hence resigns himself to a certain kind of skepticism; that is, he rejects the idea that real knowledge can be attained.

Hume is most famous for his skepticism, and many have taken his skeptical conclusions to be sufficient reason for abandoning his philosophy. However, James sees another target. In a telling passage from conclusion of the first book of his *Treatise*, Hume offers the following commentary:

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium.... I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour's amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any further.<sup>11</sup>

Here Hume confesses that his philosophy must be abandoned once he leaves his study. Indeed, he goes further by claiming that he is led by "nature herself" to abandon the "melancholy and delirium" generated by his

philosophical ideas; his nature compels him to *live*, and he can do so only by disregarding his philosophical principles. According to James's radically empirical view, Hume's admission constitutes a *refutation* of his philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

So, herein lies philosophy's dilemma: traditional systems offer one or the other of a pair of errors. The tough-minded philosophies offer "inhumanism" and "irreligion" whereas the tender-minded systems keep "out of all definite touch with concrete facts and joys and sorrows" (WWJ, 368); in other words, Western philosophical tradition leaves you with "an empirical philosophy that is not religious enough, and a religious philosophy that is not empirical enough" (WWJ, 367). James insists that no one can *live* without both the facts of the tough-minded philosophers and the principles of the tender-minded (WWJ, 364). Hence the traditional philosophical enterprise, conducted as it is on the model of the dilemma between rationalism and empiricism, is a strictly academic exercise, unfit to speak to the concerns of everyday life. In this connection, James quotes a student of his who remarked, "when you entered a philosophic classroom you had to open relations with a universe entirely distinct from the one you left behind you in the street" (WWJ, 369). In contrast to this image of philosophy, James asserts:

The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the one which is true.  
(WWJ, 379)

That is, a philosophy, if it is to perform a function at all, must begin with our actual hopes and needs, it must take

seriously our pre-philosophical “temperaments,” for these “do determine men in their philosophies, and always will” (WWJ, 374). Once these are accounted for, James insists we will find that,

You want a system that will combine both things, the scientific loyalty to facts and willingness to take account of them, the spirit of adaptation and accommodation, in short, but also the old confidence in human values and the resultant spontaneity, whether of the religious or romantic type. (WWJ, 368)

James sought to develop a new philosophy that would mitigate the intellectual deadlock between the tender-minded and the tough-minded by accommodating the best aspects of each. He hoped that such a perspective would be able to bring philosophy back into touch with the daily lives of ordinary people. According to James, pragmatism is such a philosophy:

I offer you the oddly-named thing pragmatism as a philosophy that can satisfy both kinds of demand. It can remain religious like the rationalisms, but at the same time, like the empiricisms, it can preserve the richest intimacy with facts. (WWJ, 373)

### *The Pragmatic Method*

We can already begin to see that unlike Peirce, who thought that pragmatism would expose the meaninglessness of most metaphysical disputes, James claims that pragmatism is “primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable” (WWJ, 377). That is, whereas Peirce specifically delimits pragmatism’s scope, attempting to eschew metaphysics

itself, James clearly presents his version of pragmatism as a “philosophy,” a way to handle, not avoid, metaphysics. Despite this change in focus, James’s method is, in essence, just a broadened version of Peirce’s pragmatic maxim. James writes in his earlier essay, “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results”:

If there were any part of a thought that made no difference in the thought’s practical consequences, then that part would be no proper element of the thought’s significance. (WWJ, 348)

In the 1907 Pragmatism lectures, he explains the method thus:

To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object...we need only consider what effects of a conceivably practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what actions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, then, is for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all. (WWJ, 377-378)

It would seem, thus far, that James has done nothing more than paraphrase Peirce. Like Peirce, James locates the meaning of an idea within its “practical consequences” for behavior. We begin to see the novel element in James’s formulation, however, upon examination of the notion of a “practical consequence.”

Whereas Peirce, as we saw above, limits the practical consequences of an idea to those functional proposals which it predicates of its object, James designs his pragmatism to include within a given idea’s pragmatic meaning its implications for the *entirety* of the believing subject’s experience. James realizes that belief in certain

philosophical doctrines can be *paralyzing*, that certain philosophical doctrines can induce attitudes that *obstruct* action and literally *stifle* the flow of life. James argues that such consequences, which may be characterized as “psychological,” are certainly *practical*, they most definitely affect our behavior, and a pragmatism that is radically empirical must account for them. That is, Jamesian pragmatism “plunges forward into the river of experience” (WWJ, 405), and attempts to confront it whole.

Resolution, then, and not necessarily dissolution, is the purpose of James’s pragmatism, for James saw more clearly than Peirce that metaphysical disputes can enervate, disrupting our activities. However, as we have said, James’s pragmatic method to take on such crippling disputes is contiguous with Peirce’s own maxim. James says:

The pragmatic method in...cases [of dispute] is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. (WWJ, 377)

One way to get inside the important changes that James makes to Peirce’s doctrine, however, is through his own discussion of the debate between materialism and spiritualism (WWJ, 393ff.). Traditionally, materialism is the position that maintains that only matter, and the laws of physics that govern it, exists. Further, while matter of some sort may always exist, the laws of physical nature imply that the world as we know it will dissolve away.

Consequently, materialists deny the existence of spiritual entities such as souls, minds, and God, as well as the ideas of immortality and eternity. Alternatively, spiritualism claims that there is more to the universe than just blind matter. There is in addition another kind of substance—"spirit"—which is eternal, and eternal things are superior to finite entities; thus "spirit" is superior to matter thus superior to matter.

Of course, the dispute between materialists and spiritualists cannot be resolved by means of observation. The competing claims cannot be analyzed into claims about sense experience; evidence is inconclusive. We must then apply the pragmatic method "by tracing its respective practical consequences." In so doing, an immediate implication of James's method when applied to the spiritualism-materialism debate comes into strict relief: if we were to imagine ourselves living at the very last moment of the universe's existence, the dispute between materialism and spiritualism is idle. That is, if there literally were *no future* in which pragmatic differences in behavior and attitude could manifest, "the two theories, in spite of their different-sounding names, mean exactly the same thing" (WWJ, 395). As James puts the point elsewhere,

There can *be* no difference anywhere that doesn't *make* a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, and somewhen. (WWJ, 379)

James hence insists that in "every genuine metaphysical debate some practical issue, however conjectural and

remote, is involved” (WWJ, 396); where no practical issue can be identified, debate is “purely verbal” (WWJ, 395) and consequently may be simply dismissed.

Yet as this is not very last moment of the universe’s existence (we hope), the dispute between materialism and spiritualism *does* matter. Applying this method to the competing claims in the debate, James shows that there is a significant difference between the materialist thesis and that of the spiritualist. Taken pragmatically, the materialist position amounts to the claim:

In the vast driftings of the cosmic weather, though many a jeweled shore appears and many an enchanted cloud-bank floats away, long lingering ere it be dissolved—even as our world now lingers, for our joy—yet when these transient products are gone, nothing, absolutely *nothing* remains, to represent those particular qualities, those elements of preciousness which they may have enshrined. Dead and gone are they, gone utterly from the very sphere and room of being. Without an echo; without a memory... (WWJ, 397-398)

The spiritualist, on the other hand, is pragmatically committed to the following assertion:

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 ship wreck and dissolution not the absolutely final things. (WWJ, 398)

James intentionally employs dramatic language in characterizing the competing positions because he wants us

to feel the *gravity* of the dispute *for our own lives*. Taken pragmatically, the debate between materialism and spiritualism is no longer simply a matter of interest to the detached speculation of academic philosophers, it is rather an issue which cuts to the very core of *how we shall live*. James summarizes the debate:

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 their differences entail, lie the real meanings of materialism and [spiritualism]—not in hair-splitting abstractions.... Materialism means simply the denial that the moral order is eternal, and the shutting off of ultimate hopes; [spiritualism] means the affirmation of an eternal moral order and the letting loose of hope. (WWJ, 398)

The metaphysician's sterile question regarding the existence of spiritual entities thus becomes on a radically empirical analysis a question of our own psychological attitude towards the universe: Shall we sustain *hope* for the universe, or shall we abandon hope? Certainly, we shall have to adopt one or the other of these attitudes—suspending judgment on the matter is to suspend hope. We must choose, and how we choose will significantly impact our behavior. What shall we do?

Understood pragmatically, the dispute is easily resolved. The “true objection to materialism” does not lie in some intricate philosophical argument, it lies in the realization that materialism does not provide a “permanent warrant for our more ideal interests”; it is not a “fulfiller of our remotest hopes”; it results in “utter final wreck and

tragedy” (WWJ, 398). Spiritualism, by contrast, “has at least this practical superiority...it guarantees an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved,” it “takes our joyous, careless, trustful moments, and it justifies them” (WWJ, 398). The need to believe in an “eternal moral order” is “one of the deepest needs of our breast” (WWJ, 389). Whereas “materialism’s sun sets in a sea of disappointment” (WWJ, 399), spiritualism “deals with a world of *promise*” and is, thus, pragmatically justified.

The Jamesian strategy for dealing with metaphysical disputes, then, is to translate the competing claims into propositions about our own attitudes and behavioral dispositions towards the world. Once cast in pragmatic terms, we shall find that either the competing claims mean the same thing (i.e., they result in attitudes leading to the same kind of action), or that one frustrates while the other assists action. James argues that as this is, for better or worse, a world which demands that we *act*, we should adopt those metaphysical propositions which facilitate action, support our efforts, and underwrite our deepest hopes.

### *The Pragmatic Conception of Truth*

We have been dealing with James’s account of how pragmatism addresses disputes in metaphysics. We may say that a dispute is metaphysical when observational evidence is insufficient to determine the question either way. So, returning to the above example, the dispute between materialism and spiritualism cannot be settled by simply *looking* at the world. Science can tell us about how material bodies behave and interact, but science cannot tell us whether everything that exists is material. Of course, not all disputes are like this. Furthermore, it does not follow

that James is advocating a view according to which I should believe that I have a million dollars in my pocket if this belief will lift my spirits and hence facilitate action. Such a view would be silly. In the case of the million dollars in my pocket, observational evidence *is* sufficient to settle the question. I examine the contents of my pocket and discover that it *is not true* that I have a million dollars there.

What does follow for James is, however, that pragmatism is not only a method of dealing with metaphysics, it is also “a certain theory of truth” (WWJ, 381). James’s “Pragmatic Conception of Truth” is perhaps the most controversial product of philosophy in the twentieth century; it was the subject of extreme debate in the years following publication of *Pragmatism*, and it remains central to contemporary discussions of truth. To this theory we now turn.

To begin, suppose someone says, “Lincoln was assassinated.” Clearly, this statement is true. But what do we mean by calling it true? Many philosophers have promoted what is known as the *correspondence theory of truth*. On this view, a statement is true if it “agrees with” or “corresponds to” the way the world is or “reality.” So, on this view, the statement “Lincoln was assassinated” is true because Lincoln was assassinated; accordingly the statement “Nixon was assassinated” is false because Nixon died of natural causes. Of course, this is simply common sense. A decidedly philosophical issue does emerge, however, once it is asked *how it is possible* that a statement—a bit of language—can bear a *relation* such as agreement or correspondence to a non-linguistic *state of affairs*. How can a sentence *P*, denote a situation *X*? In

what does the relation of “correspondence to reality” consist?

