William James on the Courage to Believe

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The Argument of “The Will to Believe”

“The Will to Believe” is one of a series of “popular” lectures in philosophy to which James devoted much of his time between the years 1880 and 1896. At the height of his fame, and in need of supplemental income for the education of his children, he was also much sought-after as a lecturer. His audience in this case was the membership of the Philosophy Clubs of Yale and Brown universities, in the year 1896.

Beginning on a light note, he portrays himself as about to deliver “something like a sermon” on “justification,” not “by,” but “of,” faith (WB 1); at least it will assure them that such matters are still spoken about in their sister-university Harvard! James then states his aim more precisely: he hopes to present “a defence 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. ‘The Will to Believe,’ accordingly, is the title of my paper” (WB 1–2). In the months and years to follow, James will have second thoughts on that nonchalant “accordingly”: the “right” to believe may be one thing, but the “will” to believe quite a different matter.¹

His main contention, however, is stated further on in greater detail:

Our passiona nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual
grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision,—just like deciding yes or no,—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth [WB 11].

That statement of his “thesis” supposes several semi-technical distinctions he has begun with. An option, for James, involves a “decision between two hypotheses,” but a “genuine” option must possess three characteristics: it must be “forced,” “living,” and “momentous.” A “living option,” the first kind James explains, is one in which both competing hypotheses are “live” ones; that is, they both exert an “appeal” as real possibilities to the mind of the person weighing them (WB 2). He assumes, in illustrating this property, that the advice to become a Mohammedan, a theosophist, or a believer in the Mahdi would exert no such appeal to the students of Yale and Brown, so that the question of deciding for one rather than the other would be a “dead” option—if not for an Arab or African—at least for them.3 Not so, however, the option between Christianity and agnosticism, for in this case, “trained as you are, each hypothesis makes some appeal, however small, to your belief” (WB 3).

But a genuine option must also be “momentous” rather than “trivial.” An invitation to reach for the kind of immortality involved in joining Nansen’s North Pole expedition, for example, would represent a “momentous” option, a unique opportunity, in which the stakes are significant and the decision irreversible. “He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he tried and failed” (WB 4).

The third characteristic of a genuine option is that it be “forced”: the two possibilities presented form a “complete logical disjunction”—“Either accept this truth or go without it”—with “no standing place outside of the alternative,” and “no possibility of not choosing” (WB 3; emphasis added for clarity) between them.
It would seem, at the outset, that the option James is about to discuss—"Either believe in God, or do not believe"—has already been ruled out as a "genuine" option: for a third possibility, that of remaining essentially indifferent to the question, and acquiescing in an agnosticism which is neither belief nor disbelief, seems to offer a "standing ground" outside of these two contending possibilities. It will be part of James's task further on to argue that this third possibility is, in the last analysis, illusory; but we shall come to that in time.

One would expect as James's next move that he explain that crucial term in his "thesis": our "passional" or "vollitional nature." Instead, he rather too easily supposes his auditors' familiarity with what he means, and passes on to illustrate that meaning. There are, he admits, cases where it seems "preposterous" to talk of "our opinions being modifiable at will" (WB 4): we cannot, however strongly we will it, deny the existence of Abraham Lincoln or the reality of a rheumatic attack: such Humean "matters of fact . . . and relations between ideas" are "either there or not there for us" and "if not there cannot be put there by any action of our own" (WB 5). Any talk of our believing in such propositions because we will to believe in them is nothing less than "silly" (WB 7).

As another provisional objection to his own thesis, James reminds his hearers of Pascal's famous Wager argument. Grossly put: bet on God's existence and, if He does exist, you win eternal happiness; if He does not exist, life being so short, what have you lost? James proceeds to summarize the Wager in his own fashion. That summary I shall have to deal with further on; what is interesting at this point is James's dismissal of the Wager. For dismiss it he does, and on two distinct grounds. First, "when religious faith expresses itself thus, in the language of the gaming-table," one is entitled to feel it has been "put to its last trumps"; a faith adopted "after such a mechanical calcu-
ation would lack the inner soul of faith's reality”—and we, in the Deity's place, would "probably take particular pleasure in cutting off believers of this pattern from their infinite reward" (WB 6). Betting on God's existence by calculating the gains and losses respectively entailed by belief and unbelief, James is clearly suggesting, is an entirely unworthy approach to religious faith.\(^6\)

