Outcomes and Over-beliefs

The task of ferreting out the implications of "The Will to Believe" led me swiftly to comparing it with the other popular lectures James delivered during this same period of his life, and no less swiftly to detecting several points of consistency that initially justified such comparisons. The questions James deals with in these lectures are all intimately connected with one another; they all center on what he saw as the "most general" questions confronting the human inquirer, the "vital" questions that eventually compelled him to follow at last in his father's footsteps, and to hazard his own personal say about "the deepest reasons of the universe." But one can be more precise than that: as Perry puts it, James saw the "urgency of philosophical problems" as arising from the "conflict between science and religion," a conflict whose solution must be sought, not in a "conquest" by one side over the other, but in a "reconciliation" of their competing claims.

"The Will to Believe," just one step among many toward the reconciliation James was seeking, is aimed squarely at a central epistemological problem at issue in this same conflict. It should scarcely surprise, then, if its most authentic commentary must be drawn from the other steps he took along that same road.

The mere recall of the titles he gave those lectures, though, is enough to show the kinds of questions James was haunted by. They are all of the weltanschaulich order, probing whether our entire universe makes sense or not. This should already suggest that the kinds of options he is talking about in "The Will to Believe" might be of a similarly weltanschaulich sort. But we are fortunate in
being spared the need to rely on such inferences, however obvious they might appear, for James has settled the issue for us. Writing to L. T. Hobhouse some eight years after the event (Letters II 207), in a coinage of his own he explains the kind of “beliefs” he had in mind: they were, he tells us, “over-beliefs,” a term he leaves undefined, but expects his correspondent to understand without undue technical analysis. The same term appears in the notes James penned in preparation for the Gifford Lectures, given some two years before: the “‘mystical overbeliefs,’” he writes, “‘proceed from an ultra-rational region,’” from the “‘irrational instinctive part, which is more vital’” than “‘articulate reason.’”3 The connection between over-beliefs and the passional nature of his earlier lecture on belief is transparent. But then, in a letter to H. M. Kallen, dated in 1907, James distinguishes between a first kind of belief “‘which produces verification’” by “‘produce[ing] activity creative of the fact believed,’” and a second kind which “‘may, without altering given facts, be a belief in an altered meaning or value for them.’”4

Now, the first kind of belief to which James refers here is plainly the kind he earlier illustrates by the plight of the Alpinist and the challenge of the train robbers. Both have their parallels in the streetcar and truck-driver cases concocted by Ducasse and Davis. Let me designate the common strand running through all these cases by terming them “outcome” illustrations. For in all of them we are asked to consider a belief as prompting the choice of one alternative over its opposite—jumping, for example, instead of staying—and in all of them we may judge the soundness of the guiding belief on the basis of its eventual outcome. One feature of James’s theory, in other words, would have us base our judgment of the belief on whether or not it did in fact produce the kind of action “creative of the fact believed.”

By the time he wrote that phrase to Kallen, however,
eleven years after delivering "The Will to Believe," James had come to distinguish that first kind from a second order of beliefs, which he now terms "over-beliefs": they do not "create" the facts of their own verification or even alter the facts in any way, and yet, they can cue the believer into seeing in the facts a "meaning or value" different from that which another observer might feel entitled to read out of them.

It takes no great leap of the imagination to guess that what James means by over-beliefs is identical with the kind of weltanschaulich views that earlier concerned him in his popular lectures. Adopt the view that man is free, that the universe makes moral sense, that life is worth living, or that God exists, or, as James would insist you should, adopt the entire interwoven nest of them, and you assume a viewpoint on reality which will inevitably "stage-light" the facts in such a way as to elicit a meaning and value from them which your fellow-humans might not decipher.

