William James on the Courage to Believe

Robert J. O'Connell

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On Matter and Manner

IT TAKES a certain shamelessness to present the kind of content analysis of James I have given above, however necessary it may be. I have tried to highlight those features of his lecture which have become the focus of subsequent discussion about its cogency, or lack of it. But in doing so, what a sense of embarrassment, almost of desecration. For all the hearty flavor, the genial electricity, of James's contagious style is drained away in the process.

Not everyone would deplore such a reduction of this full-blooded address to the dry bones of its matter and argumentative sequence, but a Jamesian “believer” must. For central to all James’s philosophical activity is the conviction, which features so prominently in this lecture, that the whole person must be engaged in philosophic exploration, not merely the pure intellect or logicizing reason. Cor ad cor loquitur, Newman never tired of reminding us: if “real” rather than merely “notional” assents are his concern, the thinker must be willing to present himself in all the fullness of his humanity, feeling and sensitivity included—and, one must add, human vulnerability as well. In that self-presentation, style is no mere ornament; style is the man.

But it must be admitted that James’s style has worked both for and against him, and never more tellingly than in “The Will to Believe.” Nowhere more vividly do we catch that mobile, darting, adventurous quality of his mind, his artist’s responsiveness to the folds and curves, the rock-ribbed massiveness, the darks and glints, of reality which elude the everyday eye. Not only do his early experiment with the painter’s vocation,¹ and his wide and responsive
reading in literature and poetry of every stripe, represent a backlog of “mental equipment,” a stock of lively illustrations, but both interests are profoundly symptomatic of the kind of thinker he was fated to become. Even in his more technical *Principles of Psychology*, we know we have met the man himself; but in his popular lectures, this “Hibernian” propensity, this sheer reveling in “good talk,” sprightly and humorous, serious and solemn by turns, is fully unleashed. Even at those junctures when we simply must cry halt, and slow his ebullient progress with a question, an objection, a demand for more precision, a smaller voice within us murmurs its “almost thou persuadest me. . . .”

But there are such junctures; precision, logic, cogency are not solely matter for impatience or scorn. And it must be admitted that the nether side of James’s style asserts itself exactly here: his early mockery of the “laboratory” psychologists disclosed his own lifelong impatience with the plodding unromantic toil of getting it precisely right; and the way he virtually blazoned a superficial conversance with logic and mathematics betrayed that streak in him which, Perry tells us, was “profoundly opposed to the whole life of scholarship,” amounting even to a “temperamental repugnance to the processes of exact thought.”

This congenital weakness in James’s otherwise impressive philosophical armory may serve as some excuse for the arid summary I have presented of “The Will to Believe”; but it should not excuse anyone from direct acquaintance with the lecture itself. While tracing its argumentative line as faithfully as I could, I have also attempted to point, even if allusively at times, to the slips and gaps that have fueled the discussion of later scholars, both critics and advocates of James. Before moving on to that scholarly discussion, though, one major caveat is called for. James can be headlong and charming, impatient with technicities; and his thought comes attired in a style
of matching cut. But it would be fatal to conclude that he was not “serious” about the issues he was airing, here and in the other popular lectures of this period of his career. Debonair always, he was continents removed from being cavalier. 5

The point has its importance, and the weight one feels entitled to assign to this phase of James’s activity depends upon getting it clear. For one eminent critic has come dangerously close to questioning that seriousness. John Hick prefaced his treatment of “The Will to Believe” 6 with a “pilot study” of Pascal’s “Wager”; that very association, which James himself may be thought to have invited, along with Hick’s own evaluation of Pascal, 7 may have influenced his judgment. But in any case, Hick’s analysis leads him to the conclusion that James entertained an “essentially sporting” attitude toward religious belief. 8 James does, it is true, revert to the language of the gaming table toward the end of his lecture—and that despite his earlier dismissal of such thinking as unworthy and perhaps even “vile”; Hick is also correct in pointing to James’s allusive appeal to similar expressions in “The Sentiment of Rationality.” 9 But place those expressions once more into their larger context, take account of the adversaries James is dealing with, then grant him the right to his personal lecturing style, and surely a more generous interpretation than Hick’s suggests itself. Life itself involves risk, and the human person’s total commitment in religious faith is surely one of life’s largest risks: the betting metaphor, even if Pascal’s classic argument had never given it general circulation, would come naturally to mind to express that risk. But a metaphor it remains, and James’s remarks on Pascal’s use of it show his lucid awareness of its limping inadequacy. Speak in sporting metaphors of life, and of religious faith, and only the most literal-minded would infer that you take the game of life as just another game.

But there are risks and risks, and James’s adversaries
would have it that the risk of falling into error is so "solemn and awful" a thing that no thinking being should be willing to court it. Now the word risk has taken a somber turn; the gaming-table sort of risk has become only its pale image. It is James's task to show not only that the risk of faith commends itself, but that his adversaries, instead of offering us a life without risk, would have us risk all the meaning of our human lives through a timorous submission to a one-sided epistemological rule, a rule that would dissuade us from "doing the [personal] universe the deepest service" we may be called upon to offer. We are worlds away from the gaming table now, and if "sport" is involved, it is deadly serious sport.