The second flaw in Pascal's argument, as James views it, and assumes his auditors all view it as he does, is that faith "in masses and holy water" represents a "dead" option, a set of "foregone impossibilities" to "us Protestants." So, says James in a remarkable parallel, would an invitation tendered by the Mahdi to wager on him as the guarantee of our eternal happiness! The Mahdi's logic would be the same as Pascal's, James observes, but the "hypothesis he offers us is dead," as dead as the one offered by Pascal.

May one seriously talk, then, of "believing by our volition"? Catering still to his auditors' suspicion of all such talk, James permits himself a rhetorical flight evoking the "magnificent edifice of the physical sciences," the construction of so many "disinterested moral lives" over the centuries: how utterly "besotted and contemptible" seems any sentimentalist who would ignore such scientific findings and "decide things from out of his private dream." One can understand why scientific thinkers, bred in this "rugged and manly school" should feel like "spewing such subjectivism out of their mouths" (WB 7). One can understand, as well, why some such thinkers, in their antipathy to subjectivism and sentimentalism, "pass over to the opposite extreme entirely"; Clough, Huxley, and W. K. Clifford—James's principal adversary—close ranks in preaching the immorality, desecration, and downright sinfulness involved in anyone's believing anything "'on insufficient evidence,'" no matter how strongly that belief might work toward the "'solace and private pleasure of the believer'" (WB 8). The scientific conscience, then, would
seem to anathematize the very possibility James is about to argue for: that “wish and will and sentimental preference”—factors of our passional or volitional nature—may rightly intervene in the formation of beliefs of any sort whatever.

But, interposes James, however healthy Clifford’s ethics of belief may sound, he is flying in the face of facts; for it is a fact that we believe a host of things—from molecular theory to Protestant Christianity—not from any personal insight into evidence, but swayed by the authority and prestige those beliefs have acquired in our particular “intellectual climate” (WB 9). And it is another fact that even the Cliffords of the scientific world disbelieve a whole array of facts and theories on the passional, rather than “logical,” grounds that they have no “use” for those facts and theories; indeed, Clifford’s very “law” that we should rule out our “willing nature” in the formation of our beliefs is itself based on his “wish” to exclude all views and theories for which he, in his professional capacity, can find no use!

The factual state of things, therefore, is far less simple than Clifford would allow: it is true, even for him, that our “non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions.... and pure insight and logic, whatever they might do ideally, are not the only things that really do produce our creeds” (WB 11). But all this serves only to sharpen the question: Is this intervention of our volitional nature “reprehensible and pathological,” or, on the contrary, a “normal element in making up our minds”? We have already seen James’s programatic answer to that question, in the “thesis” transcribed above; now, too, we are in a better position to appreciate how circumscribed an answer it purports to be. This much, at least, is indisputably clear. James is not claiming that the intervention of our passional nature is legitimate in any and every option we may be faced with. His claim is the much more limited one that volitional intervention is legitimate where the option in question is
“genuine”—is living, forced, and momentous. Three necessary conditions, but are they sufficient conditions as well? James’s expression is tantalizing: “whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds.” The italics are James’s own; obviously, the qualification was important to him. And yet nothing in the discussion so far has gone to clarify exactly what he intends by it. But we shall come to see that such clarity is indispensable if we are to gauge the value of his argument.

Having stated his thesis, James sees the need of clearing up two more “preliminary” points before endeavoring to argue it. The first has to do with the human tendency to be “absolutist” and “dogmatic” in epistemological matters: to claim that our feeling of certainty is validated by our possessing the “objective evidence” that grounds our certainty. And yet, how many positions down the history of philosophy have made that claim, against adversaries who made the identical claim for their perfectly antithetical views! The only solution to this impasse, James proposes, is to abandon the “absolutist” mentality once for all, to admit, like a true empiricist, that each of our views is interpretable and corrigible. Giving up the absolutist doctrine of “objective certitude,” however, is not the same as giving up “the quest or hope of truth itself” (WB 17); it means that the empiricist, as James ideally sees him, commits himself to the task of “systematically continuing to roll up experiences and think,” and in that thinking, to face future-ward rather than toward the past, toward the “outcome, the upshot,” the terminus ad quem rather than the origin and terminus a quo of his thinking. Of any of his hypotheses, the Jamesian empiricist must ask, not how it came to him, but whether “the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it.”