Some eleven years after delivering his lecture, therefore, James has become explicitly clear on the difference between these two orders of belief; it has also become clear to him that his original argument should have been aimed more unambiguously at justifying over-beliefs. Yet even when he gave that lecture, the distinction between beliefs and over-beliefs was not entirely unknown to him; his problem seems to have been that he had achieved only a blurred clarity about it, and about its implications for his argument. In opting for freedom over determinism, for example, he affirms roundly that "the facts practically have hardly anything to do with" our making that choice. "Sure enough, we make a flourish of quoting facts this way or that. . . . But who does not see the wretched insufficiency of this so-called objective testimony on both sides [DD 152]?" Indeed, when it comes to deciding issues like theism vs. atheism, idealism vs. materialism, monism vs. pluralism—all over-beliefs, surely—the facts surveyed by oppos-
ing parties “still face each other, and the facts of the world give countenance to both” positions (SR 107). What decides the issue for us, then, is precisely this: we all bring different “faiths,” different “postulates of rationality” (DD 152), to our survey of the facts. The faiths we allow to color or weight the facts on either side make us all “peculiarly sensitive to evidence that bears in some one direction” (SR 92); we all “insist on being spoken to by the universe” (SR 89) in different, and highly personal ways.

By the time he gave his lecture on belief, then, James had come to an explicit conviction about the status and influence of what he would later term over-beliefs. His problem was that he did not possess a matching clarity about the distinction between such over-beliefs and the kind of belief that fuels our action in outcome cases. His later insight entitles us to interpret “The Will to Believe” as de jure directed toward justifying our adoption of certain over-beliefs; but taking that view of his lecture entails cutting through the de facto confusion he creates by repeatedly ignoring the difference in kind between such weltanschaulich options and the decisions we may be called upon to make in outcome cases.

Stay for the moment with just two of the outcome cases James proposes. His point in appealing to them is clear: the lively belief that the abyss can be vaulted, or that one man’s opposition to the robber band may incite his companions to similar effective opposition, will certainly have much to do with the successful outcome of the action to be taken. But here James, faithful to his future-oriented empiricist stance, is contending that examples from practical life illustrate that faith can “create” the subsequent facts that can stand as its eventual verification. That claim, even as it bears on outcome cases, is not without its difficulties, as we shall see; but it is only fair to note that James’s use of outcome cases is plainly different from the use to which Ducasse and Davis put them. It is one thing to say that in
streetcar predicaments I may be thrown back on the need for resorting to a totally “non-rational” method of deciding; it is quite another to propose that if a lively faith animates the decision to act in a certain way the outcome is likelier to be in accord with what I desire. James may have encouraged both Ducasse and Davis to think in outcome terms, but not in the way they came to think of them: as though such cases represent the kinds of issue to which James, at his alertest, intended his main thesis in “The Will to Believe” to apply.

James’s use of outcome cases, then, was illustrative of the kind of faith that can “create” the facts of its own verification. Do they mean to illustrate how our faith can have a similar “creative” role with respect to the theistic hypothesis? It is not at all clear that James always took the time to analyze the issues involved here and to test whether the parallel really held. Hick has taken that time (pp. 37–39), and writers more sympathetic to James correctly concur that there is a confusion, if not a fatal flaw, in James’s thinking at this juncture.

Examine, for instance, the interconnected set of propositions embodied in his popular lectures: they come down to affirming that the existence of God is the rock-bottom assurance that life in the “strenuous,” rather than the “easy-going,” moral mood is the kind of life which ultimately makes “moral” sense. But the proposition that God exists, prima facie at least, claims to tell us “what is the case,” now, in the existing arena of our significant human activity.

The “experiential” quality of this argument for belief in God’s existence is, on one level at least, obvious enough: James would have it that such belief will make a difference in the tone of our activity and in the quality of our human lives “even now.” But there is a second level to be considered as well; one has to distinguish between “what is the case” and what one “believes is the case.” Immediately the
question arises: Has James set himself to proving that “it is the case” that God exists, or that we have a right, perhaps even that we would be better off, to “believe that God exists”? On a third level, hovering uncertainly somewhere between the foregoing two, is the question: If belief can sometimes create the facts that serve as its verification, does James mean to imply that our belief can make it “true” that God does, in fact, exist?

At this point, I submit that James’s commitment to empiricism seems actually to have gotten in his way, introducing confusions into his argument which need not have beset him. In the first place, his empirical bent has led him to make an appeal to outcome examples, as illustrations of his argument, and momentarily to ignore the basic difference in kind between outcome and weltanschaulich questions. That faith can (and ought to) influence the outcome of human action is surely true, but if it has any influence on the truth or falsity of weltanschaulich propositions, it must surely be a vastly different kind of “influence.” My belief that I can vault this chasm, and that my fellow-passengers will rise with me to foil the train robber, will surely make a difference in whether, and how successfully, I perform both those actions. Faith, in such instances, will have a bearing on the outcome, on what “will be the case.” That James’s somewhat bumptious optimism brings him seriously to entertain only the successful outcome is something to notice, surely, but I do not think it the main point for the present. The main point is this: he gives only the slightest attention to the linkage between what (one believes) “is now the case” and what “will, or can, become the case.”

