The Precursive Force of Over-beliefs

GAIL KENNEDY, in an article to which I have already made allusion, argues that James's original lecture succeeds, in part at least, in defending a "right" to believe—a realization that James himself would appear to have come to some years after he had delivered it. Given the essential sort of ambiguity affecting over-belief issues, this suggestion might seem to provide a way out of the impasse that kind of option embodies. But the few texts we have already brought to bear on the question make it sorely doubtful that James would have recognized in that pale term "right" the office of the passional for which he was arguing. For even if we eliminate the belief that "creates" the facts in some, not all, outcome cases, we are faced with too many texts where James is clearly making the claim that over-beliefs may actually alter the meaning we elicit from any array of facts we survey. Over-beliefs, then, function in James's later thinking in much the same way as those "faiths" or "postulates of rationality" as make us more "sensitive to evidence" that bears in one direction rather than in another (DD 152; SR 89–92). Those phrases already suggest something stronger than a mere "right" to believe; James is clearly talking about a positive willingness or readiness to opt for one hypothesis rather than for its rival: a preferential inclination—if the term is not too pompous.

If all that is true, however, it would appear that James, both early and late, is proposing a view that is calculated to shock our epistemological sensibilities: the passional
is being granted license to intervene prior to, and in a way that governs our intellectual survey of, the facts.

Notice how decisively this shifts the ground beneath the defenses of James's lecture we have been examining. Having equated outcome issues with weltanschaulich options, or at least ignored the difference between them, both Ducasse and Davis assume that the passional side of our nature may legitimately intervene in the settlement of any genuine option, but only after the theoretical survey of the facts has run out its string and come up dry, so to speak. But James talks frequently about our dealing with issues in such a way that the passional side of our nature does not, in fact, stand by until the theoretical intellect has exhausted its resources on the facts, and then cried "uncle." It is almost as though he had Ducasse and Davis in mind when he wrote that "The absurd abstraction of an intellect verbally formulating all its evidence and carefully estimating the probability thereof . . . is ideally as inept as it is actually impossible" (SR 92–93). "Pretend what we may, the whole man within us is at work when we form our philosophical opinions" (SR 92)—to which I would add, particularly when setting ourselves to those (pace Davis) "broad general themes" I have termed weltanschaulich issues.

Nor is it tenable to claim that one man's survey may be more dispassionate and objective and, because of precisely these qualities of mind, is more to be trusted than his rival's. James is boldly contending that all parties bring their differing "faiths or postulates" to bear on their survey of the facts. Even so zealous an upholder of scientific objectivity as Clifford is, like anyone else, whether he realizes it or not, "peculiarly sensitive" (SR 92), on passional grounds, to one sort of evidence rather than another. "Personal temperament," "mental temper" always make themselves felt in the ways different human beings "insist" that the universe speak to them, so that "Idealism will be chosen by a man of one emotional constitution, material-
ism by another” (SR 89). “Intellect, will, taste, and passion co-operate” in our forming of philosophical opinions of this sort, “just as they do in practical affairs” (SR 92); that is the way of it, James insists, and the way of it for all of us.

It is, then, abundantly clear that the early James is arguing for a pre-intervention by the passional side of our nature, a guiding influence that temperament, emotional constitution, will, taste, passion, have it how you will, exert in the whole man’s process of examining facts, selecting some as more significant than others, attributing larger importance to one group, lesser importance to another, and coming in the end to some settlement of the issue at hand. So, in “Reflex Action and Theism,” having divided the mind into three “departments”—feeling (i.e., sensory perception), conception, and volition—he lays it down that “The willing department . . . dominates both the conceiving department and the feeling department” (RA 114). He goes on to argue that theism is the most “rational” way—both practically and theoretically—of understanding our universe, and then concludes that “Our volitional nature must . . . , until the end of time, exert a constant pressure upon the other departments of the mind to induce them to function to theistic conclusions” (RA 127).