The second “preliminary”: there are two ways, James asserts, of formulating our epistemological rule of conduct. We may say “We must know the truth”; or we may say
“we must avoid error.” Often jumbled together as though they were two ways of stating the same epistemological commandment, these are, in fact, “two separable laws.” Clifford, for example, when legislating against belief without sufficient evidence, has made the avoidance of error his primary concern; but in doing so, he is merely expressing his fear—his *passional* fear—of being duped; that fear he has allowed to dominate his desire for attaining truth, making that desire a secondary concern. But what if one chooses—and that choice *is* a choice, dictated as much by the passional as Clifford’s choice in the opposing direction—what if one chooses to make the “chase for truth” (WB 18) a paramount, and the avoidance of error a secondary, concern? To an empiricist philosopher, Clifford sounds too much like a general nervously exhorting his troops to keep clear of the battle rather than risk a single wound. Obviously, James is confident that his audience by this time will concede him the right to make the search for truth his paramount concern, with the understanding that his preference for that epistemological canon is at least as legitimate as Clifford’s choice of the opposing one. And that concession frees him, at last, to go straight to the main question of his lecture.

He first refreshes his hearers on the limited application of his main thesis. The “attitude of sceptical balance” and its concomitant decision to wait for further evidence are often the appropriate one—in scientific matters, for example; but the judgments we are called upon to make about such disputed questions as Roentgen’s theory or the causality of conscious states are seldom if ever either forced or momentous. They are not, therefore, the kind of genuine option to which James’s thesis applies. But are there not, among our speculative questions, examples of “forced options” which do not permit us to “wait with impunity till the coercive evidence shall have arrived” (WB 22)?

James proposes two areas where such options confront
us; the first of them is the realm of moral beliefs: here we must consult, not science, but what Pascal calls the "heart," for it is a question, not of what sensibly exists, but of what is "good," what solicits our "moral preferences"—what appeals to the will. "If your heart does not want a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one," and when we choose to "stick to it" that there is such a thing as moral truth, "we do so with our whole nature," not merely with our pure intellects (WB 23).

But there is a second realm where the same thing applies: this realm is concerned with "facts," but those peculiar facts involved in "personal relations, states of mind between one man and another." Whether another person likes me or not will most often depend on "whether I meet you half-way, am willing to assume that you must like me, and show you trust and expectation." That "previous faith" on my part is what so often "makes your liking come" (WB 23–24). But if I stand aloof and wait for "objective evidence" that you do like me, then "ten to one your liking never comes" (WB 24).

At this juncture, James's argument has taken a subtle shift: instead of staying with the question whether, as a matter of fact, "you like me or not," he has veered round to recommending the show of "trust and expectation," a "previous faith" that you will come to like me, as the most effective way of making that liking "come." Continuing on that same tack, he observes that the "desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth's existence," not only in friendships, but in the quest for "promotions, boons, appointments," in "innumerable cases of other sorts." The faith of the ambitious and confident young executive, for instance, "acts on the powers above him like a claim, and creates its own verification."

The same rule holds, James continues, for any social
organism. A team, college, government, or army all depend on each member's doing his job with the "precursive faith" that the others will do their job as well; without this, "not only is nothing achieved, but nothing is even attempted."

A whole train of passengers (individually brave enough) will be looted by a few highwaymen, simply because the latter can count on one another, while each passenger fears that if he makes a movement of resistance, he will be shot before any one else backs him up. If we believed that the whole car-full would rise at once with us, we should each severally rise, and train-robbing would never even be attempted [WB 24–25].