Philosophers have puzzled over this question for centuries with little success. James weighs in with the pragmatic theory of truth as an attempt to apply the pragmatic method in analyzing the notions of agreement and correspondence. James writes:

Pragmatism...asks its usual question. “Grant an idea or belief to be true,” it says, “what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone’s actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth’s cash-value in experiential terms?” (WWJ, 430)

Appropriating Peirce’s theory that a belief is essentially a proposal for action, James answers:

To ‘agree’ in the widest sense with a reality *can only mean to be guided either straight up to it or into its surroundings, or to be put into such working touch with it as to handle either it or something connected with it better than if we disagreed.*  
(WWJ, 434)

That is, on the Jamesian analysis “[t]he essential thing is the process of being guided” in action; “correspondence to the way the world is” and “agreement with reality” are “essentially...affair[s] of leading” (WWJ, 435):

Any idea that helps us to *deal* whether practically or intellectually, with either the reality or its belongings, that doesn’t entangle our progress in frustrations, that *fits*, in fact, and adapts our life to

the reality's whole setting will agree sufficiently to...hold true of that reality. (WWJ, 435)

To say that a given statement is true, then, is to say that, were one to believe it, one would be successfully led in action. A statement is true, then, insofar as it is a reliable guide for action. Insofar as a statement frustrates action, it is false.

One does not need much training in philosophy to anticipate the kinds of objections that have been raised against James's theory of truth. It has seemed to many critics that James is suggesting that those statements which we should *like* to be true are *ipso facto* true. Indeed, many of James's more casual remarks in proposing his theory invite such an interpretation. Consider a few of the most notorious claims:

The true, to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in our way of thinking.... (WWJ, 438)

Our account of truth is an account of truths in the plural...having only this quality in common, that they *pay*. (WWJ, 436)

You can say...that 'it is useful because it is true' or that 'it is true because it is useful'. Both these phrases mean exactly the same thing.... (WWJ, 431)

Given these remarks, it may seem that, according to James, truth consists in simply the usefulness, expediency, or profitableness of a proposition, and this is often how we use the term 'pragmatic' in our everyday language. Were this the view that James is advocating, it would admit of an easy refutation since there are many propositions which may be useful to believe but nonetheless false. Many of

James's critics have taken him to be promoting just the kind of simplistic view that the above comments seem to suggest. As A. J. Ayer put it:

These objections are so obvious that it is hard to understand how James could have remained unmoved by them *if he really* held the views against which they were directed.<sup>13</sup>

However, James's view is in fact a great deal more sophisticated than it may first appear, and many of James's most trenchant critics have often underestimated the subtleties of James's position.<sup>14</sup>

A full explication and defense of James's view cannot be undertaken here. We can, however, address some of the principal misconceptions driving the most common criticisms. We think the most prominent criticisms share a common flaw in that they attempt to understand James's conception of truth in isolation from his pragmatism and radical empiricism. That this is a mistake should be evident from the fact that James titles his chapter on truth in *Pragmatism*, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth"; James's account of truth is continuous with his more general philosophical approach and must be understood in that context.

Typical objections to James's theory attempt to devise cases in which it is useful or expedient to believe something that's plainly false. Of particular importance to understanding properly James's theory of truth, however, is the radically empirical conception of experience it presupposes. With this in mind, let us consider the case of a beggar who finds it useful to believe that he has a million dollars in his pocket.<sup>15</sup> Surely James, of all philosophers, is the first to place value on the psychological consequences

of belief. And yet, what is James to say about the common sense consideration that, no matter how useful it is to the beggar to believe himself wealthy, it is nonetheless *false* that he has a million dollars. Clearly, this seems to be a decisive refutation of James's theory. However, the proposed refutation misconstrues the sense of James's appeal to the "useful." Of course, the beggar may find comfort in the belief that he is wealthy, and to this small extent, we can say the belief is "useful" and that the belief "pays," yet when we note that, for James, experience is not a collection of distinct sensory events, but a continuous flow of life, we see that the usefulness of the beggar's momentary relief is at best fleeting and, when placed in the context of the entire stream of experience, not useful at all.

To see this, recall that James retains Peirce's functionalist account of belief: the meaning of a belief is the habit of action it produces, and every meaningful belief thus has a *purpose* insofar as it is adopted for the sake of successful action. But habit and action are not to be understood simply as individual events, isolated *doings*. Just as habits implicate the environment as well as the organism, all action occurs within a complex network of experience. For example, the act of taking a sip of coffee involves the coordination within experience of a wide variety of factors: my beliefs about the location of the coffee and how the cup is to be grasped, the common sense trust in the existence and general stability of medium-sized physical objects, the working against gravity and other physical forces that keep the cup in place, among others. Given that actions occur within the manifold of experience, it is perhaps more correct to think of a belief as a guide for *activity*. Now, the pragmatic conception of truth maintains that beliefs are to be evaluated according to their ability to

guide activity; accordingly, beliefs “become true just in so far as the help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience” (WWJ, 382). Hence the “usefulness” James associates with the truth of a proposition has to do with its ability to guide action successfully *within* the whole of experience. To repeat, “The essential thing is the process of being guided. Any idea that helps us to *deal*...with either the reality or its belongings... and adapts our life to reality’s whole setting, will...hold true of that reality” (WWJ, 435).

In our scenario, for instance, the moment of relief generated by the beggar’s belief that he has a million dollars does not comprise the whole of his experience, and so does not constitute the usefulness of the idea. The remaining portion of the beggar’s experience will frustrate the belief that he has a million dollars, and any action based on the idea (e.g., trying to buy a new car, attempting to get a home mortgage, and so forth) will entangle him in frustrations. The belief is false, no matter how pleasurable it may be to hold it.

So it is with all our beliefs. Those beliefs are true which successfully direct action, those beliefs are false which do not. Of course, this conception denies that truth is a “stagnant” property that inheres in true propositions (WWJ, 430). As James says, “Truth *happens* to an idea,” it “*becomes* true, it is *made* true by events” (WWJ, 430). That is, beliefs are *made* true through the actions they guide. Accordingly, truths are constantly subject to revision in light of new experience; as “experience...has a way of *boiling over*, and making us correct our present formulas,” all of our current truths are “temporary” (WWJ, 438). We may imagine an “ideal vanishing point towards which all our temporary truths will some day converge,”

but “we have to live today by what truth we can get today, and be ready tomorrow to call it falsehood” (WWJ, 438).

## **The Career of Pragmatism**

The two principal components of James’s pragmatism have now been discussed, but before moving on to our discussion of the moral implications of James’s thought, a few comments about the career of pragmatism are in order.

We noted above that whereas James credits Peirce with originating both the term ‘pragmatism’ and the pragmatic maxim, we have seen that he charges that Peircean pragmatism is too narrow. Peirce saw the pragmatic maxim as a way to dismiss metaphysical disputes as meaningless. James, by contrast, employed the pragmatic method as a way of making the meanings of competing metaphysical claims clear by cashing out the psychological and dispositional implications of adopting them. Hence, for James, metaphysics was not, as Peirce claimed, a collection of “meaningless” and “absurd” (5.423) propositions. We may say that, according to James, Peircean pragmatism is too tough-minded. In a remark that calls Peirce to mind, James writes:

One misunderstanding of pragmatism is to identify it with positivistic tough-mindedness, to suppose that it scorns every rationalistic notion as so much jabber and gesticulation, that it loves intellectual anarchy as such as prefers a sort of wolf-world absolutely unpent and wild and without a master or a collar to any philosophic classroom product whatsoever. (WWJ, 460)

For his part, Peirce in 1905 recognized that

It probably has never happened that a philosopher has attempted to give a general name to his own doctrine without that name's soon acquiring in common philosophical usage, a signification much broader than was originally intended. (5.413)

And in this light, Peirce's reaction against James's pragmatism was swift. In a letter shortly following the publication of James's *Pragmatism*, Peirce charged James with planting the "seeds of death" (6.485) into the pragmatist doctrine. He resolved to "kiss his child [viz., pragmatism] good-bye and relinquish it to its higher destiny." Peirce rebaptized his philosophy 'pragmaticism', a name he hoped was "ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers" (5.414). The differences between Peirce and James regarding the nature and scope of pragmatism has lead one commentator to remark "perhaps it would be correct, and just to all parties, to say that the modern movement known as pragmatism is largely the result of James's having misunderstood Peirce"; this certainly would have satisfied Peirce.<sup>16</sup>

It is clear, then, that 'pragmatism' may not be a term that denotes a universally accepted meaning,<sup>17</sup> and Peirce was not the only early proponent of pragmatism who sought to distance himself from James's ideas. Along with Peirce and James, John Dewey (1859-1952) rounds out the trio typically identified as the "classical" pragmatists.<sup>18</sup> At the time James's *Pragmatism* appeared, Dewey was teaching at the Columbia University having gained considerable notoriety as head of the Laboratory School and department of philosophy at the University of Chicago, and had written influential works such as "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (1896), that was itself greatly influenced by James's *Principles of Psychology*. In

recognition of Dewey as head of the “Chicago school” of pragmatism, James even makes reference to Dewey throughout his *Pragmatism*. In his own 1908 review of *Pragmatism*, “What Pragmatism Means by ‘Practical’,” however, Dewey writes,

Since Mr. James has referred to me as saying “truth is what gives satisfaction,” I may remark (apart from the fact that I do not think I ever said that truth is what *gives* satisfaction) that I have never identified any satisfaction with the truth of an idea, save *that* satisfaction which arises when the idea as working hypothesis or tentative method is applied to prior existences in such a way as to fulfill what it intends.<sup>19</sup>

Shortly after this philosophical controversy concerning James’s *Pragmatism*, Dewey dropped the term ‘pragmatism’ as a characterization of his philosophical approach, preferring terms like “experimentalism,” “naturalism,” and “instrumentalism.”<sup>20</sup>

\* \* \*

Though interest in pragmatist thought dropped dramatically in the 1960s as new styles of philosophizing came to prominence, since its inception at the turn of the last century, pragmatism has been an influential philosophical perspective. And while many contemporary philosophers, such as John Lachs, John J. McDermott, Beth Singer and others, continue to work within classical pragmatist scholarship, since the 1980s, there has been a “neo-pragmatism” movement steadily growing among philosophers in America. Contemporary figures in philosophy such as Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, Susan Haack, and Cornel West have put the insights of the

original pragmatists to work within the contexts of current philosophical debate.<sup>21</sup> Not unlike that of their philosophical forefathers, the work of the neo-pragmatists has met with thorough, and sometimes harsh, criticism.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, there is no denying that pragmatist ideas are once again the center of philosophical discussion and debate.