This loose linkage between present and future may have been what led one interpreter of James to argue the validity of his position, if only one substitutes “hope” for “belief.” But this defense of James really gives his case away: I can, certainly, hope that my wife will recover from can-
cer, without committing myself to the stronger claim that I believe she will so recover. Such a hope, too, will have a bearing on whether and how I move into action; its pragmatic value—for the style of my activity, if not for my wife's eventual cure—is assured. But is it quite as efficacious as a hope which is founded on genuine belief? I scarcely think so. There are hopes and hopes, and their intensity and consequent pragmatic efficacy will vary at least to some extent with the varying "grounds" I have for hoping this or that. Those grounds bring us back to a consideration of the grounds for believing, and belief must inescapably focus on what "is now the case." A firm belief that my wife will recover must root partially at least in some realistic appraisal of her present state. To believe that I can vault some Alpine crevasse is to believe not only in what "will" be, but to some extent in what "is now the case." I may not have the muscular tone for it, the residual adrenalin; in brief, the present actualities that underlie present potentialities may simply not be there. And their absence may be so complete that no amount of screwing up my courage, "willing" to believe, will do the trick. Similar considerations apply to the train-robber example: I just may have been stuck with a crowd of human cabbages, and no amount of believing otherwise can wring the blood of heroism from these blocks and stones. Granted: I may believe that a successful outcome will ensue, my action may be successful, and thus "verify," in James's terms, my former belief; but the verification will bear on the truth of my former belief in what, then, actually was the case. This, I submit, is a much more modest claim than the one James so often makes when assuring us that belief can "create" its own verification.

In making that claim, too, James's professed empiricism comes into play, but now it is compounded by the energetic, up-and-doing side of his nature. Notice how his choice of these two examples—an Alpinist's leap, a bold
act of foiling a robbery—tends to stress the qualities of energy, courage, decisiveness: he wants us to grasp the nettle firmly, and so defy its sting. These are precisely the situations in which the very firmness of our “belief” is most often pragmatically effective. It was, I suggest, typical of James to survey the possible examples of belief and instinctively hit upon that subset in which energy, optimism, and courage enjoy greatest play. And yet, it must not be totally forgotten that the very examples he stresses, the examples that serve the energetic side of his thesis best, do indeed call for that title word “will.”

Even in outcome cases, therefore, faith may not always create its own verification. But James’s failure to distinguish outcome options from their over-belief counterparts now introduces a second level of confusion. The most glaring instance of this occurs in “The Sentiment of Rationality,” where James is addressing himself to the question whether our universe “makes sense,” by which he means “moral” sense. He produces a number of distinctions and observations which I need not go into now; the point is that, on the face of it, he is entertaining a _weltanschaulich_ much more than an outcome question. But he cannot overcome the temptation to treat the _weltanschaulich_ question in outcome terms. He asks us to consider the whole mass of “mundane phenomena” ("M") as a conceivably indeterminate mass awaiting the further determination ("x") of our subjective attitude toward it. Our attitude may be optimistic or pessimistic; typically, this means we may “brave” rather than “give way to” the evils of the world; the outcome will be dependent on the action ensuing from our attitude “x.” “This world is good, we must say, since it is what we make it,—and we shall make it good. . . . _M_ has its character indeterminate. . . . All depends on the character of the personal contribution _x_.” So, in a provisional conclusion, he declares: “Wherever the facts to be formulated contain such a [personal] contri-
bution, we may logically, legitimately, and inexpugnably believe what we desire. The belief creates its verification” (SR 101–103).9

Here, I suggest, his eagerness to be empirical, coupled with his energetic optimism,10 brings James to endow our activity with the magical power to make the universe what we wish it to be: i.e., to transform it from an indeterminate $M$ to the kind of “$M$ plus $x$” we desire it to be, and to believe that our personal contribution can make it so become. But suppose, the critical reader is prompted to object, the original $M$, however indeterminate we believe it to be, is, in actuality, determinate enough to resist our powers to transform it in this desired direction? We are faced once again with the possible gap between what is the case and what our powers may be able to effectuate as the future case, and in this provisional conclusion, James’s enthusiasm permits him to leap that gap too airily. Can our belief, however energetically it invigorate our action, endow that action with the power to “make” the world make sense? Or “make” it be true that God exists?