There are, then, cases "where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming" (WB 25). So, James concludes emphatically, "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.' . . . Yet such is the logic by which our scientific absolutists pretend to regulate our lives!" 11

Now James passes on from "human cases" to the more cosmic question represented by the "religious hypothesis." Since religions "differ so much in their accidents," James feels obliged to express the religious hypothesis in "very generic and broad" terms. "Religion" says, first, that "the best things are the more eternal things," that "'Perfection is eternal'"; and, secondly, that "we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true" (WB 26). James supposes his auditors will grant it as a "living" hypothesis, at least, that both these affirmations may be true. But then, it is evident that religion offers itself as a "momentous" option as well: belief and unbelief will issue, respectively, in gain and loss of a "certain vital good."

That "vital good" is left unexplained in this essay; but since James is about to revert to the idiom of the "gaming-
table,” it is worth observing that the terms of his wager are quite different from Pascal’s. James says nothing about the “eternal” happiness to be won; he does not exclude it, surely, but the “vital good” he is invoking seems clearly a good to be gained “even now,” in this human life before death and whatever may follow on death.12

How much that undefined, unexplained “vital good” must have appealed to the students of Brown and Yale is anyone’s guess, of course; its vacuity as it stands, though, must have been underlined by the lofty generality of James’s definition of “religion.” True, he felt that a “generic and broad” characterization was forced upon him by the needs of his argument; but one cannot help hearing Pascal himself, whispering behind the scenes about that antiseptic, bloodless being, the “God of the philosophers.” A “momentous” hypothesis, really? But a lecture is a lecture, and one has only a certain amount of time. We must not fault him overmuch if, with other fish to fry, James hurtles onward.

For he sees his thorniest task as that of showing that the religious option is truly “forced.” After all, “belief” and “unbelief” do not seem to represent two terms of a perfect logical disjunction; between them would appear to lie that middle “standing-ground,” “non-belief”: the uncommitted position of “remaining sceptical and waiting for more light,” until “sufficient evidence” for religion be found” (WB 27). But that appearance, James argues, is illusory: take a man who hesitates to marry, unsure whether his wife-to-be will turn out to be an angel when he brings her home; when it comes to gaining or losing that particular “angel-possibility,” is there any real difference between his hesitating indefinitely and never marrying at all, or deciding to marry someone else instead of that possible angel? No, argues James; he “cut[s] himself off from that particular angel-possibility” (WB 26) as decisively in one case as in the other. The indefinite postponement of decision is, to be
sure, a way of "avoiding error," on the supposition that the religious hypothesis is untrue; but if it is true, "we lose the good" it puts before us "just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve." The skeptical choice of waiting for conclusive evidence, then, is itself a kind of positive option, as much fraught with risk as the options to believe or disbelieve: the skeptic is "actively playing his stake as much as the believer is; he is backing the field against the religious hypothesis, just as the believer is backing the religious hypothesis against the field."

The Pascalian Wager language may not be that "silly," when all is said: in any event, James's ambiguity toward Pascal's maneuver has become more baffling than ever. But now he probes more searchingly into the motivation of the skeptic: instead of the cool-headed, passionless abstention skepticism would claim to be, in reality it would strive to persuade us that, when it comes to the religious hypothesis, "to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true" (WB 27). The skeptic is not preaching "intellect against passions," then; he is preaching "fear" against "hope"—"intellect with one passion laying down its law." But what entitles "fear" to the palm of "supreme wisdom" in these matters? "Dupery for dupery, what proof is there that dupery through hope is so much worse than dupery through fear?"

The "scientist," then, is not dissuading me from choosing an option; he is trying to persuade me to choose "his kind of option." In a situation where "my own stake is important enough to give me the right to choose my own form of risk," he is commanding me to "forfeit my sole chance in life of getting on the winning side."