That same conviction that willing not only does but should dominate our sensory and intellectual functions is what James is plainly alluding to when he writes, in “The Will to Believe,” of passional impulses which “run before” our beliefs, along with obviously less fortunate others which, bringing up the rear as it were, turn out to be “too late for the fair” (WB 11). This, then, is how we are meant to understand his claim that our passional nature may lie “at the root” of at least “certain” convictions we cling to (WB 4), as well as his diagnosis of the passional grounds on which we disbelieve a number of facts and theories
while accepting others (WB 10). The same view pervades his account of our “feelings of duty” toward both truth and error as “only expressions of our passional life,” an account that sets up the conclusion that two successive “first steps of passion” have committed those of his auditors who are still “with” him to adopt the epistemological canons he has been persuading them to favor (WB 18–19). The “previous” faith (WB 23), or “precursive” faith (WB 24), he shows as necessary by his three illustrations of “human” belief (WB 22–25) is meant to commend the legitimacy of “faith running ahead of scientific evidence” (WB 25; emphasis added).

Though the force of those expressions is somewhat weakened, for the purposes of my overall argument, by their frequent association with his questionable insistence that faith “creates” its own verification, they nonetheless betray unmistakably that in his own mind James is still working out of the conviction proclaimed in his other lectures: that our passional nature lies at the “root” of those faiths which work “precursively” on the conduct of our inquiry about a certain number of questions, at least—questions, I submit, which we are now entitled to identify as over-belief questions. James’s original wording of WB 22–23 (given in Works 365n27.38) supports the same conclusion: when it comes to “goods” the “heart must lead” and not “follow” our knowledge, and the “passional nature dictate” our moral beliefs. WB 22–23 in its final form compresses to: “The question of having moral beliefs at all... is decided by our will,” and “If your heart does not want a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one.” But the message is unambiguous; the insight Renouvier had supplied him at the crisis-moment of his life has borne fruit: our will can show its freedom by commanding the mind to sustain certain thoughts when other thoughts are possible to us, and
when it comes to faith, that is what the will is precisely supposed to do. That insight, we have seen, is also vintage Pascal.

This placing of the passional before the cognitive was not, however, an idea James dreamed up to suit his purposes in "The Will to Believe" and in its companion essays; Perry shows that it was one of the earliest convictions to which James came during his study of the English empiricists—if, indeed, he did not already bring that conviction to his reading of them. They may not have inspired him to take his philosophical stand as an empiricist, but they surely confirmed him in his respect for "facts." And yet, he determinedly and consistently rejected every suggestion he found in them that the mind was some kind of passive spectator, to which the messages of sense knowledge merely came in from the outer world. In what Perry terms his "reform" of empiricism, one of James's crucial contributions was the claim that humans are creatures of "interests" first, and "knowers" only second. Desires, interests, "will" are the original prompters, directing the mind's active "reach" out toward reality. "In forming and trying hypotheses," Perry writes of James's "voluntaristic" form of empiricism, "the mind is not only active, but interested. It tries what it hopes is true. This subjective interest is both unavoidable and legitimate. If the mind wanted nothing, it would try nothing." 5

That voluntaristic emphasis marks James's later thinking as well. For despite his subsequent regrets about the title of his essay, this precursive pressure in the interests of one over-belief over its competitors clearly represents a preference for, even a willingness to "go in for," the hypothesis to which our passional nature inclines us (SR 96). Even in his later correspondence, despite all his second thoughts, that precursive pressure is never denied, but repeatedly implied. The "will" to believe, he writes to J. Mark Baldwin in 1899, is "essentially a will of compla-
cence, assent, encouragement, towards a belief already there,—not, of course, an absolute belief, but such beliefs as any of us have, strong inclinations to believe, but threatened"; it is a "parti pris" which amounts to "the completest concrete expression of the individual’s life," one that is operative in "all the great hypotheses of life." Some two years later, he writes that his title had meant to designate "the state of mind of the man who finds an impulse in him toward a believing attitude, and who resolves not to quench it simply because doubts of its truth are possible." No such human beliefs, James is convinced, can claim "absolute" status: they always remain reformable, since it is always possible that some array of future facts may argue for changing or even abandoning them. But even those future facts, James implies in his letters to Baldwin and Kallen, may legitimately be illuminated by a persisting over-belief that endows them still with a meaning or value consistent with itself, thus rendering that "threatened" over-belief stubbornly resistant to change. In cases like that, the over-belief could conceivably stiffen into the "strong inclination," the parti pris James talks about, or even into a posture of "resolve" facing up to an onslaught of hostile facts which threatens to quench it. But would we do justice to such a case by speaking about a mere "right" to believe—even a readiness, a willingness, to believe? Or could it be that the only honest term for such an attitude might be exactly what James called it: a "will" to believe?