James’s terminal conclusion in this same essay shows him in a far soberer mood. It may be that the original $M$ is not, after all, the “moral universe” my subjective attitude $x$ supposed it to be; hence, if “I mistakenly assume that it is, the course of experience will throw ever new impediments in the way of my belief”—indeed, will foil, baffle, and eventually counter-verify it (SR 105–107). When it comes to issues of this breadth, therefore, the gap between what I believe to be the case and what is the case, and the associated gap between what is the case and what my believing action can effectuate as the future case, may be too sizable for spanning, after all.

Before arriving at this chastened conclusion, however, James makes another move to bring the weltanschaulich option into line with an outcome option. This time he is dealing with the issue of factual verification, so close to
his empiricist heart. He sees that verification in the two sorts of cases will differ in one important respect: the position he is arguing against, he admits, is not of the kind that "can be refuted in five minutes"; questions of this type "defy ages." For in settling this sort of question "corrobor­ration or repudiation by the nature of things may be deferred until the day of judgment" (SR 95). He admits having written as if the verification might occur in the life of a single philosopher,—which is manifestly untrue. . . . Rather should we expect, that, in a question of this scope, the experience of the entire human race must make the verification, and that all the evidence will not be "in" till the final integration of things . . . [SR 107].

Compare this verification situation with that of such outcome examples as the Alpinist or the truck driver, and another important difference surfaces. The question of whether to leap or not leap in both these cases can, in prin­ciple, be decided in "five minutes" or even less, as soon as the outcome one way or the other becomes clear, even if only to the protagonist in his last moments. The "belief" in question either creates its factual verification or it does not; the facts of the outcome are what one can quickly judge by. And our judgment after the fact implies, among other things, an estimate by hindsight of what actually was the case at the instant the truck driver or Alpinist made his decision.

James seems to be sensitive to this difference in the above quotation: the "hindsight" judgment proper to outcome issues is still being invoked, but now with the admission that it can be leveled only at the end of time. But then, of what use is this view of the outcome to any of James's own readers, asking themselves whether it is now the case that the world we live in makes moral sense? Put more strongly: isn't this judgment-day verification so indef-
initely deferred as to amount to a dodge, a verification inaccessible by very definition, hence (for the empiricist, at least) no verification worth talking about?

If we accept James’s later assurances that “The Will to Believe” should have been aimed more accurately at justifying such over-beliefs as those we bring to the theistic hypothesis, then we must admit that his way of appealing to such outcome cases as those of the Alpinist or the train robbers is seriously misguided: such scenarios serve to illustrate, from practical human affairs, his claim that an intense and energetic belief can “create” the facts that verify it and he assumes, altogether too readily, that the same or sufficiently similar “creative” property may obtain in regard to belief in the theistic hypothesis. In making this assumption, he tends to vault over two associated gaps: the first, between what I believe to be the case and what in actuality is the case, and the second, between what is now the case and what my action can, from out of what is now the case, “make” to be the future case. That logical leap is made somewhat easier for him by the very choice of outcome examples he chiefly attends to: they both put a premium on the voluntaristic qualities of energy, optimism, bravery, and decisive rather than reflective action, and encourage him in talking of the “will” to believe and precisely that. But his choice of examples aids his argument in another way: they camouflage his assumption that a weltanschaulich option may be “verified” in essentially the same ways as the outcome cases of the sort he has proposed as illustrations. Eventually, he must postpone that verification until judgment day, which is tantamount to abandoning the appeal to verification altogether.

But James’s unexamined equation between outcome beliefs and over-beliefs of the more weltanschaulich kind wreaks severe damage in another quarter as well: it goes far to obscure a distinction that is vital to the legitimacy of his claims. For in arguing for the intervention of our
passional nature, he tells us that such intervention is legitimate whenever the option facing us is genuine, but adds the proviso that the issue in question must be one that "by its nature" cannot be resolved on "intellectual grounds" (WB 11). This has brought a number of his defenders to infer that, in addition to their being live, forced, and momentous, James intended to qualify genuine options by including this fourth criterion, the criterion of "ambiguity." Their instinct is correct, but the application they go on to make of this criterion is, I submit, misdirected.