But all this supposes, of course, that I am willing "to run the risk of acting as if my passional need of taking the world religiously might be prophetic and right," and, what is more, that it may, indeed, be "prophetic and right," in such wise that religion be a "live hypothesis which may be true."
Is it far-fetched to think that James is betraying, here, an uneasiness about his preceding definition of "religion"—a definition so "generic and broad" as to drain it of all the juices that should flow through a truly "momentous" hypothesis? However that may be, he does evoke for his hearers the "further way" in which religion "comes to most" of them. One might object that James is about to present not merely a "further," but a more particular, even an accidental, form of the religious hypothesis he first felt it necessary to keep "generic and broad"; but that might be caviling. The "perfect and . . . eternal" in the universe, he now admits, is "represented in our religions as having personal form," so that if we are religious, the universe becomes "no longer a mere It to us, but a Thou." This puts James in position to exploit his foregoing observations on "person to person" relationships. He recasts them in a fresh illustration:

just as a man who in a company of gentlemen made no advances, asked a warrant for every concession, and believed no one's word without proof, would cut himself off by such churlishness from all the social rewards that a more trusting spirit would earn,—so here, one who should shut himself up in snarling logicality and try to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly, or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity of making the gods' acquaintance [WB 28].

So, James is arguing, if we entertain the notion that the "perfect and . . . eternal" is personal, thus making the universe a "Thou," it should come as no surprise that "We feel . . . as if the appeal of religion to us were made to our own active good-will, as if evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis half-way": very much the way, in his earlier illustration from the interpersonal sphere, James argued for the "half-way" meeting between two who would be friends.
Now, however, he takes another step; the unbroken sweep of his prose would imply that it follows easily from what has gone before, if not for our minds, then at least for his:

This feeling, forced on us we know not whence, that by obstinately believing that there are gods . . . we are doing the universe the deepest service we can, seems part of the living essence of the religious hypothesis. If the hypothesis were true in all its parts, including this one, then pure intellectualism, with its veto on our making willing advances, would be an absurdity; and some participation of our sympathetic nature would be logically required.

The "logic" appealed to here is the logic of interpersonal relationships; so much for the continuity presiding over James's argument in this paragraph. But a new, even a solemn, note has been injected; it is no longer merely a matter of gaining the rewards of friendship. The essence of the "religious" hypothesis has for one incandescent moment been acknowledged in different terms: in terms of "doing the universe the deepest service we can."

This said, James feels, he has made it clear why he cannot accept such "agnostic rules" as Clifford and others would impose, rules that would "keep [our] willing nature out of the game." His final formulation runs: "I cannot do so for this plain reason, that a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule. That for me is the long and short of the formal logic of the situation . . . [WB 28–29]."

James closes in a frankly hortatory vein, by quoting from Fitzjames Stephen. We all must deal with the "'riddles of the Sphinx'" encased in such questions as "'What do you think of yourself?'" and "'What do you think of the world?'" and "'choice'" is involved in whatever way we deal with them. "'In all important transactions of life,'" Stephen points out,
"we have to take a leap in the dark . . . We stand on a moun­
tain 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" [WB 30–31].

These are James's final injunctions. He was fond of this metaphor of the Alpinist's quandary, it regularly evoked, for him, the notion of "courage," the courage he thought of as energizing the "will" to take the leap of faith. The force of these closing remarks we shall explore more care­fully as this evaluation of his lecture comes, in its own turn, to a close.

NOTES

1. In fact, ensuing discussion of his lecture will crystallize into a scholarly consensus which James seems to have anticipated, and sympathetically: that he argued successfully for a right, but not for a will, to believe. See the evidence and argument presented by Gail Kennedy in "Pragmatism, Pragmaticism, and the Will to Believe—A Reconsideration," The Journal of Philosophy, 55, No. 14 (July 3, 1958), 578–88. For my own refinements on this proposal, see below, chap. 6.

2. By our "passional nature" James refers to that part, side, or (in the terms applied in RA, passim) "willing department" of our total human nature which interacts with our "perceiving" and "con­ce­iving" departments. See WB 29–30 where "heart, instincts, and courage," "senses," and "intellect" clearly designate those same three departments, though in different terms. Patrick K. Dooley, in "The Nature of Belief: The Proper Context for James' 'The Will to Believe,'" Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society, 8, No. 3 (Summer 1972), 141–51, ably argues for the appropriateness of interpreting this lecture in the light of James's other writings. James's consistency on this issue may be viewed as partial confirmation of Dooley's suggestion, but we shall see more confirmation in what follows.
To avoid tedious repetition, I shall sometimes refer to our "passional nature" as our "passional" side or simply as the "passional," without any change of meaning.