But that last phrase quoted from James's "Will to Believe" suggests an aspect of the faith-commitment which Hick, like so many others, has totally ignored. He has been perspicacious enough to see that an interpretation of this lecture may set off a hunt through its companion lectures from this period of James's production; but "The Sentiment of Rationality" is only one of a number. What light do the others shed on James's attitude toward faith?

Hunting down an answer to that question will occupy us further on. To set the stage for a fuller answer to Hick's objection, as well as to light up other facets of "The Will to Believe," a word on this phase of James's philosophical effort is in order.

"[R]eligion," James remarks in a letter of 1897, "is the great interest of my life . . ." (Letters II 58). That interest went back to a significant degree to the influence of his father, Henry James, Sr., whose energetic career as writer, lecturer, and marathon conversationalist was fiercely dedicated to religious questions. James's touching devotion to his father went along with an unfeigned admiration for the man, even if it never brought him into complete agreement with his views. But that paternal influence was as incalculable as it was inescapable; soon after his father's death,
summing up what would “stay by [him]” of all his father bequeathed, James included “the sense of his right to have a say about the deepest reasons of the universe” (Letters I 221). Specialize though he did in physiology, then psychology, as early as 1865—when 23 years of age—James pledged himself “to study philosophy all [his] days,” and remarked, eight years later, that his “interest [would], as ever, lie with the most general problems” (see Letters I 53, 171). Perry writes of him that “From his adolescence James was both fascinated and tormented by ultimate problems. . . . he was haunted by a cosmic nostalgia—by those deeper doubts and hopes which are the perpetual spring of religion. He felt these emotions both in his own behalf and vicariously in behalf of every sincerely troubled human soul.” As late as 1907, James expresses his delight that his friend Carl Stumpf is “‘working more and more into metaphysics, which is the only study worthy of Man!’”

It was, in fact, this exalted notion of philosophy that almost kept him from being a philosopher at all: his “‘strongest moral and intellectual craving,’ ” he writes to his brother Henry, “‘is for some stable reality to lean upon,’ ” whereas the professional philosopher’s business seems to pledge him “‘publicly never to have done with doubt on these subjects, but every day to be ready to criticize afresh and call in question the grounds of his faith of the day before. . . .’” This once seemed too lacerating a calling for one who for so many of his younger years had “brooded upon the nature of the universe and the destiny of man,” and for whom these questions were “vital” questions. That gnawing preoccupation with the deepest and most cosmic of questions, Perry suggests, may have contributed in part to the neurasthenic depression, and near-collapse, that brought James so low between his twenty-sixth and twenty-eighth years. It is significant that James himself attributed his “rebirth,” in large part, to the
bracing assurance he gleaned from reading Renouvier's *Deuxième Essai*: man's will is perhaps genuinely free, after all, and not the inconsequential plaything of a universe whose physical laws determine its every act. 16

Many of the seeds of James's popular lecture on "The Dilemma of Determinism" are already detectable in this earlier experience; 17 but, one may ask, why was precisely this conviction so vitally important to him? The reason lies in one of the differences James always had with his father's views: his father, he was persuaded, too easily resorted to a higher, aesthetic resolution of the problem of evil, a resolution that, in James's view, sapped at its very root the efficacy, importance, and deepest seriousness of human moral activity. 18 In later years, this would be his objection to, and the driving motive of his unremitting assault on, all forms of "Hegelism" as he understood it. 19 His early adoption of the "empiricist" attitude went along with the hope that scientific "fact" could be reconciled with the validity of religion. 20 Life, he was convinced— and paradoxically, his reading of his father's friend Carlyle made strongly for that conviction—is a "real fight," against real evils, and humankind's resolute will to engage in the fight makes a real difference to the ultimate outcome. 21

The pages of James's popular lectures are sprinkled with references to and quotations from Thomas Carlyle, all breathing the same spirit of fighting ardor he had imbibed from Carlyle's writings. "What was the most important thing he said to us?" James asks the audience of his "Dilemma of Determinism": "He said: 'Hang your sensibilities! Stop your snivelling complaints, and your equally snivelling raptures! Leave off your general emotional tomfoolery, and get to work like men [DD 174]!' This is the no-nonsense language of the "strenuous," or "serious," moral mood (MP 210–13; cf. LWL 47–51, 54–59) James always held forth as the only mood worthy of a human being, a mood he so often expresses in martial metaphors and
calls to battle. This same man, toward the end of his career, deliberately set about an extended study of the military experience, in preparation for his eventual essay calling upon mankind to wage the battle for peace as a "moral equivalent of war." 22 "The Energies of Men," says Perry rightly, is nothing less than an essay on "the psychology of heroism," a topic that always fascinated James. "What Makes a Life Significant?" asks the title of another such lecture, and the answer comes: "courage, struggle, risk—in a word, heroism..." 23 One of his most telling thrusts against the Cliffords and the Huxleys was that the materialistic universe their science might bequeath us could offer no ultimate support for the heroic dedication to truth to which they summoned us! 24

For heroism must be fueled by the "vital heat" of a fighting faith: 25 James's personal religious belief always wore this moral, even moralistic, battle-dress; this, and his accompanying conviction that we may not lay the existence of evils, any more than their final conquest, at the doorstep of an "infinite" God, partially account for the arm's-length he always kept between himself and every form of institutionalized religion. 26 God himself could be enhanced by man's uncompromising fidelity to the call which such a "melioristic" universe laid upon him; it did make sense to speak of a "deepest service" one could pay to that universe.

