Introduction

It is sometimes hard to realize that William James’s lecture on “The Will to Believe” must actually date from nearly ninety years ago, the spirit animating its every line is so unquenchably youthful; we almost fancy we can hear James delivering it. And its appeal to young philosophical minds seems never to grow old.

For nearly twenty years now, I have used it (along with others) as a text for introductory courses in philosophy, and never cease to marvel at its power. For James himself, when he gave it as a lecture, it represented an occasion to have his “say about the deepest reasons of the universe,” and to say that say with the fullest human resources at his command. Youthful minds, more haunted by those cosmic questions than we often give them credit for, and at the same time so responsive to the broad humanity, not merely the braininess, of thinkers who address them, delight in James as in a kindred spirit; they find it hard to believe he ever grew a gray hair.

But professional philosophers of every stamp have equally succumbed to “The Will to Believe.” Once read, it does not admit of being easily left aside: it bothers the mind and heart somewhat as Plato’s Symposium, Augustine’s Confessions, and Pascal’s Pensées do. Its provocative power has stimulated adverse criticisms, some of them fierce, as well as equally impassioned essays in defense; it will not let us rest. Philosophers naturally come at an essay of this sort with their own preoccupations, priorities, and methodological suppositions; it is a rare essay, though, that can respond to such a varied lot of thinkers by providing such chewy grist for each of their mills.
My own interest in “The Will to Believe” and its companion lectures was intensified by my having to deal with problems arising from St. Augustine’s theory of art. How, for instance, do a thinker’s artistic sensibility, and even artistic theory, enter into the personal way he, or she, shapes and addresses larger philosophic issues? And how legitimately do those artistic and aesthetic biases play a role in the activity of philosophizing? Relevant to Augustine, the same question intrudes upon our evaluations of Plato, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Dewey, and, of course, James—to stay with some outstanding instances.

The entryway we take toward studying anyone’s philosophy will always influence the conclusions we eventually draw; surely it is partially due to my peculiar entryway that I have come to the conviction that, with some critical honing, “The Will to Believe” still articulates some very substantial and important truths, both for young minds and for older ones. Some of the conclusions I come to here have already been suggested elsewhere; I have, I hope, not missed acknowledging any of the thinkers to whom I am indebted for those suggestions. That James’s lecture applies to our “over-beliefs” has been said before, but I have tried to draw out some implications of that view which have not received the recognition they deserve. Chief among those implications is my claim that James is proposing that the “passional” side of our nature intervenes from the very first move we make toward settling on those weltanschaulich positions he calls “over-beliefs,” and not only from the moment when the intellect’s survey of the “evidence” has reached an impasse. This might seem, at first, to convict James once for all of having commended “wishful thinking,” a charge so frequently repeated in the literature. My second major claim is that a number of defenses made of James against that “wishful thinking” charge are well-intentioned doubtless, but clearly off-target, since it is not James they end up defending. Can
he be defended? My final claim is, yes—but only if we take seriously the deontological side of his moral thought, so often neglected, along with the epistemological corollary of that deontology: that only the thinker of developed moral character can be expected to “see” our universe in appropriate moral terms. Merely an echo of Aristotle’s warnings about teaching philosophy to the young, or of Plato’s claim that only one sensibilized to beauteous forms can glimpse the Forms? In short, is James dusting off a modern version of the old traditional stress on “knowledge by connaturality”? To some extent. But even if he were (unwittingly) doing no more than that, he does it as only James could: incomparably.

One reason for the variety of criticisms and defenses of “The Will to Believe” is that critics and defenders are not always reading the same lecture, or reading it in the same way. They tend to highlight different moments of the argument, sometimes taking James’s contentions out of context when they do so. Beyond that, there are elements in James’s argument to which, I shall claim, almost none of them attributes the importance that they held for James himself. Before I can defend what I find defensible in his lecture, accordingly, I am bound in the first place to justify my own reading of it. Hence, my opening chapter: I trace James’s argument, pointing up its crucial turnings, its sometimes subtle shifts in logic or meaning of terms, and calling the reader’s attention to those features which, more generally ignored or slighted by previous writers, become important for the qualified defense I mean eventually to make of James.

But how seriously did James himself take this lecture? View him as a psychologist on a metaphysical holiday, or take his occasional slips in expression and his general vivacity of spirit as indications of a cavalier or “sporting” attitude toward his topic, and you will read his lecture out
of an attitude and set of suppositions that may seriously affect not only your evaluation, but your very understanding of his argument. My second chapter, then, attempts to place this lecture in James’s overall philosophical effort, in order to display how seriously he meant it, and how seriously we have a right to take it.

One of the fiercest critics of James’s contentions has gotten considerable mileage out of viewing his lecture through the lens provided by the famous Wager argument from Blaise Pascal’s *Pensees*: the view John Hick takes of Pascal, and the attitude he assumes James had to Pascal’s Wager, color his entire criticism. Hence, the need for a closer examination of James’s relationship to Pascal; I undertake that in Chapter 3.

But the central conclusion of Hick’s criticism comes down to a recent version of the objection that has dogged James’s proposals since they first saw the light of day: that he was providing mankind with neither more nor less than a reckless license for “wishful thinking.” Chapter 4 examines both the grounds that have been offered for that objection and the varied strategies that a number of James’s defenders have adopted in answering it.

Both critics and defenders, however, share a number of assumptions about how James’s central thesis should be understood. They regularly suppose that the validity of his contentions can be tested by application to “outcome” cases; Chapter 5 examines that assumption, and strives to show that the thesis of “The Will to Believe” legitimately applies only to what James called over-beliefs, or propositions of *weltanschaulich* dimensions.

Building on that conclusion, Chapter 6 advances what will strike many readers as the most outrageous contention in this study: that, contrary to what has been almost universally supposed, James did not mean to affirm that our impassional nature should intervene in the formation of our over-beliefs only *after* our dispassionate intellects have
INTRODUCTION failed to resolve the issues one way or the other. The surprising fact of the matter is that, early and late, James (like Pascal!) consistently taught that the passional or volitional side *de facto* exercises a precursive influence on all such intellectual surveys, and that it would be idly asking for the psychologically impossible to insist on the reverse scenario. James clearly held that the “will” to believe exerts its influence before, during, and after the formation of our over-beliefs, directing, influencing, and virtually commanding all such surveys, whether we admit it or no.

This surprising thesis seems to throw us back into an even stronger version of “wishful thinking.” Are the beliefs we come to adopt simply the pre-ordained products of our individual temperaments? Or is there more to the passional side of our nature than wish, temperament, preference, and the like? Chapter 7 investigates what James has written about the various strata of the passional, and suggests ways in which his central thesis can be salvaged from the shipwreck of epistemological irresponsibility. Chapter 8 confirms and expands those findings by exploring the various metaphors James employed in his discussions of belief.

An Epilogue briefly indicates why James’s positions, if understood as I have interpreted them, remain valid reformulations of a long-standing and quite honorable view of what philosophical thinking is truly about—reformulations which, I submit, signpost some escape routes out of the impasse in which the philosophical profession, and the business of philosophical education, find themselves mired at present.