3. James is aware, therefore, that he is referring, not to some "intrinsic property" that makes any particular hypothesis "live," but to the relationship of any such hypothesis to the "mind" of an "individual thinker," a relationship that makes it plausible to that thinker's mind. For the relevance of these remarks, see the treatment of John Hick's objection in chap. 4, below.

4. E contra, James goes on to suggest somewhat disconcertingly that an hypothesis which a "chemist finds live enough to spend a year in its verification" would rank as a "trivial" hypothesis of the sort that "abound in the scientific life [WB 4]"! Rather than taken as a put-down of science, this should shock the reader into seeing what James means by an hypothesis that is truly "momentous."

5. Observe that later on, having re-established the rights of the volitional to enter into the believing process, James alludes in passing to the possibility that Pascal's Wager argument may be a "regular" clincher," after all [WB 11]. Merely a rhetorical flourish, that admission? Or a sign that James's attitude toward the Wager argument, and possibly toward Pascal more generally, was an ambivalent one? See my discussion of this question below, chap. 3.

6. Analyze the tightly woven summary of his argument presented on WB 7, and it is possible that James means the adjective "vile" to characterize Pascal's Wager argument; but the characterization holds only if Pascal is interpreted (or caricatured) as James, at this precise stage in the development of his own case, and for the purposes of developing that case, makes free to interpret him. Did James mean this interpretation to stand as his last word on the Wager and on Pascal? See above, note 5, and below, chap. 3.

7. James groups Arthur Hugh Clough and Thomas Huxley with, but aims his fire mainly at, W. K. Clifford, who had written in his "The Ethics of Belief" the series of propositions James quotes from him. This was a chapter in his Lectures and Essays, edd. Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1879); see pp. 182–86. I elide (as not directly relevant to this stage of the argument) what James more precisely means by the "opposite extreme" these men prided themselves on embracing: the pessimistic view that the "incorruptibly truthful intellect ought positively to prefer" that the cosmos be a dark and disconsolate place, as though the "bitterness and unacceptableness to the heart" implied by that view must somehow be taken as positive guarantee of its truth. He
quotes (perhaps maliciously) Clough's jingle that: “‘It fortifies my heart to know / That, though I perish, Truth is so—’” (WB 7). More recently, of course, the fashion calls for Albert Camus' comparably pathetic “We have to imagine Sisyphus—happy.”

8. James here alludes (WB 9) to a number of “volitional” factors—belief, fear, hope, pressure, partisanship, etc.—that go to make up the intellectual climate of any time and place, but he makes no attempt to be more than illustrative when doing so. Nor does he confront the need for discriminating among their obviously uneven claims to “legitimacy”; he is, after all, merely setting up the question he means to deal with focally. But one could have hoped that, in another lecture perhaps, he might have dealt more attentively with the nest of problems raised by his enumeration; see below, chap. 7.

9. Nor, James points out, are the hypotheses involved in such scientific “options” truly “living” ones for us as “spectators” of the scientific game, though they may be living options for the passionately committed scientific researcher. There is an anticipation here of Thomas S. Kuhn’s later distinction between the creative and the more “routine” kind of scientist; see WB 20–21 and Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962; rev. ed., 1970), esp. pp. 52–65.

10. The meaning of “forced” seems to have gone through a shift in James’s mind: it is no longer merely a question of the disjunction’s leaving no (logical) “middle ground”; now the (more existential) consideration has entered whereby the choice must be made now, without postponement. That exclusion of postponement was, however, formerly a feature of the option viewed as “momentous,” so that James has not surreptitiously imported a consideration not included in his original premisses.

11. The quotation is actually from Thomas Huxley, but taken as associated with Clifford’s contention in the same sense; see above, note 7.

12. Despite his sympathetic views on the possibilities for “human immortality,” James does not make those views operative as premisses in WB. The point has bearing on whether he is encouraging us to engage in “wishful thinking”; see below, chap. 4.

13. Compare WB 30–31, SR 96, and LWL 59. The metaphor seems clearly to have resonated with his personal experience of, and predilection for, the challenges of mountaineering. See TC I and II passim, esp. I 377–78. Again, Dooley’s prescription (see note 2, above) proves a sound one.