# 4

## Pluralism and the Moral Life

*Will not every one instantly declare a world fitted only for fair-weather human beings susceptible of every passive enjoyment, but without independence, courage, or fortitude, to be from a moral point of view incommensurably inferior to a world framed to elicit from the man every form of triumphant endurance and conquering moral energy?*

—“The Sentiment of Rationality” (WWJ, 340)

### **Moral Experience**

We have emphasized throughout this study James’s radically empirical approach to philosophy. Recall once again that the radical empiricist is committed to experience in all its wild intensity and irreducible variety. Accordingly James rejects traditional empiricism for holding what he sees as an unduly tidy view of experience; according to traditional empiricism, experience comes in discrete packets of “sensation” (WWJ, 292-293). He likewise rejects rationalism for its abandonment of experience in favor of an equally tidy and secure universe that forms a rational whole, what James calls a “block universe” (WWJ, 595). James contends that both views commit the same error insofar as they turn away from the vagaries of lived

experience for the sake of theorizing a world that is finished, complete, and tame. Yet experience teaches that our world is *not* a finished, rational whole and *not* reducible to the scientists' atoms and laws; we live, instead, in a "half-wild, half-saved universe" (WTB, 61) in which "possibilities, not finished facts, are the realities with which we have actively to deal" (WTB, 62).

We have seen that James's commitment to lived experience brings with it a series of philosophical implications. In preceding chapters, we saw how radical empiricism leads James to adopt a certain metaphysics, a certain theory of meaning, a certain conception of truth, and a certain philosophical methodology. Hence the discussion thus far has been mostly academic; we have placed James in the wider context of traditional Philosophy. Yet, as was argued in the introductory chapter, James must not be read as solely an academic philosopher. The principal objective of a radically empirical philosophy is to "return to life"; that is, to bring philosophical ideas and habits consciously to bear on our lives.

Among the irreducible components of our lived experience is what we shall call "moral experience." That is, our daily transactions with others and the world feature a decidedly *moral* dimension. Just as the world *forces* us to hold beliefs and thus to act, we are likewise compelled to make judgments about good and evil, responsibility and forgiveness, beauty and ugliness, virtue and vice. According to the radical empiricist, these judgments, and the elements of experience that compel them, are as real as any other aspect of experience. Hence your visual experience of the ink spots on this page which comprise this very sentence is, on the view of the radical empiricist, on a par with your judgment that your favorite painting is a

work of beauty, your feeling of regret at the remembrance of a missed opportunity to do good, and your repulsion to the idea of the unnecessary suffering of innocents. Unlike traditional philosophical systems, which attempt either to reduce moral experience to something more scientifically manageable such as pleasure and pain, or to elevate moral experience to something other-worldly, supernatural, and as such inexplicable, the radical empiricist bids us to confront the facts of experience directly and on their own terms. This follows from the basic tenets of radical empiricism.

Regarding moral experience, it is our view that James's examination of the implications of a radically empirical approach to what he calls the "moral life" marks the culmination of his thought, the moment towards which all else points. In this chapter, we shall develop James's moral vision by means of a series of encounters with topics such as determinism, pluralism, risk, and religious belief. These might at first seem a collection of disparate and unassociated themes, but, according to James, from the radically empirical point of view they are essential topics in the analysis of the moral life. Our own analysis of James's thought requires that we discuss these factors singularly, but successful analysis on our part should in the end demonstrate successful synthesis of them as well.

## **Determinism, Possibility, and Pluralism**

### *The Problem of Free Will*

A long standing concern in philosophy, the problem of free will traditionally consists in reconciling our prevailing self-image as free agents capable of choosing our own actions through the force of our own will alone with a scientific world-view according to which *all* present events,

including human actions, are the law-abiding outcomes of previous events. Put another way, science tells us that events at the level of everyday experience are *determined* by prior events. In fact, the very *success* of science confirms this—scientists are able to make predictions precisely because future events follow from present events in law-like ways. So, for example, were I to drop a cube of sodium into a vat of water, there would be an explosion. I know this because chemists have established that sodium and water interact so as to bring about an explosion. In fact, given sufficient information about the volume of water, the amount of sodium, and other environmental conditions, a chemist can predict precisely the *kind* of explosion one may expect. Given the laws that govern the physical events in our universe, whenever sodium is introduced into a vat of water, there *necessarily* will be an explosion unless some other factor interferes so as to *inhibit* the reaction. But of course, the presence of the inhibitor makes it *necessary* that no explosion should occur. The point is simple: when there is an explosion, it is the *necessary* outcome of prior events. Alternately, we can see this point from the other side of the coin; it would be silly to say that the explosion was a *random* matter, that where the mixing of sodium and water produced an explosion there *might not have been* that explosion. These law-like regularities are both the stuff and the prerequisite of physical science, whose general mission it is to discover the laws which govern physical events so that certain events might be avoided and others brought into being.

We need not turn to the chemistry lab, however, for examples of how present events are determined by prior events. We adopt this attitude whenever we seek an *explanation* for some unanticipated occurrence. Imagine

the following scenario: You get into your car, turn the ignition, and, contrary to your expectation, the car does not start. What would you conclude? Certainly, you would instantly believe that there was *something wrong* with the machinery of the car—a broken ignition switch, an empty gas tank, a dead battery, or some such condition. You expect that some prior event, such as the battery going dead, is the *cause* of the car's inability to start; without a properly functioning battery, the car *cannot* start. The important point here is that you *expect* to find some *cause* of the car's failure to start, some defect or malfunction making it *necessary* that the car would not start. If you cannot find the cause yourself, and want the car to start, you will get the car to a mechanic with instructions to find the problem and correct it.

Now imagine what your reaction would be to a mechanic who, after examining your car, concluded that there was *nothing* wrong with it; not that he could *find* nothing wrong, but that, in fact, *nothing was wrong*. *Finding* nothing wrong means that the mechanic cannot *locate* the cause of the car's failure to start; he admits the *existence* of the cause of the car's failure, but asserts that he cannot find it. By contrast, though, to say that there is *nothing* wrong with the car is to say that there is *no cause* for the car's failure to start, that the car's failure is entirely unrelated to its mechanical condition. However, in the face of a car that will not start, if your mechanic claimed that there was no cause for your car's failure, you would with good reason look for a new mechanic. Such is the force in our thinking of the view that present events are causally determined by prior events *with necessity*.

These examples might strike you as commonplace and not particularly engaging on the philosophical level. In

part, this is because we are confident that human behavior is substantively different from the behavior of cars and sodium. This might be true, but it is difficult to explain exactly in what this important difference consists. To see this, consider that when one wants to explain another person's behavior, one typically appeals to things like the person's desires, beliefs, and purposes. But is there some great difference between saying "Mary walked into the hall because she wanted a drink from the water fountain" and "The car would not start because the battery was dead"? Would it not be just as odd to say that Mary walked into the hall *for no reason* as it would to say that the car failed to start for no reason? In both cases we rightfully *expect* there to be a cause for the observed behavior. Of course, the causes of the car's failure to start are often more easily discerned than the causes of human behavior; yet recall the distinction drawn above between being able to *find* a cause and there being one. It does not follow that since we are much better at finding causes when it comes to cars and explosions, prior events do not out of necessity cause human actions.

### *James's Analysis of Determinism*

Determinism, then, is the view according to which every event is the necessary outcome of the causal force of prior events. If determinism is true, then every event is *necessary*. Put another way, nothing that has happened could have failed to happen, and nothing that has failed to happen could have happened. The determinist asserts that for any event that has occurred, that event *must have been*, and it was strictly *impossible* for any other event to have occurred in its place. In James's words, determinism says that "those parts of the universe already laid down

absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be,” and that “the future has no ambiguous possibilities hidden in its womb” (WWJ, 590). From this, we can infer that the thesis known as *indeterminism* maintains that “the parts have a certain amount of play on one another, so that the laying down of one of them does not necessarily determine what the others shall be” (WWJ, 591). Hence, according to the indeterminist, there is a plurality of distinct possible futures, each of which is entirely consistent with the causal tendencies of this very moment and its past. In short, determinism denies that there are real *possibilities* whereas indeterminism embraces possibility and rejects the idea that everything is necessary (WWJ, 591).

So far our discussion of the determinist and indeterminist theses has been overtly philosophical, but in keeping with his pragmatism, James contends that the debate taken as a strictly philosophical question is insoluble (WWJ, 596) or, recalling our discussion of the pragmatic method, interminable. To demonstrate this we shall draw upon a modified version of James’s own example developed in his 1884 essay, “The Dilemma of Determinism” (WWJ, 593f.). Let us allow for the sake of argument the indeterminist’s view that possibilities are real, and consider that at this very moment some person, call her Alice, is confronted with two options. On the one hand, Alice may continue reading this sentence; on the other, she may stop reading and attend to something else. We may hence speak of there being two alternate possible universes: one in which Alice continues reading, and one in which she stops reading. Of course, only one of these possible universes can be the *actual* universe: *either* Alice will continue, *or* she will stop—she cannot do both. Now let us imagine ourselves in a position from which we may view

the realization of both possibilities; that is, we first imagine that the universe in which Alice continues is actualized, and then we imagine that the universe in which she stops reading is instead actualized.

On the determinist's view, exactly one of these universes is strictly *impossible* and the other is strictly *necessary*. In other words, the determinist maintains that *exactly one* of these universes is consistent with the causal force of prior events, and that the other universe is strictly *inconsistent* with the causal history of the universe. Here James asks of the determinist, "looking out at these universes, can you say which is the impossible and accidental one, and which is the rational and necessary one?" (WWJ, 594). How is the universe in which Alice continues reading to be distinguished from the world in which she stops? Recalling the pragmatic dictum that there is no difference that does not *make* a difference (WWJ, 397), James asks determinists to specify to what the difference between the necessary and the impossible comes.

Let us suppose that Alice in fact continued reading at the moment we hypothesized. James argues that the determinist can assert only *after the fact* that the event of Alice's continuing to read was necessary from the point of view of the universe's entire past. Yet James insists that *prior* to the fact of Alice's continued reading, the determinist cannot point to any feature of her stopping that would render it an impossibility. That is, prior to the fact of Alice's continuing to read, both her continuing and her stopping seem to the determinist equally possible outcomes. Hence, there is no discernable difference between an *impossibility* and a *necessity*, between the event which *must be* and the event which *cannot be*. We may

ask, then, what kind of necessity is this that cannot be distinguished from impossibility? How can the determinist's conception of *necessity* in practice be distinguished from her conception of *impossibility*? Her position founders on the pragmatic maxim.

### *Regret*

James does not put the issue to rest here. It is important for him to emphasize the practical implications of accepting determinism. Chief among these implications is the status of moral experience. In particular, it is difficult to make sense of ordinary moral language and judgment if we accept that every event occurs necessarily. To demonstrate this, James appeals to a news story involving the confession of a murderer. He writes,

Hardly any one can remain *entirely* optimistic after reading the confession of the murderer at Brockton the other day: how, to get rid of his wife, whose continued existence bored him, he inveighed her into a desert spot, shot her four times, and then, as she lay on the ground and said to him "You didn't do it on purpose, did you, dear?" replied, "No, I didn't do it on purpose," as he raised a rock and smashed her skull. (WWJ, 597)

The example is deliberately chosen to evoke a strong moral reaction. In particular, when we read of such events, we feel a sense of frustration, outrage, and/or pathos; in sum, we feel *regret*. We judge that the murder depicted above *should not* have happened, and we lament that it has. This phenomenon of regret is pervasive in our experience; as James notes, "Hardly an hour passes in which we do not wish that something might be otherwise" (WWJ, 596).