The voluntaristic spine gives shape to James's thinking, therefore, from beginning to end. And yet, his teaching on the precursive pressure our passional nature exercises in the formation of our over-beliefs still remains open to two interpretations, of seriously unequal value. He wants us to conclude with him that human beings do, as a matter of fact, behave as he describes them: this pre-intervention of the passional is de facto the way of it for all of us. But
alongside this *de facto* conclusion, another possible interpretation of his argument suggests itself: that human beings *de jure* behave this way, that the pre-intervention of the passional is always legitimate in settling issues of the *weltanschaulich* sort. Now we experience a new surge of sympathy for defenders like Ducasse and Davis, as well as for the Millers and Cliffords against whom James was contending. For, taking the two interpretations jointly, one might conclude that such pre-intervention is "legitimate," but by default, as it were; human beings not only do act this way, but cannot (alas!) act otherwise, and that is the end of it. The determinist's soup is the indeterminist's poison, but both conclusions are at bottom matters of incorrigible philosophic "taste"; and *de gustibus* . . .

Having placed the passional side of our nature, apparently at least, so much in command of the philosophic process, James would seem to have opened himself wide to the charge of legitimizing "wishful thinking," even if to decide only a limited set of *weltanschaulich* issues. Indeed, one must sympathize with those of his defenders who strive to explain the intervention of the passional as occurring only *after* the theoretical intellect has exhausted its efforts; they are, at least, well-intentioned from a pro-Jamesian point of view. And yet, if what I have argued to this point accurately reflects what James said, it is not really James his defenders wind up defending.\(^8\) Can he still, in the context I have outlined, be defended from the "wishful thinking" charge?

Much has been said, in this connection, about James's own temperamental aversion to credulity, as well as about the audiences to whom he was addressing his remarks; desiccation rather than credulity was what *they* needed warning against!\(^9\) Valuable and apposite though these biographical indications are, I am not sure they are always couched in such terms as to get to the heart of the *philosophical* problem James has created. On that philosophical
problem, however, even in the context I have outlined, something may be said in his defense. The first line of that defense requires that we turn our attention to that, as yet, highly undiscriminated term: the passional side of our nature.

NOTES

1. For my reference to her "Pragmatism, Pragmaticism, and the Will to Believe," see above, chap. 1, note 1; see also James's letter to L. T. Hobhouse, written in August 1904, in Letters II 207–209.

2. Note that this view brings the term "facts" into closer resonance with the sense Smith explains as coherent with James's "radical empiricism" (Spirit of American Philosophy, pp. 47–49). This may attenuate the shock value of what James is proposing.

3. Note, however, the proximity of the temptation to make faith "create" facts, in this text and in its context.

4. See above, chap. 1, note 2, where it is pointed out that the same three "departments" are supposed in "The Will to Believe."

5. TC I 454, 455. Cf. 555–58, on James's reform of classical empiricism in the light of the same emphasis, and 570, on his approval of Leibniz' famous tag nisi intellectus ipse; see also TC II 79, on the role of willing in the association of ideas, and 258–59, on the priority of the moral will.

6. Given in TC II 243, 244.

7. Given in TC II 244–45.

8. Since composing the bulk of this essay, I find that Edward H. Madden, in his "Introduction" to Works (p. xi), expresses a view quite similar to the one articulated in this chapter: that intellect is, for James, subordinate to the affections, and that the willing aspect of life dominates both the conceiving and the perceiving aspects. There is, however, no suspicion of this view in his 1969 article (see Hare & Madden, "James, Miller, and Ducasse on the Ethics of Belief," cited in chap. 4, note 1); nor does he, in Works, either exploit this view or face the difficulties implied by it.