For that misdirection it must be said that James himself bears a large measure of responsibility, since it arises from his defenders' having been duped by his blurry equation of outcome with over-belief issues. Keep that distinction sharp, however, and it promptly becomes clear that the ambiguity proper to an outcome situation, like the Alpinist's or the truck driver's, is of a different order from the ambiguity affecting weltanschaulich questions. I shall call the outcome type, for want of a better term, an "accidental" ambiguity, meaning that it is not essentially unthinkable that either truck driver or Alpinist might be in total command of the facts relevant to making the decision to leap or not. That is why it is in principle possible to decide in terms of subsequent outcome facts whether they made the correct decision or not; indeed, as Davis himself has admitted, a scientific study might remove the ambiguity of the situation to a large extent. Any judgment made on such decisions, accordingly, can and should be made in terms of "the facts," and only command of an insufficient array of those facts infects their decision-situation with ambiguity.

But now, taking a cue from Perry11 as well as from James himself, let me term the ambiguity proper to a weltanschaulich option a "necessary" or essential ambiguity. Let this be a provisional interpretation of that phrase in "The Will to Believe" which speaks of an "option
[which] cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds.” In deciding such options, the “facts” themselves are not only ambiguous, but irremediably so. As we have seen James put it already, the “facts practically have hardly anything to do” (DD 152) with such options, for “the opposing theories”—whether determinism and indeterminism, theism and anti-theism, moral and non-moral universe—“still face each other, and the facts of the world give countenance to both” (SR 107). In the assumption that his later thinking would have persuaded James himself to set aside his appeal to a judgment-day “factual” verification as illegitimate, how would he propose that we resolve such weltanschaulich options?

Dear old James, one is tempted to sigh, how typical of him: that incorrigible averseness to the tedium of careful analysis has turned his brave lecture into a sad shambles. Is there any point in going on with this? There is, I suggest, great point in going on. We have managed to shear away some missteps, but when compared with the real contribution James has made, they may turn out to be of secondary importance. An appeal to “belief,” the reader asks, quite in the Jamesian manner? To some extent; but the decision to terminate relations now might turn out to be Jamesian as well, but too like James in his impatient mood.

But the man himself kept thinking about these matters; his later ruminations, no doubt nourished by the controversy stirred up by his lecture of 1896, brought him to see that his argument should have been aimed more cleanly at justifying over-beliefs, the positions we assume on weltanschaulich issues. Such issues confront us with an ambiguity, surely, but an essential kind of ambiguity, of a different order from the accidental ambiguities that hover about outcome options. We may take it, then, at least as a working hypothesis, that he still saw the intervention of our passional nature as valid in the case of genuine options characterized by this sort of essential ambiguity.12
But when examined closely, even the few texts we have seen arguing for that essential ambiguity raise another, and troubling, question: At what point in our intellectual examination of the "facts" is the passional nature entitled to intervene?

NOTES

1. See chap. 2, pp. 30–31, and chap. 1, notes 2 and 13, respectively.
2. TC I 501; see also 494–503.
3. Quoted in TC II 328.
4. Given in TC II 249.
6. This "moral" note is struck most clearly in RA and MP, but once alerted to its centrality in James's thinking, the reader can find it pervading all these popular lectures.
8. I have omitted from this discussion any reference to the two illustrations James offers (WB 22, 28) about the formation of friendships. My reason is that they require more shaded treatment than the ones we have been dealing with, as we shall have occasion to see further on in this study.
9. Compare this passage, which dates from 1877, with LWL 59–62, dating from 1895, where James proposes essentially the same argument.
10. Many of the points made here have already been made by John E. Smith in The Spirit of American Philosophy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 38–79; see esp. pp. 56 and 76.
11. Who in TC II 209 points out (as Jamesian) the analogous distinction between "accidental" and "necessary" agnostics.
12. The text from James's preparatory notes for The Varieties of Religious Experience (cited in note 3) commends the realism of this hypothesis by linking "'mystical overbeliefs' " with the "'ultra-rational,' " the "'instinctive part' " of our nature.