And yet, what will the determinist say of the Brockton murder? Since on the determinist's view every event is the necessary outcome of prior events, he must say "the murder...[was] necessary from eternity...nothing else for a moment had a ghost of a chance of being put into [its] place" (WWJ 597). But to this, James replies,

If this Brockton murder was called for by the rest of the universe, if it had to come at its preappointed hour, and if nothing else would have been consistent with the sense of the whole, what are we to think of the universe? (WWJ, 597)

In such a universe as countenanced by the determinist, our judgment of regret at the murder is nonsense, since it entails that the impossible should be. James explains,

The judgment of regret calls murder bad. Calling a murder bad means, if it mean 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 affected with an incurable taint, and irremediable flaw. (WWJ, 597)

Hence, the determinist position dooms us to a passive acceptance of "what is," ruling out, in James's terms, what "ought to be," for it rules out the efficacy of human action. In this way, the determinist thesis runs counter to the fundamental commitments of radical empiricism insofar as it both denies such efficacy and rejects an important aspect of moral experience. Determinism denies the efficacy of human action in that it denies that human will can bring about anything whose existence is not already causally

necessary, and it rejects moral experience insofar as it makes a shambles of our ordinary moral judgments, such as the judgment that the Brockton murder is regrettable. Yet, according to James, we are *compelled* to make moral judgments, and we cannot understand ourselves and our actions except in *indeterminist* terms. James writes,

I cannot understand the willingness to act, no matter how we feel, without the belief that acts are really good and bad. I cannot understand the belief that an act is bad, without regret as its happening. I cannot understand regret without the admission of real, genuine possibilities in the world. Only *then* is it other than a mockery to feel, after we have failed to do our best, that an irreparable opportunity is gone from the universe, the loss of which it must forever mourn. (WWJ, 605)

Accordingly, the first implication of radical empiricism for our moral experience is that we must reject determinism and the pessimism that it engenders. Rejecting determinism does not mean that we must embrace a chaotic or random world; rather the rejection of determinism entails the commitment to the reality of *possibilities* whose actualization depends in part upon how we act. Accordingly, the indeterminist sees the universe not as a “solid block” (WWJ, 595) of “unbending” fact (WWJ, 591), but instead as open and pluralistic, as “vulnerable, and liable to be injured by certain of its parts if they act wrong” (WWJ, 606). Wrong action is thus seen as a “matter of possibility or accident, neither inevitable nor yet to be infallibly warded off” (WWJ, 606). Hence the pluralistic universe of the indeterminist is not a world that is necessarily *good*, but a world that holds the *possibility* of

good. In James's words, indeterminism means simply the "chance that in moral respects the future may be other and better than the past has been" (WWJ, 607). It is important to emphasize that James's indeterminism offers no guarantee that the universe *will* improve; James does not replace the pessimism of determinism with the naïve optimism typical of rationalist philosophies. As we have mentioned before and will discuss in more detail below, James's position is a "meliorism" where moral experience requires that we accept pluralism, and pluralism simply means that it is *possible* that one may through her action improve the world.

## **The Moral Life**

### *Morality in an Open Universe*

Thus far we have been discussing pluralism as primarily a *metaphysical* thesis, a thesis about the innermost nature of reality. Specifically, we have said that pluralism is the thesis that maintains that possibility is a real feature of the universe, that the past does not *entirely* fix the future. We have seen that this openness accounts for the potency of human will and the meaningfulness of our moral experiences. Yet this is only one aspect of the pluralist thesis. The openness of the universe and the reality of possibility also entail the unsettling result that uncertainty and risk are real, that insecurity and danger are inextricable elements of our world. That is, on the pluralist view that James advocates, our understanding of ourselves and our ability to control our universe is necessarily limited; every intellectual picture of the world must be incomplete, "Truth's fullness is elusive; ever not quite, not quite!" (WWJ, 347). However, these limitations are not

merely due to the incompleteness of *our* intellectual capacities; knowledge is limited, understanding incomplete, and truth elusive because *the universe itself* does not constitute a finished, final fact; a pluralistic universe is dynamic and open, resisting final analyses and ultimate formulations. Accordingly “none of our explanations are complete” (WWJ, 320).

Hence pluralism has important implications for morality. According to James pluralism implies that “neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer”; thus, “No one has insight into all the ideals” (WWJ, 645). Of course, this is a fairly abstract formulation. To get a better sense of the moral implications of pluralism, consider James’s account of an episode in his own experience:

Some years ago, while journeying in the mountains of North Carolina, I passed by a large number of ‘coves’, as they call them there, or heads of small valleys between the hills, which had been newly cleaned and planted. The impression on my mind was one of unmitigated squalor. The settler had in every case cut down the more manageable trees, and left their charred stumps standing. The larger trees he had girdled and killed, in order that their foliage should not cast a shade. He had then built a log cabin, plastering its chinks with clay, and had set up a tall zigzag rail fence around the scene of his havoc, to keep the pigs and cattle out. Finally, he had irregularly planted the intervals between the stumps and trees with Indian corn, which grew among the chips; and there he dwelt with his wife and babes—an axe, a gun, a few utensils, and some

pigs and chickens feeding in the woods being the sum total of his possessions. (WWJ, 630-631)

James uses loaded language to describe the scene, and his initial estimation is unqualifiedly negative:

The forest had been destroyed; and what had 'improved' it out of existence was hideous, a sort of ulcer, without a single element of artificial grace to make up for the loss of Nature's beauty. Ugly, indeed, seemed the life of the squatter... (WWJ, 631)

However, upon talking to one of the inhabitants of these coves, James comes to see that he "had been losing the whole inward significance of the situation" (WWJ, 613). He explains,

Because to me the clearings spoke of naught but denudation, I thought that to those whose sturdy arms and obedient axes had made them they could tell no other story. But, when *they* looked on the hideous stumps, what they thought of was personal victory. The chips, the girdled trees, and the vile spit rails spoke of honest sweat, persistent toil and final reward.... In short, the clearing, which to me was a mere ugly picture on the retina, was to them a symbol redolent with moral memories and sang a very paeon of duty, struggle, and success.... I had been as blind to the peculiar ideality of their condition as they certainly would also have been to the ideality of mine, had they had a peep at my strange academic ways of life at Cambridge. (WWJ, 631)

According to James, this kind of experience "befalls each one of us daily" (WWJ, 630). Most often, we are so

wrapped up in our own projects and endeavors that we come to see the world strictly in terms of our own purposes and values. This is, in a sense, unavoidable, “each is bound to feel intensely the importance of his own duties and the significance of the situations that call these forth” (WWJ, 629); yet it is precisely this intensity which leads us to “miss the root of the matter” (WWJ, 630) when it comes to understanding the lives of others. James explains,

Yet we are but finite, and each one of us has some single specialized vocation of his own. And it seems as if energy in the service of its particular duties might be got only by hardening the heart towards everything unlike them. Our deadness toward all but one particular kind of joy would thus be the price we inevitably have to pay for being practical creatures. (WWJ, 634)

In moral matters, then, each of us suffers from what James calls a “certain blindness” (WWJ, 629) where we (dangerously) judge “other persons’ conditions and ideals” (WWJ, 630). And yet, there are occasions, such as the one James describes above, when we overcome this blindness by coming to see matters not simply from our own point of view, but from that of another. On such occasions, we become aware that our feelings and judgments are tied to our own peculiar stations in life; we come to see “how soaked and shot-through life is with values and meanings which we fail to realize because of our external and insensible point of view” (WWJ, 645). Consequently, we come to see that others may be justified in their own feelings and judgments, even when these contradict our own.

The overcoming of moral blindness entails the realization that there is “an exuberant mass of goods” (WWJ, 622) and that these goods do not fit together neatly into a single system of value. As James puts it, “There is hardly a good which we can imagine except as competing for the possession of the same bit of space and time with some other imagined good” (WWJ, 622). There are real contests and real conflicts between different goods—that is, goods are conflicting and, thus, are irreducibly *plural*. In other words, to overcome moral blindness is to embrace *moral pluralism* and, thus, to recognize that the spectrum of goods is so wide and varied that each individual is privy to only a *part* of the good. Each of us is bound to his own particular sense of the good; hence “The very best of men must not only be insensible, but ludicrously and peculiarly insensible, to many goods” (WWJ, 622).

It is important, though, to distinguish James’s pluralism about morality from the view known as *moral subjectivism*, or sometimes simply as *relativism*. Moral subjectivists deny that there are any real goods and evils, claiming that all that is required for an action or event to be good is that you *believe* or *judge* that it is good. James denies subjectivism, however, insisting that there are *real* goods and evils, and *judging* or *believing* something good is not sufficient for its actually *being* good. Hence the contention of the pluralist is not that good and evil are merely subjective, but rather that our moral experience is necessarily limited to such a degree that no single individual can grasp the *entirety* of good, and no single life can manifest every constituent of the good life. Put another way, the pluralist maintains that there is an irreducible variety of mutually exclusive goods, where “irreducible”

means that no single conception of the good can be comprehensive and final, and “mutually exclusive” entails that the realization of one good necessarily precludes the realization of some others. Hence, on James’s view, the idea of a morally perfect life is contradictory; no life could realize all the moral goods any more than any single photograph of you could capture all of your features. We are thus resigned to a life in which moral conflict and uncertainty are inexorable. We must act for the best, but we cannot achieve moral perfection; “Some part of the ideal must be butchered” (WWJ, 632).

### *How We Ought to Live*

If James’s analysis is correct, we humans are caught in a difficult, perhaps terrifying, predicament. We are compelled by experience to make moral judgments and to commit to certain moral ends. Indeed, much of our lives are bound up with the pursuit of some goal or project, and these pursuits make sense to us only because we take our goals and projects to be *worth* pursuing. *Moral commitment is inevitable.* However, we inhabit a pluralistic universe, and hence our moral commitments capture, at best, only *part* of the good. We are thus led to the proposition that our own moral commitments are perhaps only *as good* as the commitments of others, even when their commitments directly oppose our own. This conflicted state of affairs presses most urgently the primary question of moral philosophy, How ought we to live?

There is no shortage of attempts to answer this question within the tradition of Philosophy where philosophers typically have attempted to *reduce* all moral goods to some single, *summum bonum*, or highest good. Once the *summum bonum* is identified, the mission of

moral theory has been to discern a way in which it may be maximized or achieved. That is, traditional moral theories endeavor to discover some set of rules, principles, or commands that can serve to regulate action; they have sought *prescriptions* for behavior that can guarantee morally right action. However, according to James, this endeavor is bound to fail for several reasons.

In particular, taking moral experience and pluralism seriously requires that the recognition that there can be no *summum bonum*, no final ranking of all goods, and no “highest” good to which all others are subordinate. Consequently, no moral principle or prescription—nor *set* of principles and prescriptions—can be complete and comprehensive. There is no simple recipe for the good life. As James says, “there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance” (WWJ, 610); “ethical treatises may be voluminous and luminous as well, but they can never be *final*” (WWJ, 626). Experience is too complex and the universe is too rich and varied to allow capture by a few philosophical maxims.

James’s rejection of the traditional philosophical aspiration for a comprehensive moral theory, however, does not constitute an abandoning of the fundamental question, How ought we to live? In fact, on James’s view this question becomes all the more vital *precisely* because we cannot rely upon tidy philosophical theories for quick-fix solutions to moral dilemmas. We must act in the absence of moral certainty; thus, the question of how we ought to live becomes crucial.