This, I suggest, is the fuller, rounder resonance that such terms as "risk" take on when James employs them; alongside the stern and martial risks of this cosmic battle, the risks of the gaming table give off a tinny echo, and sports of any description shrink to puny metaphors.

When, by the time he was thirty-five, James had become a popular figure on the lecture platform, he acceded eagerly to the invitations that came his way. The income which would help him further his children's education had something to do with that. But more significant is what
he made of that opportunity. It offered him quite literally a platform to have his say, at last, “about the deepest reasons of the universe,” to share his own “cosmic nostalgia,” and deal with the deepest, most general problems that, his own experience convinced him, were of vital importance to others as well. He returns, in a word, to the topic that had always been the “great interest” of his life: religion.

He had always admired in his father not so much the “philosopher” of religion as the “prophet”; he now takes up the succession, donning his own prophetic mantle with accustomed grace, and delivering his message in a vernacular spiced with the same verve and dash as always flavored his conversations. But his seriousness is evidenced by the cluster of topics he chose to deal with: in 1877, “The Sentiment of Rationality”; in 1879, “Rationality, Activity and Faith”; in 1880, “Great Men and Their Environment”; in 1881, “Reflex Action and Theism”; in 1884, “The Dilemma of Determinism”; in 1891, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”; in 1895, “Is Life Worth Living?” and in 1896, “The Will to Believe.” By 1899, James has been invited to give the prestigious Gifford Lectures. Health problems force a delay; but he has already decided upon the topic he intends to treat, and is snatching every well moment to get ready: *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is the fruit of that stubborn labor.

All the lectures mentioned above contribute, each in its way, to our understanding of “The Will to Believe.” For they all serve to illumine a range of questions which, on examination, turn out to be one closely related family of questions, if not, at bottom, the same fundamental question orchestrated in a variety of registers. They all concern themselves with the most general “cosmic” terms on which human life, as James sees it, “makes sense”; they all reconnoiter the impact the “religious dimension” has on that vital human question; they all propose, as crucial to settling that question, the appeal of a moral life lived in the
serious or "strenuous" as against the genial, "easy-going" mood; and cumulatively they support the conclusion that it is reasonable to believe in the religious dimension which, James is convinced, is indispensable for sustaining that moral mood.

"'Religion,'” James writes in 1873, “'in its most abstract expression may be defined as the affirmation that all is not vanity.'” 29 That “all,” for him, embraces the most precious values humankind has come to cherish; for if religion itself is vanity and humans have no right to believe in it, then our sentiment of rationality is a liar, the universe makes no sense, we are not genuinely free, morality is an illusion and heroism the posturing of witless idiots, and the sort of life this leaves us with is certainly not worth living. We must not let his manner deceive us; the man took these matters with ultimate seriousness. If the whole man was mobilized in his address to these questions, the whole man was equally engaged in grappling with them.

NOTES

2. TC I 260–73.
4. TC I 442; II 680.
5. James himself acknowledges, in a letter to Shadworth Hodgson dated December 18, 1881, a paralogism uncovered in his RA lecture; see TC I 620. One is free to think his reaction in this instance was less troubled than it might have been, but generalizing from that instance would fly in the face of the array of evidence Perry adduces for the seriousness of James’s attitude toward the topics of his popular lectures. On the term "popular," see Works xii–xiii; it does not mean "casual."
7. See below, chap. 3.
9. Ibid., p. 40. This, however, is the only other popular lecture Hick brings into his study; that limitation seriously affects his estimate of James, as we shall see.

10. Perry devotes extended attention to this early relationship with Henry James, Sr.; see TC I 3–165.

11. TC I 450.

12. Given in TC II 203.

13. Quoted in TC I 343.

14. TC I 323.

15. TC I 322ff. Quite probably there were other, less conscious factors that accounted for this depression, and James himself may have been too ready to overintellectualize the matter. See, for example, the suggestive (but, at points, highly conjectural) article by Marian C. Madden and Edward H. Madden, "The Psychosomatic Illnesses of William James," Thought, 54, No. 215 (December 1979), 376–92.

16. TC I 323; see also James's letter to Renouvier given in TC I 661–62.

17. Including the axiom that the first act of a free person ought to be that of affirming that freedom (DD 146).

18. TC I 143.

19. TC I 727.


21. TC I 143, 159.

22. TC II 271–78.

23. TC II 270.

24. TC I 503, II 210; cf. PP II 640.

25. TC II 324; cf. 353.

26. TC I 471.

27. Though not published until 1879, "Most of this [essay] was written in 1877" (Letters I 203).

28. This lecture was later incorporated into SR (see TC I 495 and SR 63).

29. Quoted in TC I 503, II 448.