So, how does James approach the question of how we ought to live? To answer this, it is important to recognize that James’s rejection of traditional moral theory is in essence a refusal to see the fundamental concern of moral

philosophy as focused primarily upon individual *acts*. (Note that we did not pose the question, How ought we to *act*?) The principal focus of Jamesian moral philosophy is *life*, not merely individual actions, and actions are on James's view the expressions or manifestations of our habits, and our habits are formed from our more general *attitude* towards life, not towards specific events. This attitude is what James sometimes refers to as our "mood" (WWJ, 627).

How, then, ought we to live? James's answer is both commonsensical and subtle. Most generally, James advises that we develop what he calls the "strenuous mood," keeping open the stream of moral experience, subjecting oneself to increasingly wider and varied experiences, avoiding the mediocre and the conventional, and resisting the tendency to mechanize or make routine our moral experience. These injunctions may be summarized by saying that the moral life is the life of constantly confronting the question of how we ought to live; James bids us to keep moral questions *open*. This perpetual confrontation forces us always to be ready to reevaluate, revise, and indeed *remake* our lives. Furthermore, we must treat others with respect and tolerance; we must "indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us" (WWJ 645). Since pluralism implies that no one has insight into all the ideals, "the first thing to learn in intercourse with others is non-interference with their own peculiar ways of being happy, provided those ways do not assume to interfere by violence with ours" (WWJ, 645).

## Meliorism

### *The Strenuous Mood*

The Jamesian moral philosopher is literally concerned with the *moral life*, with the habits and attitudes that tend to promote increasing sensitivity to the human moral predicament. Note, however, that James's call for openness and tolerance is not a call to moral quietism and passivity. Though encouragement of "respect," "tolerance," and "non-interference" lends itself to such a reading, too often the pluralist attitude is mistaken for a stance of "live and let live" which in turn manifests in a moral indifference, a relaxing of moral concerns, what James calls the "easy-going mood" (WWJ, 627). Paradoxically, when the attitude of "live and let live" generates the easy-going mood, the result is a kind of retreat from life. As you may expect, James will have none of this. As we have repeatedly claimed, the whole point of James's philosophy is to facilitate a *return* to life, a heightened mode of *engagement* with the world around us and each other.

The moral life, then, is according to James an *active* life, a life of "sweat and effort" and "struggle," life *in extremis* (WWJ, 648). To see this, consider that pluralism in its most fundamental form entails that ours is an open universe, a universe whose future is yet undetermined, a universe that is still in the making. As we have already noted, an open universe is also a universe of risk and uncertainty, a universe that offers no assurance that good will triumph over evil. Despite this uncertainty, humans are active beings; we are compelled to act on the basis of incomplete information, partial explanations, fallible hypotheses, and, in some instances, wild guesses. The combination of these two aspects of pluralism results in the

following: Our actions help create the universe and determine what our lives will become, yet there can be no guarantee in advance of acting that our act will morally improve our situation. Human life is thus a life of continually confronting moral hazards; we must make our way in the world without the benefit of moral certitude. We must act, yet every action carries with it a degree of moral risk; at every turn we have the opportunity to improve the world by means of our actions, yet we always must act under conditions of moral uncertainty. As the universe is itself pluralistic, it is in its very nature neither morally saved nor doomed. Hence human agency is all the more essential, and the question of the moral life all the more urgent—it is *we* who shall make the difference in the “everlasting battle of the powers of light with those of darkness” (WWJ, 639).

As we noted earlier, James calls this the “meliorist” attitude, and in this context, meliorism is the view that stands between moral pessimism and moral optimism (WWJ, 466). The pessimist holds that the world is morally doomed, that evil and depravity are destined to prevail, that any good that the universe may manifest is at best transient and temporary. Conversely, the optimist contends that the universe is destined to be morally saved, that in the end good necessarily will triumph over evil. For James both views constitute a retreat from life. In contrast, pluralists must take the meliorist stance towards the world by rejecting the idea that the moral fate of the universe is laid down in advance of our active contributions to it. Of course, while the meliorist must admit that the universe *may* end with a final victory of evil over good, he merely contends that this victory is not *inevitable*; similarly, the meliorist rejects the idea that the world is inevitably saved.

The question of our ultimate moral fate is “once more a case of *maybe*” (WTB 61).

Note that the meliorist view places the *responsibility* for the moral condition of the world upon each of us. As was said above, it is *we* who make the difference between light and darkness, and this difference is constructed at every moment, with every action we perform. That we shoulder ultimate moral responsibility for the world and yet lack the understanding and certainty that would guarantee our moral success makes for a troubling, potentially paralyzing, conundrum. It is easy, in light of our predicament, to feel overwhelmed, and consequently to adopt some comforting variety of moral optimism or pessimism. In so doing, we retreat from life and deny the potency of human agency, but we do not relinquish our responsibility. According to James, we must not allow ourselves to be paralyzed by the difficulties of our predicament; we must not abandon the question of how we ought to live by pretending to have discovered its final answer. The moral life requires the “strenuous mood” (WWJ, 627), the commitment to the task of *trying* to improve the world *in spite of* moral uncertainty and risk. Hence, the moral life is, for James, a life of struggling to bring about “the largest total universe of good which we can see” (WWJ, 626), all the while realizing that any success we achieve can at best be partial, incomplete, and not final.

### *Is Life Worth Living?*

While not strictly pessimistic, it may seem that James has painted a thoroughly bleak picture of human life: We are caught in a fight that we cannot win; we must participate in an ongoing struggle between good and evil,

but we have not the resources to secure a decisive victory; we are called to commit to the meliorist project of improving the world, but we have no guarantee that even our very best efforts can succeed. What kind of life is this?

James admits that the strenuous mood cannot be voluntarily adopted; he cannot *convince* you to undertake the meliorist project. Although “[t]he capacity for the strenuous mood probably lies slumbering in every man,” it cannot be summoned at will; rather, “it needs the wilder passions to arouse it” (WWJ, 627). In particular, the strenuous mood is aroused by “the big fears, loves, and indignations; or else the deeply penetrating appeal of some one of the higher fidelities, like justice, truth, or freedom” (WWJ, 627). That is, meliorism cannot be adopted on intellectual grounds; there is no *argument* for meliorism. Rather, the moral life can be taken up only when the appropriate passions have been stimulated by experience. James explains:

What excites and interests the looker-on at life, what the romances and statues celebrate and the grim civic monuments remind us of, is the everlasting battle of the powers of light with those of darkness...what our human emotions seem to require is the sight of the struggle going on... Sweat and effort, human nature strained to the uttermost and on the rack, yet getting through alive, and then turning its back on its success to pursue another more rare and arduous still—this is the sort of thing the presence of which inspires us. (WWJ, 648).

James contends that it is in these moments of inspired excitement at the world’s travails, in the throws of struggle

to realize some ideal, that we come to feel the significance of life. He states,

The significance of life...is the offspring of a marriage of two different parents, either of whom alone are barren. The ideals taken by themselves give no reality, the virtues by themselves no novelty. (WWJ, 657)

Meaningful, significant living, then, requires the active pursuit of what we want to come to pass. On James's view, life is worth living precisely because the world presents us with a plurality of ideals worth fighting for, and precisely because we must risk ourselves in these fights. In fact, James says, "It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all" (WTB, 59). Hence pluralism, and the melioristic attitude it generates, provides the conditions under which our lives can have significance. To see this, consider the following from James:

Suppose the world's author put the case to you before creation, saying: "I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own 'level best'. I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it might win through. It is a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk?" (WWJ, 468)

In his hypothetical, James gives you the choice: take our world as it is or reject its uncertainty in favor of nothing at all. On James's view, we should accept the offer made to

us by this imagined creator because it speaks to our very natures; it is the challenge posed by a pluralistic universe, the *requirement* that we struggle to achieve what we think best, the striving after a moral ideal with no guarantee of success, that makes life meaningful and worth living.

### *Faith as Courage*

We have seen, then, on James's view the moral life consists in the commitment to what we have called the melioristic project. That is, the moral life is one of constant struggle to improve the world. Of course, in light of pluralism, this struggle is multiform—not only do we struggle to realize our moral ideals, we must also struggle to overcome, insofar as possible, the moral blindness to which we are necessarily prone. Put another way, we must strive to realize our ideals, but we must also always be ready to revise those ideals in light of future experience. This willingness to act earnestly in pursuit of a fallible and revisable ideal is what James calls “faith”:

Faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible; and as the test of belief is willingness to act, one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified in advance. (WWJ, 333)

James, then, identifies “faith” with an attitude concerning action, and particularly with action that has no certitude of producing our desired ends.

However, this may seem like an odd use of the term “faith,” for rather than taking faith dispositionally or fortitudinally, most often we talk about faith as a *justification* for believing that some proposition is true. For example, when someone says, “I have faith that God exists,” what is typically meant is that faith provides the

*basis* for belief; accordingly, one who believes on faith is one who will not be swayed by evidence that runs counter to that belief. James, by contrast, is employing the term, as he says, to characterize the quality of one's commitment to a "cause." To have faith is, on James's view, to be ready to act in pursuit of a cause despite the fact that both the worthiness of the cause and the likelihood of success in attaining it have not been determined in advance. It is in this sense that faith "is in fact that same moral quality which we call courage in practical affairs...." (WWJ, 333). Faith is, according to James, the *courage* to persist in one's moral commitments despite the attendant risks and uncertainties. Again, this faith cannot be voluntarily adopted, and James cannot by means of words and argument persuade you to decide to adopt a melioristic faith; as with courage, faith must be *passional*, it must be *inspired*.

Accordingly, James's use of religious language here is quite deliberate. In fact, James employs religious terms such as "God" to characterize the kind of inspiration that evokes within us the strenuous mood; furthermore, James contends that religious commitment is *necessary* if we are to undertake the meliorist project. James writes, "...in a merely human world without a God, the appeal to our moral energy falls short of its maximal stimulating power" (WWJ, 627); however, "Every sort of energy and endurance of courage and capacity for handling life's evils is set free in those who have religious faith" (WWJ, 628). James concludes, "For this reason, the strenuous type of character will on the battle-field of human history always outwear the easy-going type, and religion will drive irreligion to the wall" (WWJ, 628). Indeed, in keeping with his pragmatic theory of meaning, James maintains that

the power of religion to evoke the strenuous mood is in itself sufficient justification for religious belief; James writes,

The capacity for the strenuous mood lies so deep down among our natural human possibilities that even if there were no metaphysical or traditional grounds for believing in a God, men would postulate one simply as a pretext for living hard, and getting out of the game of existence its keenest possibilities of zest. (WWJ 628)

Of course, like his use of the term ‘faith’, James’s appropriation of the term ‘religion’ is hardly traditional. “Religion” and “religious experience” are transformed by James’s meliorist and radical empiricist turn. Rather than the passive worship of a transcendent entity, “religion” for James is truly *inspirational*, moving us to act for the betterment of ourselves and others precisely when such “betterment” is not guaranteed. “Religious experience” then testifies not to the existence of a transcendent entity *per se*, for “the only thing that [religious experience] testifies to is that we can experience union with *something* larger than ourselves and in that union find our greatest peace” (WWJ, 785). In keeping with the pluralist position, James makes no claims about the necessity of what that “something larger” must be, stating instead that

the practical needs and experience of religion seem to me sufficiently met by the belief that beyond each man and in a fashion continuous with him there exists a larger power which is friendly to him and to his ideals.... Anything larger will do, if only to be large enough to trust the next step. It need not be infinite, it need not be solitary. It might

conceivably even be only a larger and more godlike self, of which the present self would then be but the mutilated expression, and the universe might conceivably be a collection of such selves, of different degrees of inclusiveness, with no absolute unity realized in it at all. (WWJ, 785-786)

Our own discussion in this chapter makes clear that anything that moves us to act towards as-of-yet unrealized ideals can count as the source of religious experience. Further still, however, James's meliorism implies not only that any "something larger" may be a religious source but also requires our commitment and action to bring it to fruition. That is, religion, while serving to *generate* human effort, demands such effort in order to bring about the universe of its belief. Thus, belief, in James's sense, in the face of the unknown and uncertain may be our only way of creating a life worth living, of creating a universe worthy of religious conviction. Such a world and the attitudes that inspire it, which it in turn inspires, require what James calls a "*will* to believe," and it is to this concept and its implications that we turn for our concluding chapter.

# 5

## Religious Commitment to a Moral Universe: James and “The Will to Believe”

*When I look at the religious question as it really puts itself to concrete men, and when I think of all the possibilities which both practically and theoretically it involves, then this command that we shall put a stopper on our heart, instincts, and courage and wait...till doomsday, or till such time as our intellect and senses working together may have ranked in evidence enough—this command, I say, seems to me the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave.*

—“The Will to Believe” (WWJ, 734)

### **Preliminaries**

James’s essay, “The Will to Believe,” is perhaps his most well-known and controversial essay. In our view, it is also James’s single best expression of the themes we have been discussing in this book. We hence conclude our study of James’s philosophy with a close examination of this essay. Before turning directly to that examination, however, recall that our discussion in the previous chapter demonstrated how radical empiricism leads to pluralism and eventually to meliorism; in the concluding section of

that chapter, we saw how, on James's view, meliorism has a decidedly religious dimension. To repeat, James contends that "religion" is necessary to inspire the strenuous mood; furthermore, the inspirational power of religious belief is sufficient to *justify* religious belief.

### *The Ethics of Belief*

Let us begin with a philosophical question: Can beliefs be justified solely by the positive effects that result from holding those beliefs, or must all beliefs be justified by evidence? To better understand this question, suppose, for example, that I find the proposition that *each of us has an immortal soul that survives bodily death* extremely attractive from the cognitive point of view, and by this I simply mean that the proposition is such that believing it generates a variety of positive *psychological* results: I would experience great comfort knowing that physical death is not the end, my fear of death would relax, my sorrow at the loss of loved ones would be less intense, and so on. Suppose further that these specific psychological results generate a more general sense of happiness and satisfaction with the world; that is, my belief in immortal souls encourages me to be kinder to others, more friendly, and cheerful. Suppose finally that there is *absolutely no evidence that immortal souls exist*. Psychics and so-called mediums once-and-for-all have been discredited, accounts of after-life experiences all have been shown to be dubious, religious texts are questionable, and the philosophical and theological proofs for immortality are all flawed. Given *these* conditions, would you say that I am *justified* in believing in immortal souls and an afterlife? Importantly, this is *not* to ask whether it is *likely* that I will believe in

immortality; it is rather to ask whether I am *warranted* in believing in the absence of evidence.

More generally, we may frame the question: May we believe a proposition when there is no sufficient evidence of its truth? And asking this question engages an area of philosophical inquiry known as the *ethics of belief* wherein it is claimed that each of us has an intellectual *duty* to believe only those propositions that are supported by the best available evidence. On this view, which we shall call *evidentialism*, to believe a proposition on grounds other than evidence is to commit a kind of intellectual sin, or to fail to meet an epistemic obligation. James's younger contemporary, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), expressed the kernel of evidentialism succinctly when he wrote, "It is undesirable to believe a proposition when there is no ground whatever for supposing it true."<sup>23</sup>

One immediately recognizable implication of evidentialism is that it recommends the *suspension of belief* in cases where the evidence that could decide a certain question is inconclusive. According to the evidentialist, it is better to believe nothing at all than to believe without evidence. On the evidentialist view, when evidence is inconclusive, one should suspend belief until sufficient evidence is secured.

As may already be apparent, the issue of evidentialism is prominent in philosophical discussions of religious belief with evidentialists concluding that religious belief is unwarranted. Returning to our example above, while my psychological states may well be positive and beneficial as a direct result of my belief in immortality, evidentialists maintain that it is wrong for me to believe in immortal souls because the evidence regarding their existence is

inconclusive. Note that the evidentialist does not necessarily require that I adopt the belief that there are no immortal souls, for the evidence *against* the existence of souls is likewise inconclusive! On the evidentialist view, it is my intellectual duty to suspend judgment about the existence of souls; the positive psychological effects are simply not sufficient to *justify* my belief. I may elect to inquire further into the matter, but until the evidence decisively favors one or the other proposition, I must believe neither.

A further aspect of evidentialism worth emphasizing is that it aims to make a *categorical* claim about belief. That is, the evidentialist claims that his ethic of belief applies *universally* to all kinds and instances of belief. The striking words of mathematician W. K. Clifford (1845-1879) capture the categorical dimension of evidentialism well. In a frequently quoted passage from his 1877 essay, “The Ethics of Belief,” Clifford writes, “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”<sup>24</sup>

William James’s foray into the question of what constitutes a justifiable belief strikes directly at the categorical application of evidentialism. Specifically, in “The Will to Believe,” James attacks Clifford’s position and, instead, argues in favor of religious belief. It is worth noting that James does *not* argue that the traditional claims of Western religion are decidedly true; in other words, he does not aim to *prove* that, say, God exists or that there are immortal souls. In fact, to undertake such a mission would be to accept the evidentialist ethic of belief, since such an undertaking attempts to show that the evidence in favor of religious belief is decisive. Rather he endeavors to establish two successive claims: First, *in certain cases*

evidentialism is in fact *irrational*; second, *religious belief is such a case*.

Again, since James does not attempt to *prove* that some propositions about God and immortality are true, the success of James's argument does not entail that we all ought to adopt some kind of religious belief. James's defense of religious belief, rather, is more a defense of *religious believing*. That is, in "The Will to Believe," James offers "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" (WWJ, 717). Put otherwise, in this essay, James *concedes* to the evidentialist that the evidence in favor of religious belief is insufficient to "coerce" the intellect into believing, but he maintains that the religious believer is *nonetheless* entitled to her belief and is guilty of no intellectual impropriety in believing.

The argument James deploys in "The Will to Believe" is complex and difficult. Therefore, we do not attempt here to provide a comprehensive analysis of the essay. Many of the more subtle aspects of James's argument will be glossed over, and we shall not attempt to allay some of the problems others have seen in James's argument or respond to some of the more famous objections that have been raised. Moreover, we shall not discuss the fascinating side-issues that James introduces in the essay, of which there are many. We instead hope to make explicit what we take to be the principal line of argument in the essay, to connect this line with the themes previously discussed in this chapter, and to show how this essay serves as a paradigm of Jamesian radical empiricism/meliorism that is at the core of our analysis throughout this book.

### *Hypotheses and Options*

Recall that we said above that James's argument can be understood to progress in two steps where James's first step is to attack evidentialism by showing that there are some cases in which it would be irrational to follow the evidentialists' command to suspend belief in the absence of decisive evidence. However, in order to make his case, James must introduce a system of terms and distinctions regarding beliefs to clarify the debate. So before we can understand fully his attack we must survey these terms and distinctions.

The first term James defines is 'hypothesis', suggesting that we use the term to name "anything that may be proposed to our belief" (WWJ, 717). However, he quickly determines that hypotheses come in two kinds, "live" and "dead," where a live hypothesis "is one which appeals as a real possibility to whom it is proposed" (WWJ, 717) and a dead hypothesis is one which strikes the person to whom it is proposed as so unlikely a candidate for truth that it "refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all" (WWJ, 718). This distinction is not intended to capture any intrinsic property of the hypothesis but concerns rather a subjective estimation of the likelihood of its truth. While you may take many hypotheses to be credible and interesting (if not simply trivial), other hypotheses will strike you as so implausible that they are quite literally *unbelievable*. For example, consider the hypothesis that *the pyramids in Egypt were built by aliens who visited Earth from outer space thousands of years ago*. We confess that we find this hypothesis utterly dead—it strikes us as far beyond the realm of what possibly could be true. We know some people, however, for whom this hypothesis is live at

least in the degree to which they are willing to accept it is a *possible* explanation of the existence of the pyramids; and, yes, we even know some for whom the hypothesis is so live that they fully accept it as the explanation of the pyramids.

Liveness (and deadness) of an hypothesis, then, is clearly a matter of degree. But how do we measure the degree of liveness a hypothesis has for us? In good pragmatist fashion, James estimates the degree of liveness of a certain hypothesis for a particular person by reference to that person's willingness to act under the guidance of the hypothesis. "The maximum of liveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably" (WWJ, 718), and a maximally live hypothesis is what we call a "belief."

Having defined his use of the term 'hypothesis' and its relationship to "belief," James continues by proposing that we "call the decision between two hypotheses an *option*" (WWJ, 718). And like hypotheses, "options" admit of further analysis. In particular, options may be analyzed according to three categories: An option may be *living* or *dead*; it may be *forced* or *avoidable*; and it may be *momentous* or *trivial*. We shall take each in turn.

Calling upon the prior distinction between kinds of hypotheses, an option is *living* when *both* hypotheses are *live*; otherwise, it is *dead*. Accordingly, the liveness of an option is again a subjective matter. For us, the option, *believe the pyramids were built by aliens, or believe they were built by humans*, is dead because the first hypothesis in the option is, in our view, dead. We might even say that, in this case, no true option has been presented since the first hypothesis is maximally dead for us. On the other hand, the option, *believe that Oswald acted alone in assassinating Kennedy, or believe that he was part of a team of assassins*, is live for us because "each hypothesis

makes some appeal, however small, to [our] belief” (WWJ, 718).

Next, an option is *forced* when the two hypotheses form what logicians call an *exclusive disjunction*, or sometimes a *dilemma*. Consider the option proposed to a thirsty person: *drink beer or drink wine*. This option is not *forced* because it is possible to act in such a way as to satisfy neither hypothesis; one could easily have water, soda, juice, or nothing at all. In other words, the option is *avoidable*. By contrast, consider the option, *drink beer or do not drink beer*. This option is *forced* because it is logically impossible to avoid taking one of the offered choices. Having water, or juice, or nothing at all is logically equivalent to *not drinking beer*. At every moment, you are either drinking beer or you are not drinking beer, thus the option, *drink beer or do not drink beer*, is forced.

Lastly, consider that the forced option, *drink beer or do not drink beer*, is in most instances, a *trivial* option in that your decision is reversible, the offer is repeatable, and, whatever you choose, the decision will not likely drastically affect the rest of your life. By contrast, however, some options are *momentous* insofar as the choice they propose is unique, and once made, irreversible and prone to have consequences for your life in the long run. For a good example of a *momentous* option, consider the position of a person on trial who has something of great significance to gain—such as acquittal—if he commits perjury (and is undetected). The option, *lie under oath, or tell the truth*, is momentous since the choice is unique, irreversible, and at least potentially of great consequence. It is worth noting that the momentousness of an option is, like the liveness and unlike the forcedness, a matter of degree.

From these three “options” categories, James is able to make a further distinction. James calls an option *genuine* whenever such an option proves to be *living, forced, and momentous*. A *genuine option* demands our attention and requires some decision, since even avoiding such a decision is itself a choice.

With these categorizations in place, we may now progress to the next step of the argument, which will be to show that the evidentialist ethic of belief is irrational when one is presented with a genuine option that cannot be settled by evidence. In such cases, James contends, we are fully within our epistemic rights to adopt that hypothesis which best satisfies what he calls “our *passional nature*” (WWJ, 723). That is to say, when confronted with a genuine option that cannot be decided by means of evidence, we may appeal to non-intellectual criteria (such as comfort, desire, and so on) in deciding which hypothesis to adopt.

## **Against Evidentialism**

We begin with James’s own statement of his main thesis:

The thesis I defend is, briefly stated, this: Our *passional* nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot be decided upon intellectual grounds; for to say, under such conditions, “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. (WWJ, 723)

This statement is a bit misleading because it presents as one thesis what are perhaps better understood as two distinct,

though closely related, claims. The first is the claim that evidentialism is inapplicable to genuine options that cannot be settled “on intellectual grounds,” that is, by appealing to evidence. The second part of James’s thesis is a logical point that provides a rationale for the first: When an option is genuine (and hence forced), suspending belief is *equivalent* to adopting one of the hypotheses.

Taking the parts of his thesis in reverse order, let us consider an example roughly based on one James himself offers (WWJ, 730). Suppose a new person has just moved into the vacant residence next door to your home, and you wonder, *Is she a good neighbor, or not?* Further, suppose that this is for you a genuine option: it is “living” insofar as you see both hypotheses as possibly true; it is “forced” insofar as the person will be a good neighbor or not; it is “momentous” insofar as you believe that the goodness or badness of a neighbor can make all the difference between a comfortable living environment and one that is unbearable. Which hypothesis shall you adopt?

Before you answer, however, let us imagine that you have been convinced by Clifford that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence,” and so you suspend belief until evidence regarding the neighborliness of the new person comes in. What follows from this suspension of belief, is that you must treat the newcomer as neither a good nor a bad neighbor, you must be entirely neutral until the evidence is sufficient to settle the question. The way to do this would be to ignore her entirely.<sup>25</sup> We might even further suppose that you, being the inquisitive type, hire a private investigator to look into the background of the new neighbor to gather evidence of her character; he might conduct secret interviews with her past neighbors, check

police records, and illegally tap her phone to help gather the data requisite to settling the question.

This is of course an absurd way to proceed. But the absurdity of following the evidentialist in this case is not James's main point. Rather, James argues that in cases such as the one above, *suspending belief* is equivalent to adopting one of the hypotheses. To see this, recall that James's pragmatic conception of meaning says that when two seemingly distinct beliefs lead to the same action, they are in fact equivalent. Consider further that suspending belief about the neighborliness of the newcomer requires that you *ignore* her until sufficient evidence is in. But James's point is that *ignoring* a new neighbor is to treat her *as if* she were *not* a good neighbor. If suspending belief leads one to treat her as if she were not a good neighbor, it is equivalent to believing that she is not.

So, the second part of James's thesis has been established. The good neighbor example demonstrates that in certain genuine options, suspending belief comes to the same thing as adopting one of the hypotheses. Suspending belief about whether the new person is a good neighbor comes to the same thing as believing that she is *not* a good neighbor.

Hence we see the force of the first part of James's thesis. Under certain conditions, the evidentialist's rule of suspending belief when evidence is lacking is strictly *inapplicable*. That is, in a genuine option, we cannot fail to adopt one of the hypotheses, and when evidence is insufficient, something else not only *may* but *must* guide our decision.<sup>26</sup> James calls this "something else" our "passional nature." Although James is not as explicit as one would wish about what he means by "passional nature," we can glean from the essay that the term is meant

to include not merely our momentary desires, but our more general wishes and hopes for the world. So, in the neighbor example, James would claim that if you are the kind of person who hopes for good neighbors, you are fully within the realm of epistemic responsibility to adopt the hypothesis that the new person *is* a good neighbor—and so to *treat* her as such—even if the evidence is lacking.

James pushes the point a bit further than this strictly logical objection to evidentialism. James contends that the evidentialist ethic of belief is not only inapplicable to certain cases but is moreover sometimes *irrational*. We can see this by considering James's characterization of the evidentialist position. According to James, since they believe that having no belief is better than having a false belief, evidentialists are governed by the commandment, "Shun Error!" (WWJ, 727). To this, James contrasts another possible intellectual directive, "Believe Truth!" Of course, the two principles are not mutually exclusive—by aiming to believe truth we also aim to shun error, and vice-versa. The question is rather one of the *prioritization* of the rules. The evidentialist places the epistemic command to shun error above all else; consequently, she would rather believe nothing than run the risk of adopting a falsehood. As James characterizes the position, the evidentialist advises, "believe nothing...keep your mind in suspense forever" where evidence is insufficient (WWJ, 727). By contrast, James confesses that he takes the command to believe truth to be primary; this means that he thinks "the risk of being in error is a very small matter when compared with the blessings of real knowledge" (WWJ, 727). Put another way, the evidentialist takes being a dupe to be the worst thing that could happen to a person, epistemically speaking, whereas James contends that "worse things than

being duped may happen to a man in this world” (WWJ, 727). Unlike the evidentialist, James allows certain kinds of epistemic risks, where such risks are necessary for discovering the truth.

Now, to see that that the command to “Shun Error!” is irrational, briefly consider again our example. Recall once more that in suspending belief about whether our new neighbor is a good neighbor, you must pretty much ignore her. Yet by ignoring her, you actually *discourage* her from extending to you the common courtesies that go along with being a good neighbor, and so you actively *prevent* good-neighborliness from manifesting itself. *Suspending belief* is in practice *the same thing as not believing* that she is a good neighbor; and by not believing that she is a good neighbor, you help *make* her not neighborly, even if she is in fact a person who is generally friendly and courteous to her neighbors! Hence the evidentialist commandment to “Shun Error!” can actually *prevent* you from coming to know certain truths. What are we to say about an epistemic commandment that can *foil* our attempts to gain knowledge? James’s response is clear:

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. (WWJ, 733)

## **Faith and Risk**

According to James, what the good neighbor case shows is that certain kinds of truth require *belief in advance of conclusive evidence*. To use his own example,

*Do you like me or not? ...* Whether you do or do not depends, in countless instances, on whether I meet

you half-way, am willing to assume that you must like me, and show you trust and expectation. The previous faith on my part in your liking's existence is in such cases what makes your liking come. (WWJ, 730).

Recall from our earlier discussion James's definition of faith as "the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified in advance" (WWJ, 333); in this sense, "faith is synonymous with working hypothesis" (WWJ, 336). Again, James reiterates that faith is like a kind of courage, a willingness to take certain kinds of risks for the sake of realizing some good. As we can see in the good neighbor example, James recommends that we take the *risk* of believing that the newcomer *is* a good neighbor in the *hope* that she will prove to be so. The Jamesian strategy is risky in that on some occasions our hopes will not be realized; the new person may prove to be a bad neighbor, and our initial efforts will in the end seem foolish. James's point, however, is that, insofar as neighborliness is an important good that *requires* an initial ungrounded faith in order to manifest, taking the risk of believing in the absence of evidence is warranted. In fact, he calls any intellectual maxim that would advise *against* such epistemic risk-taking "insane":

There are cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. *And where faith in a fact can help create the fact*, that would be an insane logic which should say that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the 'lowest kind of immorality'<sup>27</sup> into which a thinking being can fall. (WWJ, 731)

One final point is in order before moving on. Although James rejects the evidentialist's categorical command to "Shun Error!," he does not abandon entirely the idea of evidence. Even in cases such as the good neighbor case, James holds that our belief should be responsive to evidence. The point is that in certain cases the necessary evidence *cannot come* until we invest our belief in the truth of the hypothesis. To return once more to our example, I *hope* that the person moving in next door will prove a good neighbor. Despite the fact that evidence is entirely lacking, I adopt the hypothesis on passional grounds that she is a good neighbor, and consequently I treat her *as* a good neighbor. James's argument is that *unless* I believe that the newcomer is a good neighbor, I cannot *discover* whether she is. Of course, as we said above, my efforts might prove futile and even foolish. It may turn out that, despite my neighborliness, the person next door is in fact a bad neighbor. This is certainly a question to be decided on evidence. The point is that this evidence could not come *prior* to my belief; I must make what is commonly, and fittingly, called a "good-faith" effort to be neighborly *before* the evidence can issue.

### **The Case for Religious Belief**

What we have seen, by means of an extended examination of the good neighbor example, is that evidentialism is flawed in that it is not, as Clifford maintained, categorically applicable. What the analysis has shown is that when confronted with a genuine option, the evidentialist ethic of belief is (1) *impracticable*, in that suspension of belief is equivalent to adopting one of the hypotheses; and

(2) *irrational* in that, even if it were practicable, it would foreclose the possibility of gaining certain kinds of knowledge. Hence James has completed the first stage of his argument.

What we have yet to see is how any of these considerations constitutes a defense of religious belief. That is, James has yet to argue that the option concerning religious belief is sufficiently like the good neighbor case so as to warrant a similar analysis. What James needs to demonstrate, then, is that the question of whether to adopt religious belief is a genuine option that cannot be settled on intellectual grounds. The recognition of this missing piece leads us into the second stage of James's argument.

### *The Religious Hypothesis*

It is important to be clear at the outset about *exactly* what James means to defend under the name "religious belief," for James is no theologian. On James's view, the "religious hypothesis" consists in the conjunction of the following two propositions:

(1) The best things are the more eternal things.

(2) We are better off even now if we believe that the best things are the more eternal things. (WWJ, 731-732)

This may strike you as an odd characterization of religious belief since there is no specific *theology*

contained in James's hypothesis. Religious belief, as James will defend it, is decidedly *not* fixed on traditional theological foci; the religious hypothesis does not include statements about the existence of God, the immortality of souls, eternal rewards and punishments, or the nature of evil.<sup>28</sup> As we mentioned in the previous two chapters, James believes that religion is "a living practical affair" (WWJ, 356) rather than a matter of intellectual abstractions and highfalutin doctrines. Accordingly, the religious hypothesis, as James construes it, should be understood as *recommending an attitude* towards the world rather than *making a claim* about what exists. As proposition (2) above suggests, the religious hypothesis is essentially a hypothesis about what it is best for us to believe. As we have seen, on James's view, *believing* is essentially tied to *acting*. Hence religion is for James an essentially *personal* matter, and the religious hypothesis is essentially addressed *to us*, to our lives here and now.

With the religious hypothesis spelled out, we can take advantage of some familiar terminology. Specifically, we may use the term "religious option" to name the option between accepting the religious hypothesis or accepting its denial. Given our preliminary distinctions in this chapter, identifying the religious option as such leads to the question: Is the religious option a *genuine* option? In other words, is the religious option *living*, *forced*, and *momentous*?

First, let us recall that whether the option is living in part depends upon the person to whom it is posed. There are some persons for whom the religious hypothesis is not live, and there are other persons for whom the denial of the religious hypothesis is not live; for both groups, the religious option is dead. Interestingly, James's argument is not addressed to either group; that is, James does not aim to convince those who are decidedly irreligious to adopt the religious hypothesis, and he does not attempt to give the religious believer further cause to believe. His target is rather the person for whom the religious option is living—the person who is “on the fence,” and especially the person who *would* believe but does not due to lack of evidence.

Second, it should be clear that the religious option is a forced option. One must either adopt the hypothesis or go without it, and since believing is essentially tied to acting, one who suspends belief on the matter of the religious option is *pragmatically* in the same position as the one who positively *rejects* the religious hypothesis; both equally lose out on the truth of the religious hypothesis if it is true.

Finally, is the religious option momentous? James contends that it is, arguing that insofar as it proposes that “We are supposed to gain, even now, by our belief, and lose by our non-belief, a certain vital good” (WWJ, 732), we are confronted with a momentous choice. But what is the “vital good”

that the religious hypothesis promises? Though James is not explicit here, we can surmise that this good cannot be otherworldly; it cannot be eternal rewards or ultimate salvation. The vital good offered by the religious hypothesis must take effect *now*, and the risk of losing out on that vital good if we do not adopt the hypothesis is what makes the option momentous.

### *“Vital Questions” and Religious Commitment*

The religious option, we believe, is intimately related—even equivalent—to what James calls elsewhere the “radical question of life,” which is “the question whether this be at bottom a moral or unmoral universe” (WWJ, 341). In concluding our study of James, we hope to deepen our sense of the momentousness of the religious option through its connection to this vital question.

To begin, it is important to recall that this “radical question” is *not* a question of metaphysics as James understands it; that is, he is not asking the traditional philosopher’s question of whether the properties of good and evil *really exist*, for as a radical empiricist, James is committed to the *reality* of moral experience. Rather, James’s “radical question” is a question of the *future* of the universe, a future which is, according the pluralist, in part decided *by us*, by means of our actions and attitudes.

So, as James formulates it, the really “vital question” of life is, “What is this world going to be? What is life eventually to make of itself?” (WWJ, 404). In this way, the religious option is actually an option between two different *attitudes* towards the future of the universe. The religious hypothesis can then be seen as the hypothesis that,

The highest good can be achieved only by our getting our proper life; and this can come about only by help of a moral energy born of the faith that in some way or other we shall succeed in getting it if we try pertinaciously enough. (WWJ, 340)

Conversely, the rejection of the religious hypothesis is then the hypothesis that our moral energies are not necessary to achieve the highest good.<sup>29</sup> James assures us that this is a forced option since “The universe will have no neutrals in these questions” (WTB, 109). Our actions will instantiate one or the other hypotheses in the option—we shall either take up the project of trying to better the world, or we will not. What shall we do?

If we take the evidentialist view and wait for evidence to decide the question for us, we fail to adopt the religious hypothesis and consequently fail to act on behalf of the world’s improvement. For every moment in which we suspend belief on the matter, we forever lose an opportunity to help

*make* the world a “moral universe.” If we are resolute in our evidentialism, we put off indefinitely the salvation of the world; in the meantime, the world may further deteriorate or even end. In other words, by waiting for evidence, we may help to *make* the world an “unmoral” place. James punctuates this point by means of a set of analogies:

If I refuse to stop a murder because I am in doubt whether it be not justifiable homicide, I am virtually abetting the crime. If I refuse to bale out a boat because I am in doubt whether my efforts will keep her afloat, I am really helping her to sink. If in the mountain precipice I doubt my right to risk a leap, I actively connive at my destruction. (WWJ, 344)

By contrast, the persons who adopt the religious hypothesis are able to say in response to James’s “radical question”: “This world *is* good... since it is what we make it,—and we shall make it good” (WWJ, 340). Of course, in adopting the religious hypothesis, they certainly violate the evidentialist command to “Shun Error!” Clearly they take a certain risk with their belief insofar as they commit to the project of making the world good without prior evidence to assure them that they can succeed. Consequently, the most earnest efforts to save the world may fail—it may be an unmoral universe after all. The point is that *we do*

*not know* whether the universe is at bottom moral or not. The question of religious belief is then, on James's view, the question of whether we should act *as if* it were a moral universe or not. In other words, we can act as if it is moral, and if it is, then we shall help *make* the universe moral; but if it is not, we shall categorically fail to make the universe moral; and yet, our failure will be noble and courageous. On the other hand we need not act as if the universe is moral, and if it is not, we shall perish just like everyone else; however, if it *is* moral, we shall have actually *contributed* to the universe's demise by means of our inaction and cowardice—the universe's failure will be *our* failure.

We now can see that James's defense of religious belief is perhaps better characterized as a defense of religious *commitment*. The religious believer, on James's view, is not simply someone who holds certain beliefs about the existence of God and the afterlife. That is, religious belief is for James not belief *that* God exists or that hell awaits the wicked; it is rather belief *in* a certain moral project, a dedication to a certain cause, a resolution to engage in a certain long-run endeavor. In this sense, James's religion is a radically empirical meliorism, and the defense of religious belief is actually a defense of what we had called in the previous chapter the "moral life."

\* \* \*

Capturing the essence of his own philosophical vision better than anything we could contrive, James concludes “The Will to Believe” with a passage from Fitz-James Stephen. We close our own discussion of James by reproducing this quotation in full.

What do you think of yourself? What do you think of the world?... These are riddles of the Sphinx, and in some way or other we must deal with them.... In all important transactions of life we have to take a leap in the dark. If we decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice; if we waver in our answer, that too is a choice. But whatever choice we make, we make it at our peril. If a man chooses to turn his back altogether on God and the future, no one can prevent him; no one can show beyond reasonable doubt that he is mistaken. If a man thinks otherwise and acts as he thinks, I do not see that any one can prove that *he* is mistaken. 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. If death ends all, we cannot meet death better. (WWJ, 734-735)

# END OF SELECTION

<sup>1</sup> See Cornelis de Wal's *On Peirce* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001) for a full and accessible examination of Peirce's thought.

<sup>2</sup> The account of the origin of pragmatism that follows is drawn from remarks by Peirce in a 1906 manuscript (5.11-5.13). It is also worth noting that Peirce offers a genealogy of the term "pragmatism" that differs from James's; see 5.412.

<sup>3</sup> Originally published in *Popular Science Monthly* in the years 1877 and 1878, respectively, as the first two installments in a series of six papers collectively entitled *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*. Interestingly, neither of these essays contains the word 'pragmatism'. For Peirce's explanation, see 5.13.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. citation in Chapter 1, n11.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. 5.373 and 5.397.

<sup>6</sup> The example is Peirce's, cf. 5.403.

<sup>7</sup> We will see in Chapter 3 a decided difference between Peirce and James on just this debate.

<sup>8</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, Knox, trans. (Oxford University Press, 1952), 10. For James's most mocking assessment of Hegel, see "On Some Hegelisms" (WTB, 263-298).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Miller, trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), and for a discussion of Hegelian philosophy see Allison Leigh Brown, *On Hegel* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. citation in Chapter 1, n12.

<sup>11</sup> Hume 1978, 269. See Chapter 1, n12 for full citation.

<sup>12</sup> James's student, George Santayana, comes to a similar conclusion about any skeptical approach to philosophy in his work *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (New York: C. Scribners), 1923.

<sup>13</sup> A. J. Ayer, *The Origins of Pragmatism*, (San Francisco: Freeman, Cooper and Co.), 1968, 198 (emphasis added).

<sup>14</sup> The classic criticisms are found in Bertrand Russell's "William James's Conception of Truth" (in Russell's *Philosophical Essays* [London: Allen and Unwin, 1966], 112-130) and G. E. Moore's "Professor James's 'Pragmatism'" (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 8 [1907]: 33-77). James published a collection of his papers defending his theory of truth in 1909 titled *The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975). D. C. Phillips' "Was William James Telling the Truth After All?" (*The Monist* 68 [1984]: 419-34), Moreland Perkins' "Notes on the Pragmatic Theory of Truth" (*The Journal of Philosophy* 49 [1952]: 573-87), and Hilary Putnam's "James's Theory of Truth" (in Ruth A. Putnam, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to William James*. New York: Cambridge

University Press, 1997) all provide nice surveys of the philosophical issues. The Russell, Moore, Phillips and Perkins essays are available along with other commentaries and James's Pragmatism lectures in Doris Olin, ed., *William James—Pragmatism in Focus*, (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> We recognize that this example is not a richly complicated (unlike, for instance, the problem of false beliefs about one's own personality may be), but we believe it is better to understand James's theory through easier examples before attempting more difficult applications. We refer the reader to the "Selected Readings" at the end of the book for discussions of the deeper complexities.

<sup>16</sup> Perry 1996, 281. (Full citation available at the end of the book in "Selections for Further Reading.")

<sup>17</sup> As early as 1908, A. O. Lovejoy argued, disparagingly, that the meanings of 'pragmatism' were multiple and irreducible. See his "The Thirteen Pragmatisms" *Journal of Philosophy*, v. 5, 5-12, 29-39.

<sup>18</sup> Other figures among the classical pragmatist tradition include many of the colleagues of Dewey's during his time at the University of Chicago (1894-1904), including G. H. Mead, J. R. Angell, A. Moore, and others.

<sup>19</sup> In Hester and Talisse, eds., *Essays in Experimental Logic* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> See Talisse, *On Dewey* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000) for a full account of Dewey's philosophy.

<sup>21</sup> See Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979). Also see Putnam's *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), Haack's *Evidence and Inquiry* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), and West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> For the current debates in general, see Morris Dickstein (ed.), *The Revival of Pragmatism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998). For debates specific to Rorty, see Saatkamp, ed. *Rorty and Pragmatism* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Will to Doubt* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1958), 38.

<sup>24</sup> Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief." *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1999), 77.

<sup>25</sup> While it may not seem that "ignoring" is the appropriate "neutral" response, it is our contention that the practice of treating new persons *as if* they are neighborly (which is not morally neutral and like everything else, James would argue, cannot be an a priori duty) already undermines the evidentialist view. Such a practice of "neighborliness" is, thereby, a good example of what James is recommending with regard to faith more generally.

<sup>26</sup> It is worth emphasizing here that James intends this point to apply *only* to the genuine option that cannot be settled on evidence; in all other cases, James agrees with the evidentialist. James writes, “Let us agree, however, that wherever there is no forced option, the dispassionately judicial intellect, with no pet hypotheses, saving us, as it does, from dupery at any rate, ought to be our ideal” (WWJ, 729).

<sup>27</sup> James here is reiterating a quote from T. H. Huxley (1825-1895) he employed earlier in the essay (WWJ, 721).

<sup>28</sup> “That the God of systematic theology should exist or not exist is a matter of small practical moment” (WWJ, 357).

<sup>29</sup> Note that on this view the religious hypothesis is rejected both by those who deny that there is a highest good that could be realized (viz., pessimists) and by those who maintain that the realization of the highest good is inevitable (viz., optimists).